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"One must be ruthless in the cause of Beauty": Beverley Nichols's and John Fowler's Queer Domesticity in Mid-Century England

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Abstract

This essay focuses on the interior decoration style now known as "English Country" that is often credited to John Fowler and the "gardening novels" of author Beverley Nichols. I argue that through an appeal to England's idealized past, particularly the aristocratic tradition and the eighteenth century, Fowler and Nichols *queered* the visual representation of British national identity in properties owned by the National Trust, in popular magazines, and in novels. I also argue that both Nichols and Fowler, by grounding their efforts at beautification and stylization in a mythical British past, gain a kind of de facto acceptance for queer men and the queering of gender for consumers of their various media, both visual and printed. Finally, analysis of Fowler's and Nichols's work identifies a significant precedent for effeminate queers today who refuse the assimilation into mainstream masculinity called for by many homosexuals and heterosexuals alike.

> In Somerset Maugham, Cecil Beaton, the dilettante actor Ivor Novello, and Noël Coward, we can pinpoint the sort of camp the English upper classes adore: an outrageous but unprosecutable *arbiter elegantarium* who bullies the world of married society into accepting a homosexual's view of how it should dress, act, entertain and sometimes think.
>
> —Philip Core
> *Camp*

> "They're all queer, every damn one of them. The queer is the artistic arbiter of our age, chum. The pervert is top guy now."
>
> —Raymond Chandler
> *The Long Goodbye*

Queering Domesticity

I want to stress that I am using *queer* throughout this essay as a verb after the methods of Sullivan (2003): "rather than functioning as a noun, queer can be used as a verb, that is, to describe a process, a movement between viewer, text, and world, that reinscribes (or queers) each and the relations between them" (p. 192). In its most elemental form "Queer Theory, as a deconstructive strategy, aims to denaturalize heteronormative understandings of sex, gender, sexuality, sociality, and the relations between them" (Sullivan, 2003, p. 81). Such a strategy, however, creates no monolithic interpretation: "all performances, and all attempts at subversion will be ambiguous and open to multiple meanings" (p. 92). In other words, the (queer) 'language' created by Fowler and Nichols functions on multiple levels and offer different messages depending on the viewer's positionality. For me, and numerous other effeminate queers, that message was/is that we have a place wherein we may actively participate in social critique and community formation. Viewers inhabiting different positionalities may see none of this, or they may only benefit from some aspect of one of Fowler's decorated rooms or Nichols's novels and begin to see the world in an altered manner.

Sullivan offers a particularly apt analogy that elucidates the (queer) positionality I see Nichols and Fowler occupying. Discussing queer incongruity she cites, "the gay skinhead who passes [as both acceptably masculine and heterosexual] and yet whose parodic performance is 'visible' to others like him […] transform[s] the world and the mechanisms that support it" (2003, p. 87). I contend that Nichols and Fowler were able to appear, to those who wished to see them as such, as middle class professionals capably producing the work of their respective fields. Fowler, particularly, may have raised suspicion by choosing decorating as a career, but he was easily cast as a gifted historian (more on this later) and scholar, which likely alleviated potential anxiety about his

queerness. However, the fascinating aspect of both men's performance is their visibility for those "in the know." I argue that both men function as role models for other effeminate queers by demonstrating the potential for infiltrating mainstream society and influencing the public's perceptions and experiences. If this sounds sneaky or underhanded, I intend just that: living in England where homosexuality was illegal until 1967, queer men were forced to speak to one another in shared code—a code that would gain mainstream currency—signaling their existence, shared experiences, and aspirations.

Is Fem Fatal?

In *Merry Hall* (1951), Beverley Nichols cautions his readers, "We are about to enter an entirely new world, as different as the one which Alice entered when she stepped through the looking-glass" (p. 284). Exploring the work of author Beverley Nichols and decorator John Fowler parallels passing through the looking glass: their worlds bear many of the features of our world, but other, queerer, elements overlay their work and suggest alternate modes of living.

