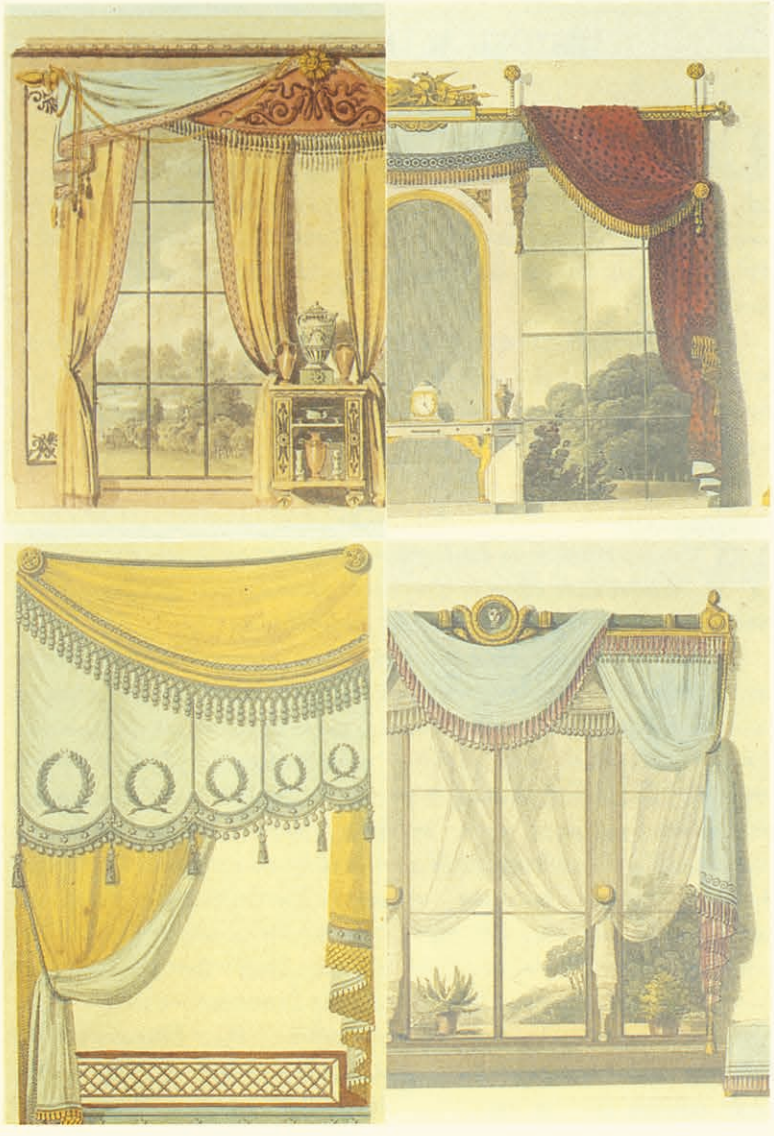
The Georgian Group Guides

No 14

CURTAINS AND BLINDS



A Brief Guide to the Development and Reconstruction of Georgian Window Treatments

FRONT COVER: REGENCY CURTAIN TREATMENTS OF 1809-16 FROM RUDOLF ACKERMANN'S *REPOSITORY OF THE ARTS*.

INTRODUCTION

This short guide is intended as a general outline of the historical development of Georgian window treatments, and of the simple do's and dont's to be remembered when repairing or re-creating original Georgian curtains, blinds or shutters. It can only serve as a brief introduction to this vast subject; more detailed information can be found in the works cited in Further Reading, below.

Before you begin any expensive or detailed work, always consult a recognised expert — one who, preferably, has no commercial interest in the project. Your local District or Borough Council Conservation Officer, or a national organisation such as English Heritage, the Georgian Group, or the textile experts mentioned in Sources (below), should be able to help in choosing reliable methods and local suppliers.

HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT

SHUTTERS

During the Georgian period, sash windows were usually fitted with interior shutters. These fittings were used not only to keep out direct light, but also to retain heat and to provide added security. Many houses still possess workable shutters inside their shutter boxes; it is always worth checking this before you embark on complicated draughtproofing or secondary glazing.

