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At the time of publication, the author was affiliated with Columbia University. Currently, February 2008, he is a faculty member in the Historic Preservation Program at the University of Pennsylvania.

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Abstract

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Comments

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A RARE EXAMPLE OF EARLY NINETEENTH CENTURY TROMPE L'OEIL DECORATION

The Octagonal Reception Room at Telfair Mansion, Savannah, Georgia

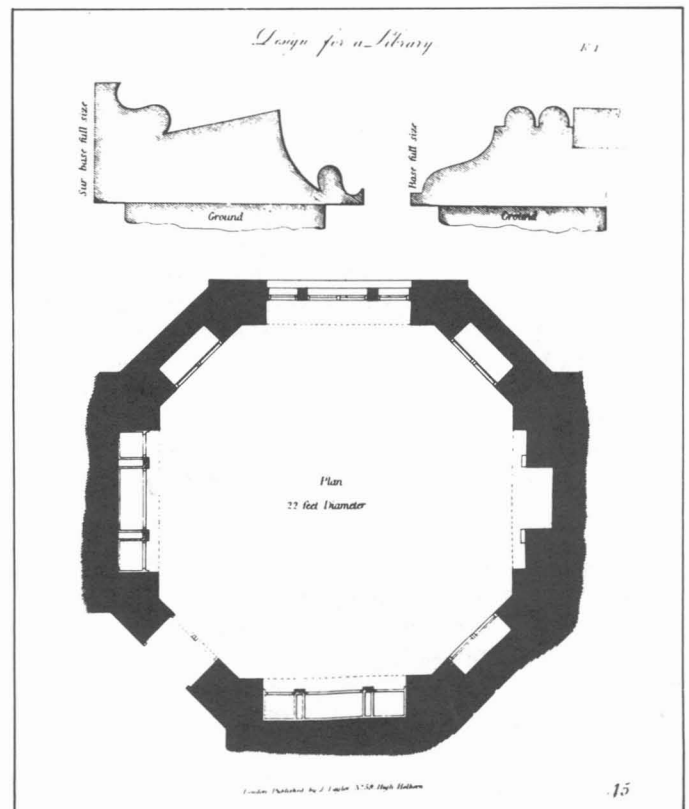
Frank G. Matero*

In the spring of 1981, an architectural investigation of the "Octagon Room" at the Telfair Academy of Arts and Sciences in Savannah, Georgia was conducted in order to determine the room's original architectural decoration.¹ Guided only by a few tantalizing clues found in the late nineteenth century plans for the building's renovation, the urbane sophistication and complexity of the room's original ca. 1819 design became apparent after a careful analysis of the architectural fabric (Fig. 1, 2).

Telfair Mansion was designed by the English architect, William Jay, in 1818-19 for Alexander Telfair, son of Edward Telfair, Governor of Georgia. One of only three surviving documented examples of Jay's residential work in Savannah,² Telfair Mansion is similar in both its design and detailing to Jay's other buildings, characterized by their severe exterior massing of classically-inspired elements, a balanced central plan with apsidal-ended rooms, and deeply projecting and strongly profiled mouldings. Such an architectural vocabulary was the result of Jay's professional training in Regency England and the influence of his contemporaries Sir John Soane and John Nash.³ The original function of the room is not certain; however, the renovation plans of 1885 identify the room as a "Reception Room," a use complimentary in both its location and relation to the other first floor rooms also identified on the plans.

Octagonally-shaped rooms had become a common feature of English villas and country houses by the early 19th century, the form usually reserved for drawing rooms and libraries (Fig. 3).⁴ A comparison of Telfair's octagonal room with a number of Soane's smaller residential spaces such as the Front and Back Parlours at Pitzhanger Manor, Ealing (remodelled 1800); the Breakfast Parlour in his own home at Lincoln's Inn Fields, London (remodelled 1812-13) and, in particular, the

Library at 48 Grosvenor Square, London (remodelled 1801) clearly illustrate a similarity in both architects' approach to the articulation of interior space using curved and multi-faceted walls, arched recesses and

