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THE DECORATION OF THE SOUTH-EAST CLOSET OF SYON HOUSE

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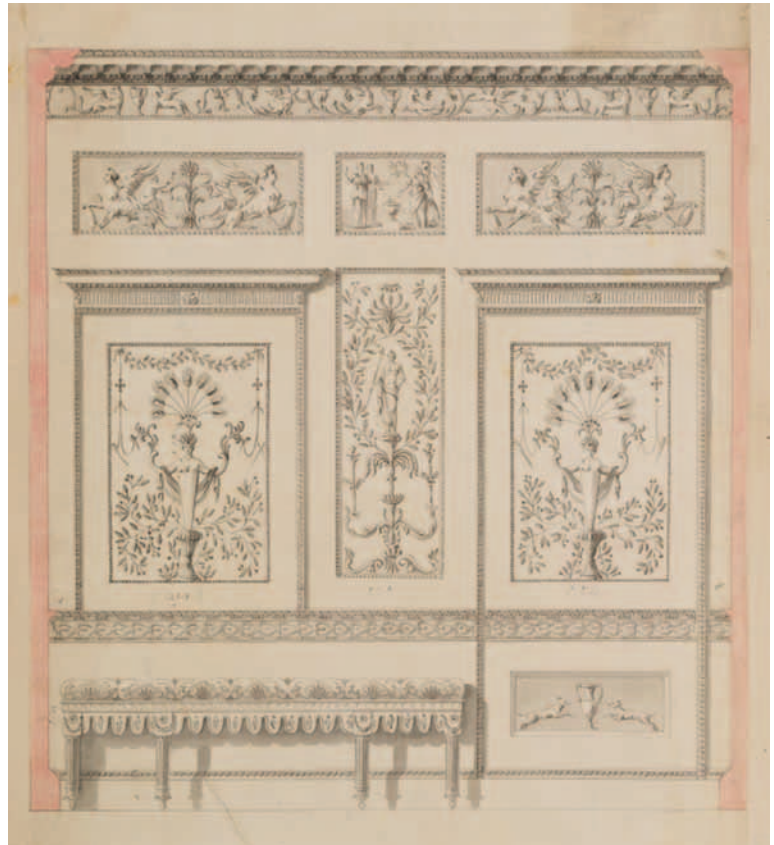
Unlike many of the great country houses in England, Syon House remains privately owned and managed. It has been in the Percy family for more than four hundred years and is still the London home of the Duke and Duchess of Northumberland.¹ While much has been written about its superb interiors, the history of the south-east Closet has been somewhat neglected. Like its counterpart, the north-east Closet, it is located in a turret on the principal floor of the quadrangular house, adjoining the Long Gallery in the east range.

But it has not garnered the same interest as the north-east Closet, despite an absence of records for the latter in both the 'Duke's Memorandum' of 1767 and the 1847 'Inventory'. The heightened interest in the north-east Closet can be explained both by its impressive Robert Adam plasterwork designs and by its brighter, newer appearance resulting from John Fowler's restoration efforts carried out in the 1970s.² Yet perhaps it is the south-east Closet's unique decorative style which should warrant greater attention. This article will examine the origins of the



Fig. 1. The exterior of Syon House, as it exists today. (*Author, April 2017*)

Fig. 2. Drawing of a turret room at Syon by Robert Adam, 1760. (By courtesy of the Trustees of Sir John Soane's Museum, *SM Adam Volume 27/74*)



Closet through a brief review of the commissioning of Robert Adam and a description of his style as exemplified in the Long Gallery and the turret rooms. Further, an analysis of the main decorative elements of the south-east Closet will highlight some of the contributing factors which influenced the various schemes as they were realised under the first, third and tenth Dukes and Duchesses of Northumberland.

THE COMMISSIONING OF ROBERT ADAM

In 1762, Sir Hugh Smithson, later first Duke of Northumberland,³ offered his patronage to Robert Adam to remodel Syon's Jacobean interiors. As

Adam recalled, he 'communicated his intentions to me, and having expressed his desire, that the whole might be executed interly [*sic*] in the antique style, he was pleased, in terms very flattering, to signify his confidence in my abilities to follow out his idea.'⁴ Like many of Adam's projects, Syon presented interior challenges that required him to adapt and rethink an existing house, rather than build from the ground up. While this may seem less than ideal for the architect, it has been widely accepted that some of Adam's best work was born out of projects that presented the most daunting challenges. The Long Gallery at Syon, of typical Jacobean scale and proportion, has even been suggested as 'the place where the Adam style was actually initiated.'⁵

The body of Robert Adam's work at Syon has



Fig. 3. Drawing of a turret room at Syon by Robert Adam, 1760. (By courtesy of the Trustees of Sir John Soane's Museum, *SM Adam Volume 27/75*)

been, and continues to be, extensively researched. But one aspect of his work that has yet to be completely understood involves two elevation drawings, dated 1760 (Figs. 2 and Fig. 3). Curiously, unlike the drawings of the north-east Closet and of the ceiling of the south-east Closet, these sections lack titles and labels. Nevertheless, their scale, proportion, and door placement leave little doubt that they refer to one of the turret rooms. Noting the differences in window proportions between the top and the principal floor turret rooms, the nearly square shape of the window in one of the drawings suggests that the location of the room be on the top floor. The date of the drawings is, however, suspect. It would seem odd for the architect to be commissioned to begin such a large-scale

project with such a small, arguably much less important room.