Nichols (1898-1983), author of 60 plays and novels, was a prominent English tastemaker and social figure, internationally known, throughout most of his adult life (see Figure 1). Although much of his writing has been largely forgotten, his "garden writing" maintains its popularity to this day. It seems unlikely Nichols foresaw his garden trilogies becoming the most enduring volumes of his sizeable collection of novels, plays, children's books, and newspaper and magazine articles. As recently as December 2006, Nichols's trilogies, routinely catalogued as "garden literature," were touted as "ideal Christmas gifts for women" in the tony *Town and Country*.[1] After reading just a few pages of Nichols's "garden" novels reveals their enduring appeal: wit, urbanity, and pronouncements about living "the good life" abound. Consider this excerpt from *Merry Hall*:

> The bedrooms were—potentially—gay and charming, but they had been transformed by previous owners into a succession of chambers of horror. The main excruciation in each room was the fireplace. There are certain shades of pink that should come under the Obscenities Act—(if there is such a thing)—shades so arch and so evil that they turn the stomach. (1951, p. 32)

When reading Nichols, one is rarely, if ever, left wondering about the nature of his opinions.

Figure 1. Beverley Nichols in his Study at Merry Hall. Beverley Nichols Papers. Special Collections, University of Delaware, Newark, DE.

Nichols capitalized upon his (gender-atypical/effeminate) love of old houses, antique furniture, and gardening and parlayed these passions into a series of narratives about his own life and experiences. Frequently Nichols suggests that the writing of his garden novels was the result of overspending on lavish purchases for Merry Hall:

1. Interestingly, seventy-five years after Nichols's first 'garden' volume was published, his trilogies are still being marketed almost exclusively to women. This seems remarkable since the editors of the magazine, *Town and Country* (December 2006, p. 108), could have chosen the noun *gardener* and avoided gender specificity.

> If you have only just enough money to buy a bed, a chair, a table and a soup-plate, you should buy none of these squalid objects; you should immediately pay the first installment on a Steinway grand. Why? Because the aforesaid squalidities are essentials, and essentials have a peculiar way, somehow or other, of providing for themselves. 'Look after the pennies and the pounds will look after themselves'… that is the meanest, drabbest little axiom that ever poisoned the mind of youth. People who look after pennies deserve what they get. All they get is more pennies (1951, p. 67).

One cannot help but laugh at Nichols's approach to life, and recognizing that he is writing autobiographically is just part of the fun. After all, our narrator is not just a colorful character in a novel—he is a highly visible society figure living quite differently from most people. At the time of their publication, Nichols presented communities unlike anything that existed in post-WWII England and earned a devoted following that endures to this day.

Figure 2. John Fowler. Photograph property of Colefax and Fowler.

In a similar fashion, John Fowler (1906-1977) (see Figure 2), best known for his work with the eponymous London decorating firm Colefax and Fowler, translated his gender-atypical (what I will henceforth call queer) interests in old houses, historic decoration, vintage clothing, and the decorative arts into a set of business-worthy skills that earned him a sterling reputation as the pre-eminent English decorator of his day.

At the height of his career in the 1950s and 1960s, Fowler was the high priest, if you will, of English decoration whose input was considered imperative for any serious redecoration or restoration efforts. His work, like Nichols's, endures to this day and has inspired countless imitations by decorators worldwide.

I contend that Nichols's *Merry Hall* trilogy and Fowler's work for the National Trust, particularly in Sudbury Hall[2] and Clandon Park,[3] *queer* the popular conception of "home" and its purposes. This queering transpired, in large part, because the decorative arts register as relatively insignificant in the world of masculine endeavor. Fowler and Nichols were both renovators and redecorators; each possessed a profound affinity for mansions and estates of the eighteenth century and spent their careers working with such properties. For Fowler, the properties belonged to the National Trust and, by extension, the nation. Merry Hall was Nichols's private residence made public in his novels. Nichols and Fowler both queer the idea of "home," catapulting it from the private sphere to a highly public space. In other words, each man *queers* or "denaturalizes," to use Sullivan's word, the traditional purpose of home as a private sphere created for heterosexual couples and their childrearing by placing queer males in a role of hybridity wherein they merge traditionally masculine and feminine roles in private homes made public; homes that no longer exist for the rearing and edification of children but for the education of the public-at-large in England.