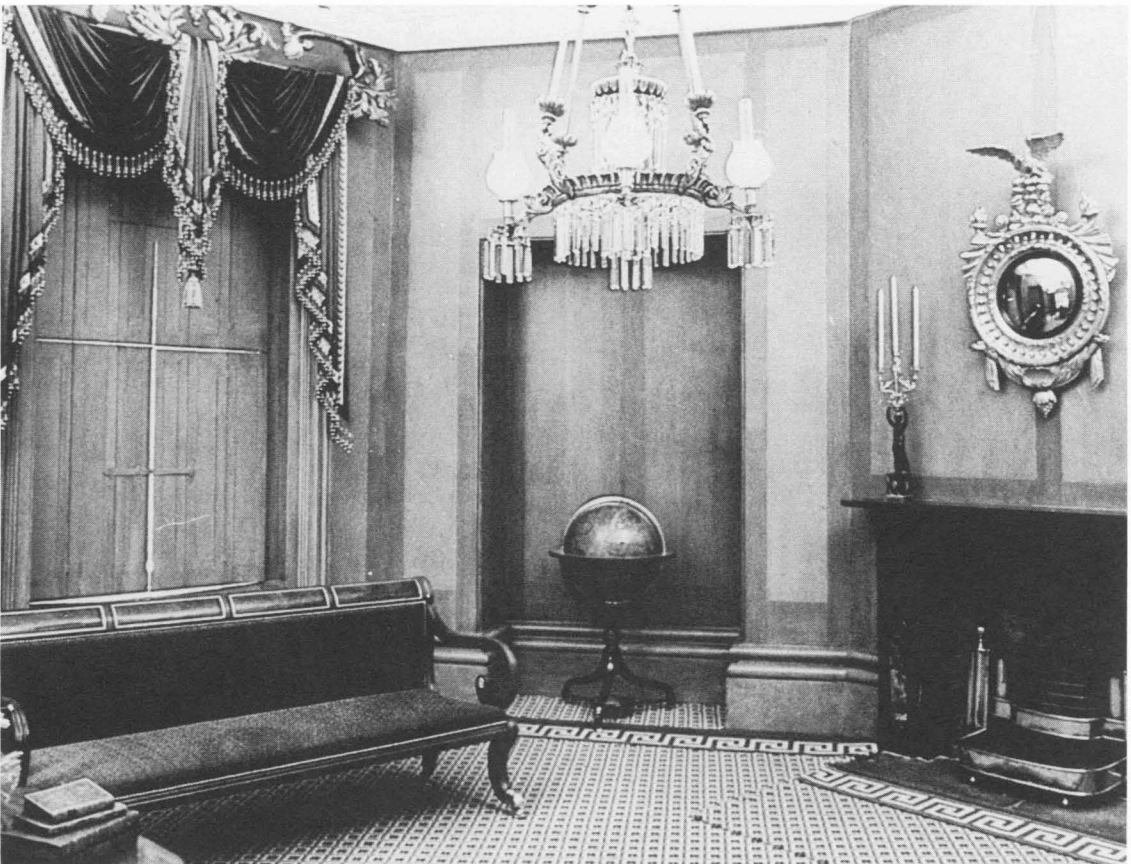


3. Design for a Library (from W.F. Pocock, *Modern Furnishings for Rooms* (London, 1811), pl. K1).

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1. Octagon Room, Telfair Mansion. View looking south before restoration, 1981. (Photo: D.L. Grantham, Jr., courtesy of Telfair Academy).



2. Octagon Room after restoration, 1982. View looking south (Photo: D.L. Grantham, Jr., courtesy of Telfair Academy).

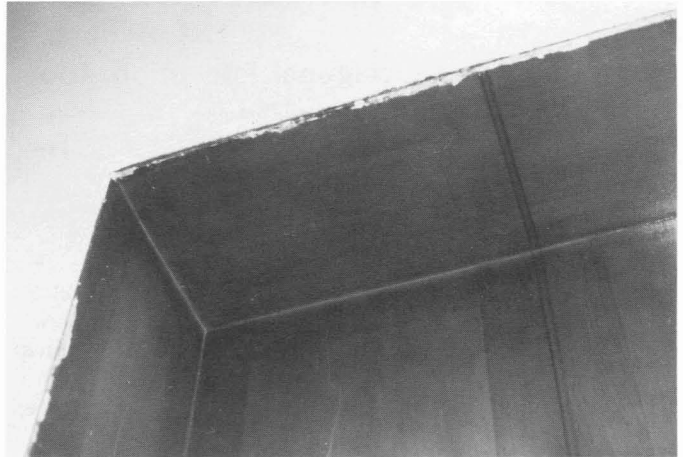
niches, and complex ceiling designs. Moreover, Soane's preference for delineating and compartmentalizing flat planer surfaces with mouldings, incising and decorative painting also can be found in Jay's work as well and will be discussed more fully later on.

