

English Engravings as Sources of New England Decoration

By NINA FLETCHER LITTLE

ANYONE who has had occasion to peruse early inventories, or to glance through published "gleanings" from eighteenth-century newspapers, will have noted the large number of English mezzotints and engravings which were imported into the Colonies during the years immediately preceding the Revolutionary War.

Some of the subjects were topical, illustrating contemporary personages or events of special interest in America. Many, however, were decorative and were issued in related sets varying from four to twelve or more titles. Popular subjects included, among others, The Continents, The Elements, The Four Seasons, Months of the Year, Parts of the Day, and Celebrated Beauties, Statesmen, and Generals in Britain. Persons having a taste for the out-of-doors could be accommodated with landscape views of English gardens and palaces combined with "curious and entertaining prints . . . of horse racing," in addition to the ever popular Prodigal Son and Rakes' and Harlots' Progress.

Certain subjects were particularly suited to serve as models for American artists who either copied the fashionable poses in their own provincial portraits or adapted the contours of the English countryside to conform to the taste of their local clientele.¹ It is the purpose here to record and illustrate several instances in which imported engravings have been identified as sources or inspiration for the architectural decoration of New England homes.

One interesting sequence begins with a large landscape painting on wood which forms an integral part of the fireplace paneling in a lower room of the old Alexander King house in Suffield, Connecticut (Fig. 1). This late eighteenth-century scene, with its tranquil river winding through a flat and fertile countryside, has been traditionally accepted as portraying the unknown artist's version of some unrecognized portion of the Connecticut River Valley. In fact it was not until close scrutiny revealed the unfamiliar design of the canopied pleasure boat, and of the house in the foreground, that a foreign prototype was suspected of which the topography had been artlessly "Americanized" by a naïve local hand.

It remained, however, for Mr. Edward Croft-Murray, Keeper of Prints at the British Museum, to pinpoint the actual source of the Suffield view by calling to my attention the engraving illustrated in Fig. 2. The title of this charming scene "A View of Richmond Hill Up The River" is self-explanatory, as it exhibits a stretch of the Thames River a few miles distant from London. Even a casual glance establishes the affinity between the two compositions, but it is interesting to compare them in detail and to observe which elements were omitted or simplified in the Connecticut version.

The original print was published in London during the middle of the eighteenth century and engraved by François Vivares after a painting by Antonio Jolli (1700-1777). The latter was a pupil of Pannini and a follower of Canaletto. He

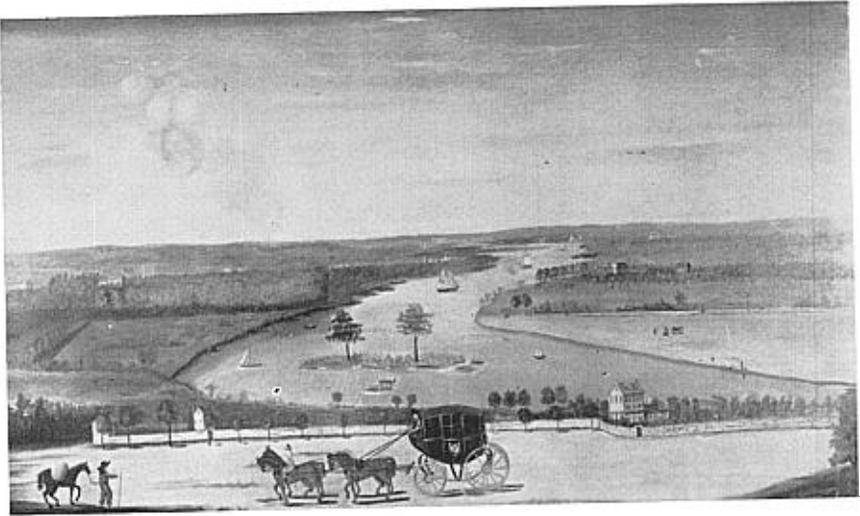


FIG. 1. OVERMANTEL IN THE ALEXANDER KING HOUSE,
SUFFIELD, CONNECTICUT
Suffield Historical Society. Photograph from Index of American Design.

