

Script

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In the Summer of 2017, the University of Mary Washington Archaeological field school excavated a utilitarian yard of Sherwood Forest Plantation in Stafford County, Virginia. From 1843 to 1864, this property was home to the plantation owners, the Fitzhughs, white overseers, and approximately fifty enslaved individuals. During the university's dig, multiple decorative items were found. These items most likely belonged to the Fitzhugh family.

The Fitzhugh family, like others in 19th century Europe and America, probably had an enormous appetite for mass-produced, consumer goods. The rapid standardization of manufacturing methods made formerly inaccessible products both cheap and readily available. A trend of home object curation, or what is commonly called “bric-a-brac,” arose from this sudden influx of consumer goods. Completely decorative and mostly cheap, these knick-knacks decorated the tables, mantles, and other furniture pieces of Victorian homes. These seemingly ubiquitous objects offer some insight as to how their former owners positioned themselves socially and their participation in the cultural movements and attitudes of the mid to late nineteenth century. In the context of an Antebellum and Postbellum plantation home, decorative objects and the spaces they occupied were used to convey complex messages about the power and cultural capital of the owner.

The selection and curation of the decorations in the Fitzhugh home would have been the responsibility of the family matriarch, Jane Fitzhugh. In doing this duty, Jane was following the tenets of a dominant cultural ideology, the “Cult of Domesticity.” The idea

behind the Cult of Domesticity was that a mother and wife should be the spiritual center of her home, and raise her children to be patriotic and virtuous citizens. Jane Fitzhugh would have been obligated to make her home a literal “shelter” from the outside world, where her husband could rest and her children would be safe from corrupting influences. This shelter also needed to be beautiful. It was thought that beautiful surroundings would positively influence the mind and soul, so Jane would have been expected to decorate her home beautifully.

The Cult of Domesticity’s emphasis on the physical separation between public (masculine) and private (feminine) spheres, made it so that female-dominated spaces within the home, such as the parlor, became increasingly private and physically secluded. This seclusion is reflected in the floor plan of the Sherwood Forest big house. The home had a “closed off” floor plan, with a central hallway running through the ground story. The first floor’s dining room and two parlors are accessible from the hallway by french doors. The two living spaces, the parlor and the less formal “living room,” were internally divided by a pocket door. In these photos you can see the two French doors on either side of the main entrance. The photo on the right is a view from within one of the living rooms. You can see how the pocket door could be used to divide the space. Access to these private living spaces was probably granted at the discretion of Jane Fitzhugh. She would have opened and closed her parlors for visitors based on status and relation to the family. The objects that decorated these spaces would have been carefully selected. Remember, Jane was operating under the premise that the beauty of these spaces was a reflection of her and her family’s virtue.

Now, let's talk about what was actually decorating these spaces. By the late nineteenth-century, almost anything that could be modeled was represented in the form of a figurine. People, animals, and mythological characters were all possible muses for figurine makers. Contemporary celebrities and notorious figures were also popular subjects, so many parlors were graced with a miniature Queen Victoria or Napoleon Bonaparte. On this slide, I have Queen Victoria, shepherdess, and "King John" 19th century figurines.

Actors and other performers could also inspire figurines. Joseph Grimaldi, who was a famous clown of the period, popularized the traditional Victorian clown costume. Many figurines of clowns were likely modeled after him. These two clown figurines, which are currently housed in the Victoria and Albert museum, are in costumes typical for the time period.

This is the head of porcelain clown figurine, recovered from the Sherwood Forest dig. Its head was broken cleanly from the body of the figurine, which is to be expected. Anything that protrudes from a statue or figure is normally the first thing to be broken off. Much of the paint has definitely worn off in the 150 years it was in the earth, but you can still see some of the original colors on the hair, brim of the hat, mouth, and cheeks. It was probably displayed in its entirety inside the Fitzhugh family's home.

When compared to the other clowns, it seems very similar to them in dress and expression. The painted face, raucous expression, conical hat, and oddly styled, curly hair were all common visual motifs for 19th-century clowns.

This clown is interesting because it means that the Fitzhugh family probably participated in , or at least knew about, popular forms of leisure and entertainment. Clowns were typically seen in performances called pantomimes. The pantomime would begin with a tableau from a recognizable story, like “Cinderella” or Romeo and Juliet, and then be disrupted by clowns or stock characters like Harlequin and Columbine. On this slide I have some advertisements from Alexandria newspapers for “The Green Monster” and “the Rendezvous” pantomime. “Christmas” pantomimes were also popular and in the middle here I’ve also included a late 19th century advertisement for a London Christmas pantomime. After looking through some databases of Virginia newspapers, it seems that advertisements like these were fairly prevalent. So, one can easily imagine that the Fitzhughs would have attended and been familiar with pantomimes. In doing so they were not only entertaining themselves, but also signaling their cultural literacy. Because, in order to laugh at the clown’s antics and disruptions, they had to already understand the canon they were hijacking.

