Robin M. Hanson

More Than Simply Treatment

What a Conservator Can Tell You About an Object

Why would someone choose to send to a conservator an object that was not in obvious need of treatment? (The object's condition was excellent and it did not need to be prepared for storage or display.) What could the curator or historic site hope to learn from the conservator? What tools would be needed to accomplish the task?

These were some of the questions raised when the author examined an object from the White House collection. The goal was not treatment, rather it was to collect information. The object's provenance had been established; information provided by the conservator helped to confirm or refute what was already known about the object.

Crazy Quilt, c. 1893-1904, from The While House Collection. Photo courtesy the author.

Background

White House object 995.1747.1 is a crazy quilt, a style of quilt popular in America during the last quarter of the 19th century and into the early years of the 20th century. The quilt is very large, measuring over 90 inches in length and 65 inches in width and comprising over 900 pieces and between 80 and 90 different textiles. White House records date the quilt to the period 1893 to 1904. Accompanying the quilt is a pillow sham, White House object 995.1748.1, that measures roughly 19 inches square. Neither the quilt nor the sham is signed or dated.

The quilt and sham were constructed of scraps of upholstery fabrics, at least some of which were used in White House upholstery projects during the last decade of the 19th century. As such, the objects provide an invaluable record of late-19th-century furnishing textiles, the taste of the day, and textile manufacturing technology. The quilt and sham were made by A. E. Kennedy, a Washington, DC, merchant who provided a variety of services for the White House, including reupholstery, during the years 1893-1904.[1] Both objects were purchased in the summer of 1995 in Frederick, Maryland, at an estate sale of a descendent of A. E. Kennedy.

The quilt and sham are reflective of Victorian sensibilities in their use of a variety of rich textiles such as brocades, velvets, taffetas, and satins. By any measure, the textiles used throughout are sumptuous.

Project Description and Findings

One of the goals of the project was to determine if any of the fabrics used in the quilt and sham could be found on furniture in the White House during the last decade of the 19th century. Research focused on the main formal rooms of state on the first floor, particularly the East Room, and the Green Room, Blue Room, and Red Room. The interiors of the formal rooms of state were photographed frequently, therefore increasing the likelihood that photographs including upholstered furniture might exist and could be matched to fabrics used in the quilt.

As a first step, a Mylar overlay of the quilt was made. Pieces were counted and fabrics inventoried for later reference and characterized as to weave structure and fiber content.

A stereo binocular microscope (common equipment in most large conservation labs) was used to characterize the weave structure of the textiles. This step is particularly important in cases where there are several small pieces of simi-

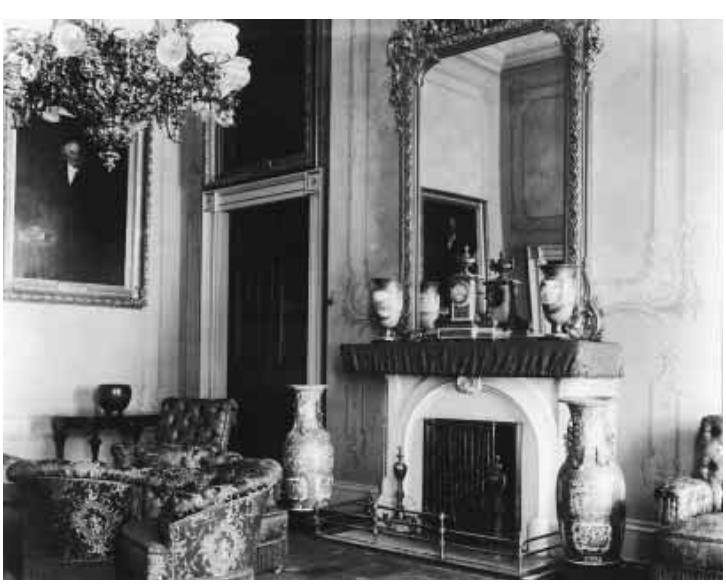
larly colored textiles; determining the weave structure often can help confirm whether or not the two pieces are from the same textile.

A polarized light microscope was used for fiber identification. Because this testing technique is destructive (it requires the removal of several minute fibers from the object) only limited fiber analysis was accomplished in the course of this project and only in those few areas where existing splits or tears allowed a small sample to be taken. The excellent condition of the object made complete fiber analysis impossible.

Determining if any of the fabrics used in the quilt were the same as those seen in the historic photographs was a process akin to assembling a jigsaw puzzle. From the large black-and-white prints taken of sections of the quilt, all scraps of the same textile literally were cut out of the photograph, laid on a table, and oriented to try and establish a pattern, or repeat, that matched the textile on a particular piece of furniture in a historic photograph. Once properly oriented, the scraps were taped together. The results of this detective work are described below.

East Room

Although envisioned by the architect as a levee or reception room, the East Room—the largest of the formal rooms of state and occupying the entire east end of the first floor of the White House—instead functioned more as a grand salon. Photographs from 1890, taken during the Benjamin Harrison administration, show a room with furniture upholstered in a dark pile textile, presumably a velvet. The furniture was typical of the Victorian era, massive and solid in feel and very ornate, with elaborate fringe known as passementerie.



Green Room, 1893. Photo courtesy The White House (Library of Congress Collection).