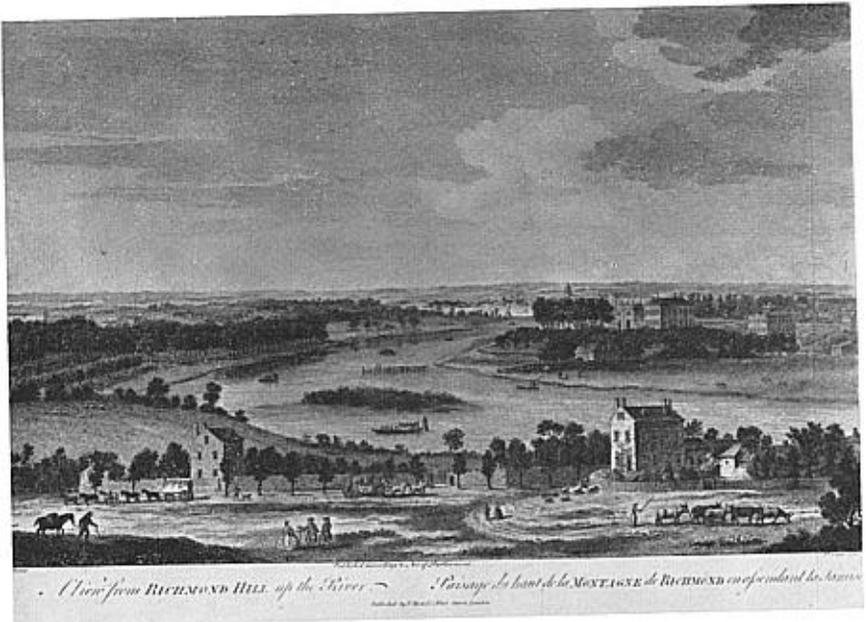


FIG. 2. ENGLISH ENGRAVING OF THE THAMES RIVER NEAR LONDON
Circa 1749. This view was the basic source of the Connecticut painting of Fig. 1.
Author's collection.

