The Winterthur Museum and Gardens, from Inside to Outside: Interpretation and Conservation Challenges

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Introduction

Winterthur is a non-profit educational institution set on a 980-acres in Delaware. The institution was founded in 1951 by Henry Francis du Pont (1880-1969), a DuPont Chemical Company scion who repurposed his ancestral estate into a museum housing a premier collection of American decorative arts, an outstanding botanic garden and a first-rate research library. Envisioned by du Pont as a unified entity managed by a strongly hierarchical staff, over time the Museum Garden & Library separated into more horizontal, professional divisions: curatorial, interpretative, horticultural, conservation and collection management. Today Winterthur’s professional divisions are charged with the management, preservation and interpretation of about 90,000 objects in the museum and garden collection and 750,000 in the library (Figure 1).

Abstract

For decades, Winterthur has been a leader in the practice and theory of conservation, preservation and interpretation of American decorative arts, applying this knowledge to the Winterthur museum collection and to the training of the next generations of curators and conservators. A recent policy change requiring a similar level of care to the institution’s garden ornament challenges many established practices. This paper will discuss the various issues confronting the institution regarding Winterthur’s outdoor objects, in terms of ethics, conservation treatments, long-term maintenance and funding. The necessity of a multidisciplinary collaborative approach of historic houses preservation will become evident, from inside to outside.

Keywords

Preservation, twentieth century museums, seventeenth to twentieth century objects, garden ornament, garden interpretation, conservation

Fig. 1. Winterthur garden, October 2012
HF du Pont and Winterthur

Henry Francis du Pont, born at Winterthur in 1880, was the third generation of his family to live on the estate (Figure 2). He married Ruth Wales in 1916 and together they had two daughters. Du Pont had three great passions: American antiques, gardening, and cow breeding; all of which contributed to making Winterthur one of the greatest of American country estates in the first half of the twentieth century [Aslet 1990]. His collections and garden were developed as a unified vision of grand living rooted in a twentieth century ideal of the American past. During World War II, when fuel restrictions and labor shortages made country house life no longer viable, du Pont made plans to open his estate to the public. In 1951, he endowed a non-profit corporation and gave over the management of his collection to museum professionals [Montgomery, 1964].

The inside

Over the eighteen years that du Pont and the museum co-existed, from 1951 to 1969, the curatorial staff preserved most of du Pont's 1931-1951 displays of 1640-1840 material while using as many opportunities as possible to provide the public with the latest scholarship. With du Pont’s support and advice, the staff upgraded the collections, installed new rooms and presented temporary exhibitions. Excited by all the new information and eager for more, du Pont funded a Winterthur graduate degree program, a research library, a state of the art conservation facility [Harris, 1981]. The contradictions between du Pont’s displays and new information gathered from the growing field of American decorative arts, a field he was largely responsible for launching, increased immeasurably after his 1969 death. By 1975, changes to the installations at Winterthur caused enough concern that the board of trustees adopted a policy to “freeze” 21 rooms which best represented du Pont. The other 154 rooms could be changed freely.

With great seriousness, and much discussion over the last three decades, the institution has held to its twinned responsibilities of maintaining du Pont’s rooms as much as possible while investigating the original condition and context of the objects. These responsibilities can produce conflicting results: a 1770s Philadelphia-made sofa (1951.0007) [1] has been re-upholstered using a reproduction of an early eighteenth century French damask chosen by Mr. du Pont in 1952; on the other hand a rare set of 1764-65 English silver candlesticks (1961.0546.001-004) which once...
provided atmospheric electric illumination in du Pont’s Port Royal Parlor and were part of the Frozen Room collection, were stripped of their wires and plastic candles in 1998 and restored to an approximation of their eighteenth century condition (Figure 3).

This tension between interpretations manifests itself in nearly every conservation and curatorial decision. However, across all areas of responsibility, there is an agreement on the institutional mission, which is preservation for future generations. This dynamic tends to favor treatment options that adhere to the conservation profession’s best practice of keeping alterations as reversible as possible.