During the 1950s, *Country Life*, and various other publications, routinely chronicled Fowler's work and invited countless middle class

2. Sudbury Hall (including the staircase hall) was featured in the BBC's 1995 production of *Pride and Prejudice*. A clip of this space can be viewed at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XrZCCsfelCc&feature=player_embedded#

3. An excellent virtual tour of this National Trust property is available at http://www.clandonpark.co.uk/

readers to experience his decorated spaces as sources of inspiration and creativity for their own homes. Nichols, on a less grand scale, also included photographs and sketches of his home in the pages of his semi-fictional novels. As a regular contributor to *Woman's Own*, and various other publications, he transgressed the private sphere, freely presenting his home redecorating publicly and destabilizing notions about the use of such publications. After all, as a privileged, middle-class male, Nichols queers women's magazines by offering advice about "womanly" topics and by suggesting that interior decorating and the pleasures of domesticity might be enjoyed by males as well as females. In this way, Nichols's work can be seen as possibly benefitting feminism by re-presenting the domestic sphere in new ways, ways that demanded respect for home and its beautification. Because women had been traditionally attached to this sphere, Nichols destabilized, or queered, the notion that no serious or worthwhile endeavors took place in the domestic sphere. Fowler and Nichols, each in their own way, queered home in a way that allowed certain kinds of queer men freer access to the realm of the domestic while simultaneously heightening its cultural capital for their readers and viewers. One must acknowledge, however, that these moves, while helpful to some marginalized queers, also probably still marginalized women trapped in quotidian domesticity.

My interest in effeminate queers, past and present, is at once personal and academic. As a queer, White, middle class male enthralled by fashion, interior decoration, antiques, and issues of style, I often struggle to understand the overwhelmingly homophobic response to effeminacy. Furthermore, I am struck by pervasive assertions (by queers and not-so-queers) characterizing effeminate queers as parodic, superficial, inconsequential figures. In fact, popular response routinely dismisses queer effeminacy as disingenuous, artificial, stereotypical minstrelsy that degrades all queerness. Asserting effeminate queerness as inauthentic imperils us all: the move to disallow variation in queerness invites attack and marginalization for all varieties, which is why my use of the term queer is not intended as a universal portrayal of queer but rather an exploration of a specific variety of effeminate male queerness that, regardless of its source (be it essential, socially constructed, or otherwise) gains power and influence by altering the domestic realm and presenting its destabilized form publicly.

Consider *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy's* Carson Kressley: effeminate, flamboyant, witty, and wicked, he is reviled in both popular and academic commentary. For example, E. Michele Ramsey and Gladys Santiago argue, "*Queer Eye* reifies public definitions of gay men as "feminine" in three primary ways including the neutralization of homo*sexuality*, the choice of men to be made over, and the focus on Carson as the program's primary sense of humor" (2005, p. 353). They continue, "Carson's behaviors further aid in the detrimental representation of the Fab Five (and thus gay men in society at large) by a form of reluctant testimony—Carson is the member of the group who most often gives credence […] to the stereotypes of gay men" (Ramsey & Santiago, 2005, p. 354). The message of this rhetoric is that for queers to gain acceptance they must assimilate to mainstream ideals of masculinity. Or, the message is interpreted that all gay men are effeminate. Regardless, the underlying message is that an essentialized notion of masculinity defines both straight and gay men.

Despite the highly visible disdain by many for effeminate queers, they continue to gain visibility in various media today. Nearly every month I peruse *Country Living*, *Traditional Home*, or *House Beautiful* and find articles featuring the fabulous homes of any number of White middle to upper class effeminate queer couples across this country. Thanks to effeminate queer pioneers like Beverley Nichols and John Fowler, I can see a measure of myself reflected in the media that validates my sense of self as well as my sense of belonging to a larger community of like-minded individuals. Furthermore, these depictions suggest to me that non-queer individuals are gaining exposure to, and perhaps learning to appreciate, effeminate queers. I view readers' exposure to this visual alterity as significant and potentially revolutionary. If consumers come to admire the work of these queer men, might they not eventually shift their worldview? Perhaps it is a less noisy or controversial (and context-specific) way of working toward social justice, but I argue it is no less effective or potentially subversive.

I initiate this discussion about the evaluation of publicly effeminate queers with anecdotal evidence for several reasons. First, I wish to establish that this study focuses upon a highly privileged subset of

queers—White, middle class effeminate professional men—who, though marginalized, achieved a high measure of professional and financial success. I include myself in this class of queers as an academic afforded the privilege of investigating these issues and offering my analysis of their cultural impact. Second, this highly focused area of study allows me to draw conclusions relevant primarily to this group of individuals. However, this work should incite further investigation into the congruencies and incongruities at play for other groups of less privileged effeminate queers. Their experiences differ significantly and will prove a productive area for examination, though they fall outside the parameters of this exploration.