Based on this information, two hypotheses are suggested. The first is that the dates of the drawings are incorrect. It would not be unheard of for a drawing to be misdated or mislabelled, as a drawing presumably of the north-east Closet was mislabelled as being of a proposal for Alnwick Castle, the Northumberland residence of the Duke and Duchess (Fig. 8). The second hypothesis is credited to Eileen Harris, who concludes that the proposals are, indeed, for a turret room on the top floor of the house, once accessed only by the roof.⁶ This argument has recently been augmented by Dr Adriano Aymonino, referencing correspondence in 1760 from Robert Adam to his brother, James,

whereby it is noted that he had ‘done a painted room for him which is quite in a new taste’.⁷ This excerpt is open to interpretation; is Adam suggesting that he has proposed a painted room or actually executed it? Unfortunately, there is no known evidence of this room ever being executed to these drawings⁸, which are thought to have showcased the work of the Italian painter, Michelangelo Pergolesi (d. 1801).⁹ No paint analysis has been conducted on any of the upper floor rooms,¹⁰ so further research is still required.

Whether or not one accepts Harris’s conclusion that the drawings in question were proposals for a top floor turret room, it could be assumed that they

were well-received by the first Duke and Duchess. Despite the obvious differences in shape and size, they exhibit similarities in scale, proportion and even ornament to the drawings proposed for and executed in the Long Gallery. In the proposals for both the turret room and the Long Gallery, Adam employs a rhythmic configuration of decorative panels combined with niches and projections. In fact, he describes this concept as key to his work:

‘Movement is meant to express, the rise and fall, the advance and recess, with other diversity of form, in the different parts of a building, so as to add greatly to the picturesque of the composition... That is, they serve

Fig. 4. The Long Gallery. (Courtesy of L. Singleton Boudiette, February 2018)



to produce an agreeable and diversified contour, that groups and contrasts like a picture, and create a variety of light and shade, which gives great spirit, beauty and effect to the composition.¹¹

In both spaces, the upper panels suggest a deep frieze above the cornices. They depict either ancestral portraits or landscapes, as seen in the Long Gallery, or figural stories, as seen in the proposed turret room.¹² Both spaces also emphasise architectural ornamentation to again create depth in an otherwise somewhat two-dimensional plane. In the turret room, Adam added cornices above not only the window but also the false door and

decorative panel in order to create balance. In the Long Gallery, he introduced 62 pilasters, painted by Pergolesi, to counteract the lack of verticality in the long and narrow space.

The rhythm and ‘movement’ in Adam’s proposal for the Long Gallery (the niches having since been filled in with bookshelves) was of paramount importance in realising his vision for the space. Adam therefore devised a scheme to visually conceal the Closets at both ends of the Gallery (Fig. 4 and Fig. 5). By almost seamlessly fitting the doors, not only to the Closets but also to the exterior grounds, the sightline can be undisturbed when viewing the



Fig. 5. The south wall of the Gallery depicting two ‘hidden’ doors. (Author, April 2017)