Early in the history of the museum, there was a commitment of the annual budget toward care of the museum collection. Beginning in the early 1950s, a Belgian-trained cabinetmaker, Arthur Van Reeth, worked as furniture restorer. In 1953, Gordon K. Saltar began the first scientific research on the microscopic identification of woods. In 1958, Howard Plenderleith was hired to make a comprehensive assessment of collection care which established care of collection procedures for over a decade. In response to his recommendations, tinted storm windows were installed to reduce sunlight intrusion and the resulting heat burden. A full-structure heating, ventilating, and de-humidifying project began in 1961 and took six years to complete. More light-reduction steps were taken in the 1980s. In the late 1990s, a state-of-the-art lighting system was installed. An updated and comprehensive Collections Management Policy was adopted by the Board in 2005 and has been subsequently revised. Today there are 17 professionals dedicated to the conservation and preservation of the museum collection.
The outside

Before a 2010 policy change, Winterthur’s collection of 400+ garden ornaments – antique English and Continental wrought-iron gates, lanterns and seating furniture; antique lead sculpture and cisterns; a variety of bird baths, sundials and armillary spheres; 1930s terrace furniture, lighting and decorative cast concrete objects were not managed within the museum’s collection care framework. Because most of the outdoor collection is European and/or twentieth century, with no history in the United States before being sited at Winterthur, it was previously considered outside the usual collecting policy. Moreover, and in high contrast to other collection objects, these pieces are exposed to the weather; touched by the public and treated even more cavalierly by insects, birds and squirrels. Particularly because of the latter reasons, the collection was considered not within the scope of Winterthur’s curatorial and conservation staff.

High-risk conditions are the inherent environment of garden furniture and there are ways to minimize the risk. The most extreme is to simply store them indoors, and this has been employed in some cases at Winterthur. This sort of radical intervention is modified when reproductions are made and placed in lieu of the originals, an accepted approach in the conservation field. Winterthur textiles have long been subject to this. Although fabrics are retained on view as long as possible, some reach a point when they must go into storage and are replaced with reproductions. Du Pont suffered reproductions on occasion. He was aware, as the staff is today, that they are never perfect—they lack the luster, color and texture of the original.

Particularized ethical questions arise with garden ornament. When artifacts have been created to be integrated in an inherently damaging environment, is removing them from their setting acceptable or not? Is their authenticity preserved when stored indoors? Is the original material more important than the original intent? In 1981, the Florence Charter drafted by ICOMOS to address the conservation of historic gardens, defined a Historic Garden as a living monument (Article 3) [2]. During the Nara Conference on Authenticity in 1994, Carmen Anon Feliu, referring to that article, emphasized that the creator of a historic garden provided Time with original material to be transformed. This action converts Time into a “creative element.” Dynamism is integral to the garden, which is in perpetual transformation [Anon Feliu 1995, 221]. The Florence Charter posits: ‘The permanent or movable architectural, sculptural or decorative features which form an integral part of the historic garden must be removed or displaced only insofar as this is essential for their conservation or restoration. The replacement or restoration of any such jeopardised features must be effected in accordance with the principles of the Venice Charter, and the date of any complete replacement must be indicated’ (Article 13). In the instance of gardens, the intent and attitude of the creator of the gardens, H.F. du Pont at Winterthur, should be considered in regards to conservation decisions.

At Winterthur, the challenges posed by the garden furnishings are accentuated by the institution’s complicated history with the garden. In 1951, when du Pont turned over the management of his indoor collections to the museum staff, he released all responsibility to them and until his death, acted only as an advisor. In 1952, when he opened the garden to the public, it was for the spring only, and he chose to lease the land and supervise his gardeners himself. By the time the institution took ownership of the garden on his 1969 death, the museum staff had spent decades creating guidelines and policies with the indoor collections in mind. Immediately after du Pont’s death, the gardeners continued to care for the furnishings with the same efficiency as when du Pont was alive (Figure 4). Everything was regularly repaired, oiled and repainted; placed in the barns or under customized covers in the winter; each moveable item marked and identified on a garden furnishings plan originally drawn up in 1931 by du Pont’s landscape architect, Marian Coffin (1876-1957).

This care was commensurate with du Pont’s understanding of the ornament as an essential element of his garden. In 1928, when he commissioned Coffin, ornaments were prioritized: ‘I have a great number of figures, benches, wall fountains etc. collected over a period of years, which I thought could be used to advantage.’
planned accordingly. They are as integral to the design as the plant spectrum, the rolling terrain, and the path systems. For over 60 years, with painstaking devotion, du Pont developed the best American example of the “Wild Garden” theories of landscape architect William Robinson (1838-1935). In creating this unusual garden, du Pont was aided by Coffin, between 53 and 83 gardeners, and an almost unlimited income. By 1970, when the institution took on the responsibility of the Winterthur garden, none of these factors were available anymore.

