FRENCH in STYLE
AMERICAN at HEART
The resurrection of Nemours

*Last, and far removed in terms of time and genre, a very fine French tableau mécanique, or mechanical painting with changing scenes, promises to be one of the exhibition's key attractions. Sumptuous indeed in its magnificent sculpted gilded wood frame adorned with fleurs-de-lis and foliate volutes, it depicts a masked ball like those given at Versailles or Marly at carnival time. Dated 1710, it has much to interest historians of pictorial art as it bears dedications from Antoine Watteau, the celebrated master of the fêtes galantes, to the Grand Dauphin, eldest son of Louis XIV.*

**Mechanical painting with scene changes, French, 1710. Inscribed "To His Royal Highness the Dauphin by his most humble servant Antoine Watteau/Superintendant of the Fêtes Galantes/Assistant painter to the Manufacture Royale des Gobelins/ Professor, Member of the Académie Royale. 1710." Oil on paper laid on brass in carved and gilded wood frame; height 29, width 34, depth 9 inches.** *FEMS.*

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*A little more than 100 years after Alfred I. duPont built his monumental tribute to his family's ancestry, its restoration has fulfilled his vision of a place the public will find more beautiful as time passes*

*By Grace Gary*

In 2005, midway through a tour of the gardens surrounding Nemours Mansion, Charles Birnbaum, fellow of the American Society of Landscape Architects and president of the Cultural Landscape Foundation, exclaimed, "Why have I never even heard of this place?" Why, indeed? In 1913 *Town and Country* called Nemours "one of the purest examples of French architecture to be found in this country" and made a particular point of praising the house for having "restraint without undue formality."[1] The next year *The Spur* said, "The furnishings and decorations combine the delicacy of French treatment

**Fig. 1. Standing at the heart of the maze garden, Henri Crenier's (1873–1948) monumental *Achievement* of 1928 presides over the newly restored grounds of Nemours Mansion and Gardens in Wilmington, Delaware.**

*Photography by Sisse Brimberg and Cotton Coulson*

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Fig. 2. Originally the long walk from the front of the mansion to the reflecting pool was a gently sloping lawn without steps or urns. Thomas Hastings (1860–1929) and Alfred I. duPont (1864–1935) added the terraces and the urns in the early 1920s.

Fig. 3. The bluestone steps enhance the perspective of the mansion facade when viewed from the reflecting pool and give the composition the drama of a stage set.

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Fig. 4. Dennis DaSilva of the Gilders' Studio in Olney, Maryland, brushes away loose gold leaf from the newly regilded *Achievement.*

Fig. 5. The architectural conceit of a proscenium is further enhanced by the central arch of the colonnade, which perfectly frames both *Achievement* and the mansion.

Fig. 6. The finished statue shines in all its art deco glamour.

with the compelling comfort generally associated with English homes."[2] More recently a guide to Delaware architecture described the estate simply as "spectacular."[3]

The house and gardens opened to the public as a museum in 1977, but for thirty-one years Nemours slumbered as one of the best-kept secrets in what is known as Delaware's "Chateau Country." Birnbaum was not alone in being unaware of its existence. That began to change in 2008 as the estate emerged from the first phase of a comprehensive restoration.

Carrère and Hastings designed Nemours in 1909 for Alfred I. duPont, one of three cousins who were the principal shareholders in the DuPont Company.[4] Alfred was the oldest male in a three-generation line of oldest sons of the founder of the company and he was devoted both to the firm and to the family's French heritage.

His allegiance to the firm made him rich, and his fidelity to his heritage led him to choose the top Beaux Arts firm in the country when he decided to build a new house. He also chose to give the house a name weighted with family history: Nemours is a small town south of Paris that was represented in the first French parliament by family patriarch Pierre Samuel DuPont de Nemours.

Thomas Hastings was the principal designer in the firm and the work at Nemours is credited to him. Any experienced architect will tell you that the most successful buildings represent a collaboration between architect and client, and nowhere is that more important than in the design of houses. Nonetheless, experienced as he was, Thomas Hastings probably got more of a partner in Alfred duPont than he originally wanted.

One major point on which duPont got his way was the selection of the builder. After receiving from Carrère and Hastings a list of contractors thought capable of undertaking such a large project, duPont informed them that he had chosen James M. Smyth of Wilmington, a man unknown to the architects and who had never undertaken a project as large or as complex as Nemours. Furthermore, duPont told them he had sealed the deal with a handshake and had no contract. The big-city architects may have been dismayed by such small-town ways, but Smyth remained on the scene at Nemours for more than a decade, skillfully managing a nearly continuous stream of projects on the estate.

