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**“‘Something of Splendor’: Decorative Arts from the White House” Opens at the Smithsonian American Art Museum’s Renwick Gallery Oct. 1**

***Rare Look at Objects in the White House Collection***

“‘Something of Splendor’: Decorative Arts from the White House” opens Oct. 1 at the Renwick Gallery, the Smithsonian American Art Museum’s branch museum for craft and decorative arts, and closes May 6, 2012. The exhibition features 95 objects from the permanent collection of the White House, including furniture, ceramics, metals, glass and textiles. Many of these objects were made by the most celebrated craftsmen of their time and some have never been seen outside of the White House. William G. Allman, curator of the White House, and Melissa C. Naulin, assistant curator of the White House, selected the works included in the exhibition.

The exhibition, organized in honor of the 50th anniversary of the White House Historical Association, allows visitors to explore the history of the decorative arts in the nation’s foremost home. The exhibition and its related publication include archival images of the interiors to help the visitor envision life in the President’s official residence. Objects in the exhibition range from a box lined with wallpaper used in the White House prior to its burning in 1814 to a gilded Herter Brothers armchair from 1875 to a coverlet embroidered by First Lady Grace Coolidge between 1925 and 1927 to a service plate from the 1982 Reagan state china.

“Each artwork in ‘Something of Splendor’ has a rich story to tell, and White House curators William Allman and Melissa Naulin are gifted tellers of these stories,” said Elizabeth Broun, The Margaret and Terry Stent Director of the Smithsonian American Art Museum. “Through their eyes and the lens of history, we see these rare objects as touchstones of our democracy. We cannot know the presidents and first ladies who are gone, but through the objects they chose to live with, we can understand something of their dreams for the nation.”

“The White House is often called the ‘People’s House’ and it has been our pleasure and privilege this past half century to bring to the people of America and nations across the world a better understanding of its rich history,” said Neil W. Horstman, president of the White House Historical Association.

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“The White House embodies the story of how the presidents and their families live, work and entertain within its historic walls and among its historic furnishings,” said Allman. “Noted artist and inventor Samuel Morse commented in 1819 that the President’s House should be furnished with ‘something of splendor... for the credit of the nation.’ We hope this exhibition imparts some of the rich history of the decorative arts of the White House.”

The White House interiors were refurbished repeatedly in modern styles throughout the 19th century. In 1902, noted New York architects McKim, Mead & White were hired to make the interior of the White House more stylistically compatible with its late 18th-century architecture. This major renovation, accompanied by significant sales of old furnishings, gave the public rooms a more formal and ceremonial character that they retain today.

Many objects have grown venerable with the building, while others have been acquired as part of an ongoing program, begun in 1961 by First Lady Jacqueline Kennedy, to restore the historical ambience of the rooms. Kennedy envisioned the White House as an ideal showcase of American fine and decorative arts for the enjoyment and education of both American and foreign visitors. She brought in the first curator to supervise the creation of a museum collection, fostered the creation of the White House Historical Association in 1961 and worked with an advisory body that formally became the Committee for the Preservation of the White House in 1964. Each subsequent first lady has contributed to these acquisition and preservation efforts.

### **Film— *At Home in the White House***

The museum, in collaboration with the White House Historical Association, produced a 13-minute film in which first families offer their personal recollections and memories about living in America’s most famous home. *At Home in the White House* includes interviews with Susan Ford Bales, Laura Bush, Rosalynn Carter, Tricia Nixon Cox and Lynda Bird Johnson Robb. The film, by Northern Light Productions in Boston, will be shown continuously in the exhibition galleries in a special screening room, and it is available for sale (\$20) in the museum store.

### **Publication**

An illustrated catalog, published by the White House Historical Association, accompanies the exhibition. Authors Allman and Naulin present an introduction to the history of the White House collection followed by extended information about selected decorative arts objects displayed in the exhibition. The book opens with forewords by Horstman and Broun. It is for sale (\$14.95) in the museum store.

## **Public Programs**

Several free public programs are planned in conjunction with the exhibition, including a talk by Allman Saturday, Oct. 1, at 2 p.m.; personal recollections of living in the White House by Bales, daughter of President Gerald Ford, Thursday, Oct. 13, at noon; a panel discussion about caring for personal collections of decorative arts Sunday, Oct. 30, at 2 p.m.; and a talk and book signing with historian Doug Wead about the antics of children at the White House Thursday, Nov. 17, at noon. A series of gallery talks will take place at noon on the first Friday of the month for the run of the exhibition; speakers include Leslie Jones, White House Historical Association collections manager, Oct. 7 and Naulin Nov. 4. A full list of programs and complete descriptions are available online at [americanart.si.edu](http://americanart.si.edu).

## **Credit**

“‘Something of Splendor’: Decorative Arts from the White House” is co-organized by the White House Office of the Curator, the Renwick Gallery of the Smithsonian American Art Museum and the White House Historical Association.

## **About the White House Historical Association**

The White House Historical Association was established in 1961 as a non-profit organization to enhance the understanding, appreciation and enjoyment of the White House. All proceeds from its trusts, publications and other items are used to fund acquisitions of historic furnishings and artwork for the permanent collection, to assist in the preservation of the public rooms and further its educational mission. Website: [whitehousehistory.org](http://whitehousehistory.org).

## **About the Renwick Gallery of the Smithsonian American Art Museum**

The Smithsonian American Art Museum celebrates the vision and creativity of Americans with artworks in all media spanning more than three centuries. The museum’s branch for contemporary craft and decorative arts, the Renwick Gallery, is steps from the White House in the heart of historic federal Washington. Located on Pennsylvania Avenue at 17th Street N.W., the Renwick Gallery is open daily from 10 a.m. to 5:30 p.m., except Dec. 25. Admission is free. Museum information (recorded): (202) 633-7970. Smithsonian information: (202) 633-1000; (202) 633-5285 (TTY). Website: [americanart.si.edu](http://americanart.si.edu).

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