Telfair Mansion remained essentially intact until its remodelling and enlargement as Telfair Academy of Arts and Sciences in 1885 by Detlef Lienau.⁵ Lienau's drawings (plans, sections, elevations and details) of the house and its proposed alterations and additions are extremely valuable for the study of the original building since they appear to document the plan and design of the house as Lienau found it (represented in ink and color washes) as well as his suggested alterations (in pencil). This observation led to the first and perhaps most important discovery for it identified potentially undisturbed original areas behind built-in case furniture (notated in ink) obviously added at a later date (ca. 1870) but before Lienau's arrival in 1885 (Fig. 1). Since it was discovered early on that nearly all the walls had been stripped of their pre-1885 finishes during Lienau's renovation, these protected niche areas were unique in possessing a record of the earlier wall finishes. As anticipated, the removal of the built-in bookcases and chests from the four niches revealed an undisturbed condition: the original unfinished floorboards with the newer Lienau hardwood flooring scribed around the bases of the furniture. Significant to the study and interpretation of the room was the discovery of a single set of tacks and tackholes along the perimeter of this original flooring indicating the use of an early floor covering; evidence substantiated by the later discovery of the 1832 inventory of Alexander Telfair's estate listing the use of a carpet and rug in the room.

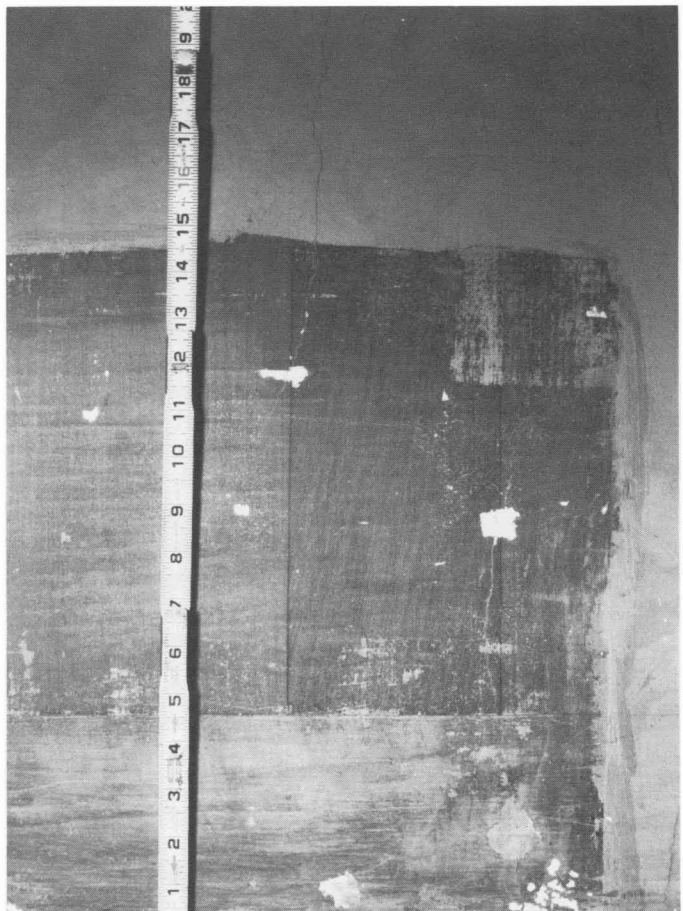
Those wall surfaces protected by the built-in pieces in the four niches (Fig. 4) and behind a large oak overmantel mirror (contemporary with the niche furniture) (Fig. 5), were found to possess their original painted finish which, in the case of the niches, was never over-painted. Although greatly discolored, this decorative wall treatment was a highly sophisticated scheme of *trompe l'oeil* light oak panelling executed in conjunction with oak-grained woodwork. Fragmented areas of the same decorative scheme discovered under the later Victorian overmantel mirror as well suggested that this treatment was not only restricted to the niches but was applied to all the plaster walls in the room. As mentioned earlier, such articulation of the wall surfaces through the use of actual or painted panels was popular during the early nineteenth century. Whereas few of these painted decorative treatments appear to have survived intact in England and America, the popularity of such schemes is evident as indicated by contemporary English design and trade books such as C.A. Busby's *A Collection of Designs for Modern Embellishments*, ca. 1811 and C.F. Partington's *The Builder's Complete Guide*, 1825.⁶ Plaster walls grained to simulate oak panelling such as found in Telfair's Octagonal Reception Room are known to have been employed by Soane in the design of several of his interior spaces. Crace, the painter, refers in his accounts to "graining the greater part of the Library [at 48 Grosvenor Square] satinwood"⁷ and in the Breakfast Parlour and Dressing Room of Soane's own house at