I conceive of both Nichols and Fowler as (effeminate) queer collectors (of objects, cultural traditions, houses and gardens), which I contend brings the nature of their queerness into high relief. Michael Camille (2001) argues,

> While issues of gender have been enormously productive in our discipline [art history] in recent years, gender and sexuality tend to be understood as things we see in images rather than as inherent in the very structure of relations through which images have been inherited, bought, sold, exchanged and enjoyed. It is perhaps the last term—enjoyment—that has been the most difficult to come to terms with for art historians, fearful of the unscientific lapse of 'jouissance', and yet it seems to me that pleasure—not as a passive and merely optical response but as an active, productive and shaping stimulation of all the senses—is the fundamental experience at the foundations of the act of collecting. Uniting the collector with the object collected—it is productive pleasure felt in the body that binds the connoisseur to the gesture of the brushstroke and the philatelist to the sensation of the serrated edge. (pp. 1-2)

Their "enjoyment" and the pleasure created (for themselves and their audiences) by "collecting" interests me most about Nichols and Fowler. I posit that we can productively read each man's cultural contribution as implicated in the complex matrices of identity, including queerness, expressed in their work. Camille (2001) argues "that desire reflects or expresses gender and that gender reflects or expresses desire" (p. 2). In other words, the cultural productions of effeminate queers both express and create their desire in rich, complex ways that work to reveal a great deal about the potential for queering heteronormativity. Camille (2001) explains this best:

> [T]he collector's desire has often seemed to strain the limits of the heterosexual matrix and to problematize the logic of oppositions structuring it. It is not just that the unmentionable nature of same-sex desire has often meant that the subject had to communicate the 'secret' in a coded language, but the fact that this language was a system of objects. What could not be said could be spoken through things. (p. 2)

In other words, Nichols and Fowler, in my estimation, actively communicated their queerness via the objects, large and small, that they collected. For members of their group, this 'language' clearly spoke to issues of identity, culture, and community formation and preservation. For the un-queer, these messages may have been cryptic, perhaps even indecipherable, yet possibly gained notice as *other*.

Working within, and simultaneously subverting, patriarchal society, Nichols and Fowler, in their respective fields, each adopt surprisingly similar modus operandi. Both men elevate and revere the British institution of the country house, queering its historical significance and purposes by imagining and enacting new uses for that institution: in their hands the country house no longer represents a site for traditional heteronormative families and their needs. For Nichols, the country house represents a home with his partner, Cyril Butcher. For Fowler, the country house operates as an environment dedicated to queer aesthetic perfection. Shifting the meaning and the purpose of this hallowed English institution, both Nichols and Fowler queer British national history (for which the houses serve as a metonym), inserting queer effeminacy into its cultural narrative. Finally, both men queer social hierarchy by effectively positioning themselves as purveyors of the aristocratic tradition, ignoring their firmly middle class provenances.

Before moving forward, I think it necessary to note why I am paralleling the work of an artist working in a visual medium (Fowler) and one working in a written medium (Nichols). First, as two famous, creative queers of the same generation, their success in promoting queer, effeminately inflected worldviews, ultimately gaining sizeable audiences during the 1950s and in the intervening five decades bears examination. Second, both men chose the English country house, particularly as they *imagined* its existence in the eighteenth century, as the locus of their creative endeavors. Martin Wood, Fowler's biographer, describes the work of Nancy Lancaster (Fowler's long-time decorating partner) as, "A subtle amalgam, which has at its heart 'a cool and eclectic view of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries,' the English Country House Style sought to produce an image of the past that was in essence an illusion" (Wood, 2005, p. 6). Artifice, an oft-criticized feature of effeminacy, characterizes both men's historicized creative output. Both men, in effect, draw upon the aristocratically inflected, effete traditions popular during various decades of those centuries and adapt it to life as they thought it ought to be, likely failing to recognize (or care) that few people enjoyed the privilege to realize such goals. Performing as self-appointed aristocrats, these effeminate queers proceeded with a sense of entitlement based upon their artistic talents to guide audiences (reading and viewing) toward greater sophistication and a new understanding of home and community.

