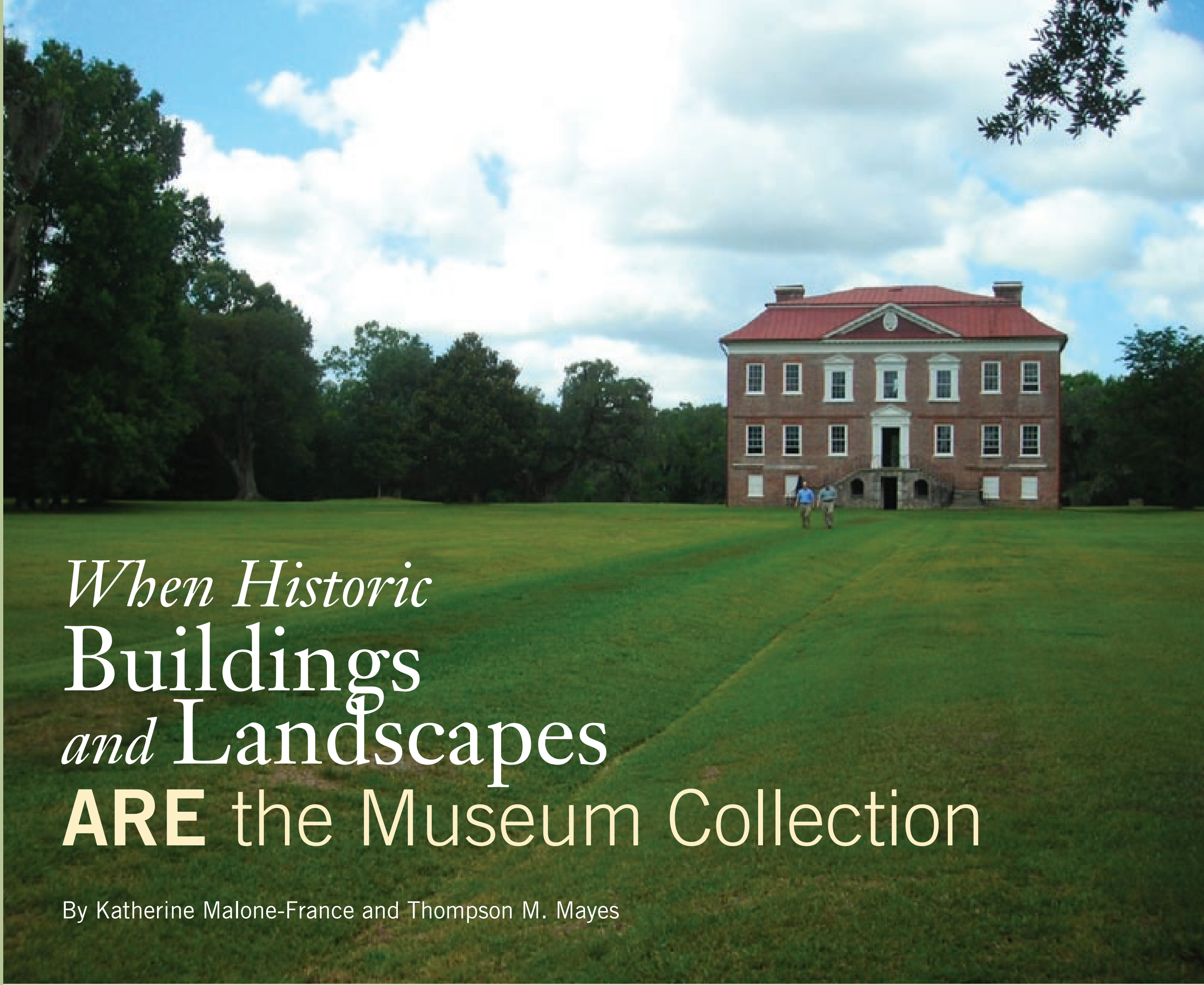

When Historic Buildings *and* Landscapes **ARE** the Museum Collection

By Katherine Malone-France and Thompson M. Mayes

National Trust for Historic Preservation

At the largely unfurnished Drayton Hall, the building is the primary artifact interpreted for the public. The landscape of Drayton Hall is also actively interpreted.

