



THE LEGACY

Exploring the history of the Garrett-Jacobs Mansion

2022

GARRETT-JACOBS MANSION ENDOWMENT FUND, INC.

Herter Brothers, Decorators of the Gilded Age

A Grand Entrance in Baltimore

Herter Brothers, a New York City-based interior design firm, defined the esthetic sense of the ultra-rich during the Gilded Age, the era that followed the Civil War and lasted until the early 20th century. The firm's best work in Baltimore is in the stunning foyer of the Garrett-Jacobs Mansion, located in the city's historic Mount Vernon neighborhood. This soaring two-story space is topped by a coffered ceiling and embellished by carved paneling, stained-glass Tiffany windows, and a masterful spiral stair crowned by a multi-hued dome, also by Tiffany. Architect Stanford White intended that the foyer be a showstopper, and Herter Brothers' skilled woodworkers and designers transformed White's vision into the magnificent room we still enjoy today.



Robert and Mary Frick Garrett

Young and Wealthy: Robert and Mary Frick Garrett

Baltimore's Robert and Mary Frick Garrett were among the newly rich seeking a grand presence in society. In 1884, Robert succeeded his father, John Work Garrett, as president of the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad (B&O) and became a colleague of other wealthy Gilded

Age industrialists, including the Vanderbilts, Morgans, and Goulds. To entertain in the grand style their position required, Robert and Mary Frick transformed their Mount Vernon Place home, a gift from John Work Garrett upon their marriage in 1872, into a magnificent mansion where they hosted not only the luminaries of Baltimore society, but also the elite of New York, government officials, business and railroad leaders, and influential politicians.



Herter Brothers advertisement



The 2nd floor foyer landing of the Garrett-Jacobs Mansion



The foyer of the Garrett-Jacobs Mansion

Herter Brothers and McKim, Mead & White

The Garretts selected Stanford White of the firm of McKim, Mead & White as their architect. White, whose name would become synonymous with the Gilded Age, was adept at melding features from the past and trends of the present into exciting and eclectic designs. Like the Garretts, White was inspired by Europe's castles, estates, and monasteries and he envisioned an entrance foyer that would recall the grandeur of a lord's manor. To realize his vision, he turned to Herter Brothers, a design firm nationally renowned for creating beautifully crafted interiors through its expert woodwork, furniture, flooring, and drapery.

Gustave and Christian Herter: Founders of the Firm

Herter Brothers was the culmination of the vision and expertise of Gustave and Christian Herter. Born in Germany, the brothers immigrated to New York City—Gustave in 1848 and Christian in 1859—where they found great opportunity during the Gilded Age.

Gustave (1830-1892) and Christian (1839-1883) learned their skills in Stuttgart, Germany, first as members of the demanding woodworking guilds, and then as assistants in the workshop of their father, Christian Herter. As woodworkers in Germany, they were familiar with designs and furniture popular in Germany and European cities, especially Paris. The elder Christian Herter was an “ebenist,” a highly skilled woodworker adept at adding veneer and inlay. This skill in inlay would become one of the brothers’ characteristic techniques in furniture design. Gustave’s early designs and later Christian’s adaptation of Japanese motifs in marquetry (where one wood is inlaid into another) often identifies a piece as a Herter Brothers masterpiece.



This chair in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art represents a typical highly decorated and carved Gustave Herter design.

Building a Reputation in America: Gustave Herter

Upon arriving in New York, Gustave Herter first settled in a Lower Manhattan German community where many other skilled immigrant woodworkers lived and worked. After laboring in various shops, he established a partnership with Auguste Pottier, a French woodworker. In 1851, he joined cabinetmaker Erastus Bulkley to found Bulkley and Herter. The firm relocated uptown on Broadway where other successful cabinetmakers and decorators also operated showrooms. During his time with Bulkley, Gustave designed two entries for the New York Crystal Palace exhibition of 1853 that demonstrated his artisanship and historically derived creative designs.

Gustave’s work attracted the eye of wealthy clients. As early as 1850, New Orleans hotelier Ruggles Sylvester Morse engaged Gustave to decorate his entire home as well as his summer retreat—Victoria Mansion—in Portland, Maine. The interior Gustave designed for Victoria Mansion is the only commission by Gustave that survives intact today.

in the guilds, his fellow Germans were skilled craftspeople and expert carvers, capable of rendering intricate, detailed, and artful designs. Gustave understood what his audience wanted and was able to adapt European designs for the tastes of his American clients. As the head designer, he oversaw the design of all aspects of interior decoration. From his company’s huge stockpile of wood varieties, Gustave’s workers produced furniture with detailed ornamentation.

Gustave’s designs were dynamic. He kept up with the latest trends through exhibitions and publications, taking note of the elaborate furnishings and decor favored by Americans who wanted both function and ornament. While his esthetic leaned toward the Classical, he absorbed ideas from a variety of artistic sources and melded new trends and variations into his work. He was inspired by Owen Jones’ 1856 book, *The Grammar of Ornament*, which compiled examples of ornamentation from different historical eras and geographic areas. Wallpaper designs, fabric textures, and different woods all inspired the pattern, color, and shape of Gustave’s firm’s furniture.