Hastings may not have known what to make of duPont's involvement in the early stages of their relationship (which lasted until Hastings's death in 1929), but as the two worked and reworked the estate they became close friends. In fact, in 1926 Hastings jokingly proposed to duPont "I would like to take you into the firm of Carrere & Hastings—I would play 'second fiddle.'"[5]

Construction of the forty-seven-thousand-square-foot, seventy-seven-room mansion was finished in less than two years, but work on the gardens continued until duPont's death in 1935. Carrère and Hastings was not duPont's first choice for designing the gardens; originally, he approached Hermann W. Merkel of the New York Zoological Society about developing a landscape plan for Nemours. He soon discovered, however, that Hastings felt strongly that "the architect should always have control of the design...of the surroundings of his building. We have a very characteristic name for this portion of the composition. We call it the 'sauce of architecture.'"[6]

Nemours *was utterly unlike anything ever before built in the Brandywine Valley. It is still the grandest house in Delaware*

What Thomas Hastings created, with considerable help from his client, was utterly unlike anything ever before built in the Brandywine Valley. Nemours marked a dramatic break with the duPont family tradition of expanding and remodeling old houses that had been in the family for generations. To this day, it is still the grandest house ever built in Delaware.

When duPont died in 1935 his will specified that his third wife, Jessie Ball duPont, was to have a life interest in the estate. Following her death, the will decreed, Nemours was to be "maintained for the pleasure and benefit of the public... it being my particular desire that this memorial to my great, great grandfather... and to my father... be not permitted to deteriorate, but that it shall consistently become more beautiful and attractive to those who view it as time passes."[7] Jessie duPont died in 1970, and the estate opened to the public seven years later.

Overshadowed by nearby duPont estates Winterthur and Longwood Gardens, Nemours struggled to establish its place within the rich cultural community of the Brandywine Valley. It even struggled to find its place within the Nemours Foundation, which in addition to the house museum also operates the Alfred I. duPont Hospital for Children and major pediatric health-care clinics in four states. In 2005, however, the directors of the Nemours Foundation charted a new course for the estate when they hired Mary W. DeNadai of John Milner Architects, in Chadds Ford, Pennsylvania, and Wilmington, Delaware, landscape architect Rodney Robinson to undertake a comprehensive restoration of the house and gardens.

After reviewing the condition of the twenty-four historic buildings on the property and nearly sixty acres of formal gardens, the first decision the team made was to limit the first phase of the project to the house itself and the garden features stretching from the front door to the Temple of Love—a quarter-mile-long swath that represents the primary visitor experience at Nemours. The second decision was to set the period of the restoration very loosely to the mid-twentieth century. This allowed for the full restoration of the house Alfred built while keeping the changes Jessie duPont made during her long residency.

Aesthetically the building was in good shape, but its infrastructure was woefully out of date: wiring dated to

Fig. 7. The hump bridge reflects the serenity of the gardens at Nemours.

Fig. 8. A portrait of Jessie Ball duPont (1884–1970) by Pierre Troubetzkoy (1864–1936) hangs over the mantelpiece of the drawing room at Nemours. To the left is a portrait by Sir Joshua Reynolds (1723–1792) of Maria, Duchess of Gloucester and her daughter, and to the right is a portrait of Charlotte Marie Le Dee de Rencourt (1743–1784), the first wife of Pierre Samuel DuPont de Nemours (1739–1817) by an unknown artist.

Fig. 9. The Whitehall rowboat floating in the reflecting pool is a copy of the rowboat duPont is known to have kept in the pool in the 1910s.

1910, heating and air conditioning systems to the 1970s; and the entire basement required new waterproofing. The gardens were another story: they looked their age. Plants can die in one bad week, trees a century old can come down in one great windstorm, and water features can wear away under the slow drip of time.

Before any work was undertaken, however, the entire contents of the house had to be packed and moved into off-site storage. Nemours has a particularly large inventory of items—more than 110,000 pieces ranging from Jessie duPont's chamois nail buffers to a portrait of Maria, Duchess of Gloucester by Sir Joshua Reynolds—and over five months it took forty-nine truckloads to move everything out of the house.

While DeNadai and the architects began selective demolition to better understand the construction and condition of the building, Robinson and his

firm of landscape architects began analyzing soil and scouring archives for old lists of plant materials. At the same time, Frank S. Welsh of Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania, began paint analysis, and John Carr of Milner and Carr Conservation of Philadelphia began a conditions assessment of outside sculpture, ironwork, and interior woodwork.

