

CODART TIEN congress: Workshop 4

The “authentic” interior: toward the limits of ambition

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Introduction

Museum staff and curators are regularly confronted with the impact of the visitor on the interior. We all face questions as what concessions we have to make for our visitors and what limits we should impose on ourselves to our ambitions. Also the authenticity, the type of interiors we may show to our public, are choices we are facing. In this light other questions may arise: to whom does the house belong and to whom the interior, who makes the decisions? These are questions of collection and museum management as well as of ownership. What problems do we share as a curator / museum director? Three speakers will share their view on this matter: *Marta Gołabek* will inform us about the Wilanów Palace Museum, in origin a baroque royal palace and garden, maintained by Polish noble families through 1945. Most changes were made in the 19th century. She will explain what kind of interiors the Wilanów Palace Museum wants to present and how authentic the interiors should be. Also the need to make concessions and how to face ambitions for temporary exhibitions within the limits of a historical location will be touched upon. *Alastair Laing* will present us with two case studies of two houses, Greenway and Scotney (New) Castle, which will be opened to the public. Each poses problems in terms of what should be shown, and of how it can be shown. For Greenway there are two different, but to some extent complementary risks, of doing too much to make the house 'visitor-friendly' and of imposing a predetermined idea of our own on how the house should look. Scotney (New) Castle presents us with the dilemma of a clash of presentations. Do we preserve it to show visitors how things have really been since the last war or do we put it all into context? *Thijs Boers* has been asked to tell if we can determine the area of tension between opening a historic house museum and the impact of (an increasing number of) visitors on the building, what influences visitors have on the presentations and the building. Further, he will share with us his thoughts on how to establish a delicate balance, if concessions are inevitable and if so, which ones. Aspects like visitor experience, preservation and safety should be taken into account. The three introductory speakers and the 24 participants to the workshop (see the list below) were asked to respond to the following points for discussion:

- What is authenticity and how authentic should an interior be?
- How do we face (exhibition) ambitions versus the limits of a historical location?
- How far do we go in our concessions to the public?
- What influence do the visitor's experience, preservation and safety have on our choices?

Speaker I: Marta Gołabek, assistant curator of prints and drawings, Wilanów Palace Museum, Warsaw

Wilanów Palace is a complex of historical edifices and garden, preserved in its original, historical development throughout the centuries. Its main structure is a baroque royal palace; an *entre cour et jardin* residence. The palace in Wilanów is one of a very few houses in Poland, still preserved in its

original form with its authentic interiors and a collection of fine and decorative arts. This makes it an exception among Polish monuments after World War II. Designed as a royal residence, the palace was since the 18th century up to 1945 maintained by Polish noble families. In the course of time they made changes and rearrangements according to their tastes and needs.

- I. An important change was made in 1805 when count Stanislaw Kostka Potocki adapted part of the palace into a public museum. To gather the collection of art and memorabilia in a way that would be convenient for visitors, the original baroque interiors were re-arranged. At the same time other parts of the palace maintained its function as a private mansion.
- II. Between 1955 and 1962 a broad conservation program was undertaken and we are aware of the professional choices which were then made. For us as a curatorial team, it is now again a very exciting time with many challenges which I would like to share with you.
- III. With a new conservation project which started in 2004, entitled *Restoration of the first museum of art in Poland-the Wilanów Palace Museum* (with support from the European Regional Development Fund), one of the three programs focuses on research and conservation of the palace's ground floor.

The aims are:

- to create a residence museum; to adapt historical domestic interiors for public use in a modern sense (based on original inventories)
- to get to know and partially regain the most original palace interiors recalling the early modern state
We do this for instance by
- finding the most original, primary materials and colors used for the interiors
- searching and analyzing the object's current condition for further works
- leading a broad, international program of archival and historical research
We have already decided that
- The temporary exhibitions are located in the outbuildings (orangery, kitchen)
- The basement will be arranged as a space for tourists and additional events
- The only exhibitions taking place in the palace interiors are those integrally connected with its early aspects and decoration. (i.e. the monographic exhibition of the author of plafond paintings- *Siemiginowski- Apelles wilanowski*)

Some examples of six dilemmas we are facing:

- *Dilemma 1:* When in 1805 count Potocki adapted part of the Palace into a public museum, some of the original baroque interiors were re-arranged. What is the more original or the more important and should be kept or brought back, the museum; or the royal, baroque palace?
- *Dilemma 2:* Most changes and reconstructions in the baroque apartments were developed according to the 19th century academic interpretation of "baroque". Should they be kept where they are or should they be exhibited separately as an interesting evidence of conservation/restoration tradition?
- *Case 1 Garden Galleries:* These galleries have baroque ceiling and wall paintings. In the southern gallery, beneath the layer of secondary plaster a stone portal (a 17th century tower entrance) was discovered which was decorated with illusory paintings. These paintings are in very bright and intense colors creating a very different aspect from the one that is now being proposed. As this new discovery dates back to Sobieski's times, this may constitute a starting point for further conservatory assignments (chronology and stadygraphy in other locations). Also, we found that architectural details like pilasters were painted with similar, intense colors (the niche behind Sobieski's equestrian statue)
- *Dilemma 3:* How should these discoveries be transported onto future conservation/restoration projects and should we allow for changes in this now mainly 19th century architecture and color?
- *Case 2 Lapidarium (Cabinet of Antiquities):* In the 19th century a garden gallery span was rearranged into an exhibition space for antique sculpture. This so-called lapidarium was designed by a well known, academic architect and is an important example of 19th century museology. It's wall is covered with 31 pieces of antique reliefs. However, underneath still exists the original, baroque decoration.

Dilemma 4: Should we debate over changing it back to a gallery space?

- *Case 3 The Grand Vestibule:* This was the principal room in the palace; it was reconstructed between the end of the 18th and beginning of 19th centuries in a classicist form (the baroque elements were then abolished). In 1955 some wall paintings *al secco* were discovered. Recently, in the same room but higher, under a late 19th century frieze of *en grisaille* paintings on canvas, some very high class paintings *en grisaille* on the wall were uncovered. The late 19th century canvas paintings are artistically weaker than the originals. However, only 40% of these remain.

Dilemma 5: Should we reconstruct the original frieze paintings?

- *Case 4 The "Dutch" study:* This is a collector's study room which was originally hung with numerous Dutch paintings. In the first half of the 18th century it was reconstructed thoroughly in a late baroque style. We are now bringing it back to its originality and prime function, but preserving its later ceiling decoration.

Dilemma 6: How will this late baroque interior match with the Dutch 17th century paintings?

Speaker II: Alastair Laing, Adviser on pictures and sculptures, National Trust, London

Historic Houses belonging to the National Trust: the visitor's impact

This year the National Trust will open, at least in part, two houses for the first time: Greenway, which had belonged to Agatha Christie; and Scotney [New] Castle, which was the ancestral home of Christopher Hussey, the historian of the Picturesque and Georgian architecture, and long-time Editor of *Country Life*.

Each poses problems in terms of what should be shown, and of how it can be shown. Greenway, when Agatha Christie first acquired it in 1938, was simply a Georgian villa that served as a holiday home for her by the sea. Later, it became the home of her daughter, and was lived in all the year round. When Agatha Christie died, it became the repository of such heirlooms and possessions of hers as were not sold – including the corrected typescripts of her extraordinarily successful detective novels. Also of the possessions of her husband, the Near Eastern archaeologist, Sir Max Mallowan (of whom she once said: "It is a great advantage to be married to someone interested in old pots: the older one is, the more interesting one becomes to them"). His archaeological collections were, however, bequeathed to the British Museum, and the first editions of her novels were sold after her death in 1976.

When Agatha Christie's daughter gave Greenway to the National Trust in 2000, it was for the sake of its picturesque site and the garden. The house was not to be open to the public, and the National Trust was forbidden to use Agatha Christie's name in connection with any publicity for it. There are also considerable problems of access, since it is down a very long, narrow country lane, with a few other houses off the lane. The local council has therefore severely restricted access by car, and requires visitors to be brought by bus or by boat.

That should limit one of the major problems of houses belonging to the National Trust: the sheer weight of numbers (the National Trust alone has 3½ million members). Agatha Christie's daughter has now died, and her son is perfectly relaxed about the use of his grandmother's name. He is also moving out of the house, so that we can open it to the public, taking with him, or selling, anything that we do not want to show.