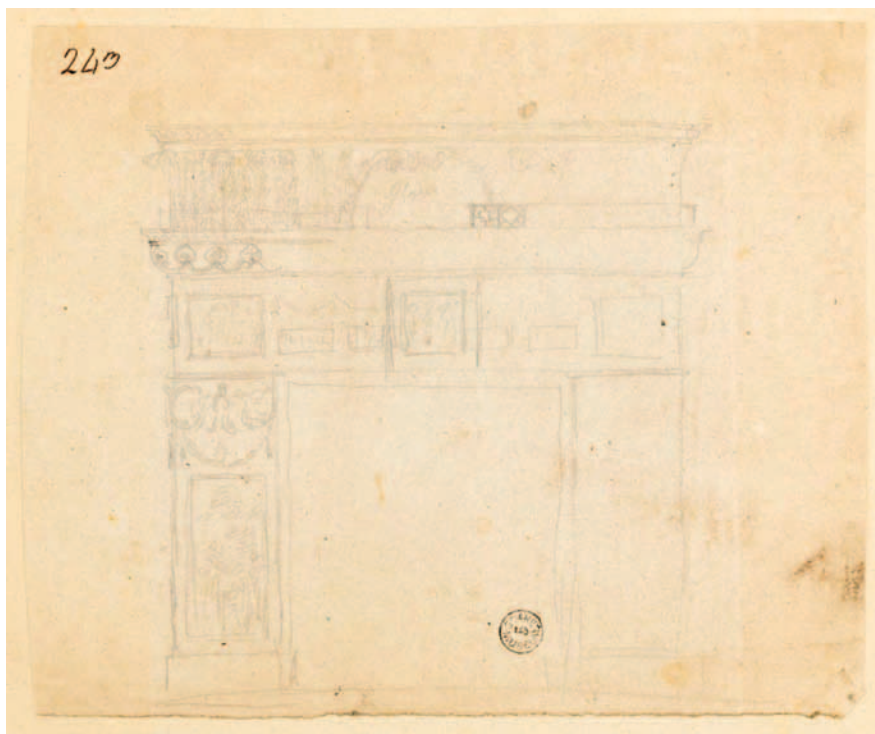


Fig. 6. Robert Adam's design for the chinoiserie chimneypiece at Kenwood House.
(By courtesy of the Trustees of Sir John Soane's Museum, *SM Adam Volume 23/243*)

entirety of the space. In this way, Adam succeeded in transforming the Jacobean interiors into spaces that celebrated the new-found taste for Neoclassicism.

Robert Adam was so influential in the Neoclassical movement that his work, showcased in his designs for Syon's Long Gallery, became a style named for him. But British architectural taste in the second half of the eighteenth century ranged, as Geoffrey Beard pointed out, 'from the classical proportioned columns and porticoes of Palladianism and the exuberant swirling forms of the Rococo to the mannered elegance of the Gothic and Chinese styles' before embracing 'the ordered symmetry of Neoclassicism.'¹³ The first Duchess's keen interest in Chinoiserie, although perhaps at the time considered less fashionable than Neoclassicism, was the

deciding factor when making the decorative choices for the south-east Closet. Robert Adam showcased the style in several of his commissions, notably the Chinese Room at No. 23 Hill Street, London, the Chinese Drawing Room at Headfort House in Ireland and also in the Upper Hall of Kenwood House, where his Chinoiserie chimneypiece is a prime example of the blending of the taste for the Far East with that of antiquity (Fig. 6 and Fig. 7). While the proportions and decorative ornamentation mimic other Adam chimneypiece designs, the Chinese scenes painted on stone panels, four of which were executed by Sefferin Nelson (1739–97), are unlike any other in Adam's *oeuvre*.¹⁴ His collaboration with Thomas Chippendale (1718–79) on the remodelling and refurbishing of the State Dressing Room



Fig. 7. Detail of Robert Adam's chinoiserie chimneypiece at Kenwood House.
(Author, August 2018)

at Nostell Priory also resulted in '... a masterful synthesis of European and Chinese decoration'.¹⁵

The Long Gallery in Syon was intended to be primarily used by ladies and it was assumed that the adjacent pair of Closets would serve the same purpose. These spaces would surely have been important to the first Duchess, who was widely regarded as a superb hostess. Mrs Delany commented on her host's penchant for entertaining when she wrote on 14 October: 'The entertainment that beat all others was given by the Duke and Duchess of Northumberland at Sion'.¹⁶ Adam seemed to understand her desire to showcase her personal taste and to impress her female guests; when describing the turret rooms he noted that 'the little closets or cabinets, the one circular for china,

and the other square for miniatures ... serve only for an additional amusement.'¹⁷ However, in 'Fashioning Bluestocking Conversation: Elizabeth Montagu's Chinese Room', Stacey Sloboda's assessment of the function of such female-centred spaces delves a little deeper than that of Adam. She states that 'the chinoiserie interior of the mid-eighteenth century provided a stage for occupants and visitors to perform various sociable identities. Likewise, the decoration of a room could provide visual testimony of its owner's qualities and characteristics, freeing him or her to behave in contradictory ways'.¹⁸ Horace Walpole may also have had a firmer grasp on the purpose of such a cabinet when he wrote in one of his letters that the Duchess 'must have been one of the most entertaining figures of the time both for



Fig. 8. Drawing of the north-east Closet at Syon by Robert Adam.
(By courtesy of the Trustees of Sir John Soane's Museum, *SM Adam Volume 39/15*)

her physical appearance and her quick tongue' and describing her as 'a jovial heap of contradictions'.¹⁹ This observation hints at the notion that Chinoiserie, as a visual testimony of conventional femininity, could provide a space where unconventional norms and identities might be safely explored and that the first Duchess, as a 'jovial heap of contradictions', may have employed it as such.