Georgian homes frequently had external window shutters, too. Most, though have now been dismantled, and only their fixtures survive as a record. Their disappearance should not, incidentally, serve as an excuse to install plastic or wooden 'French-style' shutters of any description.

BLINDS

Window blinds were employed not to retain heat — shutters could do this far more effectively — but to prevent direct light from fading precious furniture, fabrics and paintings during the daytime.

The first patent for a painted cloth blind was granted in 1692, to William Bayley. Primitive roller blinds comprised little more than a strip of cloth nailed to a wooden cylinder; by 1700, however, more sophisticated spring-loaded canvas or cloth blinds, often known as 'spring curtains', were already widely available. The material, attached to the tin case which housed the spring, was often dyed or painted green. By 1808, however, George Smith, was recommending that roller blinds be painted 'of the same colour as the principal draperies'. Even such an august craftsman as Thomas Chippendale was not beneath supplying houses with roller blinds: in 1776 his men worked ten days repairing the blinds in just one house. However, despite their widespread use during the Georgian period, few original roller blinds survive today.

The same can be said of Georgian Venetian blinds. Made from painted deal laths held by cloth tapes, these had reached Britain and America by 1760 — their name possibly deriving not from Venice itself but from their original employment behind English Palladian Venetian windows. Just as roller blinds frequently suffered from defective spring mechanisms, Venetian blinds were also unreliable, the tape binding the laths often coming loose.

Venetian and spring blinds were expressly designed to protect furnishings. They were often complemented by smaller blinds or screens which covered only half or part of the window area; these were intended to frustrate the gaze of nosey passers-by rather than to filter out the sun's harmful rays. Such 'snob

screens', as they were often called, were fixed at the bottom of the window, and were, it seems, painted green.

External roller blinds, drawn up into painted wooden blind boxes, were popular by 1800. The boxes themselves often survive today, but it is extremely rare to find an extant exterior blind. From the evidence we do have, it seems that they were made of very heavy-duty canvas, and were often decorated with gaily-coloured stripes.

HALF-DRAWN VENETIAN BLINDS DEPICTED IN A REGENCY WATERCOLOUR *(CHARLES HIND).*

SUB-CURTAINS

Behind the curtain itself many Late Georgian households installed a muslin 'sub-curtain'. Its primary function was to keep direct light out of the room during the daytime, and thus to help protect valuable furniture, fabrics and paintings from fading.

Originally only imported from India, muslins were spun in Britain after 1779, following the invention of the spinning mule. They were made from very finely-spun cotton, and could be of a variety of consistencies, from cambric to dimity. Today, however, the term 'muslin' is reserved for what the Georgians would recognise as a plain, gauze-like white cambric.

CURTAINS

Curtain Types

Only grand early Georgian homes possessed fine window curtains. More modest households made do with white or undyed stuffs tacked or hung inside the window — or more often than not dispensed with such pretentious trappings altogether. These simple cloth hangings were often tied back during the day, and the tacking at the top of the window frame hidden behind a valance.

By the 1730s, however, window curtains were of prime significance in the domestic interior. They could be drawn horizontally, along a rod, or vertically, using cords, and could be in one or two pieces. Of the vertically-drawn forms, the 'festoon' was, by 1750, evidently the most popular. A fashion which was probably borrowed from France, the festoon curtain comprised one piece of fabric drawn vertically in swags — and was accordingly made of light fabrics which could be raised with little effort. The lines which pulled the curtain ran through vertical lines of brass rings on the back of the material, over boxwood pulleys hidden behind a pelmet or board, and down to cloak pins at dado level. The cords were generally attached to lead plumbets, to help them hang properly.