Lincoln's Inn Fields he painted the room in a pale oak graining picked out in gold.⁸

The severely alligatored conditions of the original painting found on the fireplace wall possibly suggest why this finish was stripped from the exposed wall surfaces in 1885 before repainting. Although the niches and room walls share the same general *trompe l'oeil* treat-



4. Octagon Room, northwest niche showing original plaster walls painted in imitation of oak shutters, ca. 1818. (Remaining photographs by author).



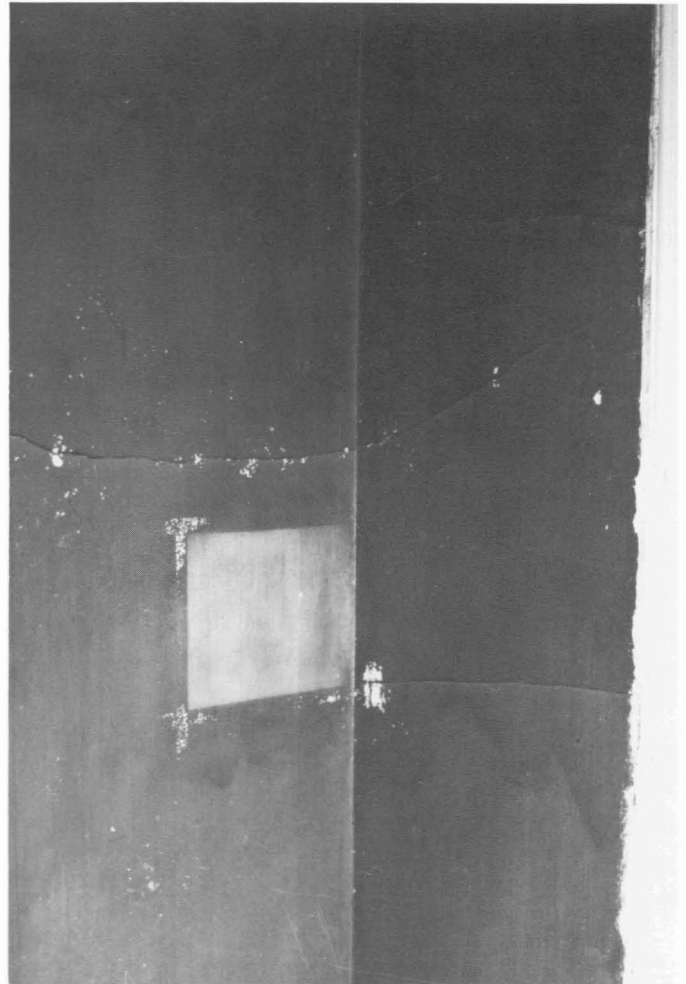
5. Octagon Room, west wall over fireplace mantel showing surviving original *trompe l'oeil* panelling (fragmentary).

