

Old style in the new world

Interiors Victoria Maw reports on the enduring appeal of 'colonial revival' architecture and decoration in the US

Presidents' Day, on February 20, celebrates the birthday of George Washington, founding father of the US. Washington's leadership may have marked the end of the colonial era, but the domestic tastes of the early European settlers have endured. "Colonial revival," a style of architecture and decoration born in the late 1800s, continues to influence interiors across the US and has become known as a quintessential American aesthetic.

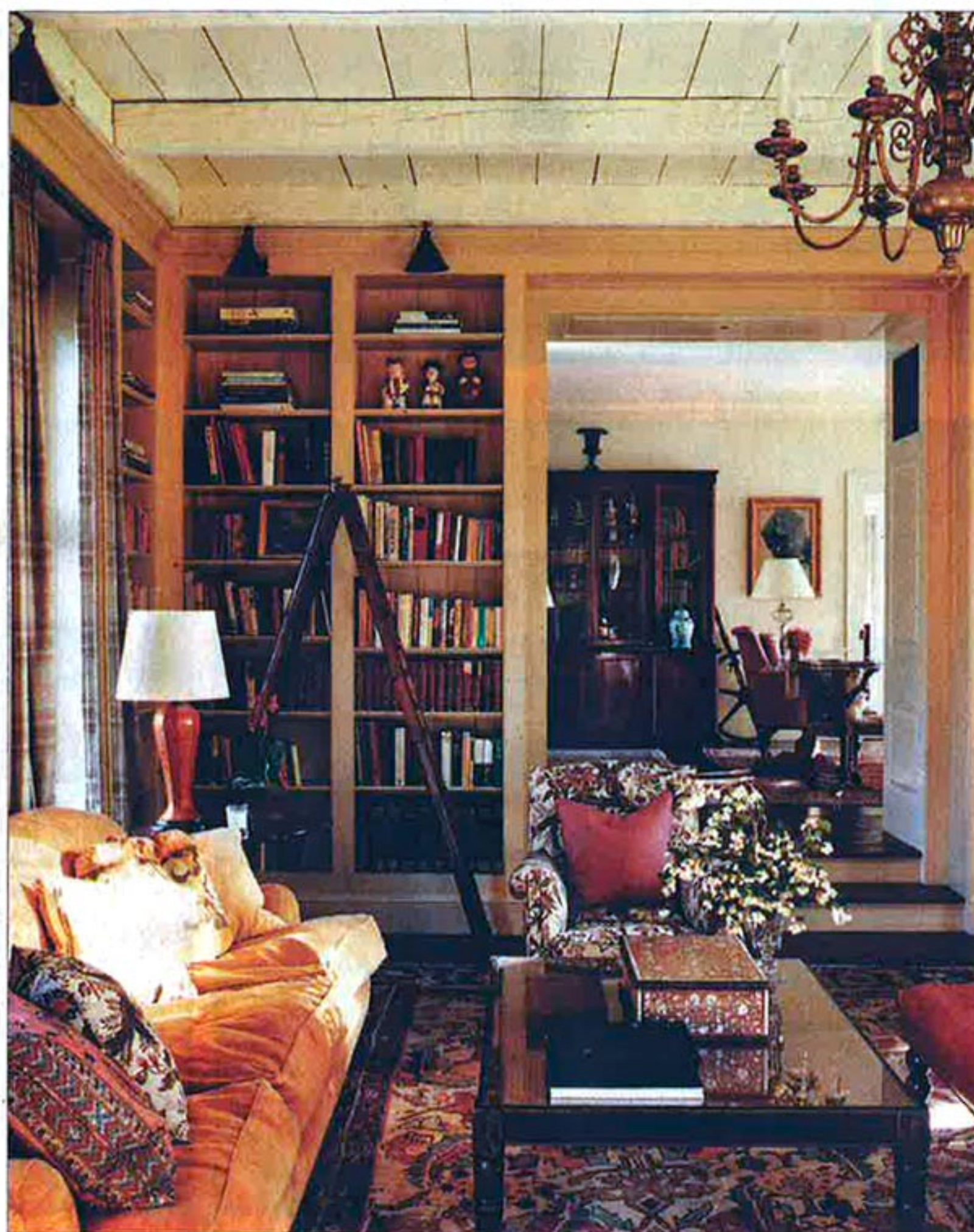
For many, the mention of colonial revival evokes images of large symmetrical houses with classical columns and temple-style entrances. But the

architectural style is much broader, encompassing simple wood-sided houses with painted shutters as well as grand red-brick homes. In terms of interiors, European and Regency influences abound. Typical colonial revival furnishings are Georgian or Chippendale-inspired, from gate-leg tables to finely-made mahogany sofas, pewter candlesticks and silver tea services.

Donald Albrecht recently co-curated an exhibition at the Museum of the City of New York that examined the history of colonial style and its various revivals. According to Albrecht, it was not until the country's centennial in 1876 that colonial architecture and furniture was first truly appreciated and revived. He believes people were nostalgic for an era that was thought to be simpler, more moral and less modern.

"In the 1870s and 1880s, New York City was booming: skyscrapers were being built, corporate culture had happened and suddenly the colonial is revived as an evocation of a simpler time," says Albrecht. "It wasn't simpler, it was difficult, but that is all blacked out."

◀ Tea and Coffee Service, est \$1,200-\$1,800. Christie's are selling this 20th-century American five-piece tea and coffee service in New York at the end of the month. www.christies.com
Christie's Imagos Ltd 2012



▲ The living room in Willow Grace Farm was decorated by LA interior designer Michael S Smith. The furnishings are a mixture of English Regency and 19th-century American antiques.