Our dilemma is: *what* do we want to show? The public will undoubtedly want to see Greenway as just one thing: Agatha Christie's house. It would then, however, be as bare as most holiday homes are, with very little to see. Nor do we have any exact record, in the form of inventories and/or photographs, of how it was furnished. And, even though the family did very little to alter the configuration or decoration of most of its rooms after her death, it would be a denial of the house's

history, to obliterate all traces of their occupation. It would also prevent us showing most of Agatha Christie's possessions, which only arrived at Greenway after her death.

The public would also like to see evidence of Agatha Christie as a writer; but it was not there that she wrote, so there is not – as there is at Rudyard Kipling's house, Batemans – a room that could authentically be presented as her study. Corrected typescripts do not have the glamour of holograph manuscripts (but that is all we have from a number of 20th-century writers – for the 21st-century it will be worse: everything in invisible electronic form!); and, her own first editions of her books having been sold, all that we can show are the first editions later collected by her daughter – who put deceptive dedications from her mother into a number of them!

Greenway is therefore a house whose final appearance is going to be the result of a process of selection by the National Trust, governed by, on the one hand, the desire to preserve as much as possible of what there is there, as is; and, on the other, by the desire to meet the expectations of the public. And all this, whilst trying to create visitor routes that cause the least dislocation or wear and tear, and doing our best to protect fragile fabrics and paper from the effects of light; and whilst creating luxury holiday flats in the parts of the house that cannot be shown, so as to generate the income needed to maintain the house and its grounds – all the more necessary, because the restrictions on the numbers of visitors will inevitably limit the amount of money that can be earned by selling tickets and things to them (there will, indeed, be neither shop nor tearoom, which are the things in the National Trust most popular with visitors!).

At Greenway we run two different, but to some extent complementary risks: on the one hand, of doing too much to make the house 'visitor-friendly'; on the other, of imposing a predetermined idea of our own on how the house ought to look. In the present, all the interest will reside in its being Agatha Christie's house. A hundred year from now, when she is as forgotten as Charlotte M. Yonge is today, if we are successful, what we shall have succeeded in preserving is an upper middle-class interior of no particular taste or distinction – but which will by then be an almost unique survival of its kind.

Scotney (New) Castle is something very different. It is a house designed by Edward Hussey and his architect, Anthony Salvin, and built in the late 1830s, on a hill overlooking the Old Castle, which he and his garden designer, W.S. Gilpin (nephew of the Reverend W. Gilpin, author of a series of influential *Picturesque Tours* of Britain), made into the half-ruined focal point of a garden that, with it, became the epitome of the Picturesque movement in England, just before that began to give way to more pompous layouts, and architecture (including Salvin's own) started to become increasingly complex, grandiloquent, and extravagant. Edward Hussey's grandson, Christopher Hussey, was almost destined by where he grew up to become the pioneering author of *The Picturesque* (1927), and his and his wife Betty's life's work, until his death in 1970, when he bequeathed it all to the National Trust, with a life-interest to his widow, who died last year, was to preserve Scotney as one of the most perfect embodiments of that movement.

So important is the rapport between the New Castle and the Old, that Betty Hussey, in her will, stipulated that – regardless of considerations of light protection (she was on the side of the visitor over this!) – the blinds in the bay window of her bedroom should be kept up, so that visitors should enjoy the classic view of the Old Castle, framed by its windows (whether we also need to preserve the hideous white plastic Venetian blinds furled up in the upper part of the window – is like the preservation of her images of cats all over the house – an interesting question of aesthetics versus authenticity!).

The gardens at Scotney already face the perennial challenge of all gardens – that of the impossibility of unchanging preservation, and of the necessity for constant, but different, renewal, in order to preserve - and that of all popular gardens open to the public - of preventing the sheer pressure of numbers from coarsening and degrading what was only ever intended for a few people at a time (it is one of the things that makes our jobs as curators and custodians most worthwhile, that we can see gardens as they were meant to be seen and enjoyed, by ourselves, and at all hours and seasons).