In the continued aftermath of du Pont’s death, as the institution struggled with the new financial burden of a 1000-acre estate and the diminishing endowment returns of the 1969-1970 recession, it is surprising any attention was paid to the newly-inherited garden furnishings. In fact, there were several attempts to treat them in a manner consistent with the house furnishings. In August of 1970, conservator Geoffrey Lemmer made a condition assessment of the 76 lead garden statuaries. In 1976, an iron assessment was made by Winterthur metals conservator Don Heller. It is unclear if any treatment resulted. The economic stagnation of the mid-1970s forced the museum into difficult choices. Among many other institutional cut-backs, winter care for garden furniture was eliminated. Things either remained outside all year or went into storage indefinitely. The pieces outside (even the newest were then at least 30 years old), deteriorated. Over time, more and more were relegated to storage. In 1985, volunteer Lonnie Dobbs and her daughter Renee photo-documented as many pieces as they could find, in storage and in the garden. The notebooks they created remain one of the primary

Fig. 4. The Winterthur Garden, 1935 Samuel Gotscho. Courtesy of Winterthur Archives.
historical source materials. By 1990, the majority of ornament was in storage and the condition of the remainder was poor. Squirrels had developed a habit of gnawing on the lead, literally eating the statues away. This single factor figured prominently in the decision to remove as much lead as possible from the garden.

Garden objects elsewhere

At Winterthur, the neglect of the garden in the 1970s and 80s fits into a larger social trend. There was not a wide interest in historic landscapes in these decades. The reconstruction of Thomas Jefferson’s vegetable garden at Monticello did not begin until the 1980s. Until then, the iconic presidential home was marooned within parking lots. As at Monticello (and Mt Vernon, Winterthur and almost all historic houses in the period), the focus was inside not outside [Birnbaum, 2000]. In an even more concentrated fashion, the 1970-1990 history of garden ornament at Winterthur is consistent with what took place at other gardens during the same period. The decorative sundials and lead cupids esteemed by du Pont and his cohorts in the 1930s lost their value after World War II. A more clean-lined and modernist style became preferred, a cultural shift that only deepened in the 1970s and 80s as the objects and the generation that valued them aged. Among the better documented examples of this is Hidcote, the extravagant Cotswold garden created by Lawrence Waterbury Johnston. Although one of the most popular sites in the British National Trust’s portfolio since Johnston gave it to Britain in 1948, most of the garden ornament was dispersed to other gardens or auctioned off in 1970 [Clarke, 2009]. A less dramatic example, but closer to home, is Longwood Gardens, developed on the private estate of by du Pont’s second cousin Pierre (1870-1954). This highly technological garden, known for its spring-bloom-in-winter conservatories, has evolved in style since Pierre’s 1954 death. Old photographs testify to the unexpected romanticism of the ornament that once dotted those grounds.

Resurrection

By the 1980s, the Winterthur garden was widely perceived as almost lost. There was an initiative taken in the early 1990’s ‘to sell all garden furniture.’ [3] A board committee formed to resuscitate the garden. They declined to sell the furniture and instead raised funds and awareness (Lonnie Dobb’s 1985 photo documentation of the furniture was part of this effort). In 1988, Winterthur hired a director to supervise the rehabilitation of the garden, Thomas Buchter (now at Marie Selby Botanical Gardens in Florida). The clean-up of the garden took a decade. Damaged hardscape included cracked concrete, crumbling asphalt, and an acre of obsolete greenhouses. The horticulture task was even more massive. Overgrown shrubs, invasive plants and dead and dying plants tunneled through du Pont’s once-meticulous garden. There was no hope of achieving an exact restoration of du Pont’s garden, which had been a magnificent dinosaur even in the 1960s when du Pont was alive to supervise his army of gardeners. Instead Buchter aimed for a more achievable goal: design intent, defined as identifying du Pont’s objectives in each area and then approximating it as closely as possible given the resources available and the fluctuating environmental conditions. Intent was exposed through systematic investigation of remaining plant material, photographs and maps; the vast archive of plant orders and gardener’s reports; and oral histories with those involved. To give clarity to the project, the board of trustees declared the garden a complete work of art, each area adding to the whole. Winterthur’s department of horticulture united behind that understanding.

Summation of history

At this point, in the early 1990s, a distinct philosophical split cleaved the inside and outside goals of the institution. Outside, the garden staff committed fully to achieving du Pont’s design as the ultimate goal.
Inside, the commitment was much wider than to one man’s point of view. It was also to the long-term preservation of objects, to the advancement of historic understanding and making new information accessible to the public. Recent treatment of the garden ornament, in its new position as a collection object and its traditional role as a garden design element, has been instructive in first making apparent and second helping to bridge this institutional gap. A review of the restoration process for three objects, each at a different time period, reveals different approaches that have been taken.