By co-opting the English country house, they firmly established a credibility that afforded them carte blanche as *arbiters elegantarium*. Nichols and Fowler exemplify the potential trajectory and empowerment possible for queer men willing to work both within and against entrenched social order. While I am analyzing their work at a remove of over fifty years, I carefully assert that both men were likely working out of a complex set of motivations and desires and I have no wish to suggest their queering of culture was a mission they set out to achieve. Indeed, it seems far likelier that it was simply the result of a body of work completed with a queer perspective. To further clarify my position, I present a case study of these two remarkable men.

Nichols: Planting the Seeds?

Nichols propagated queerness in his 'garden literature,' though his *Merry Hall* trilogy offers little practical gardening advice. The trilogy provides a disarming portrait of an idealized queer community established, managed, and marketed by an effeminate semi-autobiographical narrator legally required to deny his sexuality, but who does little to conceal it. While the majority readership of Nichols's trilogies was likely women, evidence of male readership exists (Connon, 1991, p. 161). Emphasizing community, decorum, and an aristocratically inflected lifestyle in his trilogy, Nichols's writing impacted men and women in a country where gardening was considered a leisure pursuit appropriate for both genders. Little did his readers realize they were being instructed about queering society. If this scenario sounds vaguely ominous, I would encourage you to consider Christopher Reed's idea that "queer space is space in the process of, literally, *taking place*, of claiming territory" (1996, p. 67). Considered in this light, Nichols's novels functioned as Trojan horses. This represents, for me, a significant feature of the queer *modus operandi*: the willingness to employ (benevolent) sleight of hand to disseminate their worldviews and ideals. This method, perhaps suspect to some, ensured an audience for Nichols's works.

Nichols[4] markets himself as an amusingly whimsical and self-deprecating quasi-aristocratic exemplar of taste, refinement, and dignity. He personifies conspicuous consumption and an affinity for artifice and performance (which may be traced to his interest in the eighteenth century, if we consider conventions of French royalty, theater, and fashion at the time). He evinces supreme confidence in his sensibilities and witheringly criticizes dissenters. Nichols proclaims in *Sunlight on the Lawn* (1956), "One must be ruthless in the cause of Beauty" (p. 66).

Nichols nurtures a home based upon, above all, his interpretation of Georgian ideals: order, symmetry, and beauty. He establishes his fanaticism for Beauty drolly: "One of my grandfathers died of a clump of

4. Throughout this discussion I will refer to the narrator in the *Merry Hall* trilogy as "Nichols," acknowledging the fact that while the narrator is based on the author's own personality and life experiences, he remains a fictionalized version of the actual person known as Beverley Nichols.

iris stylosa; it enticed him from a sick bed on an angry evening in January, luring him through the snow-drifts with its blue and silver flames; he died of double pneumonia a few days later. It was probably worth it" (Nichols, 1951, p. 17). The *Merry Hall* trilogy establishes Nichols as a queer, resolutely un-patriarchal, 'lord of the manor' patron/protector to the members of his queerly constructed community that includes no heteronormative families.

As a queer self-styled aristocrat his worldview differs significantly from his heterosexual predecessors. Nichols's concerns lie not with his progeny, but with his community's welfare. He assumes responsibility not only for the community's aesthetic disposition, but also for its well-being. For instance, he mediates and helps resolve village squabbles, primarily between "Our" Rose and Miss Emily, his closest friends and competitors in matters domestic and aesthetic. When Rose launches a floral design business, much to Miss Emily's jealousy and chagrin, it is Nichols who repairs their rift (1956). When Miss Mint, a retired elderly governess, rents a small cottage (her sole source of income) to the Stromens, unsavory out-of-town tenants that refuse to pay or leave, Nichols gathers community members together to forcibly eject the drunken, abusive tenants to protect Miss Mint and find her more suitable tenants. As if that were not enough, Nichols and Bob R. then completely (and lavishly) redecorate Miss Mint's property to cheer her up (Nichols, 1956). Whenever necessary, Nichols finds ways to rescue the poor, the wounded, and the elderly.