One project that all agreed was essential to the final product was the regilding of *Achievement*, an art deco statue by Henri Crenier of a man and a woman that stands at the center of the Maze Garden. At nearly twelve feet tall and standing in the center of a ten-foot-tall basin made of red Levanto marble, *Achievement* is a bold statement of the happiness duPont found in his third marriage. Originally covered in 23 ¾-karat gold leaf, which lasted for nearly fifty years, the statue was coated with bronze-powder paint in the 1980s. While deciding to regild it may sound extravagant, in fact between 1980 and 2005 the statue had to be repainted four times—each coating lasting only about six years. So if the new gold leaf endures for almost half a century as the original application did, the savings in future scaffolding costs alone will have covered the expense of the project.

## The regilding *of* Achievement, *Henri Crenier's twelve-foot statue, was essential to the restoration of the landscape*

A second signature project of the restoration was re-creating the fifty-four lace panels that covered the windows of the first floor reception rooms. The first set was bought in 1911 from the B. Altman department store, and a second set was bought in 1929 from Alois Klein of Carlsbad, Czechoslovakia. By 2005 the oft-repaired Klein panels had reached the end of their useful life. On the advice of John R. Burrows, a historical design merchant in Rockland, Massachusetts, Morton Young and Borland Textiles Group in Ayrshire, Scotland, was hired to reproduce the lace. In order to achieve the desired appearance, the new lace was woven as two separate pieces on two different looms: eight point and fourteen point. Twenty-two different motifs were copied this way.

The third hallmark project that distinguishes the Nemours restoration was the rebuilding of the reflecting pool rowboat. We know from historic photographs that the duPonts kept a fifteen-foot-long

Whitehall rowboat in the eight-hundred-thousand-gallon pool. Alfred believed strongly in staying fit and the estate abounds in stylish facilities for doing so: the rowboat was just one of them. The incongruity of keeping a rowboat in the middle of the elegant French garden probably also appealed to his sense of humor. When Jonathan Minott of Island Falls Canoe Company in Atkinson, Maine, re-created the Whitehall, he helped breathe life back into the estate.

Finally, after all the studies were done, new wiring was pulled, walls were repainted, fire suppression, heating, air conditioning, and alarm systems were installed, and the basement was waterproofed. Ceiling, wall, and table light fixtures were upgraded. New copper gutters and leaders were installed and chimneys capped. Iron statues, gates, and grilles were repaired and repainted. Marble statues and fountains were cleaned and fountain water quality was improved. Soil was amended, plants were replaced, retaining walls were disassembled and rebuilt, and, historic landscape patterns were re-created. Three years and $36.8 million later, the restoration team achieved their goal: accomplishing Alfred's vision of Nemours becoming more beautiful as time passes.

One hundred and one years after it was first occupied, Nemours Mansion and Gardens has found its place in the cultural life of the Brandywine Valley. It's the new kid on the block.

[1] "The Country Seat of Mr. Alfred I. DuPont," *Town and Country*, June 28, 1913, p. 23. [2] "Mr. Alfred I. duPont's Nemours at Wilmington, Delaware," *The Spur*, June 15, 1914, p. 25. [3] W. Barksdale Maynard, *Buildings of Delaware* (University of Virginia Press, Charlottesville, 2008), p. 47. [4] Variations in the capitalization and spacing of the family name exist across the many members of this large, diverse family. Alfred I. duPont chose the lower case "d" and no space version, but the company name is always spelled DuPont. [5] Hastings to duPont, 1926, Alfred I. duPont Papers, Leyburn Library, Washington and Lee University, Lexington, Virginia. [6] Quoted in Mark Alan Hewitt, Kate Lemos, William Morrison, and Charles D. Warren, *Carrère and Hastings Architects* (Acanthus Press, New York, 2006), p. 13. [7] Last Will and Testament of Alfred I. duPont, dated November 19, 1932, probate filed May 24, 1935, as cited in *In Re the Estate of Alfred I. duPont, Deceased True and Correct Copy and Literal Transcript, Book 5* (privately published, 1935), p. 57.

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**Fig. 10. A copy of Joseph-Siffred Duplessis's portrait of Louis XVI (r. 1774–1792) presides over the dining room table. The chandelier is believed to have come from the Schönbrunn Palace in Vienna. The table setting is Coalport, and the stemware is by Thomas Webb and Son.**

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**Fig. 11. The paneling in the library was purchased through Charles of London in 1916. To the left of the window is a portrait of Alfred I. duPont by Herman Linding (1880–1940); to the right of the window is a portrait of Lady Prescott and her children by George Romney (1734–1802).**

**Fig. 12. The basement bowling alley has lanes for ten pins and duck pins; the walls are paneled in old-growth cypress.**