ment simulating vertical flush rectangular panels with slightly darker stiles and rails, the niches were painted with a delicately highlighted vertical bead extending down the center of the rear wall thus giving the illusion of closed panelled doors or shutters (Fig. 4). Micro-chemical cross-section analysis of paint samples removed from the protected niche walls indicates that the overall design was first layed out on the plaster wall with a straight edge and black lead pencil and the individual areas (stiles, rails and panels) primed with their appropriately colored oil paint grounds. These areas were then outlined with a dark painted line. A light brown overgraining glaze was then applied to all areas creating the characteristic oak figuring for each individual element (i.e., stiles, rails and panels) and a thin protective varnish applied. Sometime later, the original decorative painting was revarnished presumably to revive the surface. This was confirmed by the noticeable accumulation of a later varnish in wall cracks which obviously occurred sometime after the initial decoration. Solubility tests identified this varnish as a spirit varnish — possibly an orange shellac — which had darkened and had become dirty over time obscuring the original colors and color contrasts of the graining underneath (Fig. 6).

Cross-section analysis of paint samples taken from the woodwork similarly confirm that all the woodwork in the room, including the sash and sash hardware, was originally oak-grained as well. As many as six subsequent campaigns of oak graining were observed in cross-section; the earliest regraining exposed in narrow bands approximately one inch wide on the baseboards immediately adjacent to the niches. This evidence suggests that the woodwork was probably first regrained at the time of the installation of the Victorian oak case furniture in the niches. This narrow strip represents the area which was protected by the scribed oak boards added at that time to conceal the joint between the furniture and the existing baseboard and corner bead. The vertical edge of the baseboard containing only the original graining further indicates that the original 1819 finish was still extant until the time of the niche installations around 1870, at which point both the wall and baseboard were concealed and protected until the present investigation.

With this information in hand, restoration of the room began. Due to the unique survival of the niche decoration, conservation of these areas was given first priority. Treatment included cleaning to remove the later discolored varnish and dirt, crack repair and inpainting. In addition, the fragmentary area of original painting on the west wall over the mantel was consolidated and covered with a protective isolating layer for future reference before repainting. Based on the design of the niche painting and the overmantel area, a reconstruction of the room's finishes was developed by the restoration architect (Fig. 7) and the scheme carefully executed imitating the original grounds and overgraining, graining pattern and general stylistic character.

During the investigation of the room, ongoing research into the Telfair family papers produced two significant documents critical to the interpretation of



6. Octagon Room, southwest niche, rear wall. Cleaning test for the removal of later varnish (note later varnish accumulation in the rear wall cracks).

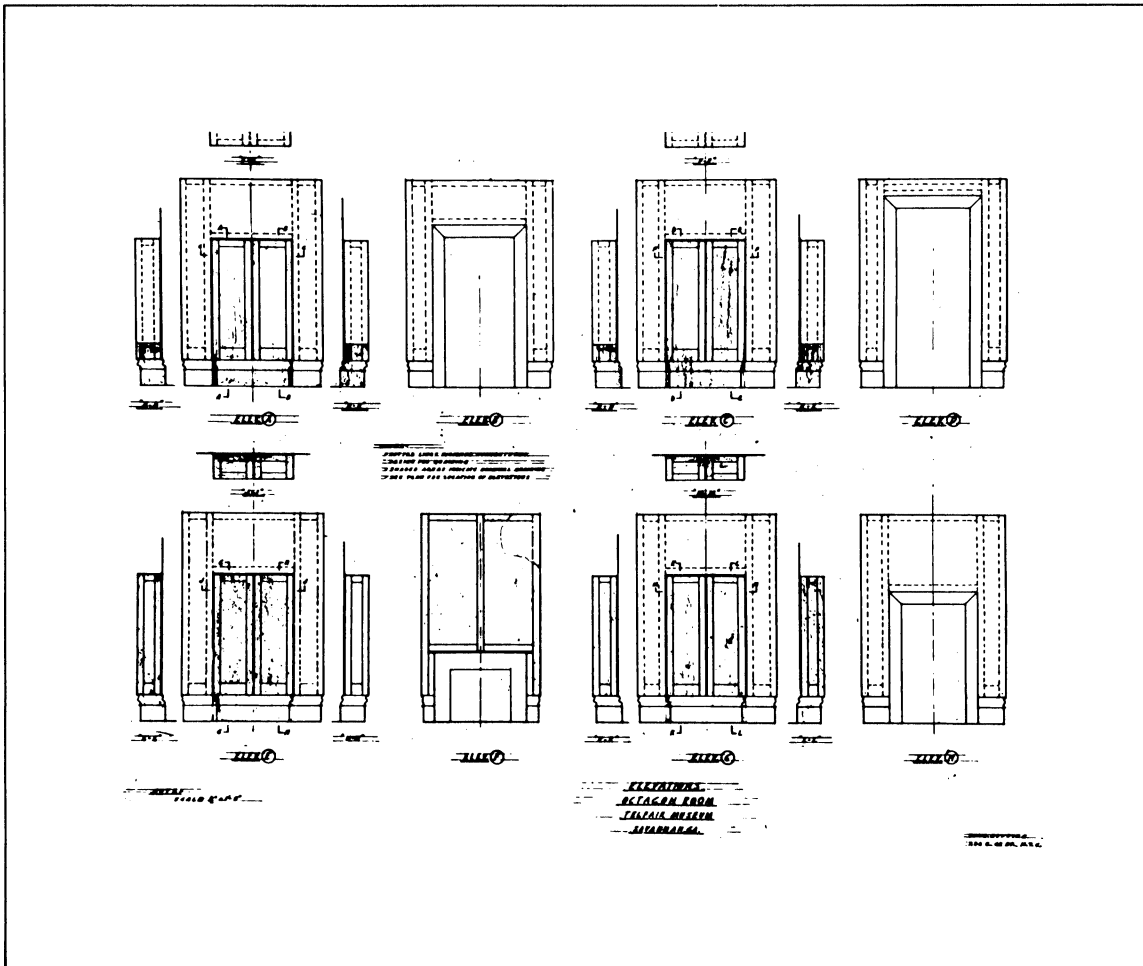
the room:⁹ an 1832 inventory of Alexander Telfair's estate listing household furnishings and a seemingly insignificant letter written to Alexander Telfair's sister, Margaret, verifying the room's faux finish.