Closely related to the festoon was the two-part 'drapery' display. This operated on roughly the same principle as the festoon, two pieces of material being drawn towards the outer corners of the window to create a series of heavy swags at both sides of the architrave. This type of curtain did not, Annabel Westman has discovered, appear until the 1750s. In 1758 William Vile and John Cobb made a 'Green Lutestring festoone curtain, Slitt up the middle, Lin'd and fing'd Complete' for Croome Court in Worcestershire, and by the later 1760s influential figures such as Chippendale and Linnell were beginning use the term 'drapery window curtains'. However, Annabel Westman has concluded 'by the 1760s the terms "festoon" and "window curtain" had become synonymous in fashionable English households'.

By 1780, however, enthusiasm for both the festoon and the drapery curtain was fading fast. The latest fashion was now 'French draw' or 'French rod' window curtains: a pair of curtains which drew horizontally, and which were attached to two rods (possibly by a pelmet or 'curtain cornice') by brass or

wooden rings. 'These curtains are still in use in bedrooms', remarked Sheraton of festoons in 1803; but he noted 'the general introduction of the French rod curtain in most genteel homes'. These French rods represent the immediate ancestor of today's horizontally-drawing curtain display.

For those who wanted a more ostentatious arrangement than French rods could provide, Regency Britain boasted a far more elaborate style of decorating windows: the drapery display. By 1810 some large rooms were being fitted with what was called 'continuous drapery', where vast swathes of fabric ran in massive swags from pelmet to pelmet. In extreme cases even the ceiling was draped, creating the effect neatly described in the contemporary term 'tent-room'.

Curtain Fabrics

Early Georgian curtain fabrics were often heavy and dense — and, as Loudon noted of moreen in 1833, 'apt to harbour moths and other vermin'. Increasingly, however, householders turned to lighter, washable curtain materials, which were easy to operate and easy to clean.

By 1770 the whole family of furnishing fabrics was being revolutionised by the rapid pace of Britain's industrial development, which brought linens and cottons within the reach of middle-class purses. In 1770 James Hargreaves' spinning jenny was patented, allowing eight spindles to be wound at the same time; nine years later Samuel Crompton 'mule' (named after the principal animal power source of the early 18th century) combined Hargreaves' invention with Arkwright's rollers in one machine. Thomas Bell patented the cylinder printing of fabrics in 1783; from this date, too, James Watt's steam engines began to be harnessed to both the mule and the spinning jenny, facilitating faster and less labour-intensive production.

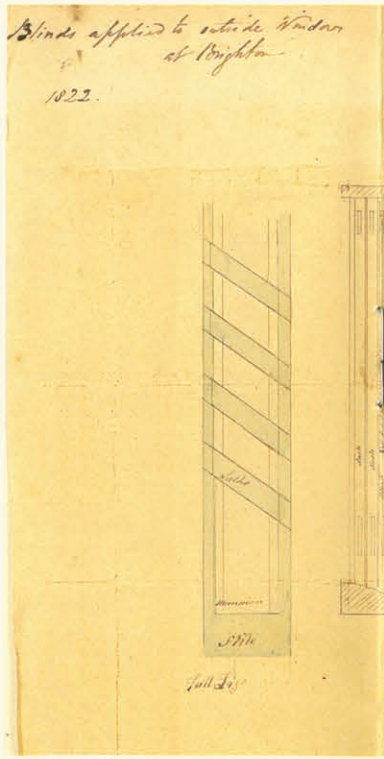
Such advances effected lasting changes in the home. As Mary Schoeser has commented, 'The industrialisation of textile manufacture about this time precipitated a substantial change in the furnishing of interiors'. Fabrics could now be manufactured faster and more cheaply than ever before; printed patterns were now available to everybody, not just the privileged few; and even those materials which had previously been prohibitively expensive, such as silks, were no longer solely the preserve of the rich.

Most significant of all was the vast expansion in the use of cotton fabrics. Cartwright's power loom of 1787 and Whitney's cotton gin of 1793 enabled the cotton industry's products to overtake and eclipse the more traditional furnishing materials. Cotton chintzes were particularly favoured as curtain material. Glazed or unglazed, printed chintz (the term comes from the Indian 'chitta', meaning 'spotted cloth') was cheap and washable, and served very well for curtains. In 1809 Ackermann noted that, as the novelty of the early, bright chintzes had faded, so 'the gaudy colours of the chintz and calico furniture' had recently given way to 'a more chaste style, in which two colours only are employed to produce that appearance of damask'.