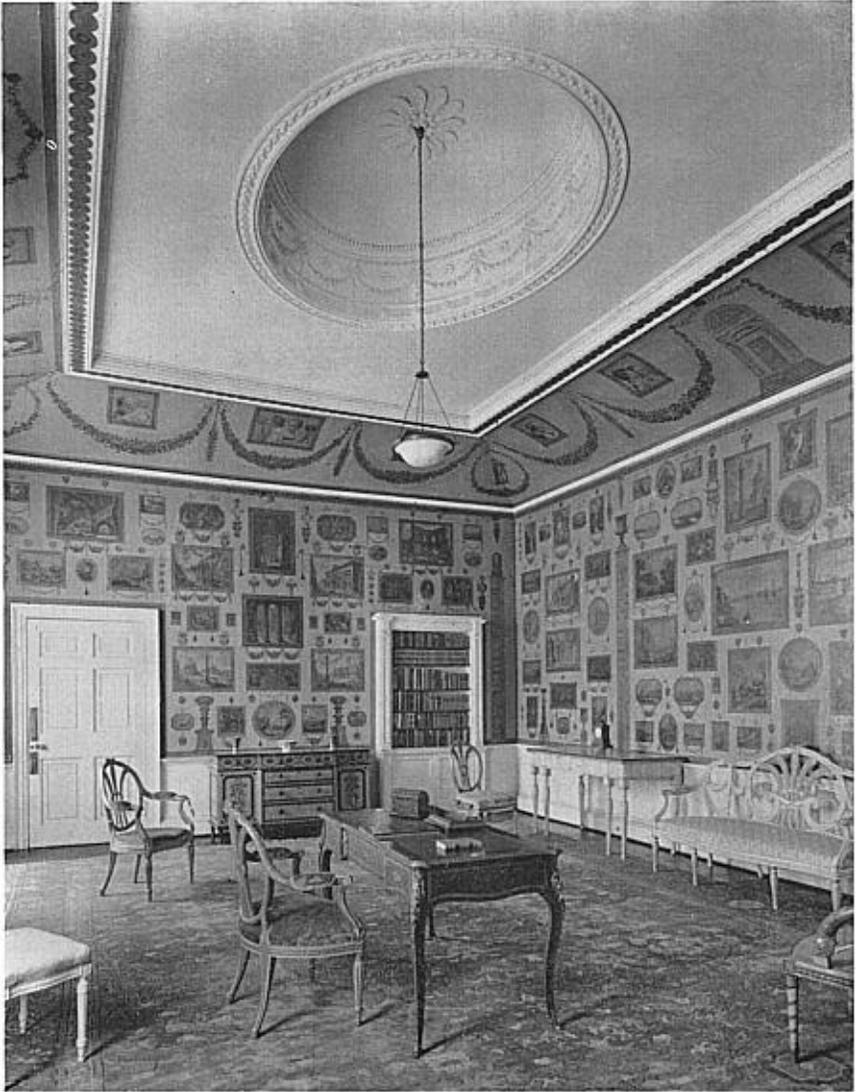


FIG. 3. PRINT ROOM AT WOODHALL PARK, HERTS., ENGLAND

The original drawings for this arrangement still exist with a key identifying the subjects, and an inscription on the chimney frieze: "Designed and finished by R. Parker, 1782."

Photograph copyright *Country Life*.

also executed scenes for the London opera, combined with drawings of ruins and topographical landscapes. Vivares (1709-1780) was a native of France who passed the greater part of his life in England and eventually became one of the eminent landscape engravers of his time. He was particularly successful with panoramic views of this type, and with plates taken after Pannini and Claude Lorrain.

It now only remains to be proved that examples of Vivares' work could have been seen in America at the period when this overmantel was painted. Fortunately documentary evidence is available in the form of an advertisement that appeared in *The New-York Journal or General Advertiser* on March 16, 1775, which reads in part: "MINSHULL'S LOOKING GLASS STORE, has for sale an elegant assortment of Looking Glasses, in oval or square ornamental frames. Birds and baskets of flowers for the top of bookcases, gilt bordering for rooms by the yard. *Engravings by Strange, Wollet, Vivare's & other eminent masters.* [Italics are mine.] I flatter myself that when the difference is settled between England and the Colonies, of having my store constantly supplied with the above articles."²

Other instances of engravings serving as sources of New England decoration derive basically from the "print rooms" in English country houses and involve the handsome wallpapers which simulated and elaborated this novel form of trompe l'oeil. In describing Strawberry Hill, his Gothic "castle," Horace Walpole wrote to Sir Horace Mann under date of June 12, 1753: "The room on the ground floor nearest to you is a bedchamber, hung with yellow paper and prints, framed in a new manner invented by Lord Cardigan, that is, with black and white borders

printed. Over this is Mr. Chute's bed-chamber hung with red in the same manner."³

In designing a "print room" of this type numerous engravings of various sizes and shapes were trimmed of their margins and then pasted upon a plain colored paper which covered the walls. They were subsequently surrounded with printed paper borders which faithfully imitated molded frames. To complete the illusion the pictures were often "hung" on "ribbons" from simulated nails with dependent miniatures supported below on swagged "chains." Everything was fabricated of printed paper including such added ornaments as busts, plinths, vases, and candelabra which, taken together, produced the handsome effect of an apartment embellished with engravings and sculpture (Fig. 3).

An eighteenth-century description of the English estate of *Wanstead* written in 1769 provides a contemporary point of view: "We entered a breakfast room, elegant indeed, prints pasted on buff paper with engraved borders, all displayed in a manner which shows great taste. The prints are of the very best masters, and the ornaments elegant."⁴ Bills for similar treatment of a room at *Mersham le Hatch*, decorated by Thomas Chippendale's firm in 1767, include cutting out of prints, borders, and ornaments, and hanging them complete at a price of 14 pounds, 10 shillings.

Although it is doubtful whether any print rooms in the elaborate English manner were ever installed in this country, the idea was not unknown here. A pertinent advertisement in the *Pennsylvania Journal* proves that at least one enterprising paperhanger was prepared to attempt this specialized decoration if occasion warranted: "Aug. 25, 1784, Paper



FIG. 4. WALLPAPER IN THE HALL OF THE JEREMIAH LEE MANSION,
MARBLEHEAD, MASSACHUSETTS

Circa 1768. Classic scenes enhanced by painted rococo moldings were intended to suggest handsome framed engravings.

Marblehead Historical Society. Photograph from S.P.N.E.A.

hangings for rooms manufactured by Joseph Dickinson, Manufacturer from London . . . will superintend or do the business

if any Philadelphia patrons responded to Mr. Dickinson's intriguing offer!

Meanwhile English wallpaper manu-



FIG. 5. FRAGMENT OF ORIGINAL WALLPAPER FROM THE MOFFATT-LADD HOUSE, PORTSMOUTH, NEW HAMPSHIRE

Circa 1763. The design simulates stucco moldings.