The house presents us with the dilemma of a clash of presentations. The most elaborately decorated room, originally a small drawing room, was taken over by Christopher Hussey as his study, since he no longer, in the days of no or minimal staff, needed the position of the old study, where the master of the house was able to keep his eye upon all its comings and goings (that became a banal 1950s – 1980s kitchen, in which Mrs. Hussey mostly ate, presenting us with a further dilemma: do we preserve it, in all its horror, so as to show visitors how things have really been since the last War, with none of the *Upstairs/Downstairs* life glamorized by the television program of that name, and by *Gosford Park*? Or do we turn it, as almost the only available space in which to do so, into a room that interprets for visitors what they have seen, putting it all in context? Genuine experience? Or imposed explanation?). Christopher Hussey could instead make his study in the most agreeable downstairs room of the house, filled with light, and with a beautiful view of the garden. But a study means bookshelves, and these he brought in in the form of bookcases, or had made, rather crudely; in either case, obliterating both the detail and the balance of Salvin's decoration of the room.

Do we take and strip these out, so as to give visitors a proper idea and enjoyment of the room? Or do we preserve it as it is, recognizing that we only own the house because of Christopher Hussey's bequest, and that it is in a sense, his memorial: that of the man who did so much to shape the appreciation of the past, of old gardens and houses, that has enabled the National Trust to thrive, to enjoy the enormous support and membership that it has today? Having regretted the fact that, at Greenway, we do not have Agatha Christie's writer's study (instead, we have her Buddhist-inclined grandson's, created in the 1960s), would it not be very inconsistent to sweep Christopher Hussey's away? And yet, how many visitors will respond to him and his memory, as opposed to those who might have delighted in it as a pure Salvin room?

Christopher Hussey did another thing in it. In order to create yet more shelves, for deed-boxes and for bound volumes of the influential magazine that he edited, *Country Life* (despite its name, also the journal where every week an article on some historic building was published, often based on original work in the archives), he blocked up the doorway that led into the Library. Do we now keep this doorway blocked, both because it was an integral element of Christopher Hussey's study, and because that is the only way to preserve the integrity of both the Study and the Library as rooms? (but creating bottlenecks, as visitors have to both enter and leave each by the same door). Or do we open up the doorway, so as to make Study and Drawing Room part of a sequential circuit of the house? (but half turning them into passageways in the process).

I have chosen these two case studies, of Greenway and Scotney, not just because they are new, but because they are actual; and because they show that, in everything that the National Trust does, its impact upon the visitor, not just now, but in the future, is something that always has to be taken into account.

Speaker III: Thijs Boers, Curator of historical building, Museum Ons' Lieve Heer op Solder, Amsterdam

In the heart of Amsterdam's bustling centre stands one of the city's oldest historic house museums: Museum Ons' Lieve Heer op Solder (or in English Our Lord in the Attic) which was founded in 1887. Here the Dutch Golden Age comes to life. Visitors step back almost 350 years in time and wander through corridors, rooms, kitchens and stairs to the jewel at the heart of this museum, the magnificent church in the attic. Built at a time when Catholic services were officially prohibited, in 1661, this church cannot be seen from the street. The attic is a church, complete with galleries, a large altar and seating for a congregation of 150. This hidden church of Our Lord in the Attic is integrated architecturally into a seventeenth-century house of which the interior can claim to be unique in Amsterdam. So people are always surprised when they enter for the first time. This is how you could describe the museum in a nutshell. There are two issues I would like to address. The first is how the collection has been formed

and presented after the house became a museum in 1887; the second is in what way we can address the visitor impact in relation to the conservation of this historic house museum.

The collection

The most important part of the collection is the monument itself, the immovable part. The second part of the collection is formed by our movable collection; paintings and silver objects which belong to the original inventory of the church. The third and biggest part of the collection is made up of several other movable collections (silver, paintings, prints, sculpture and liturgical objects) which have been collected after the house became a museum in 1887. The year of the founding of the museum is an important turning point in the history as many objects came into the house which were never before in the house. These collections represent the cultural heritage of catholic Amsterdam from the late 16th until early 20th Century. Therefore the presentation of the collections (house and movable collection) was and is of a mixed nature. On the one hand there are parts in the museum which reflect the history of the house, on the other hand there are several rooms which are used as an exhibition room and thirdly, there are rooms which show a combination of the two. Only recently we are trying to bring back the spirit of the place, a house that was lived and worked in for hundreds of years. In the near future this means that the exhibition rooms will be changed back to their original function (as living quarters from different periods and a church). In rooms which now have a plural function, the objects will be taken out which have no relation with the original function of the room. The leading principle for the re-decoration of the rooms is that the stories which we are going to tell in the future are provided by the house itself. Research in the historical, architectural and social history is of course vital.