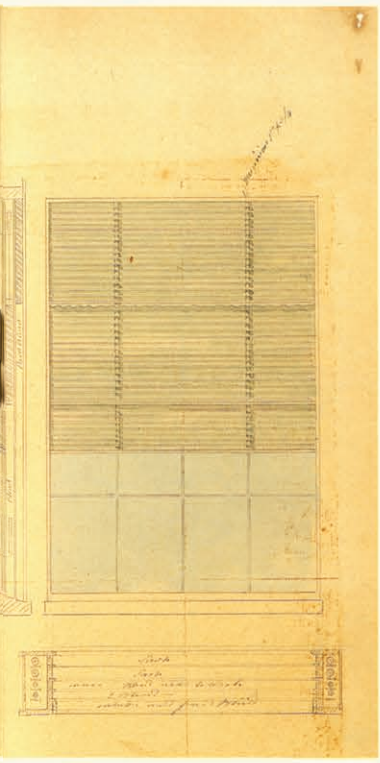
By 1820 light blues, lilacs and fawns were very much in vogue as fashionable colours for curtains. These were often augmented by a decorative border: the disappearance of the festoon encouraged a vogue for the application of printed or hand-worked curtain borders. Gold 'tabby' silk curtains were also popular: in 1808 George Smith testified that this material, with its alternate satin and watered stripes, was often chosen for drawing room curtains. In the dining room and library, however, red was the colour most commonly chosen for both curtains and matching seat upholstery.

Most of these light cotton or silk fabrics were lined either with a simple cotton or with 'tammy', a light but strong worsted material which, like chintz, was

THE RECENTLY RE-CREATED DRAPERIES IN THE GREEN PAVILION AT FROGMORE, BERKSHIRE. THEIR FORM HAS BEEN TAKEN FROM THE DEPICTION OF THE ROOM INCLUDED IN PYNE'S *ROYAL RESIDENCES* OF 1820; THE PATTERN OF THE CHINTZ IS TAKEN FROM A DESIGN OF 1804, WHILE GREEN VELVET HAS BEEN USED FOR THE VELVET BORDERS, AND GREEN TAMMY FOR THE LINING. *(THE ROYAL COLLECTION ST JAMES'S PALACE © HER MAJESTY THE QUEEN).*



DETAILED DRAWING OF 1822 BY C H TATHAM AT BRIGHTON' *(THE BRITISH AR*

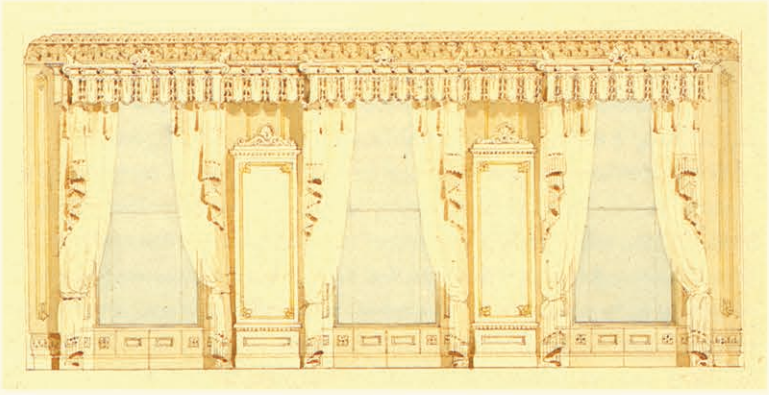


OF 'BLINDS APPLIED TO OUTSIDE WINDOWS
CHITECTURAL LIBRARY/RIBA).

often glazed to make it even more washable. Rarely was the lining itself decorated: in 1807, for example, Robert Southey described 'rich printed cotton curtains' as being 'lined with a plain colour and fringed'. The colour chosen for this lining material was often a pale tint of the facing fabric's complementary colour.

