

# Artistic Furniture

## Of The Gilded Age



At The Metropolitan Museum Of Art

**By Kate Eagen Johnson**

**NEW YORK CITY** — “This commission marks Arabella Worsham’s moment of transformation as she establishes herself as a woman of taste.” Excited in the telling, Alice Cooney Frelinghuysen underscored the significance of Worsham’s selection of George A. Schastey to reimagine her Manhattan mansion as an Aesthetic-style showplace in 1881. This event is central to the three-part exhibition “Artistic Furniture of the Gilded Age,” which opened at the Metropolitan Museum of Art on December 15. The

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Page Above: The exhibition’s programmatic offerings include concerts of Gilded Age music performed on this “attribution benchmark object” made for William Clark of Newark, N.J. Model B grand piano with case by George A. Schastey & Co. and piano by Steinway & Sons, New York City, 1882. Satinwood, purpleheart, brass and silver mounts. Collection of Paul Manganaro.

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Right: At the same time Schastey was redecorating her home, Worsham had this portrait made while touring Europe. “Mrs Arabella Worsham” by Alexandre Cabanel (1823–1889), Paris, 1882. Oil on canvas. Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, gift of Archer M. Huntington.





concept of “transformation” runs as a leit motif with relevance to the patron, the cabinetmaker-decorator and others involved with these luxurious furnishings and even to certain of these interiors themselves.

Not the least of those transformed is George A. Schastey (1839–1894), whose artistic reputation has risen exponentially. Having fallen into obscurity until resurrected through this initiative, Schastey has now assumed a place in the pantheon of American Aestheticism alongside Herter Brothers and Pottier & Stymus.

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“Morning” by John La Farge (1835–1910), New York City, circa 1881. Opalescent glass and painted decoration. This window and its companion, “Evening,” were originally part of the 4 West 54th Street mansion. Worsham’s son, Archer M. Huntington, created Audubon Terrace in upper Manhattan. The Academy of Arts and Letters and The Hispanic Society of America are still a part of that cultural center. American Academy of Arts and Letters.



The three-part exhibition "Artistic Furniture of the Gilded Age" celebrates the recent metamorphosis of the Worsham-Rockefeller Dressing Room, designed and executed by George A. Schastey & Co., New York City, 1881–82. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, gift of the Museum of the City of New York.

Frelinghuysen, the Anthony W. and Lulu C. Wang curator of American decorative arts, and Nicholas C. Vincent, manager of collections planning — with support from research assistant Moira Gallagher — co-curated this dazzling exhibition. Its centerpiece is the newly installed and conserved Worsham-Rockefeller Dressing Room, originally part of Schastey's interior design campaign for the 4 West 54th Street mansion. Miraculously squeezed into a redundant stairwell, the dressing room joins the chronologically arranged period rooms on permanent display in the American Wing. It stands as testament to the project team's research, conservation and restoration accomplishments.

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The Worsham mansion a tawdry love nest? Hardly! Yet suggestive of an atmosphere of amour is the glistening mother-of-pearl inlay "mistletoe" ornamenting the dressing glass. Dressing table and dressing glass, Worsham-Rockefeller Dressing Room, George A. Schastey & Co., New York City, 1881–82. Metropolitan Museum of Art, gift of the Museum of the City of New York.





Richly ornamented in satinwood, purpleheart (amaranth), mother-of-pearl and silver and gold leaf, the intimate Worsham-Rockefeller Dressing Room absorbs only 12 by 18 feet of floor space. As Frelinghuysen noted, the form of the room was inspired by an Italian Renaissance *studiolo*, or scholar's study. There is seriousness in the Renaissance- and Mannerist-inspired carving and marquetry on cabinetry doors and drawers. In counterpoint, on the door frames feminine accoutrements, including a hand mirror, comb, scissors, an étui and various pieces of jewelry, are rendered as marquetry trophies highlighted by mother-of-pearl insets. One can imagine putti

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A remarkable object on many counts, Schastey's miniature "Barcalounger" maintains its original 1870s silk upholstery. Patent model for adjustable reclining chairs by George A. Schastey, New York City, 1873. Walnut, silk and paper tag with ink. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, gift of Mr and Mrs John Schorsch.

flying off the room's painted canvas frieze and plucking the dainty tools and personal ornaments from the door frames in rococo-winged flurry to assist Worsham at her toilet.

Until May 1, this prize historic interior will be set off by two companion gallery exhibitions featuring more than three dozen gems of American Aesthetic design. The first spotlights the furnishings Schastey's firm executed for other rooms in the Worsham mansion and for the other projects. Nearly all of these tour-de-force...

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Frelinghuysen told how historian Shelley M. Bennett discovered an album of photographs of Worsham's mansion at the Hispanic Society of America. This case piece appears in a photograph of the drawing room. Cabinet by George A. Schastey & Co., New York City, 1881–82. Ebonized oak, brass, gilded bronze and agate. Seattle Art Museum.

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