It is clear that Adam applied his signature style to the north-east Closet, showcasing niches flanked by columns of delicate plasterwork (Fig. 8).

Although evidence of his contributions in the south-east Closet is not quite as obvious, typical Adam-style design concepts and motifs can be spotted throughout the room. However, when it came to the decoration of the walls, both protocol and propriety were clearly considered by the Duchess. On the topic of appropriate wall treatments, Isaac Ware suggested that:

'The decoration of the inside of rooms may be reduced to three kinds: first, those in which the wall itself is properly finished for elegance; that is where



Fig. 9. Drawing of the ceiling of the south-east Closet at Syon by Robert Adam.
 (By courtesy of the Trustees of Sir John Soane's Museum, *SM Adam Volume 11/26*)

the materials of its last covering are of the finest kind, and it is wrought into ornaments plain or uncovered; secondly, where the walls are covered with wainscot; and thirdly, where they are hung; this last article comprehending paper, silk, tapestry and every other decoration of this kind.²⁰

He went on to suggest that the latter is used for show, being appropriate for the apartment of a lady.²¹ Therefore, it is not surprising to learn that the services of Pergolesi were requested by Adam, and that he was probably sent from Rome to London by

Adam's brother, James, when on his Italian tour.²² Pergolesi was responsible for incorporating the Duchess's taste for Chinoiserie, primarily through painted silk hangings. According to the 'Duke's Memorandum' in 1767, he also, through a commission to Thomas Moore of Moorfields, supplied:

'Closet South / Painted Silk Naples / Settee Tappestry [sic] whiter and Flowers - Mr Moor / Ceiling painted Adams / Carpet / Spring Curtain / Hangings 7:11 high and the Room 8:10 and 8:8 $\frac{3}{4}$ Square'²³

No known section or elevation drawings of the Chinoiserie scheme for the south-east Closet exist, but Adam has been credited with the ceiling (Fig. 9), the window shutters and the design of the walls including and below the dado.

The first Duchess's taste for Chinoiserie, of which no other trace of fixed decoration appears anywhere throughout the principal floor at Syon, would have been largely influenced both by her travels and by the women in her social circle. As Emile de Bruijn's research into the Parker and Montagu families' 'Indian' decorative schemes demonstrates, 'the connection between the ... families suggests how the taste for this kind of wall decoration could spread through networks of friends and relations'.²⁴ In the case of the Duchess, a visit to the home of Lady Strafford in 1766 resulted in a diary entry regarding the newly-completed closet in the south wing of Wentworth Castle (Yorkshire). She noted that 'the little closet ... had an arch'd ceiling painted Blue with a Trellis upon it with a Honeysuckle running all over it (the Frize [*sic*] of the Closet is of Looking Glass painted with Festoons of Blue heighten'd with gold) the Floor is inlaid in a pretty figure, the hangings straw colour sattin [*sic*] painted with sprigs of natural flowers.'²⁵ The visit must have pleased the Duchess, for there are apparent similarities between this description and what was realized in her own south-east Closet at Syon. Her taste for Chinoiserie most likely developed further with time spent in the presence of Queen Charlotte, herself a devotee of Asian-inspired decoration, to whom, as Countess and later, Duchess of Northumberland, she was a Lady of the Bedchamber.²⁶ Women of her social status were also known to have undertaken shared projects, such as one which resulted in 'the imitation of painting on glass'.²⁷ These accounts leave little wonder as to the genesis of the chosen decoration of the south-east Closet.

The location, the size and the decoration of the south-east Closet made it suitable for the Duchess to



Fig. 10. The ceiling in the south-east Closet, as it exists today. (Author, February 2017)

host intimate conversations with ladies appreciative of the ambiance. H. Avray Tipping, Architectural Editor of *Country Life*, described its appearance in 1927:

'If the expanse of the gallery was to be for the general assembly of the elegant society of the day, the 8ft. Square spaces of the end towers offered accommodation for more intimate intercourse *à deux*, and Adam lavished upon the decoration of the tenderest kind. In the south-east corner is a square with a coved ceiling enriched with gilt stucco. The space taken by the window to the east is matched on the other three sides by corresponding mirrors, one of which retains painting in the Chinese manner, in unison with the silk panels that flank them and are painted in Oriental fashion with trees in leaf and flower, on or about which sit or hover birds and butterflies of brilliant hue.'²⁸

More than ninety years later, little has changed from Tipping's account, with the exception of the obvious restoration efforts on the carpet and the ceiling (Fig. 10). Tipping did not make mention of window hangings, so it is not certain how that element of the room's decoration might have appeared at that time.