In more modest rooms linen curtains had by the end of the 18th century begun to replace the traditional heavy worsteds, Southey remarking that the 'damask curtains which were used in the last generation have given place to linens'. For households of more limited means white cotton dimity — sometimes bordered, but often left plain — was used for curtains and hangings in the bedroom and possibly elsewhere, too. These curtains could, declared a condescending Loudon in 1833, be 'put up with a degree of style and taste which indicates both talent and a love of the home in the occupant'.

By the later 18th century, too, care was being taken that the curtains always matched the other fabrics of the room. In 1840 the *Workwoman's Guide* advised that, in bedrooms, 'Window curtains should always accord with the hanging on the bed, both in colour and material, as also in shape'.



A DISPLAY OF C.1830 BY J B PAPWORTH, INTENDED FOR THE DRAWING ROOM AT LEIGHAM COURT, STREATHAM *(THE BRITISH ARCHITECTURAL LIBRARY/RIBA).*

MAINTENANCE AND REPAIR

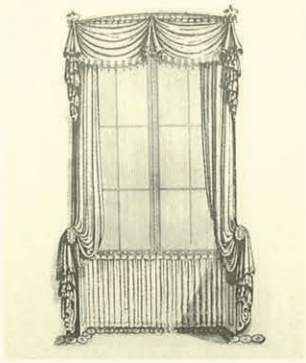
SHUTTERS

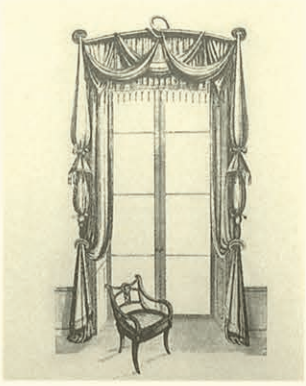
If your house has its original shutters, it is important that they be kept in working order, and used as often as possible. Window whutters are the most effective way of prolonging the life of a room's furnishings.

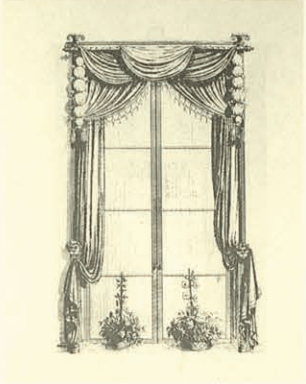
Wooden shutters are often susceptible to dry rot. To prevent this, ensure that the mouldings and flashings on the outside of the window are doing their job properly, and that water is not being admitted into the wooden members of the sash. Regular operation of the shutters — and regular opening of the windows themselves — also helps to encourage a free flow of air, which can help prevent decay.

If your shutters are infected by dry rot, ask an experienced local joiner to replace the affected area with pre-treated timber. Surrounding members should also be provided with anti-fungal plugs. Remember, through, that once the source of the water penetration has been dealt with, there should be no recurrence of the problem; similarly, if the basic problem is ignored, no amount of chemical treatment or wood substitution will help eradicate the infection in the long term.

Window shutters were *never* left unpainted during the Georgian or Victorian periods. The fashion for exposing internal woodwork derives more from late







CURTAIN DESIGNS FROM SHERATON'S *THE CABINET-MAKER AND UPHOLSTERER'S DRAWING BOOK* OF 1791-4.

19th century Arts and Crafts theories, and from the postwar fashion for stripped Scandinavian pine and 'honest' materials, than from genuine Georgian practice. The idea of stripping the paintwork from old pine shutters in order to reveal the inferior, knotty grain of the wood below would undoubtedly horrify Georgian designers.

If you are painting or repainting the shutters, a useful rule of thumb is to chose the same colour as the window surround — which in most cases will be white. Remember, too, that the bright bleached whites which are so commonly used for historic properties today are very much a 20th century innovation. Georgian designers and decorators always used creamier, off-white matt oil paints, which tended to yellow with age, for most of the internal woodwork. The harsh glare of modern bright white paints is inappropriate for such old surfaces.

