

A row of four ornate, painted wooden chairs, likely klismos chairs, with yellow cushions and decorative tassels. The chairs feature intricate painted designs, including a Greek key border, a palmette, and a lyre. The tassels are made of gold and red threads, with red tassels hanging from the front of the chairs. The chairs are set against a plain, light-colored background.

# *Classical Splendor*

Painted Furniture For A Grand Philadelphia House

By Karla Klein Albertson

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A close examination of these klismos chairs reveals the carefully shaded palmette, lyre and Greek key borders decorator George Bridport used to unify the furniture of the Waln drawing rooms.

PHILADELPHIA, PENN. — In the first decade of the Nineteenth Century, Philadelphia was a dynamic hub of society, politics and fashion. Many of the magnificent townhouses have disappeared over the last two centuries, their interiors unrecorded by any ancestor of *Architectural Digest*. The Philadelphia Museum of Art, however, has preserved in its collection a remarkable group of objects — united by theme and decoration — which once furnished the fashionable residence of William and Mary Wilcocks Waln. After years of research, investigation and restoration, this collection of surfaces and sculptural forms is displayed in “Classical Splendor: Painted Furniture for a Grand Philadelphia House,” on view until January 1.

Although the Waln house did not made the midcentury mark, a remarkable 21 pieces from an 1808 furniture commission have survived. Every surface is covered with gold and bright paint in a robust Classical style that pays tribute to the art and archaeology of



Sideboard, or console table, designed by Benjamin Henry Latrobe, made by John Aitken, with rear panel framed by Thomas Wetherill, painted and gilded by George Bridport, Philadelphia, 1808. Tulip poplar, a conifer (probably pine), gilded and painted decoration, gilded metal rosettes, later mirror, cotton velvet.



Sofa, or Grecian couch, designed by Benjamin Henry Latrobe, attributed to John Aitken, painted and gilded by George Bridport, Philadelphia, 1808. Tulip poplar, maple, gilded and painted decoration, iron, brass, replacement caning, modern upholstery. Philadelphia Museum of Art.

Greece and Rome. The reason for their survival in such remarkable condition is evident — they were simply too splendid to discard. Of this group, the Philadelphia Museum owns the largest block — seven side chairs, a sofa or couch, a card table and a sideboard. The exhibition places them in a re-creation of the home's drawing room, in a gallery filled with supporting material from the permanent collection or on loan from other institutions. Thanks to generous grants, there is an accompanying volume by Alexandra Alevizatos Kirtley, the museum's

Montgomery-Garvan curator of American decorative arts, and Peggy A. Olley, associate conservator of furniture and woodwork. The book analyzes the relationship of the furniture to the interior decoration and architecture of the Waln townhouse. The show and catalog are the fruit of Kirtley's passionate interest in the material. Kirtley notes, "It's been a five- or six-year project, but my interest in it really began the moment I arrived at the museum."



When they married on March 14, 1805, the Walns united two strong cultural traditions that existed side by side in Philadelphia. William Waln (1775–1826) came from a prominent family in the Society of Friends community. His father had given up his law practice to become a most conservative Quaker preacher. Mary Wilcocks (1782–1841), on the other hand, was born into a sophisticated merchant family of Episcopalian persuasion. The Wilcocks appreciated the arts, music and dancing. The two family’s paths crossed when William entered the merchant trade and formed a...

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Card table, one of a pair designed by Benjamin Henry Latrobe, attributed to John Aitken, painted and gilded by George Bridport, Philadelphia, 1808. Mahogany, tulip poplar, white pine, brass, gilded and painted decoration, iron and cotton velvet. Philadelphia Museum of Art. The table's mate belongs to the Kaufman Americana Foundation, George M. and Linda H. Kaufman. The useful form was mounted on casters so that it could easily be shifted to fit the changing entertainments planned for the space.

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