THE DECORATIVE ELEMENTS OF THE SOUTH-EAST CLOSET: THE CEILING

According to the labels of his drawings, Robert Adam designed a ceiling for the south-east Closet in 1765. Geoffrey Beard suggested that 'his schemes of decoration have been placed in five main categories:

'(a) Simple, concentric oval and circular rings, of which the Entrance Hall ceiling at Osterley is an example of the basic form (b) An arrangement and division of the concentric rings or ovals by enrichments in plaster or composition (c) Ceilings in which a central motif in plaster or paint is emphasised (d) Tripartite patterns in which two end sections flank a larger central square or rectangle (e) Overall patterns of which many versions abound.'²⁹

If one accepts these categories, the scheme in the south-east Closet would be assigned to the last description (e). Even in such a small room, Adam managed to increase the grandeur by designing a coved, rather than a flat, ceiling (Fig. 9). As the eye is drawn up, the attention is held by delicate stucco work and gilding, probably carried out by Joseph Rose & Company and Thomas Davis, respectively, who were commissioned for work in the Long Gallery.

Aside from his favoured use of classical elements such as scrolling acanthus leaves, rosette medallions and laurel leaf wreaths, Adam chose additional elements that were symbolically specific to the Percy family. The four crescent moons in the central compartment of the design (and the echoed moon shape at the end of the guilloche-patterned laurel leaves) is a direct reference to the 'Crescent of Percy',

which first appeared on the Earl's shrievalty seal in 1386.³⁰ It is of little surprise that Adam included this symbol, as it reflected the pride in lineage felt by the Duke and Duchess. The crescent moon may also be a reference to the goddess, Diana. As the goddess of the hunt, Diana is commonly associated with woodlands, as well as having the power to talk to and control animals. This would appear to be an appropriate choice by Adam for a Chinoiserie room, as it seemingly references the painted birds of paradise and domestic woodland creatures in other decoration of the interior. These elements all play to the Duchess's affinity for nature and botany. While classical ornamentations such as the Greek *pelta* and the antique ewer are recurring elements in Adam's work, his use of curved swords in the ceiling design could hold a more specific meaning. The depicted weapon could be that of a Turkish sabre and scabbard. Although it appears similar in style to a typical eighteenth-century design, Adam could be using it to make reference to William de Percy who, in the eleventh century, took a celebrated Saracen prisoner during his crusade.³¹ This again supports the theme of pride in lineage.

While the current condition of the ceiling appears to be good, it is the result of a relatively recent restoration. A paint analysis of the room was conducted by Catherine Hassall in 2012. While a sample from the ceiling was not included in the process, information from other areas of the room which appear to be in a similar state could be used as a preliminary examination. Hassall observed that the painted room today, appearing pink and green, was not a combination ever found to have been used in the Long Gallery or the north-east Closet. This contradicts Arthur Bolton's note in *The Architecture of Robert and James Adam* in reference to the Long Gallery: 'The general effect of the faded pink and green of the wall decorations is very good: it must all have been immensely gay when new and fresh'.³² Nevertheless, Hassall concluded that some of the paint on the walls appeared to be evidence of John

Fowler's work in the second half of the twentieth century. Judging by the good condition of the ceiling in the south-east Closet, it could be assumed that it was also part of the Fowler scheme.

THE SILK PANELS

While some believe that the Closet's original panels in the eighteenth century were of Chinese paper, they were, in fact, silk panels attributed to Michelangelo Pergolesi.³³ The 'First Duke's Memorandum' of 1767 specifically mentions 'Hangings 7:11', possibly in reference to his mention of 'Painted Silk Naples' in his account of the south-east Closet.³⁴ As was the common practice, the walls would have been lined in a canvas or hessian material which would better protect the silk panels.³⁵

The Chinoiserie style of decoration enjoyed a return to vogue in the early part of the nineteenth century. During this period, and more than fifty years after the completion of Robert Adam's work, the third Duke and Duchess commissioned London-based Thomas Ponsonby (1794–1840) to refurbish several of Syon's interiors.³⁶ When the time came to refurbish the south-east Closet, the decision was made to replace the Pergolesi panels with new, chinoiserie-style silk panels, painted by the third Duchess herself, thus essentially replacing one Chinoiserie scheme with another. Much as Queen Charlotte's taste for Chinoiserie might have influenced the first Duchess, so too might King George IV have influenced the third Duchess, particularly as it applied to the freedom to create one's own Chinoiserie elements. In reference to the King's 'extraordinarily inventive version of the chinoiserie style' in the Royal Palace, Brighton, du Bruijn notes that 'In this hyper-designed environment the boundaries between original and copy, authentic and imaginary became blurred...'.³⁷ Even though budget was clearly not an issue,³⁸ one might assume that it was the Duchess's desire to

display her own artistic abilities, as well as express her continued affinity for Chinoiserie, which influenced her decision to create new painted silk panels. An 1833 bill from Thomas Ponsonby records that he proceeded with 'Works executed as for Design approved for the ... Tower room of Gallery'.³⁹ In reference to the silk panels, Ponsonby was responsible for the installation of '134 ft of new and fully enriched Borders to go round her graces drawing on satin for panelling of room'.⁴⁰ Interestingly, some of the painted elements of the panels may have been added by a more talented artist than the Duchess,⁴¹ perhaps Edmund Thomas Parris (1793–1873), who was commissioned to repaint the 62 pilasters of the Long Gallery.⁴²