It is also worth retaining any original closing mechanisms that remain. Not only do flimsy modern brass catches look inappropriate on heavy Georgian shutters; putting original or reproduction iron bars back also helps create a good security barrier. During the Georgian era some shutters were even equipped with bells — the ancestor of the burglar alarm.

CURTAINS

Textiles are easily damaged by direct light. The fabric both fades and rots — and neither of these processes is reversible. So, if you have valuable old curtains, it makes sense to treat them as reverentially as possible.

While few houseowners will want to install the type of complex lighting controls now common in large historic houses open to the public — where a limit of 50 lux or less is often imposed — this does not mean that nothing can be done to stop undue decay. Ensuring that furniture is not pressed up against the curtains helps to guard against unnecessary wear and tear, as does limiting over-frequent handling. In addition, try not to have old curtains gathered in tie-backs too often, since this fashion causes undue stress on the fabric. Leaving curtains to hang free and unfettered when you can is always a good idea for delicate old curtains.

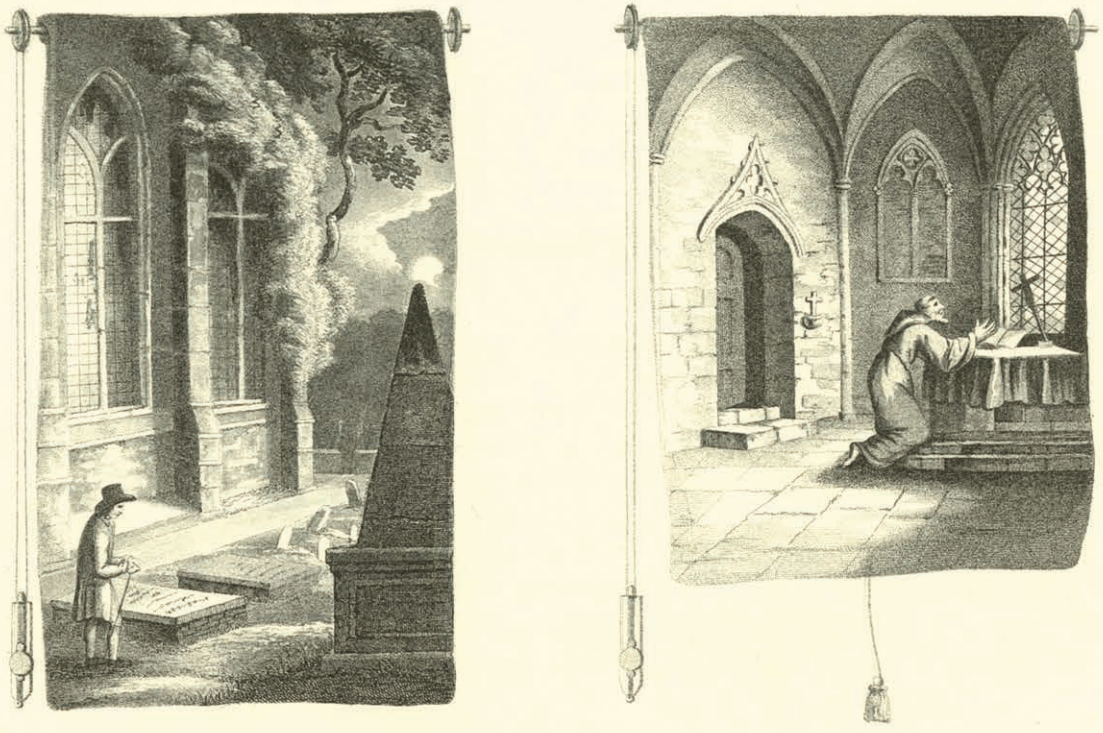
Installing a plain sun-blind or sun-curtain — the modern equivalents of the muslin sub-curtain — behind the main drapes helps to protect the lining from excessive fading. This type of protection can be seen in many houses in the care of the National Trust and English Heritage.