"I feel the ground shifting," joked Bob Beatty, Vice President of AASLH, when he heard that the National Trust for Historic Preservation was exploring the possibility of including historic structures and landscapes in its museum collections. While it may seem common-sensical to someone who is not trained in museum standards and ethics, within the profession the possibility of treating historic structures and landscapes as part of museum collections seems radical, particularly if proceeds from de-accessioned objects will be used to care for the structures and landscapes. Yet, after careful consideration and a thorough examination of ethical standards, the National Trust decided to do just that, revising its collections management policy to incorporate historic structures and landscapes into museum collections, along with objects. Here's the story.[1]

The National Trust preserves and interprets a national network of twenty-seven historic sites and house museums around the United States. These properties are located in small towns and large cities, in suburbs and rural areas. They have a range of operations, resources, and capacities. Of the twenty-one historic sites owned by the National Trust, the organization manages half while other nonprofits, serving as co-stewardship partners, manage the others. In addition to the twenty-one properties that the National Trust owns outright, the organization formally affiliates with another six historic sites located throughout the country, which add geographic, thematic, and operational diversity to the portfolio.

With this diversity, the National Trust grapples with virtually every significant issue facing historic sites and house museums. Name a challenge and at least one of the twenty-seven sites is facing it … and working to meet it. Indeed, one of the current strengths of the National Trust's portfolio lies in its variety as representative of the broader field, coupled with the willingness to take calculated—but sometimes radical—risks to create expansive public benefit and increase long-term sustainability at its sites. In 2007, at the historic Rockefeller estate Kykuit, the National Trust and others convened experts from across the field for the Forum on Historic Site Stewardship in the 21st Century. The organization continues to work on the recommendations from the Kykuit conference and strategically chose in recent years to prioritize its work around the idea of reimagining historic sites for the twenty-first century.

One of the strengths of historic sites and house museums is that visitors have the opportunity to experience a *place*, which has the potential to convey history and story more powerfully than documents or other artifacts alone can do. The *place* is not one element, but is a combination of landscape, buildings, and objects woven together. National Trust historic sites represent a broad range of American stories embedded in all three of these elements. The structures at National Trust sites range across a broad spectrum, from Phillip Johnson's Glass House, built in New Canaan, Connecticut, in 1945, to Drayton Hall, completed outside of Charleston, South Carolina, almost exactly two centuries earlier in 1742. Structures at National Trust sites also include a wide range of more modest buildings, such as a freedman's log cabin at Montpelier in Orange, Virginia, and redwood barns at the Cooper-Molera Adobe in Monterey, California.

Similarly, the landscapes of the National Trust's portfolio represent significant historic and artistic resources. Among the 4,000 acres that the National Trust owns are woodlands and wetlands, Louisiana oaks covered in Spanish moss, trenches dug by soldiers during the Civil War, carefully framed vistas of the Hudson River that exemplify the picturesque in landscape design, and even a small section of the San Andreas Fault in the foothills of the Santa Cruz Mountains. These landscapes represent the work of celebrated estate gardeners such as Ferdinand Mangold at Lyndhurst and Isabella Worn at Filoli, but they also bear the marks of nineteenth-century phosphate mining in the South Carolina low country and twenty-first-century population growth in northern Virginia. And they are all enhanced by elements of beauty—dry-stacked stone walls, iron gates, winding paths, wooden fencing, rare and common varieties of trees and flowers, furniture, sculptures, and fountains.

The object collection at the sites of the National Trust contains a wide variety of fine arts and decorative arts, including baroque paintings, modern sculptures, Gothic Revival furniture, and Native American pottery, not to mention a grizzly bear rug, Napoleon's death mask, and homespun clothing believed to have been worn by people enslaved at Shadows-on-the-Teche. The collection also encompasses an eclectic mix of items related to life at these properties, from the extraordinary—Dolley Madison's engagement ring at Montpelier—to the absolutely ordinary—Edith Farnsworth's original stove at the Farnsworth House. According to Carrie E. Villar, the John and Neville Bryan Senior Manager of Museum Collections at the National Trust, "While the object collection of the National Trust has