Moffatt-Ladd House, New Hampshire Society of Colonial Dames of America.

of hanging rooms, colouring ditto plain, or [with] any device of prints, pictures, or ornaments to suit the taste of his employers."⁵ It would be interesting to know

if any Philadelphia patrons responded to Mr. Dickinson's intriguing offer! Meanwhile English wallpaper manufacturers were not slow to copy the "print room" idea. A very attractive fragment of paper in the Victoria and Albert Museum cleverly simulating a

wall hung with engravings is illustrated in Nancy McClellan's *Historic Wall Papers*. Other scenic papers hand painted in tempora exhibited both classical and sporting subjects enframed with elaborate rocaille scrolls which were designed to imitate stucco moldings, and were inter-

English theme and many eighteenth-century subjects were based on paintings by the famous sporting artists John Wootton and James Seymour. On the staircase at Hickstead Place, Bolney, Sussex, are several large painted wallpaper panels which compare in arrangement and style

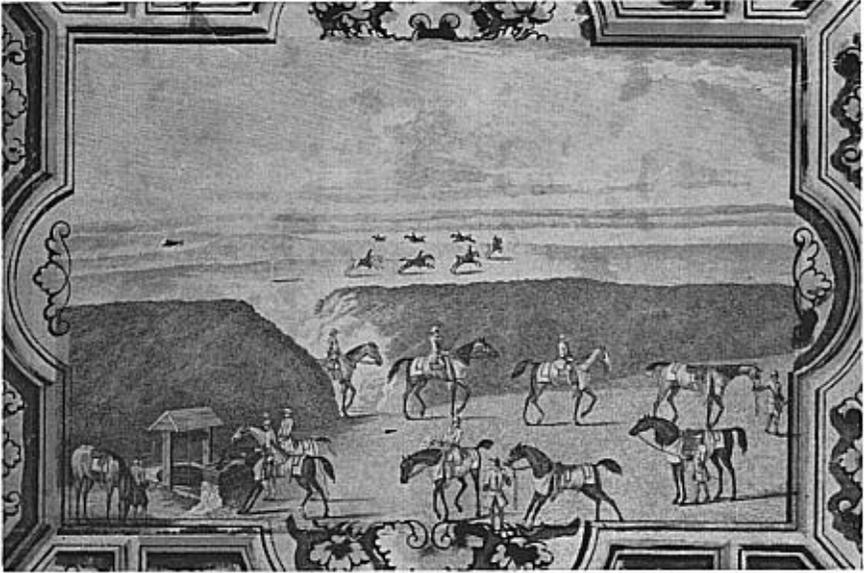


FIG. 6. ENGRAVING FROM THE MOFFATT-LADD HOUSE,
AFTER JAMES SEYMOUR

With original wallpaper surround, showing where the scenes were incorporated into the background design.
Collection of S.P.N.E.A.

persed with panels of trophies in the sculptural tradition. Several English houses still retain large paper panels on stairways or in halls, and at least two sets came to America before the Revolution. One of these was installed in 1768 in the old Van Rensselaer Manor House in Albany and is now exhibited in the Metropolitan Museum. The other still remains as originally hung in the Jeremiah Lee mansion in Marblehead, Massachusetts (Fig. 4).⁶

Field sports were, of course, a favorite

with those in the Lee mansion, except that at Hickstead some of the scenes are not classic in origin but are copied from Seymour engravings of huntsmen and hounds.⁷ The reverse of these panels bears a printed cypher with the initials G R for Georgius Rex, interlaced and surmounted by a crown. This stamp proves that the required tax of 1½ pence on each square yard of printed, painted, or stained paper had been paid by the manufacturer.

At the same period in a handsome

three-story mansion in Portsmouth, New Hampshire, now known as the Moffatt-Ladd house, an important wallpaper was hung presumably in 1763. Constructed by John Moffatt for his son Samuel upon the latter's marriage to Sarah Mason, no

facturers at this time, used as allover background patterns or as enframements for various types of engraved scenes in the "print room" manner. Horace Walpole writing further of Strawberry Hill refers to a similar effect: "From hence



FIG. 7. IN FULL CHACE, ENGRAVING AFTER JAMES SEYMOUR
One of the most popular hunting subjects to reach Colonial America.
Author's collection.

expense was spared in its design or fittings, and one would have expected to find there the most fashionable wall hangings in the current English taste.⁸

In "the Yellow Chambr" above the drawing room now hangs a framed sample of this first paper (Fig. 5). Within outlines of black the bold Gothic pattern is printed in buff, dark brown, and gray on a yellow background and is designed to suggest ornamental strapwork. Printed or painted imitations of stucco moldings were much in vogue with English manu-

under two gloomy arches you come to the hall and staircase, which is impossible to describe to you, as it is the most particular and chief beauty of the castle. Imagine the walls covered with (I call it in perspective to represent) Gothic fretwork."⁹ New England was not behind the times, however. "Gothic Paper Hangings" were being imported into Boston as early as 1764.