Other objects of bric a brac that probably existed in the Fitzhugh home were ceramic vessels with decorative motifs. Two sherds from two different vessels were recovered during UMW’s investigation of Sherwood Forest. One from a “Rebekah at the Well teapot” and one from a “Bennet Heron” pitcher. These sherds are pictured here.

The “Rebekah at the Well” motif comes from an Old Testament Bible story, where a woman named Rebekah was chosen to be Issac’s wife because of her willingness to help his servant. This story captivated Americans of the 19th century, and the Rebekah at the Well pattern became the best and longest selling Rockingham ware pattern in history. Rebekah seemed to represent the ideal woman: one who was unquestionably helpful and obedient to

God's plan. Therefore, as a woman served tea to others with her Rebekah teapot, she simultaneously saw and was seen by an idealized, virtual version of herself. In this way, a woman like Jane Fitzhugh would construct and reproduce her identity as a wife, striving to meet the Biblical ideal.

In contrast to the feminine Rebekah at the Well teapot, the other vessel sherd recovered from the Sherwood site represented a more masculine vessel, a Bennett Heron Pitcher. When it was complete, the pitcher probably depicted a scene of several herons in a grassy marshland. Images of prey animals and their environment, were evocative masculine pursuits and sensibilities. Hunting motifs also acted as complementary pieces to Rebekah and the Well and other feminine vessels. A hunter, one who leaves the domestic sphere and proves his mastery over nature, is loosely the masculine ideological equivalent of Rebecca at the Well. It seems that the ideal nineteenth century man would be one that is independent, and able to provide for the women and children that depended on him. Henry Fitzhugh, the plantation master of Sherwood Forest, was likely the owner of the Heron vessel. As land-holding, Southern gentry, Henry perceived himself as master of the surrounding landscape, the individuals he enslaved, and his household. The fruit of this mastery was the capital generated by his plantation. In much the same way Rebekah's image aided in the representation and reproduction of Jane Fitzhugh's identity, Henry Fitzhugh's heron pitcher would have reminded others and himself of Henry's masculine independence.

All of these items of bric-a-brac would have all been displayed on a mantle above the fireplace, or in a special furniture piece called an *étagère*. The Victorian *étagère* functioned as a display case for collections of bric-a-brac and other mementos. It could stand by itself or be

mounted above the mantle for additional display space. It is very likely that one of these pieces of furniture was present in at least one of the parlors or the dining room of the Fitzhugh home. The concept of bric a brac and the étagère was somewhat paradoxical. An individual could express their original thoughts and feelings through the mediums of massed produced furniture and massed produced trinkets, while all their neighbors did the same. Bohemians and authors of the time, like Oscar Wilde and Henry James, spoke on the artistic importance of home decorating . However, even though Wilde claimed that, "...it is difficult to lay down rules as to the decoration of dwellings because every home should wear an individual air in all its furnishings and decorations," it was clear that there were in fact, rules of decoration which reflected the rules and social conventions of the time. In tastefully expressing their individuality through the correct combination of objects, the Fitzhughs could clearly express their cultural capital to themselves and others . Certain objects, such as a decorative glass flower, a clown figurine, or a vessel depicting the Bible story of Rebecca at the Well, could all be imbued with "agreeable values." These values, whether they stemmed from Christianity or the popular, intersecting philosophies of individualism and naturalism, were constantly being reproduced and reinforced.

As the Fitzhughs admired their clown and other decorative objects in their home, they gazed into a mirror reflecting their own constructed identity. Objects that contain an image, such as porcelain figurines, help us to better understand the cultural landscape from which they came. No image, whether it is a painting or an item of bric-a-brac, exists in a vacuum. The fact that it was created, purchased, and consumed implies that there was cultural meaning embedded within it. The image also serves as a material manifestation of the identity of an individual. If not the artist, then the individual to whom the image belonged. The Fitzhugh

family's clown figurine and vessels, along with a multitude of other decorative objects that might have existed in their home, all conveyed a thousand tiny messages regarding the social class, cultural literacy, and cultural capital of the family.

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