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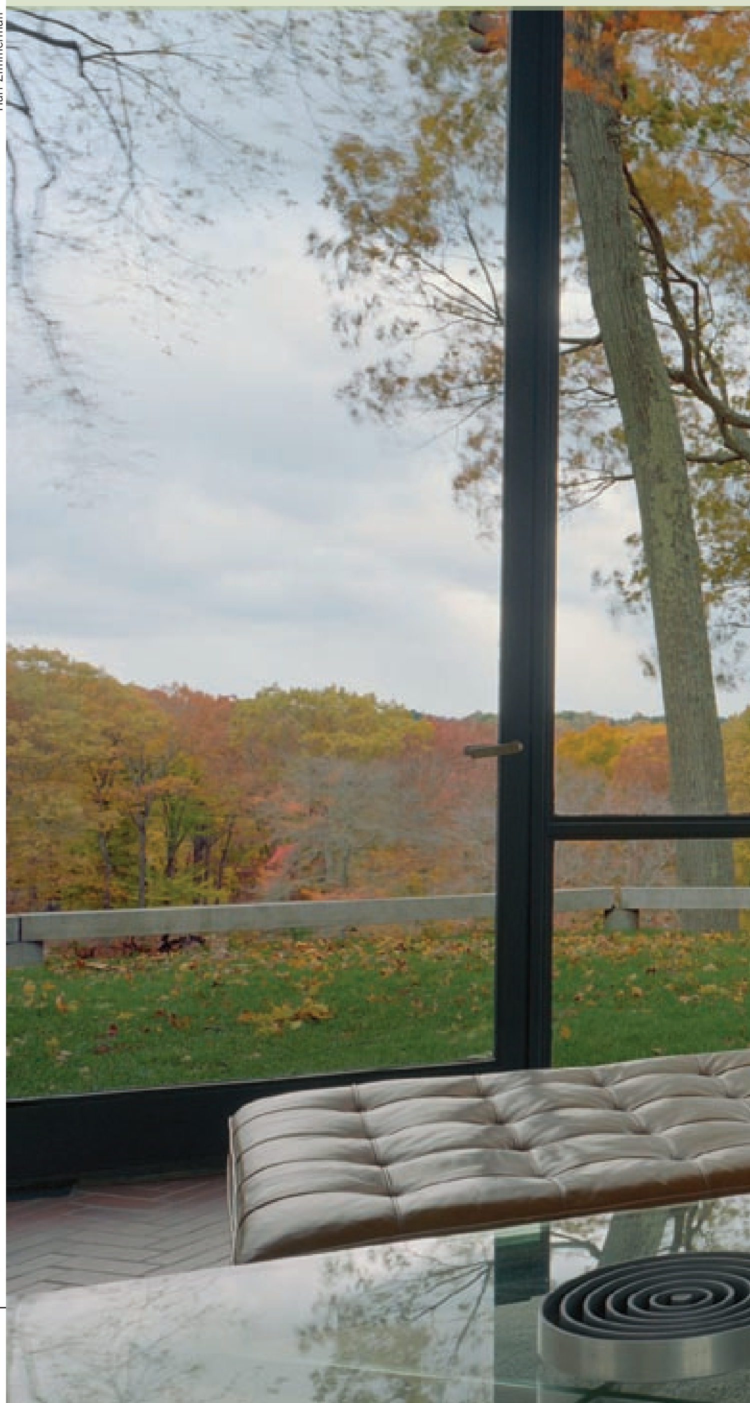
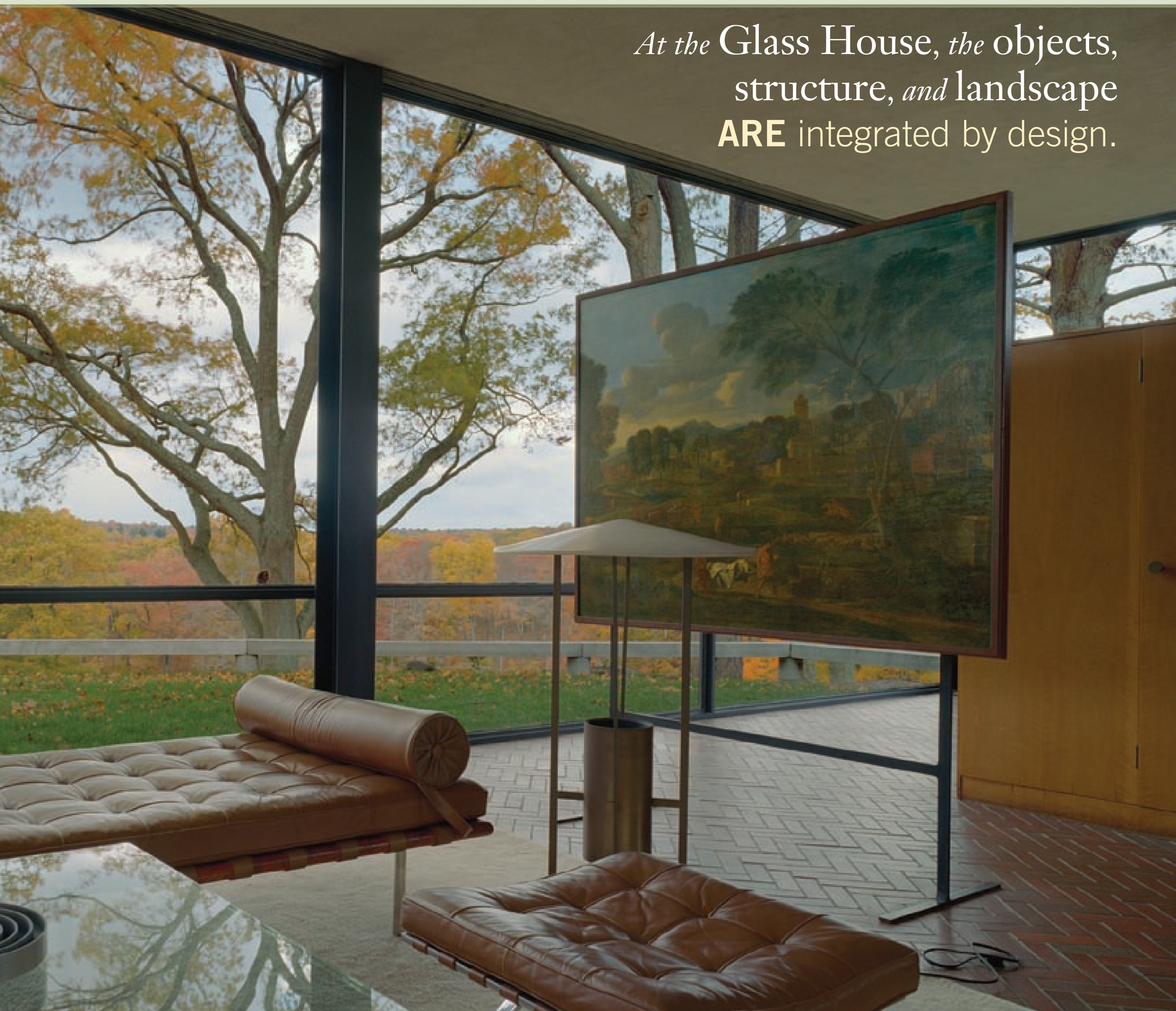