Carter Berg



▲ Mahogany clock, \$7,500. Grandfather clocks were common in colonial revival interiors. This Chippendale style with a silver dial is in original condition and dates from the late 1800s. www.stanleyweiss.com



◀ Willow Grace Farm: This new farmhouse in the Hudson Valley in upstate New York was built by Schafer's firm. The client wanted a house that evoked the region's colonial heritage. The interior has simple cornices and architraves in a Georgian character appropriate to the colonial revival.

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Albrecht says this was the pivotal moment when the country appreciated its roots. Celebrated American architects such as Charles McKim, William Mead and Stanford White toured New England to study 17th-century colonial construction; designer Duncan Phyfe's colonial furniture, incorporating elements of English neoclassical and Regency styles and applying ornamental carving to tea tables, card tables and fine sofas, was widely imitated. "It is all English-inspired," says Albrecht, "but after the centennial it became American and we adopted it as our own."

During the Depression of the 1930s, the style was mass-marketed and its

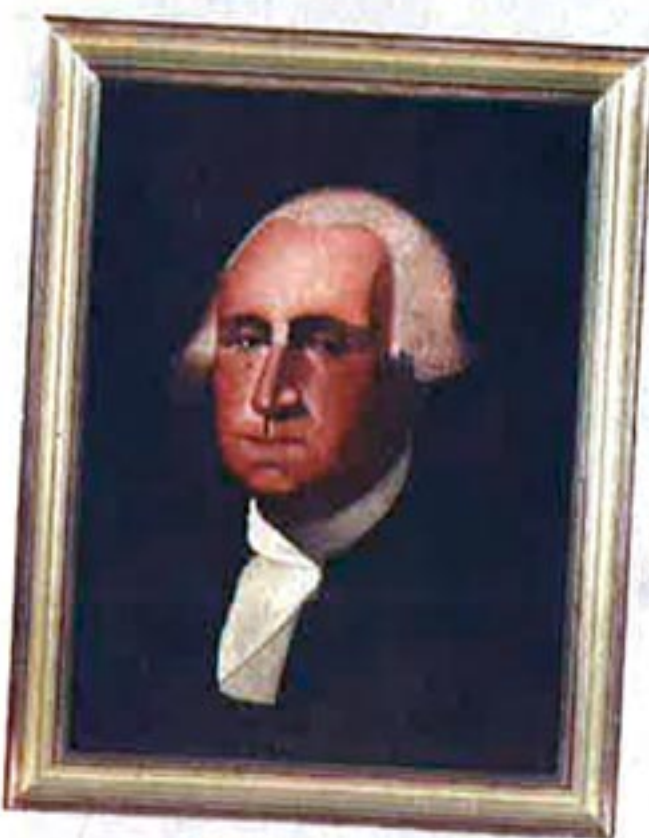
popularity rose again. Department stores and companies like Tiffany & Co produced ranges of colonial style reproduction furniture; more fabrics were used and modern appliances were hidden behind colonial-style panelling. Paint companies produced colours popular in the colonial era, such as dark greens for shutters and creamy yellows for exterior walls – and patriotism once more became a focus, with furniture featuring American motifs such as eagles or images of George Washington. The style was made liveable and sold to consumers as a route to elegant living: good, clean taste with an appealing connection to history.



◀ Centennial Flag, \$25,000. The US centennial celebrations resulted in various patriotic flag creations. Among the rarest are flags like this, with stars that spell out numbers or words. Only three other designs are known to exist. www.jeffbridgman.com



◀ Eagle weathervane, \$25,000. This eagle weathervane, made by New York company, The JL Mott Iron Works, dates from the late 1800s. Eagle motifs featured heavily in the colonial revival movement. www.jeffbridgman.com



◀ Folk painting of George Washington, \$36,000. Cyrus T Fuery, a barber from Parma, Michigan, painted this image of George Washington in 1917. Patriotic images of Washington were extremely popular when the colonial revival movement gathered momentum in the late 1880s. www.jeffbridgman.com



▲ Colonial revival chair, \$2,850. This wing chair with carved mahogany legs dates from the 1920s, at around the time when the colonial style experienced its second revival. www.stevensclaroff.com



◀ Chippendale Highboy, \$85,000. This walnut dresser dates from the end of the colonial period. The claw-and-ball feet were a typical feature when the colonial style was revived. www.stanleyweiss.com



▼ Duncan Phyfe sofa, \$25,000. This sofa is thought to be one of Duncan Phyfe's earliest sofas, dating from the 18th century, and was widely imitated. www.antiquariovc.com

Today, colonial style is seen as "very traditional, almost postcard Americana", according to Gil Schafer, a New York-based architect whose firm specialises in designing colonial revival houses and interiors. His houses often feature windows with painted shutters, symmetrical façades, colonnaded fronts and wood siding. Schafer believes that his clients are seduced by the historical appeal of the colonial revival style but says that it must continue to evolve in order to suit modern living: "Comfort and convenience is such a big part of the way we live now. The style has to conform to that mandate for comfort. Some people say it is too fussy and not

adaptable to the way we live but I think it can be." When it comes to interiors, Schafer tries to source original mantels and fireplaces in order to "ground the architecture". He often mixes antiques and new pieces, including items picked up from travels or inherited from relatives. In a bedroom in his own colonial revival style home, for example, he has combined a 19th-century American carved four-poster bed with an American Federal settee from the 1820s and a portrait from his great grandparents' shooting lodge in south Georgia that they probably bought on a European trip. "You can be somewhat eclectic in

the mix of things," says Schafer. "The English are the absolute masters of the country house aesthetic where everything is mixed in and that actually is quite comfortable. The Americans have picked up on that and tried to adopt a similar sensibility."

Details

- Museum of the City of New York www.mcny.org
- Gil Schafer www.gpschafer.com
- Donald Albrecht www.djalbrecht.com

