

12 December 1972

MEMBERS, FAC

The attached article from the Washington Post criticizes the Department of State's Fine Arts Commission for furnishing some parts of the Department as though it were an 18th century Philadelphia town house, and argues it would be much wiser to use the best 20th century furniture, in which the U.S. excels, as well as modern American handcrafts. Presumably the author would say the same for American art. The article thus is an unconscious recommendation of what the CIA's FAC has in fact been doing. Note especially in the sidelined paragraph on page 2 that Knoll is identified as one of the two great American design firms. It is for this reason that [REDACTED] and I have been pressing to returnish one of the Agency's public faces, the main reception room, with Knoll furniture even though it exceeds the schedule.

STATINTL

[REDACTED]
Acting Chairman
Fine Arts Commission

STATINTL

The Old And New

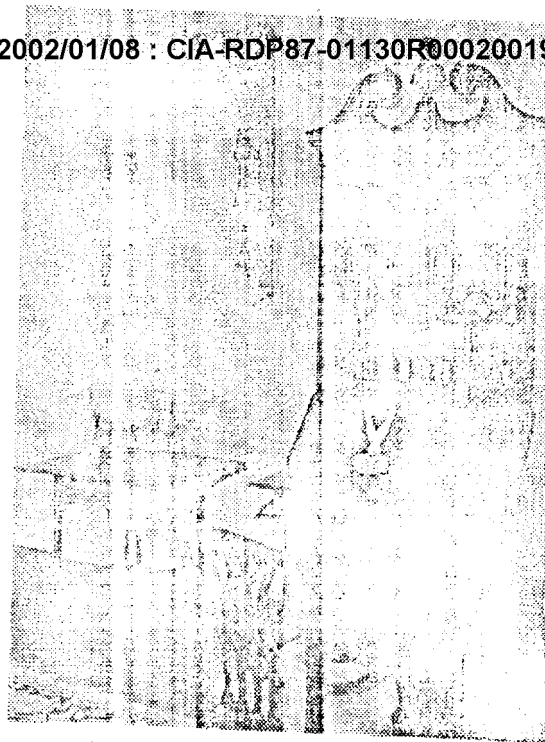
By *Wolf Von Eckardt*

One of the most beautiful public collections of early American furnishings is housed in one of the ugliest buildings in Washington.

"Be kind to us, we are hard-pressed public servants who are doing the best we can," said Clement E. Conger after a tour of this \$7 million array of precious Americana. It furnishes what seems like miles of Diplomatic Reception Rooms on the eighth floor of the State Department Building, a pseudo-modern structure of awesome, sterile mediocrity, designed in the late 1950s.

Conger, a man with charming humor and erudition, is the chairman of the committee in charge of the State Department's Americana collection. He serves without salary, being paid only for his other job as curator of the White House.

There is no reason for anyone to be unkind about Conger's punctilious per-



A Philadelphia Chippendale Pembroke table and late 18th-century mahogany Philadelphia secretary-desk are part of the antique furnishings in one of Washington's modern office buildings.

formance in carrying out a difficult but questionable assignment for the State Department. One might also question his zeal in raising funds for the White House furnishings, a growing but somewhat lesser collection

than that displayed at State. Furnishing the Diplomatic Reception Rooms with precious antiques can be questioned on several counts:

Why, first of all, should
See CITYSCAPE, C5, Col. 1

By
F
I dc
me
Gab
Ball
Hot
Fi
who
abo
for
ing
the
ball
app
side
Fra
vice
Am

whi
mir
Chi
Adr
Zur
wal
wir
be
the
wh
the
rief
N
slip
tho
mer
ver
pro
"
a
act
the
es
the
sig
as
gra
E
call
Roc
bee
ion
a
Kea
gue
Spi
laud

INSIDE STYLE

Coming

• *Walter Hopps, this area's most widely respected authority on contemporary art, has been hired by the Smithsonian Institution's National Collection of Fine Arts. See story, Page C7.*

Going

• *Bill Walton, managing director of the Washington Theater Club, has resigned after two years in that post. See story, Page C3.*

Washington Post, 9 Dec 1972

Mixing Antique Chippendale With GSA Drinking Fountains

CITYSCAPE, From CI

the setting for the official functions of late 20th-century American government in Washington be dressed up in late 18th-century Philadelphia townhouse style.

The reception rooms are, of course, meant to impress foreign visitors, some 60,000 a year, not to speak of the 20,000 or so tourists who see them annually. Foreigners tend to look upon the U.S. as a progressive, forward-looking nation. Most of them can see more and older antiques in one of their own small towns than we can offer in the whole country. We can't beat them at their own game.