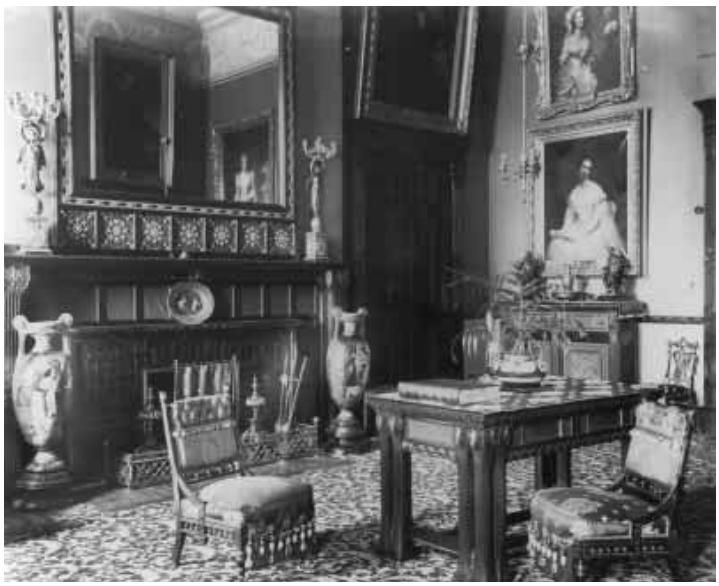
While it was not possible to positively match the pile textiles in these black-and-white photographs to the pile textiles that appear frequently in the quilt, clearly pile textiles were commonly used upholstery fabrics. Period photographs reveal a large round ottoman in the center of the room and side chairs along the walls; all are upholstered in the same dark pile textile. Elaborate ornamentation in the form of long fringe is in evidence around the bottoms of some of the side chairs as well as the ottoman.

By the late-19th century, visual records reveal a room with an exotic feel. Large potted palms and ferns, interspersed with seating furniture, line the walls. Only a small section of this enormous room is revealed by the photograph. An upholstered armchair with elaborate fringe is seen in profile in the foreground. From the small yet clearly-visible area of textile covering the armrest, it is possible to identify this textile as one of the fabrics used in the quilt. It is a satin weave with gold warps and wefts in pale yellow and white comprising the design of varying species of exotic flowers—parrot tulips, double or triple carnations, chrysanthemums, and lilies, among others—appearing as "medallions" surrounded by interlocking circular garlands of small flowers such as forget-me-nots[2] and diamonds. The round ottoman, still present in the center of the room, has been reupholstered in a textile similar to or the same as the textile used for the armchair.

Because historic documentation indicated the room was decorated in gold and white, it is not illogical to assume that the furnishing textiles used in the room were gold. By cutting pieces out of the black-and-white photographs that corresponded to the same textile, and piecing them together, the pattern on the armrest could be established.

Green Room

Somewhat lighter and airier in feel than the East Room, the Green Room is a small room located along the south side of the building, between the East Room and the Blue Room. In a photograph dated 1893, taken at the end of the Harrison administration, a large piece of upholstered seating furniture, serpentine in shape, is covered in a lavish textile. Known as an *indiscret*, this type of seating furniture is described as being "typical of conversational seating fashionable



Red Room, 1893. Photo by Frances Benjamin Johnston, courtesy The White House (Library of Congress Collection).

during the Second Empire."[3] While the color of the textile cannot be determined from the black-and-white photograph, it is not unreasonable to presume that it was green. It is another one of the fabrics on the quilt, a satin weave with green warps and white and gold wefts. Again the repeat was established in the same manner.

Red Room

Adjacent to the State Dining Room, the Red Room traditionally is used by first ladies as a reception room. Photographs taken in the summer of 1893, during the second administration of Grover Cleveland, reveal another room typical of the Victorian era. Again large urns flank the fireplace, pictures are hung salon style on the walls, and the massive, solid wood chairs are sumptuously upholstered and finished with elaborate passementerie. The chairs that appear in the foreground of the photograph are upholstered in a textile that corresponds to yet another textile on the quilt. It is a satin weave with red warps and red and white wefts.

Of particular interest is the description of this upholstery fabric found while examining historic records. It was characterized as a "silk-like fabric with palmette-like medallions interspersed with small diamonds." This pattern can be seen in photographs where the repeat was established in the same manner. These small diamonds have been used as a design element in the quilt; several of the motifs in the center section contain alternating pieces of this red textile with its small white diamond, interspersed with a pile weave textile.

Since completing this research, the author made a fourth match using a photograph in Esther Singleton's 1907 book, *The Story of the White House*. In this undated photograph, Mrs. William McKinley is seated in an upholstered chair; the textile used on the chair is the same one used on the back of the sham. At least two other matches have been made by staff during the course of related research. In these cases, actual fabric scraps were recovered from furniture during reupholstery projects, and matched to fabrics used in the quilt.

As has been illustrated, invaluable information about this unique artifact was provided by the textile conservator. By using a few simple tools and techniques, the conservator was able to obtain information directly from the object itself. This information contributed to the understanding of the quilt's history and of furnishing textiles used in the White House at the turn of the century.

Notes

1 In the 1940s, a Park Service historian went through White House records at the National Archives and copied transactions, including invoices, between local merchants and the White House. From these records, Kennedy can be linked to specific White House projects between the years 1893 and 1904.

2 Forget-me-nots commonly were regarded as an emblem of constancy and friendship. In the Victorian era, the symbolism attached to specific flowers would have been widely understood.

3 Mary Schoeser and Kathleen Dejardin, *French Textiles: From 1760 to the Present* (London: Laurence King, 1991), 130.

Robin M. Hanson is completing an advanced internship in textile conservation at the NPS Harpers Ferry Center–Conservation. The research on this object was undertaken during her training in art conservation at the Winterthur Museum/University of Delaware Program in Art Conservation.

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