Nichols establishes his fiendish dedication to aesthetics a few pages into *Merry Hall* via his flamboyantly queer friend, Bob R. as he surveys Merry Hall's façade: "About 1770 I should say,' continued Bob. 'And whoever it was who put that coloured glass in the fanlight should have been popped into Dachau" (Nichols, 1951, p. 29). Bob R.'s acid (and objectionable, even if he is Jewish) dark humor highlights Nichols's belief in the transcendent and edifying value of Beauty, as well as his willingness to sling arrows at anyone or anything he considers in poor taste. As chatelain of Merry Hall, Nichols immediately obliterates the unseemly, dubious (and markedly Victorian) elements installed on his property by its previous (heterosexual) owners, Mr. Doves and Mr. Stebbing:

> If you had happened to stroll down the lane, on any sunny afternoon during those first few weeks, and if you had chanced to stand on tiptoe and look over the old brick wall, you would have seen a remarkable assembly. You would have seen a number of young men in a minimum of clothing hurling themselves with a savage joy at the Excrescence, rending it apart and chucking it into wheelbarrows. (Nichols, 1951, p. 49)

This idyllic scene evokes Halcyon, a place where a beneficent patron re-establishes beauty and harmony, albeit barbed with catty wit and sarcasm. The 'excrescence' Nichols refers to—a Victorian bay window—represents the demolition of an old order, a move toward re-establishing Merry Hall's original Georgian architecture (see Figure 3).

Figure 3. Merry Hall. Beverley Nichols Papers, Special Collections, University of Delaware, Newark, DE

Nichols's performance as aristocratic patron suggests patriarchy or paternalism, but his queering of the role ultimately ushers in a kind of

queertopia. Rather than creating a dichotomy where Nichols represents one faction of society and the laborers renovating the mansion another, Nichols and his other queer middle and working class friends work together renovating and reinvigorating Merry Hall and its grounds. In addition, members of the community converge as an interdependent family of homosexual men, single and widowed women (some arguably lesbians), a married couple (Oldfield and his wife), and individuals of various social classes and age groups who function in unison rather than isolating themselves based on gender, sexuality, or socio-economic status.

Over the course of the trilogy, Nichols pursues—at great expense and stress to himself and others—a home unencumbered by oppressive heteronormativity. The lynchpin to this community's success is the similarity of viewpoints and sensibilities shared by its members and their willingness to band together to forcibly eject individuals or groups who would do harm to their fellow community members. In Merry Hall queers unapologetically revel in their interests and desires. Nichols and his community members forge ahead and model new (queer) societal standards. In essence, Nichols's home and community create, by example, an idyllic model for society where queerness, i.e., a denaturalization of heteronormative projections, is embraced and celebrated.

Fowler: National Trust?

Much as Nichols's novels were reaching an audience eager to establish themselves more firmly in the social order, so was Fowler's work: "New-found riches required old-style trappings, so land and a country house—or merely a house and never mind the land—were demanded by those seeking respectability and social acceptance" (Wood, 2007, p. 111). Fowler's work, like Nichols's, influence interior decorators even today; English Country Style is Fowler's creation (with the help of Nancy Lancaster and, to a lesser degree, Sibyl, Lady Colefax). Fowler's work merges the refinement and symmetry of the eighteenth century with modern convenience and luxury into a style part grandeur and part *deshabille*. Jones proclaims,

> John Fowler took the romantic spirit of late eighteenth-century decoration, the simplicity of rural life with its celebration of nature, and fashioned it into a style of his own. The freshness and originality of his work was such that he became the seminal influence on English decoration in this second half of the twentieth century. (Jones, 1989, p. 1)

Both Nichols's and Fowler's success was due in part to their drawing upon an aristocratic tradition of style and taste that had lost currency during and after the Victorian period. Several high-profile women heavily influenced Fowler's taste.[5] One particularly interesting influence epitomizes the eighteenth century: Marie Antoinette. John Cornforth, author of *The Inspiration of the Past: Country House Taste in the Twentieth Century* (1985), describes Fowler's first trip to Paris in 1936: "Perhaps it was at that time he developed his romantic passion for Marie Antoinette, who also became a kind of patron saint of all that he admired most in light, elegant and highly sophisticated decoration" (p. 150). In his affinity for the fallen queen, we find his inspiration: Marie Antoinette's aesthetic ideals. Her desire for a country village was pure affectation: perhaps she enjoyed the irony of a queen imitating peasantry. A similar mindset informs Fowler's decoration in similarly artificial decorating treatments. For example, he adored *trompe l'oeil*, a treatment mimicking a real object in a manner not wholly convincing. Its appeal lies in its simultaneous genuineness and falseness.