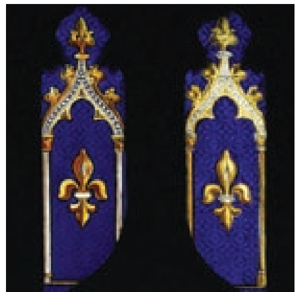
some truly extraordinary pieces by artists and artisans such as Thomas Affleck, Gustave and Christian Herter, Andy Warhol, Alberto Giacometti and others, the power of our collection to make meaningful connections with the public lies in the depth and breadth of objects, places, and spaces that tell the stories of how we lived in the past."[2]

Across the National Trust's portfolio, the buildings, landscapes, and objects are interconnected in design, stewardship, and the power to convey meaning, as is often the case at historic sites and house museums throughout the country. At Frank Lloyd Wright's Pope-Leighey House in Alexandria, Virginia, much of the furniture is built into the fabric of the home, leaving no physical distinction between the building and its furnishings. At Kykuit, the fine arts collections are placed in the buildings and in the broader landscapes as they were by the property's private owners, resulting in combinations, such as a Tang Dynasty Bodhisattva framed by a Hudson Valley landscape, that both delight and inspire. In these cases, and others, the National Trust is charged not only with the preservation and interpretation of these objects, but also of the larger compositions of which they are a part. Phillip Johnson's Glass House is perhaps the most literal example of this intent and interconnectedness—there is no distinction intended or created between landscape, building, and objects. All are manipulated, all are organic, all are art. Public benefit is only enhanced by an understanding of these elements as a single collection, both at the individual sites and across the portfolio.

In outlining the key conclusions from the Kykuit meeting, James Vaughan, then Vice President of Stewardship of Historic Sites at the National Trust, stated, "Responsible site stewardship achieves a sustainable balance between the needs of the buildings, landscapes, collections, and the visiting public." As the National Trust continued to search for a sustainable and powerful future for its historic sites, the *imbalance* between these elements became increasingly apparent.[3]



Lyndhurst, a National Trust site in Tarrytown, New York, provides a particularly evocative example. At the heart of the sixty-seven-acre estate is a mansion designed by A.J. Davis, considered to be one of the finest examples of Victorian architecture in the United States. Davis was the Frank Lloyd Wright of the nineteenth century. Like Wright, he not only designed the mansion's exterior but was also keenly interested in the placement of the home within its landscape and the design of the interior spaces, fixtures, and furnishings. The exterior design is an icon of the Gothic Revival style. The interiors include detailed plasterwork, marble mantels, carved doors, elaborate faux stone and grain painting, and stained glass. The object collection includes furnishings designed specifically for the home by A. J. Davis in both 1840 and 1865, as well as fine art, decorative arts, and other furnishings acquired by railroad magnate Jay Gould and his daughters, who owned the property from 1880 to 1961, when it was bequeathed to the National Trust.