Visitor impact

We are lucky that the interest in historic house museums, interiors and monuments by the (national and international) public results in an increasing number of visitors. But as visitors numbers increase from 35-45.000 in the '80-'90's up to 70-80.000 visitors in the last couple of years (2006 even 92.000 visitors), we were 'forced' to assess the impact of visitors on the museum. Together with The Netherlands Institute for Cultural Heritage (and more recently also with The Getty Conservation Institute) several assessments on the collection were being carried out from 2003 onwards. These resulted in a better understanding of the house and collections. Many issues were addressed like: - how many visitors can the museum handle? (sustainable capacity), - how can we monitor the wear and tear of the museum? - what can we do to enhance the indoor climate? Et cetera.

Balance

The staff of the museum, together with the help of many experts, is trying to establish a delicate balance between conservation and access. It is a task, which can only be carried out whilst discussing the above-mentioned subjects with great care and the ability to learn from each other. The museum deserves it.

Report on the discussion

In conclusion

- It is important to determine the aim of the museum, and you'll have to think if the expectations of the public have a roll in this.

- Think of the name of the museum. If you have the word palace in your name, the public expects a palace and a palace furnishing.
- If you wonder which period of the history of your building you'd like to show to the public, create a digital reconstruction how the building evolved during the centuries. Then the choice is more easy
- The National Trust has experience with methods to determine the capacity for visitors.
- The historic house museum itself is the most important object (not its moveable objects).
- Museum Ons' Lieve Heer op Solder will bring back 'the spirit of the house'. The function each room had, will be the point of departure and exhibitions rooms will close.
- Modern art in historic house museums: the Rubens House has skipped these kind of exhibitions, Ons Lieve Heer op Solder still organises them, but only in relation to the building, its interiors or collection.
- How to present what you want to show ?

Robert Schillemans, April 2007

Participants in this workshop were:

1. Ben van Beneden, Curator, Rubenshuis, Antwerp
2. Pieter Biesboer, Curator, Frans Hals Museum, Haarlem
3. Thijs Boers, Curator, Museum Ons' Lieve Heer op Solder, Amsterdam
4. Thera Folmer-von Oven, Curator, Private collection, Aerdenhout
5. Eliška Fučíková, Senior advisor, The Office of Senate of the Parliament of the Czech Republic, Prague
6. Marta Gołębek, Assistant Curator, Wilanów Palace Museum, Warsaw
7. Krystyna Gutowska-Dudek, Curator of painting, Wilanów Palace Museum, Warsaw
8. Stephen Hartog, Advisor, Instituut Collectie Nederland, Amsterdam
9. Karen Hearn, Curator of 16th-and 17th-century arts, Tate Britain, London
10. Alastair Laing, Adviser on pictures and sculpture, The National Trust, London
11. Inga Lander, Curator of the department of prints, Russian National Library, St. Petersburg
12. Catalina Macovei, Head of department of prints and drawings, Library of the Romanian Academy, Bucharest
13. Norbert Middelkoop, Curator of paintings, prints and drawings, Amsterdams Historisch Museum
14. Robert Schillemans, Curator, Museum Ons' Lieve Heer op Solder, Amsterdam
15. Peter Schoon, Director, Dordrechts Museum, Dordrecht
16. Loekie Schwartz, Maarssen
17. Júlia Tátrai, Curator, Szépművészeti Múzeum (Museum of Fine Arts), Budapest
18. Catherine Verleysen, Associate, Vlaamsekunstcollectie, Ghent
19. Dominika Walawender-Musz, Assitant Curator, Wilanów Palace Museum, Warsaw
20. Lisbeth Wouters, Director, Rubenshuis, Antwerp