**Bath House Lanterns** *(1969.4228.1,2)*

By 2000, this pair of 1930 iron lanterns, designed by Walter Kantack for the bath houses, had become dangerously eroded (Figure 5). Accessioned into the collection in 1994, the number was never painted onto the object. In 2000, when the lanterns were evaluated by the curatorial and conservation staff, they were unaware that the pair was already part of the museum collection. Using standards of connoisseurship developed for eighteenth and nineteenth century objects, the lanterns were judged to be in poor condition, lacking in significance and replacements were ordered. As intended, the replacements - custom-made reproductions of a pair of nineteenth - century lanterns from one of the museum rooms - had no connection to the originals in design, date or scale. In 2005, the new garden director Chris Strand rescued one of the lanterns from the trash and stored it. The other is lost. This painful chain of events galvanized the institution into taking its twentieth century garden ornament more seriously. In 2006, the position of estate historian was created and in 2010 the responsibilities of curator of garden objects was added.

**Lead hippocampus** *(1969.4083)*

Purchased at auction in 1928, this sculpture was bought as English, late seventeenth century (Figure 6). A year before the garden was complete, Coffin installed it at the pool for a focal point as she completed her design (Figure 7). Over the years it has suffered significantly from the elements, handling by visitors and gnawing squirrels. In 2005, garden staff, curators and conservators, determined that it was no longer aesthetically or structurally fit for display in the reflecting pool. A reproduction in polyester resin was crafted using imaging and modeling techniques to recreate the hippocampus so that the original could be stabilized and stored [4]. The reproduction was then painted to resemble the aged original. Although more expensive and time-

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*Fig. 5. Bath house lanterns. Left: one of the pair of original 1930s lantern. Right: one of the pair of 2005 replacements.*
consuming than anticipated, the project is considered a success. Since 2007, the painted resin casting has been on view year-round and, with two hot-wax coating applied to protect the paint, has aged well. A similar approach has been taken with twelve other lead garden objects. Creating and installing custom reproductions has preserved the original object while providing the public with an understanding of the design intent. A few years later the opposite decision was made!

Fig. 6. Lead hippocampus (back) and its reproduction in polyester resin (front).

Fig. 7. Winterthur pool, May 5, 1930, with hippocampus in place. Courtesy of Winterthur Archives.
Iron lilies (1969.4178.1,2)

In 1956, du Pont bought from a New Orleans antiques dealer an unusual pair of wrought-iron lilies set in a battered bronze, concrete-filled, Italianate vase (Figure 8). The lilies were placed immediately in the newly-created Sundial Garden. In 2001, they were removed because of safety concerns. In 2010, a donor pledged restoration money for the lilies. A $30,000 estimate for the reproduction of the pair stalled the process as options were discussed. A resin reproduction was not expected to produce successful results. Commissioning an ironsmith to recreate individual flowers generated questions about artistic ownership, artistic license and objective evaluations of the end result. Ultimately, the decision was made to repair the original lilies for one-third of the reproduction price and return them to their original position in the garden. This choice included a long-term maintenance plan and permanent funding for a summer intern. The surface of the lilies will be hot-waxed each summer and covered in the winter.

Conclusion

From 1987 through to 2005, Winterthur developed several guidelines and policies that impacted the stewardship of garden furniture and objects. As imperfect as these were, they set the stage for the present guidelines and practices. In 2010, paint conservator Susan Buck analyzed the paint history of a set of 1930s chairs and they are now repainted the proper 1930s color, a variation of the fashionable “Wallis Blue.” Currently, outdoor sculpture conservator Adam Jenkins is testing a capsicum-wax to use on our lead sculptures as protection against the squirrels so they may be returned to the garden.

Garden objects are at the frontier of “permanent” and “ephemeral” works of art. They relate to traditional indoor museum objects by their materiality but to the dynamism of nature by their situation outdoors. The iron lilies illustrate that unique dichotomy perfectly: flowers made out of iron to be part of a garden. What is their meaning in an indoor storage? Hence the difficulty in making conservation decisions about these objects. The conservator needs to find the right equilibrium between preserving the material and their essence as garden artifacts. The Winterthur staff works collaboratively to define that equilibrium on a case to case basis, with the intent to link, as du Pont did in his time, the inside with the outside.
Endnotes

[1] The numbers in brackets cited refer to the inventory numbers of artifacts belonging to the Winterthur collection


References:


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