By the 1950s, Fowler ascended to the role of superstar decorator and *the* authority in all matters relating to the eighteenth century and the restoration of homes from the period. In 2005, Sir Neal Cossons, the Chairman of the English Heritage, remarked, "Using his innate good judgment and personal flair he created serene and subtle interiors that provided a wonderful background for great collections" (Hughes, 2005, p. xi). Cossons describes this seasoned professional oddly; the terms "innate" and "flair" suggest Fowler lacked professional training or a

5. Both Sibyl, Lady Colefax and Nancy Lancaster played important roles in the creation of the signature Colefax and Fowler style. Chester Johnson suggests that Lady Colefax's style helped instill a level of formality and balance to Fowler's work, while Nancy Lancaster helped him to reach the peak of country house elegance. Lancaster, an American and niece of the formidable Lady Astor, is regarded by many as one of the most prominent interior decorators from the United States to date.

methodical approach. Much commentary casts Fowler as a decorating savant instinctively attuned to the restoration and redecoration of eighteenth-century interiors. Such descriptions afford him mystique and even, perhaps, brilliance, but they also reveal the streak of personal caprice in his restorations.

If one is charged, by virtue of being hired by that nation's government, with creating the public face of the nation and its history, is one not obligated to present that history based upon extant evidence or clues? Is it permissible to "jazz up" that history if it is visually unappealing or even tacky? If one represents a historically unrepresented group, is there a temptation to restore some of the foremost museums as that individual believes those spaces *ought* to have looked? For Fowler, his queer aesthetic frequently trumped extant evidence. An outsider to both the upper classes and his government, Fowler altered how both groups thought about themselves by imprinting their museums with his own style: a style informed by the complex matrix of his personal taste, class roots, and queerness.

Let us turn now to Sudbury Hall, a sixteenth-century house "given to the Trust by the 10th Lord Vernon in 1967" (Wood, 2007, p. 223), the site of one of Fowler's most significant queer interventions. I find Fowler's re-decoration in the staircase hall particularly telling in terms of the risks he took and the profound expression of his personal taste in the end result. As a house denuded of its contents, Sudbury still represented power, prestige, and privilege because of its aristocratic history. Entering the staircase hall, Fowler found "the walls had been painted cream and the elaborately carved balustrade varnished a dark Victorian brown" (Wood, 2007, p. 223). Wood notes, "Under John's guidance, the brown varnish was stripped off and the balustrade painted in two shades of white. He had the walls painted a rich shade of yellow, and he also removed the brown graining from the plasterwork frames on the staircase walls, gilding them with silver leaf" (2007, p. 223). Proving highly controversial, Fowler undertook these treatments without National Trust approval: "John recognized that if this proposed scheme had been put to the committee they would probably still be discussing it. Democracy was something of anathema to him, at least as far as decoration was concerned" (Wood, 2007, p. 223). In short, Fowler treated the space as his own, decorating as he saw fit without the requisite permission.

Deborah, Duchess of Devonshire, a member of that committee, observed that upon seeing the staircase hall for the first time, "jaws dropped" (Wood, 2007, p. 223). According to Tim Knox, when the redecoration was covered in 1971 in *Country Life*, the treatment in the staircase hall was "swiftly passed over in one sentence" (Hughes, 2005, p. 18). Lord Vernon, whose childhood home had been Sudbury Park, "claimed he had never been consulted at any stage during the restoration" (Knox, 2005, p. 18). Vernon also complained, "there was no evidence […] that it [the balustrade] had originally been this colour, the traces of white paint found on it were the result of a disastrous misunderstanding with a nineteenth-century agent" (Knox, 2005, p. 18). Other critics of the restoration emerged:

> One of the latter, Richard Tyler, wrote in August 1971 of how the Staircase had "been unsexed" and prettified. "Many of us are familiar with, and admire, the considerable talents of Mr. John Fowler, the Trust's decorator, and his experts," he wrote "but his very recognizable taste is what now dominates Sudbury. The clock has not been turned back to 1671: it has been set to 1971: Period of National Trust Redecoration." (Knox, 2005, p. 18)

Knox concludes, "The National Trust, a guardian of historic-house museums, not living family houses, should not perhaps have permitted a decorator to impose his taste upon them in a way that a private proprietor might do" (Knox, 2005, p. 18).