Do not be tempted to clean valuable old curtains yourself, or to entrust them to dry cleaners — no matter how many claims they may make as to their reliability and experience. Only recognised textile conservation experts have the skill to clean old curtains without damaging them. (A list of the leading textile conservation centres can be found below.) Simple dust-removal can be effected once every one or two years with a gentle, domestic vacuum cleaner, adjusted to its least powerful level. (The National Trust recommends the Hoover Dustette.) Once again, though, take care not to handle or disturb the fabric too much. And be careful of tassels or fringes, which may be prised loose by the cleaner's suction.

If you have Georgian curtains which need repairing, *never* attempt to do this yourself, no matter how expert you may be. Countless historic textiles have been permanently damaged by well-intentioned but harmful and irreversible home repairs. As with cleaning, it is always best to entrust the repair of historic textiles to a recognised conservation expert.

If you are storing or moving old curtains, there are a few key guidelines to bear in mind. Firstly, never fold the curtains, or they may hole or tear; always roll them up, using tissue paper to separate the surfaces. Ensure, too, that the paper is non-acidic, otherwise the acid may in time help to decay the material.

The same applies to the cardboard box in which you store your curtains: this, too, should be acid-free. And ensure that no metal pins — which can rust and damage the fabric — are included in the package, nor any rope or string, which can bite into the fragile surfaces. The store-room itself should be dark, free of pests and of a relatively constant humidity.



PAINTED WINDOW BLINDS FROM EDWARD ORME'S *TRANSPARENT BLINDS* OF 1807.

RE-CREATING HISTORIC CURTAINS

Curtain-making can be extremely rewarding — especially if it is helping to re-create a sense of your home's historic past. However, in creating 'period' curtains for Georgian interiors, it is wise to first demolish a few popular myths.

The most commonly-held of these is that the festoon curtain (or 'ruched blind' or 'Austrian blind', to give it just two of the many names used today) is appropriate for windows of all periods and sizes. The basic principle of the festoon curtain was to let the maximum amount of light into the room by gathering the curtain material into the awkward space between the window architrave and below the room's cornice. Unfortunately, this simple idea is one that is often lost on professional and amateur decorators today. Festoons are made not only of heavy, bulky materials, but are allowed to obscure most of the window even when they are raised. The result is that often the whole of the top sash frame is unseen behind the folds of plush, frilled fabric.

Other general misconceptions regarding size, pattern and colour also need to be dismissed. In the same way that chimneypieces and mouldings varied in size and design according to the wealth of the household and the function and relative size of the room, so Georgian curtain displays were always designed to correspond with the purpose and dimensions of the room in which they were hung. The more modest the room, the plainer and more reticent the curtains would have been. A lavish, elaborate and over-sized festoon arranged in the middle of what would have been a small bedroom makes no decorative sense at all, as well as looking ridiculous.

Sources Of Information

Bristol City Museum and Art Gallery (Applied Art Department), Queen's Road, Bristol BS8 1RL, tel. 0117 922 3571.

Manchester City Council Conservation Studios, Queen's Park, Harpurhey, Manchester M9 5SH, tel. 0161 205 2645.

Temple Newsam House, Temple Newsam Park, Leeds LS15 0AE, tel. 0113 264 7321.

UK Institute of Conservation, 37 Upper Addison Gardens, London W14 8AJ. tel. 020 7603 5643.

Department of Furniture and Woodwork, The Victoria and Albert Museum, Cromwell Road, South Kensington, London SW7 2RL, tel. 020 7942 2290.

Examples of original window treatments can be found in many of the Georgian houses open to the public.

Further Reading

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Annabel Westman, 'English Window Curtains in the 18th Century' in ***Antiques,*** June 1990.

The Georgian Group exists to save Georgian buildings, townscapes, monuments, parks and gardens from destruction or disfigurement, and to stimulate public Knowledge of Georgian architecture and Georgian taste. The Group offers a yearly programme of visits and educational events; applications for membership can be obtained from the Group office at:

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