

## NABOBS OF THE NORTHEAST

JERRY MILLER

I was doing an appraisal in a house on Mount Desert, and came across three trunks squirreled away in the far corners of the attic. Inside the trunks, wrapped in the plainest of white cotton, were the gaudy remnants of the original decorations of the house. The silks glowed as I laid them out on the floor.

Although the original summer visitors to Mount Desert Island were housed rather simply, the late Victorian/turn-of-the-century era saw a leap in confidence, opulence and disposable wealth that was reflected in the ever more grandiose houses of the summer residents. Originally designed and built locally, later homes were built by local contractors but designed by New York and Boston architects such as William Ralph Emerson, Arthur Rotch, George Thomas Tilden, and Bruce Price.

These homes were built to provide a refuge for well-heeled summer people from the miasmatic heat of the urban flatlands. Their sweeping verandahs, cool interiors, and Scottish-derived names – “Glen Eyrie” and “Islescote,” for example – were based on images of the British Empire that had been inculcated during the long reign of Victoria and through the rousing tales of Rudyard Kipling and others of his ilk. Photos in books such as *Lost Bar Harbor* show rooms with leopard skins on the floor and Moorish arabesque silks festooning the walls. The idea was to recreate the Raj in the Northeast. Just as the British in India retreated to the hill towns in summer, our nabobs fled to Bar Harbor and the cool of the Northern Coast.

Residents would arrive in the early summer, decamping from steamships with trunks filled with fashionable new items to be displayed for the season. The remarkable silks and brocades I discovered, long hidden in the three trunks, originally hung in the main rooms of the house.

The development of textiles such as these was initially part of the Utopian Movement created by English middle-class artisans such as William Morris (1834-1896) and his followers at “Red House,” which became a center of the Arts and Crafts movement in England. They believed that the chivalric virtues of the Renaissance could be renewed by living among handcrafted items. They opposed production in factories where craftsmen performed the same tasks day after day. Craftsmen should be able

to create an entire object, not just a piece of it, Morris and his colleagues asserted. Their influence kept these ideals alive throughout the Victorian era. However, success created such demand among English and American cottagers that artisans were soon overwhelmed, and they, too, began the mass manufacture of their designs. American enthusiasts took the Arts and Crafts ideas of the English, endorsed the more Far Eastern influences on design in the Aesthetic Movement, and created an industry.

Designed in part by Louis C. Tiffany (1843-1933), who summered on Mount Desert Island, and by members of The Associated Artists of New York City, stunning textiles were fabricated in America that mim-



*Velvet portiere*

icked those made in Britain. Paisley patterns were drawn from the Indian subcontinent and rugs copied from those carried over the Silk Road. Embroidered silks followed the patterns brought home by sea captains and mercenaries of the Opium Wars.

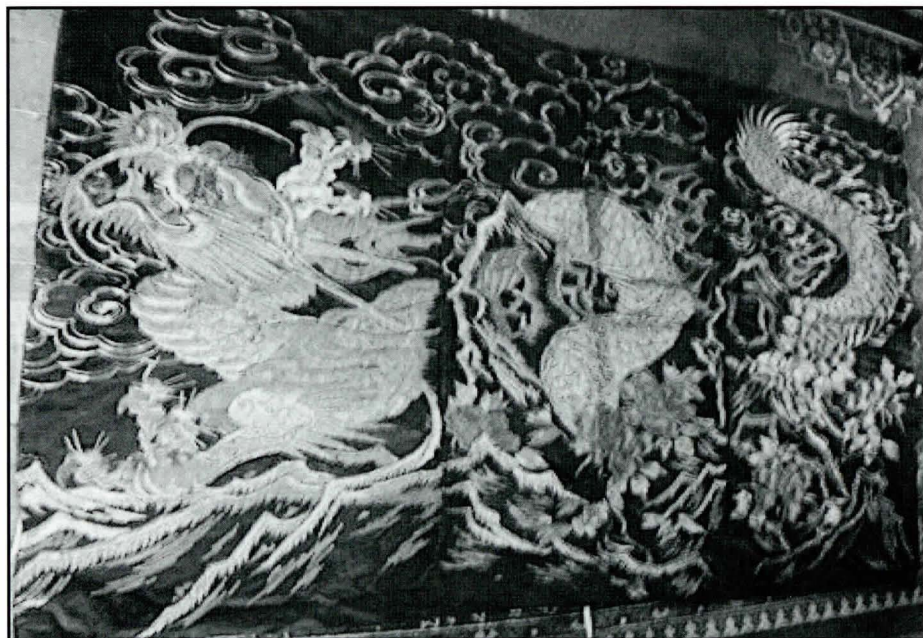
This green velvet portiere (*left*) with its sky blue and gold embroidered edge hung between the doors of the Great Room, its decorated side to the room and

its plain side to the hall and cottage staff. Its weight provided protection from the intrusive fog and prying eyes.

A gold embroidered dragon (*following page, upper image*) leaps from its black silk background above the oak paneling of the Great Hall. It shimmers as if alive in the draught caused by the Persian tile-bordered fireplace.

Strewn across the library table lies a thistle-patterned jacquard throw (*following page, lower image*). It establishes kinship with the doughty Scotsmen who settled both the Orient of silk and the Western lands of the fur. Their descendants, having conquered the wilderness of America, were now anxious to be seen as genteel, and they decorated their Bar Har-





*Gold embroidered dragon*



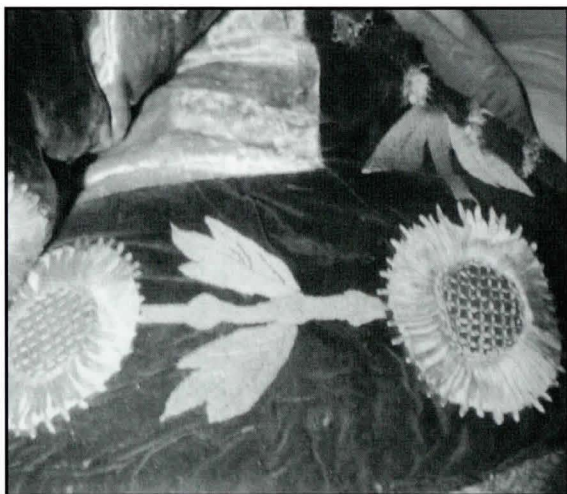
*Thistle-patterned Jacquard throw*

bor summer hideaways to reflect their success as merchants, industrialists and gentlemen.

The rooms glowed at night as the family gathered after a day at the Gymkhana at Kebo or a long hike across the barren Hibernian hills of Mount Desert. They read the works of Rudyard Kipling; his leather bound volumes rested on the shelves lined with red silk, embossed with gold lilies. Leaping tiger and knightly bronzes held them in their place.

The British Empire receded and the Great War was fought. Tastes changed and Frenchified furniture appeared and the dark oak was painted over in white. Most of the houses fell into disrepair, were burned in the fire or looted by pirates. Friends helped by burning that old stuff and, gradually, all that remained were a few trunks in the attic.





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