A set of four hunting prints also hangs in the yellow chamber of the Moffatt-



FIG. 8. OVERMANTEL PANEL FROM FRANKLIN, MASSACHUSETTS
Late eighteenth century. A simplified copy of the engraving
"In Full Chace" after James Seymour.
Author's collection.



FIG. 9. OVERMANTEL PANEL FROM EAST DOUGLAS, MASSACHUSETTS
Late eighteenth century. This composition is undoubtedly derived from the engraving "In Full Chace," note the group of buildings at left, steeple in center, and running fox. The number of horsemen and hounds has been modified and a new set of houses introduced at right. An interesting example of what an itinerant New England artist could do with an engraved source.
Author's collection.

Ladd house. Although now framed as separate pictures, they were originally printed on individual sheets of the yellow background paper from which they were cut out when the room was redecorated many years ago. The sheets containing the engravings were formerly hung around the tops of the walls so that the repeated scenes formed a continuous high border, or frieze.

Three matching prints, also from this room, have been for some years in the collection of the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities. This group fortunately still retains narrow strips of the surrounding yellow paper so that by comparing them with the large sample in Portsmouth one can ascertain the exact section of the basic pattern within which the scenes were printed (Fig. 6). This paper must have provided in simplified form the effect of a room hung with hunting prints and is the only example of its period and type at present known to me. The reverse of the engravings bear the same form of tax stamp as appears on the backs of the Van Rensselaer, and

English Hickstead Place and Harrington House panels. The Moffatt-Ladd engravings also represent scenes after James Seymour (1702-1752) who lived and painted in the south of England in contrast to his contemporary John Wootton who depicted scenes in the midlands and the north. As early as 1758 "hunting pieces under glass" were imported and sold at vendue in Boston, thereby providing basic designs for local artists.

A large overmantel panel in the collection of the Marblehead Historical Society consists of elements copied from a handsome engraving by B. Baron of London after Wootton's painting *The Going Out in the Morning*. Two other overmantels from houses in Franklin and East Douglas, Massachusetts, are based on Seymour's *In Full Chace* (Figs. 7, 8, and 9). This subject was also in the Moffatt-Ladd set, and judging from the many examples found in New England it appears to have been one of the most popular hunting prints exported to Colonial America.

NOTES

¹ John Singleton Copley copied poses and accessories from several engravings taken after English portraits. See also *The Waldron Phoenix Belknap Jr. Collection of Portraits and Silver*, with a Note Concerning the Influence of the English Mezzotint on Colonial Painting (Harvard University Press, 1955).

² *Arts and Crafts in New York, 1726-1776* (New-York Historical Society, 1938), p. 132.

³ W. S. Lewis, Ed., *Yale Edition of Horace Walpole's Correspondence*, Vol. 20 (Yale University Press, 1960), p. 381.

⁴ E. A. Entwistle, *The Book of Wallpapers* (London, 1954). Contemporary description by Arthur Young.

⁵ *The Arts and Crafts in Philadelphia, Mary-*

land and South Carolina, 1721-1785 (The Walpole Society, 1929), p. 281.

⁶ For a thorough and well-illustrated study of comparable English and American scenic papers see Edna Donnell, "The Van Rensselaer Wall Paper and J. B. Jackson. A Study in Dissociation," *Metropolitan Museum Studies*, Vol. IV (1932-1933), p. 77.

⁷ One of these subjects is illustrated in Entwistle's *Book of Wall Papers*, plate 31.

⁸ The Moffatt-Ladd house is owned and opened to the public by the New Hampshire Society of Colonial Dames of America.

⁹ *Walpole's Correspondence*, Vol. 20, p. 381.

¹⁰ *The Arts and Crafts in New England, 1704-1775* (The Wayside Press, 1927), p. 24.