But where we are beating them is in the area of 20th-century interior design. America's modern designers, the people behind Knoll, Herman Miller, the two foremost American interior design firms, and designers like George Nelson, Harry Bertola, Marcel Breuer, Mies van der Rohe, to name just a few, are world leaders.

What is more, as Sarah Booth Conroy, a writer on such matters, has often reported, there is currently an exciting revival of the crafts in this country. The \$50,000 the State Department has paid for a desk used by Thomas Jefferson (and protected by a glass cover from diplomatic cocktail stains and cigarette butts), could finance the work of an American craftsman for at least a year.

For half the money spent on showing where America's culture of living has been, when we were still a British colony, we could show the best of that culture today, now that we are a mature, and astoundingly creative nation.

It is also questionable, highly questionable, whether antique American Chippendale, English Sheraton, rare Hepplewhite and 18th-century French furniture can be made to fit into modern assigned modern spaces whose architects had some awful motel interiors in mind. The scale is all wrong. The sequence in which the rooms are arranged from the elevator lobby to the grand hall for big state dinners, with a parlor in between, would not even work right for a Shriners' convention.

It is just awful to see Conger's treasures displayed under these low ceilings, amidst GSA office drinking fountains. The effect of a charming early American painting is utterly spoiled when it half covers a red fire alarm.

Lovely, dainty crystal chandeliers are cluttered by hideous air conditioning vents. The glass walls are obscured by all these curtains giving the room the appearance of the yard

floor of some department store. And then there are those columns, the curse of curtain-wall architecture, which in some rooms utterly defeat the furniture display. And a display it is. Most of the antiques are lined up along the wall as in a museum, conversation pieces for stand-up cocktail parties. These reception rooms may serve receptions. Rooms they are not.

Conger knows it, of course, and is unhappy about it. His remedy is to rebuild the rooms—heightening ceilings where possible, hiding the plumbing, installing moldings, fireplaces and alcoves and placing false walls with small windows in front of those modern expanses of glass.

It is all skillfully done, in the proper style of the period pieces by an expert architect, Edward V. Jones, who has restored historic houses and done the same sort of thing for the New York Metropolitan Museum of Art.

But it is skillful, stylistically expert fakery—and fiercely expensive. \$215,000 has already been spent on these so-called "architectural improvements" and at least another \$200,000 is needed to complete the deception.

Yes, it is a deception to put a kind of pastiche 18th-century Disney world on top of a modern office building.

We are not really that devoid of genuine history in our national capital. Why couldn't the State Department, for less money, have restored one of Washington's great mansions—the kind we keep tearing down?

The lovely houses along the west side of Lafayette Square, instead of being remodeled into offices, might have served well, particularly since they adjoin Blair House, which is also used to receive foreign guests.

The old State, War and Navy Building (now the Executive Office Building) next to the White House, a jewel of glorious Americana of the boisterous Ulysses S. Grant period, could yield some fabulous reception halls. Their counterpiece would be the Indian Treaty Room.

But this is hindsight. What remains to be acknowledged, and sadly, is that our Secretaries of State who launched this questionable idea do not have much faith in the culture and design of our own time. They truly believe that only the 18th century—even if faked—"reflects our national history and culture," as Secretary William P. Rogers put it.

One question still keeps nagging, however. If it is official policy to represent government in a staged, historic setting, why doesn't the government pay for it? The State Department and the White House antiques are

paid for not with tax money but tax deductions. The donors are rich and prominent, of course, and more often than not the kind of people who are receptive to having their favors returned.

To raise more money for White House furnishings, Conger and his White House Historical Association authorized a commercial enter-

prise, the Franklin Mint, to sell officially-blessed presidential medals in exchange for royalties.

Criticized for this commercialism, Conger asked: "How else can we raise more money?" Well, he might, for instance, follow the British example. To help finance the upkeep of Blenheim Palace,

the late 10th Duke of Marlborough used to stand at the palace gate, selling guidebooks to tourists. Other lords, knights and dukes, in addition to charging admission to their historic homes, introduced side-shows to pull the crowds.

The Marquess of Bath acquired 46 lions of Oceanic origin to pay his guests. Lord

Montagu featured a vintage car museum and an antique car model mail-order business. The Duke of Beauford charged extra for a peek at his foxhounds. Some ladies of the manor extract a fee for tea.

Perhaps Conger could persuade President Nixon personally to sell these medals which he might autograph

with a grease pencil. There would be no end to the White House Historical Association's income potential, if the pandas, those cuddly gifts from China, were to be displayed at the White House Rose Garden where they could be viewed for a \$10 admission, say.

Tea with the First Lady should fetch at least 10

times that amount, with extra charge when Tris serves the sugar.

Aburd? Well, isn't the whole notion of turning government state rooms into period museums a little absurd? I am afraid it is, even if hard-pressed civil servants does it with exceptional d

vision and expertise.