"... I think of you and dear Mary. I would gladly find myself sitting by the fire in the dear Oak Room. And even now I can see you all with Friday bringing in the tea tray and your little page in devoted attendance."

Now completed, the restoration of Telfair's 'Oak Room' gives witness to the presence of high style English Regency design on American soil in the early 19th century. Moreover, it points to the sophisticated results which can be achieved through proper restoration methodology involving archival and archaeological research, documentation and conservation, and authentic craft replication.

Acknowledgement

The author would like to give special thanks to Miss Feay Shellman, Curator of Telfair Academy, without whose help and interest this study could not have been written.



7. Wall elevations of the Octagon Room showing areas of surviving original decoration (shaded) and the proposed restoration of that scheme (Drawn by Daniel M.C. Hopping, arch.)

Footnotes

1. This project was undertaken by the author and Mr. Daniel M.C. Hopping, restoration architect, at the request of Alexander V.J. Gaudieri, Director of Telfair Academy of Arts and Sciences, Inc. A complete description of the restoration of the room can be found in Telfair Academy of Arts and Sciences, Inc., *The Octagon Room* (Savannah, 1981).
2. In addition to Telfair Mansion, Jay's other residential projects in Savannah include the Richardson (now Owens-Thomas) house (1819), the William Scarborough house (1819), and the Bulloch-Habersham house (1819, now destroyed).
3. What few records exist indicate that Jay served as an apprentice to the London Surveyor, D.R. Roper, from 1809 to 1815 and exhibited drawings at the Royal Academy before coming to Savannah in 1817.
4. House plans published in English architectural design books from

- 1780 to 1830 generally incorporate one or more polygonal-shaped rooms, the most popular form being the octagon.
5. Lienau Collection, Avery Library, Columbia University, New York City, New York.
6. Partington discusses both graining and ornamental painting, the latter requiring "a ground to be painted of the tint required and the ornament to be painted is drawn out neatly with a black lead pencil, and then is to be painted and shaded to give it its due effect."
7. Dorothy Stroud, *The Architecture of Sir John Soane* (London, 1961), p.83.
8. Discovery of the original oak graining and its restoration in 1953 is noted in Sir John Summerson's *A New Description of Sir John Soane's Museum* (London, 1981), pp.16 and 44-45.
9. Telfair Academy of Arts and Sciences, Inc., *The Octagon Room* (Savannah, 1981), pp. 9 and 19.