Almost two centuries later, these panels are still



Fig. 11. Detail of a silk panel in the south-east Closet, as it exists today. (Author, March 2020)

extant. In recognition of the fragility and antiquity of the fabric, conservation efforts employed by the tenth Duke and Duchess in the latter part of the twentieth century resulted in the silk panels being placed under panes of protective glass.

THE MIRRORS

The closet is decorated with three large looking-glass panels, one painted (Fig. 12), positioned opposite the window and the other two, plain (Fig. 13), each centred on the two remaining walls. Prior to the first Duchess's decoration of the south-east Closet, the fashion for painted mirror glass had already been established. In the seventeenth

century, Charles Audran (1594-1674) painted arabesques on mirror glass (*verre églomisé*) for the Duchesse de Bouillon's closet. The taste for this decoration spread to England, as demonstrated by the painted looking-glass at Kensington Palace, attributed to Jean-Baptiste Monnoyer (1636-1699) for Queen Mary.⁴³ Then in 1752, almost ten years prior to the commencement of Adam's work, the first Duchess commissioned Andien de Clermont (d. 1783), a pupil of Jean-Baptiste Monnoyer's son Antoine (1670-1747), to decorate a looking-glass in the Chinoiserie style that would later be hung in the south-east Closet.⁴⁴ In addition to the influence of Kensington Palace, the Duchess was perhaps inspired by a mirror that she had seen in the Library at Wentworth Castle in 1766. She



Fig. 12. The painted looking-glass in the south-east Closet, attributed to Andien de Clermont, as it exists today. (Author, March 2020)



Fig. 13. To the right of a silk panel one of two unadorned looking-glass panels in the south-east Closet, as it exists today. (Author, March 2020)

subsequently recorded in her journal that it was painted with ‘Wreaths of Holly & in the upper part of each is an Owl’.⁴⁵ The inclusion of the painted mirror in the Closet was a very appropriate choice; as John Cornforth suggested, by the 1760s ‘painted looking glasses had become associated with chinoiserie, notably the importation of glasses back-painted in the East with oriental subjects’.⁴⁶

Perhaps due to their high monetary value or their sustained good condition, the three mirrors were not included in any redecoration efforts recorded by either the third or tenth Duke or Duchess.

THE CURTAINS

The ‘1st Duke’s Memorandum’ of 1767 includes ‘Painted Silk Naples’ in the list of the south-east Closet’s contents. The term ‘Silk Naples’ refers to ‘*Gros de Naples*’, which was a plain silk fabric. The term was applied to textiles not necessarily from Naples, but used to describe a silk of sturdy weight, often with a slight ribbed texture.⁴⁷ The practice of painting on silk originated in China and became fashionable in eighteenth-century France, largely popularised by Mme de Pompadour and Marie Antoinette. The technique became known as *pekin peint*.⁴⁸ Like many fashions in France, the trend spread to England. Due, however, to the political climate at the time, it is all but certain that the Duke’s ‘Painted Silk Naples’ did not come from France, but rather from England or from the Far East. Considering the Duchess’s close relationship with Mrs Montagu, it is possible that the ‘Painted Silk Naples’ came from the Far East through Mrs Montagu’s brother, William Robinson, who was a captain in the East India Company.⁴⁹

It is unlikely that there were curtains (in addition to the listed ‘Spring Curtain’, commonly known as a roller-blind) at the time of the first Duke and Duchess, as this would not have been consistent with the otherwise identical windows

in the Long Gallery. But, at the time of the third Duke and Duchess, the 1847 ‘Inventory’ of the south-east Closet lists the ‘India print Curtains to window lined with white silk, and brass rods’,⁵⁰ the mention of ‘India’ referring to a decorative style of Eastern origins, rather than a literal statement of the textile’s geographic provenance. As it would still be considered odd to hang curtains in this room, there must have been a specific purpose for them. It seems that, under the direction of the third Duchess, Thomas Ponsonby only installed six replacement silk wall panels, thereby leaving the pair flanking the window unadorned. In fact, it would appear that the eighteenth-century fillets that once framed the first Duchess’s hangings still appear on the panels hidden behind the curtains (Fig. 15). This, along with the brass tie-back brackets (one partially missing) being affixed to the lined panels, would imply that the curtains would have been installed with the intention of concealing the missing hangings.