Here, Fowler's willingness to assume "ownership" of a national property, decorating it according to his own aesthetic, speaks volumes. For one, his decoration directly affronted Lord Vernon and the National Trust, both abstract emblems of heteronormative patriarchal culture. That the description of Fowler's work included terms like "unsexed" and "prettified" suggests Fowler's queering, emasculating effect on the property. By disrupting the existing decoration, which he considered drab and unappealing, Fowler affords queer style primacy over the established scheme others were intent upon preserving. Fascinatingly, the scheme remains to the day and serves as a visual reminder of Fowler's indelible

queer imprint upon the property.

To elucidate Fowler's queer visual narrative further, I would like to turn to the Saloon at Clandon Park (see Figure 4). Helen Hughes (2005), Head of Historic Interiors and Conservation, English Heritage, observes,

> The existing presentation of the room is not a recreation of the original eighteenth-century scheme—and Fowler never intended it to be so—but a fusion of selected elements which reflected his own taste. To a certain extent, Fowler's transformation of so many of the National Trust's interiors did condition our perception of historic houses; with limited space for interpretation information, Fowler recreations were generally accepted by visitors as surviving historic schemes or careful recreations of such. The Fowler vision became the vision of the past, so much so that it became *de rigueur* for regional museum curators to paint all Georgian panelling in 'three shades of…[white, for which Fowler was renowned].'(p. xiv)

Figure 4. The Saloon at Clandon Photo property of the National Trust.

Two elements in Clandon Park's saloon prove especially fascinating and *queered*: the curtains and Fowler's redecorated overmantel and chimneypiece. Astonishingly, the deep red curtains (created at the end of WWII), which appear to be velvet or some other sumptuous fabric, are constructed of American army blankets. Wood (2007) notes, "he [Fowler] could probably have replaced the curtains […] However, John felt that they were part of the history of the house and so they were left. Not everyone was impressed with the overall effect" (p. 229). Fowler's retention of the army blanket curtains deserves interrogation: is there not a sense of queer campiness (for a man renowned for his exquisite draperies) in preserving curtains made of such humble materials in such a grand space? For Fowler, who so frequently cited his *modus operandi* as an awareness and appreciation of historical decoration, this choice suggests he was poking fun at the serious institution of the country house. James Lees-Milne, Fowler's friend and National Trust member, noted about Clandon "Looking round, I thought it the most hideous decoration I had seen" (Wood, 2007, p. 229).

Fowler's work on the overmantel and chimneypiece at Clandon Park also raised concerns. Before his redecoration, the upper elements of the fireplace had been painted white, which Fowler decided to paint black, marbleize, and then pick out in white. Peter Inskip, who worked with Forster as an informal intern during the restoration at Clandon, notes "Of course, there was always a hunt for any black paint over gilding on furniture, picture frames, and looking glasses as John was obsessed with funereal traditions and discovering evidence of mourning" (Hughes, 2005, p. 4). One wonders if perhaps Fowler's choice of decoration for the overmantel and chimneypiece was not actually some expression of this particular fascination. Inskip (2005) clearly indicates that further investigation has revealed that Fowler's scheme for the piece has no precedent in the room. Tim Knox remarks, "the overmantel above the ponderous black and white marble chimney piece was transformed into a funereal confection of almost Sicilian boldness and drama. Yet he also—for John Fowler had a sense of humour as well as style and history—chose to retain the curtains made out of dyed American army blankets in the 1940s" (Hughes, 2005, p. 16). These incongruous (army blankets and funeral décor) elements, strongly suggest Fowler's dedication to communicating

more than just national or even decorative history with his work for the National Trust. Knox notes, finally, "Fowler was quite prepared to alter or obliterate historical evidence if it didn't fit in with his plans" (Hughes, 2005, p. 16).

While Knox's assertion casts Fowler's obliteration of "historical evidence" in a negative light, perhaps that obliteration becomes the ultimate method of queering a space, of creating a literal *and* figurative space for effeminate queers. Nichols certainly engineered similar obliterations at Merry Hall: rather than preserving a past that gave no expression to men like him, he chose to remake his mansion and community as exemplars of social change and queerness. As a result, each artist in his respective *métier*, claims a niche for queer effeminacy in English history, literary history, and design history that paved the path for future effeminate queers to further their aesthetic tradition.

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