One of the Herter Brothers’ interiors is this gold bathroom installation at Evergreen, the North Baltimore mansion of Robert Garrett’s brother, Thomas Harrison Garrett. In addition to its much-discussed gold toilet, the bathroom features a mosaic design on its walls, ceiling, and floor. Image: Library of Congress

The Younger Brother: Christian Herter

Gustave's younger brother, Christian, immigrated to the United States 11 years after his brother and became a full partner with Gustave in 1864. The firm, renamed Herter Brothers Decorations and Furniture, expanded its reputation and wealth. While Gustave was skilled and innovative, Christian brought a special spark of creative energy and synthesis to the business.

Christian's ease with borrowing different styles was enhanced by a year in France. Already a sophisticated, cosmopolitan artist who spoke several languages, Christian absorbed the latest design trends while working with Pierre-Victor Gallard, a sought-after Parisian decorator who specialized in "eclectic classicism." Through Gallard, Christian became familiar with other prominent designers and was influenced by the seasoned decorator's ability to amalgamize different design styles into his work. At that time—the late 1860s—American design emulated the French, and Christian's own gift for synthesizing influences and translating the grand French models to suit American tastes brought decorating trends to a new level. Soon after Christian's return from Paris, in 1870, Gustave returned to Germany to educate his children, and the younger Herter became the firm's leader and source of its vision.

Christian Herter embraced another set of influences from Europe: that of the English. By the mid-1850s, two artistic movements arose in England that would complement his artistic inclinations. The Aesthetic Movement (1860-1900) and the Arts and Crafts Movement (1880-1920), both of which celebrated individually crafted objects. These movements sought to make everything—from furniture to vases—artistic. The two movements' followers valued "honest" handcrafted items—just what Herter Brothers excelled at—and deplored as "soulless" the mass-produced furniture that had become standard. Words like "reform" and "moral" were associated with these movements. The Gilded Age's newly moneyed class responded to the "honesty" of individually designed furnishings and held in high esteem pieces that were unique expressions of their creators.

Two English artists, Alfred Waterhouse (1830-1905) and Edwin W. Godwin (1833-1886), were particularly influential in revolutionizing Christian's designs. Reflecting a neo-Gothic inspiration, Waterhouse designed the Manchester Town Hall and its furniture in 1868. Waterhouse's chairs often featured a spool design inspired by medieval chairs. Christian's unique rendition of the spool made it a signature ornament for his furniture.

Japanese art, made accessible to Europeans when the nation opened trade to the West in the 1850s, greatly influenced Godwin, who found beauty in its austerity and simplicity, as well as its rectilinear shapes, nature motifs, and stylized designs. Through Godwin's introduction of these elements into English design in the 1870s, Christian discovered new variations of ornamentation. With his great talent for synthesis and his individual creative genius, Christian masterfully translated this new influence into his own work. For the rest of his career, England and Japan were his principal sources of inspiration.



Christian Herter's designs often married Japanese-inspired effects with austere English style. For this piece, the Mark Hopkins Side Chair, housed in the Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum in New York City, Christian "painted on" Japanese nature motifs through marquetry, using different woods to create color. The graceful legs, decorated with spooling, were a specialty of Herter Brothers. Gilding in design cuts added richness, as did the opulent upholstery for the seat. (Credit: Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum in New York City)

A Firm of Innovative Designers

While excelling in furniture building, Herter Brothers also was considered New York's leading decorating firm. Their wide-ranging expertise prompted William H. Vanderbilt, head of New York Central Railroad, to engage Herter Brothers to design his "Triple Palace," a project consisting of three neighboring mansions on Fifth Avenue. Here, Herter Brothers returned to Classical vocabularies while still incorporating new trends. Each room was designed with a different theme (Moorish, Japanese, Egyptian, Classical) and many featured carved interiors similar in design to the foyer of the Garrett-Jacobs Mansion. The Vanderbilt Mansion was demolished in 1926.

Herter Brother's Legacy Lives On in Baltimore

In 1882, Christian retired from Herter Brothers and returned to Germany, leaving William Baumgartner and William Gilman Nichols to lead the firm. It was during this era that Herter Brothers designed the opulent interiors of the Garrett-Jacobs Mansion.



Spiral staircase at the the foyer of the Garrett-Jacobs Mansion

In 1906, Herter Brothers closed its doors. While Herter Brothers furniture can still be seen at museums, auctions, and antiques shops, few of their crafted interiors remain. The Garrett-Jacobs Mansion's dramatic foyer is one of the few places where visitors can experience the work of Herter Brothers on a grand scale. Baltimore has reason to celebrate the existence of this extraordinary space imagined by Stanford White and executed by Herter Brothers.

Bernadette Low, Ph.D., is a member of the Garrett-Jacobs Mansion Endowment Fund (GJMEF) Board of Trustees and Professor Emerita at Community College of Baltimore County, Dundalk.

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