What is odd about the current state of the curtains is that they are not wide enough to be functional. Clare Baxter, the Collections and Archives Manager at Alnwick Castle, has suggested the possibility that they were altered in the 1960s.⁵¹ These alterations were likely performed by Lady Meade-Fetherstonehaugh of Uppark (Sussex), one of the founders of textile conservation.⁵² Meade-Fetherstonehaugh felt strongly that historical textiles should be ‘preserved rather than restored to a more pristine condition’ and it was this concept that forged her style of conservation.⁵³ She worked on projects at Syon, as well as other historic houses, and her work can often be identified by the tramlines that she stitched to hold the threads of the textile in place.⁵⁴ As several areas on the south-east Closet curtains show groupings of tramlines, they were probably altered by her (Fig. 17). Furthermore, the strangely narrow width of the curtains could also be the result of her conservation efforts. As the curtains were unprotected by ultraviolet filters on the window in the 1960s, it could be assumed that the



Fig. 14. The curtains in the south-east Closet, as they exist today. (Author, March 2020)



Fig. 15. Detail of the wall behind the curtains depicting tie-back hardware on what is thought to be the lining of the original silk wall panels. (Author, March 2020)



Fig. 16. Detail of the curtain lining, as it exists today. (Author, March 2020)



Fig. 17. Detail of the curtains, as they exist today. (Author, March 2020)

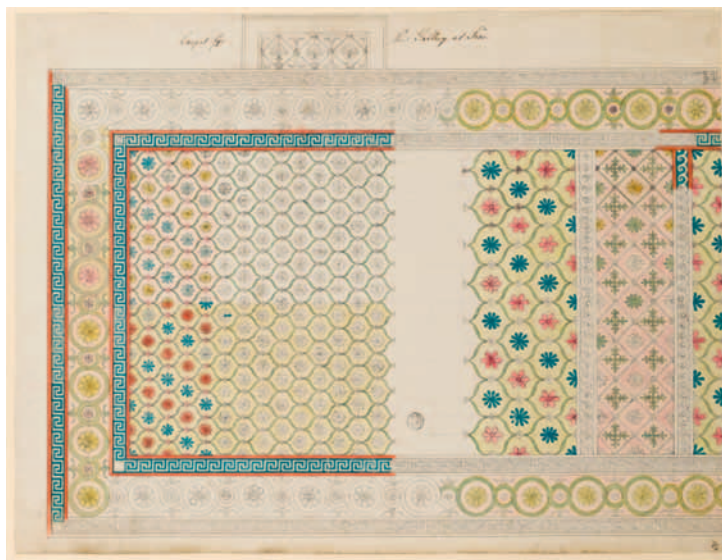


Fig. 18. Robert Adam's rejected carpet design for the Long Gallery.
(By courtesy of the Trustees of Sir John Soane's Museum, *SM Adam Volume 17/172*)

areas closest to the glazing would have shown severe deterioration. She might therefore have chosen to remove a substantial amount of the curtain width which would account for why the curtains, as they exist today, conceal the bare wall hangings but are not wide enough to be drawn across the window.

A preliminary visual assessment of the curtains as they appear today suggests that they have the quality of an original painted hanging.⁵⁵ This suggestion could support the literature supplied by Syon House which claims that the curtains of the Closet are thought to be eighteenth-century. However, it is unlikely that the curtains, as they exist today, are of the eighteenth century, due to their suggested purpose and function, as well as the noted curtain and hardware description in the 1847 'Inventory'. It could be argued, therefore, that the textile itself dates from the time of the first Duke and Duchess, described as 'Painted Silk Naples', and was later used in the construction of the south-east Closet curtains.

THE CARPET

It has been suggested that there is a close relationship between the history of the carpet in the Long Gallery and that of the south-east Closet. In 1765, Robert Adam appointed Pergolesi to complete the designs for the carpet at Syon House. They were originally thought to be for the Gallery, but may instead have been connected to the south-east Closet. According to an account by Thomas Butler, a visit 'to Mr. Moor to see his Tapestry' was recorded in the same year.⁵⁶ The tapestry in question is identified in the 'Duke's Memorandum' on a page titled 'The South Closet' as a 'Settee Tappestry [*sic*] White of Flowers Mr Moor', and also notably mentions a carpet.⁵⁷ Therefore, it could be suggested that the carpet mentioned by the Duke might have been supplied by Mr Moore of the London carpet manufactory, Moorfields.

