

Re-creating Jonathan Warner's Bed Hangings

BY JOYCE GEARY VOLK

The 1814 inventory of Portsmouth, New Hampshire, merchant Jonathan Warner listed a full complement of green damask upholstered items in the parlor chamber: ten chairs, an easy chair, a night chair, and bedstead with bed hangings. Also in the room was a large and a small mahogany chest of drawers, a bureau, looking glass, toilet glass [a small dressing mirror], chimney glass [mirror over the mantel], some glazed and framed pictures, and "1 Carpet (old)."¹ Based on the contents of the inventory, this was the most elaborate room of the mansion. Now a museum (The Warner House), it is important that the room be interpreted accurately.

The centerpiece of high style eighteenth-century bedchambers was the "bedstead" and

primary reception area for friends. Based on surviving evidence and documentation, Warner redecorated the house in the latest fashion when he moved into the mansion with his wife, Mary, in 1760. He had the house repainted, wallpapered, and the large fireplaces changed to the preferred smaller openings. Presumably the Warners would have wanted the best possible bed hangings in the parlor chamber so that the guests who were entertained there would be duly impressed

To help determine the appearance of the bed hangings, it was necessary to examine surviving period examples. A fragmentary set of mid-eighteenth-century gold damask hangings at Winterthur Museum in Delaware proved most helpful. Recorded as having a provenance from

the color hierarchy and "rooms with green upholstery tended to be more important than those with blue." Since green was associated with "Venus, felicity and pleasure...it was often chosen for best beds."²

But what shade of green? Eighteenth-century greens are a combination of blue and yellow dyings. The yellow is fugitive, so a 1760s green fabric seen today is not likely to be the color it was when new. Indeed, most tend to the blue side. Edward Maeder, textile curator of Historic Deerfield, suggested we copy the color of the green silk damask banyan worn by Nicholas Boylston in his 1767 portrait by John Singleton Copley, who was known for his efforts to duplicate actual colors. By comparing textile samples directly to Copley's painting (in the collection of the Fogg Art Museum at Harvard), a matching shade was found. The color choice was confirmed by several more experts in the field, all of whom agreed it was appropriate for the period.

Clarissa de Muzio of Glencourt Design in Philadelphia was retained to design the bed hangings. In addition to making the patterns and cutting the material, she incorporated the unusual eyelets she found on the inner and outer valances of Winterthur's set, which were used to hang the fabric on small nails on the valance boards and tester. Context Weavers in England produced seventy-four meters of green wool damask along with 170 meters of matching woven tape and fringe. The remarkable tassels at the outer valance corners are exact copies of Winterthur's. Seven volunteer seamstresses met weekly and the hangings

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"furnishings": the wooden bed frame, bedding, and textile hangings. The hangings were often the most valuable component of a household; the most elaborate could have used as much as fifty yards of imported fabric, an expensive commodity. As was often the case, the accompanying seating furniture would have been upholstered en suite to create a bold effect on the eyes of the visitor, for in the eighteenth century the best bed chamber was a

Essex County in north coastal Massachusetts, the set provided an example of the elaborate bed hangings used by wealthy inhabitants north of Boston such as the Warners. Enough survived to do a reasonable reconstruction of the entire set of Warner hangings.

The damask, as stated in the inventory, was green. Apparently the color was a conscious choice based on the social norms of the day, in which crimson was at the top of





Recently reinstalled parlor chamber, Warner House, Portsmouth, New Hampshire. Photography by Geoffrey Gross.

were completed by August 2006.

With its green damask bed hangings in place, the interpretation of the Warners' parlor chamber took shape. Four of the original ten green damask chairs are already in the collection; another three have been promised, along with an easy chair that was also part of the chamber's furnishings. A night chair, donated by Northeast Auctions, completes the acquisition of referenced upholstered items. The present seating furniture has been covered en suite with the bed hangings.

Prior to the completion of this portion of the project, the color of the walls needed to be determined so as to provide as unified a picture of the room as possible. Paint analysis revealed that during the Warners' tenancy the walls had been covered with an unusual deco-

orative treatment — smalt: ground cobalt blue glass applied to wet paint, in this instance mauve. The surface creates a sparkling effect in the presence of candle and fire light.³ The generosity of the Felicia Fund allowed the museum to pay for both the paint treatment and the green wool damask and trims.

In combination with the lavish upholstery and many of the other furnishings listed in the inventory, the parlor chamber is now interpreted quite accurately, reflecting the elegance and sophistication of one of the most prominent couple's in eighteenth-century Portsmouth and the surrounding region.

The Warner House Association is still in search of the chimney glass for over the mantel, also in the 1814 inventory. If readers can offer any information on its whereabouts, or where

an appropriate example could be obtained the Association would be very grateful. To contact the Association or for information on visiting the Warner House call 603.436.5909 or visit www.warnerhouse.org. @

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¹ Rockingham Country Probate no. 8936 (New Hampshire State Archives, Concord).

² John Cornforth, *Early Georgian Interiors* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2004), 120.

³ Joyce Geary Volk, "The Great Smalt-Out." *Catalogue of Antiques and Fine Art* (Holiday 2003): 130–31; "Smalt at the Warner House, Portsmouth, NH," *The Magazine Antiques*, 167 (February 2005): 66–71.