Under the direction of the tenth Duke in the 1970s, John Fowler installed a new carpet depicting a repeated ogee pattern in the central panel with a guilloche border (Fig. 18). This carpet is said



Fig. 19. Office of Robert Adam, drawing of a view of the Gallery or Library, Syon House. (© *The Victoria and Albert Museum*)

to have been manufactured by the Royal Wilton Carpet Company,⁵⁸ but is based on an original Adam design that was rejected by the first Duke. It is assumed that Fowler's choice replaced a carpet that was much more typical of Adam, a geometric pattern that echoed his design of the ceiling. The carpet depicted in an engraving illustrates a similar geometric pattern to the one that was photographed in the early twentieth century (Fig. 19), and it has been suggested that the carpets of the Long Gallery and of the connecting Closets that were removed in the 1970s were original to the eighteenth-century Adam scheme.⁵⁹

THE FIXTURES AND FITTINGS

Being on the corner of the building, one might expect the south-east Closet to have two of the four walls fitted with windows. Only the east-facing window, however, has glazing while the south-facing window has been blocked off. Sash windows,

such as the one in the south-east Closet, were first introduced in England in the late seventeenth century, the word 'sash' being a derivative of the French *chassis*.⁶⁰ While the date of the windows in the Closet has not been confirmed, it is evident that they are by no means modern.

The shutters are attributed to Robert Adam, as they also appear on each window in the adjacent Long Gallery. While the earliest European shutters consisted of a single-leaf swinging on hinges at one side, those in the south-east Closet are much more mechanically advanced.⁶¹ They have a dual purpose. When not in use, the plain set of narrow shutters accordion back into the wall on either side of the window and are concealed behind the pair of wider, panelled shutters. When the shutters are in use, the plain set unfold against the glazing to block the light and drafts while the panelled shutters unfold in front of the plain set, slightly inset from the edge of the window sill. As they appear today, the panelled shutters are inset with mirrors and are trimmed with laurel and dart moulding to

coordinate with other decoration in the room. The fashion for mirrors in a *boudoir* setting, specifically on mechanical shutters, was later popularised by Marie Antoinette with her *Cabinet des Glaces Mouvantes*, in the Petit Trianon. Whether this mirror feature in the south-east Closet was part of Adam's original design or is a subsequent addition to reflect the later trend from France, is not known.

From the Long Gallery, the entrance to the south-east Closet, like its north-east counterpart, is not noticeable upon first glance. The secrecy of the jib doors is an appropriate and clever design, allowing the Closets to be secluded for intimate conversations. Likewise, the door is disguised on the interior of the Closet; the trimwork and silk panels continue almost seamlessly from the walls above (Fig. 12). The doorknob, latches and bolts at Syon were provided by the ironmonger John Dayo in 1766.⁶² Robert Adam may have commissioned this work, as the gilded rose details echo the motif he used on the coved ceiling (Fig. 20).



Fig. 20. Detail of the knob and lock of the south-east Closet, as they exist today. (Author, March 2020)

CONCLUSION

Though there are still aspects of the south-east Closet's decoration which have not yet been fully explored, it is hoped that this brief examination has brought to light the significance of this small but intriguing room, both as a representation of the seminal 'Adam style' and as a reflection of the decorative tastes and societal norms prevalent at pivotal points in its evolution. The information gathered from relevant historic records has served both to confirm and highlight the importance of the element of patronage as it existed in the upper echelons of British society during this time frame. In particular, Adam's commissioning by the first Duke and Duchess of Northumberland exemplified the symbiotic nature of this relationship. Just as the Duke had communicated to Adam his confidence in the young architect's talents, so Adam wrote of the Duke: '... the alterations and inside decorations of Sion House were begun, and as the idea was to me a favourite one, the subject great, the expense unlimited, and the Duke himself a person of extensive knowledge and correct taste in architecture, I endeavour to render it a noble and elegant inhabitation...'.⁶³

The previously-noted examples of Adam's Chinoiserie-Neoclassical style, commissioned by other well-connected, wealthy patrons and executed with a variety of collaborators, bears testimony to the rapid dissemination of this particular decorative style among the elite of British society. Strong familial connections and intricate social networks, as well as the widespread import of Chinese materials, fuelled an ever-increasing desire to showcase the exotic and glamorous. As de Bruijn notes: '... the use of Chinese objects and materials as part of European decoration was effectively an aspirational rhetoric, an expression of cosmopolitanism and sophistication.'⁶⁴ As it was primarily women who embraced this aesthetic in Britain, it is not surprising that it was applied most consistently to those rooms over which they exercised control: bedrooms, sitting rooms, dressing

rooms and closets. The continuity of the Chinoiserie style in the south-east Closet through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries attests to the desire of the first and third Duchesses to maintain the use of and control over this particular domain. However, in the latter part of the twentieth century and under the auspices of the tenth Duke and Duchess, the focus shifted towards a desire to conserve and restore its extant elements: an affirmation of the enduring aesthetic, the changing social norms and the ancestral lineage it continues to represent. It is hoped that this analysis has led to a greater understanding of the room's unique history and that the south-east Closet will attract renewed interest from academics and Syon House visitors alike.

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