Carol Highsmith

STAINED GLASS **at Lyndhurst could not be conserved using disposition proceeds under the previous collections management policy, because the individual windows had not been formally accessioned.**

The house contained a series of five stained glass windows attributed to John LaFarge. During a prior restoration of the mansion's parlor to reflect its earliest period of decoration, the LaFarge windows were removed from the parlor, accessioned into the collection, and placed in storage. Other stained glass remained in the house, much of it in need of conservation. The stained glass that remained *in situ* in the mansion vividly illustrated the imbalance between the collections and the historic structure. Under the provisions of the National Trust collections management policy, the collections care fund—financed by disposition proceeds—could be used only for the stained glass windows that had been removed from the building, given accession numbers, and placed in storage. Disposition proceeds could not be used for the conservation of the windows that remained in place in the building—*and which the public saw every day.* This seemed highly inconsistent—that disposition proceeds could apply to the direct care of items that were in storage and not then interpreted for the public in any way, but these funds could not contribute to the care of stained glass that is in public view, is a part of site interpretation, and is an intrinsic element of the full composition of buildings, landscapes, and objects that is Lyndhurst.

"The National Trust's de-accession policy was loosely based on those developed by art museums, in which the intent was to prevent cherry-picking of an art collection to pay for deferred maintenance on a building, with the tacit assumption that there was nothing inherently aesthetic about the building," explains Howard Zar, Executive Director at Lyndhurst. "In an architecturally significant house museum, many of the highly visible and defining elements of the structure are as aesthetically important, if not more so, than the collections within. They need to be accessioned into the collection and should be subject to restoration with de-accession funds."[4]

"The misconception that Lyndhurst highlights," Zar continues, "is using structural attachment as the bright, dividing line on what could be restored with collections de-accession funds. In a Frank Lloyd Wright house, would anyone posit that a built-in dining room table is less of an art object and less worthy of restoration than the dining room chairs, simply because they aren't built in? Similarly, do I have to rip out my Tiffany windows and put them in storage to make them 'art objects' worthy of restoration? In a house museum, oftentimes, the house is the art object."[5]

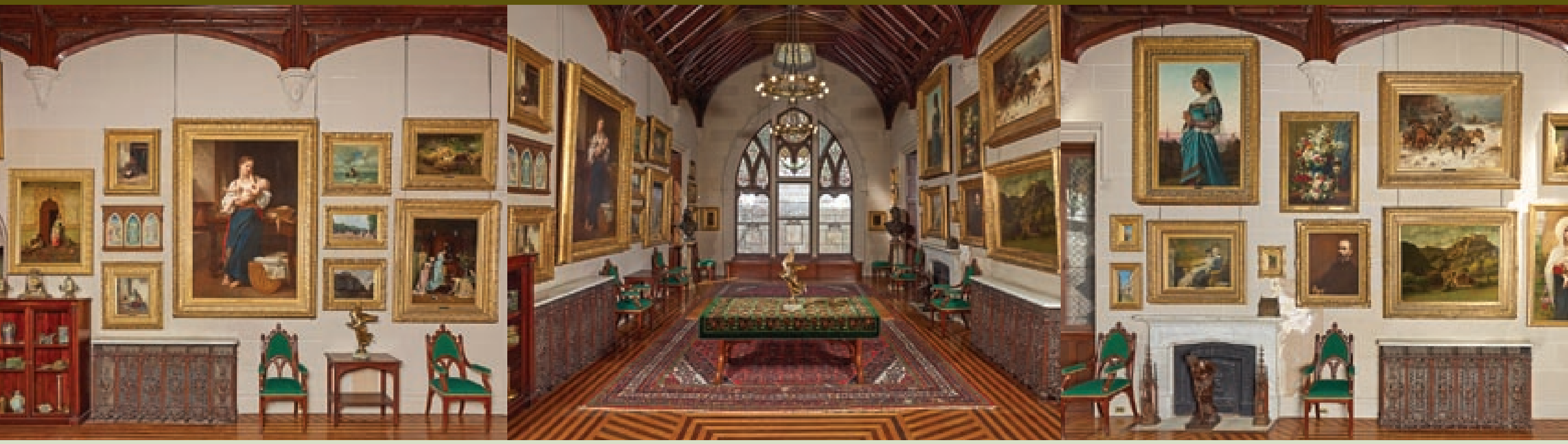
The example from Lyndhurst dramatically illustrates the arbitrary nature of attempting to separate the care of objects from the care of buildings and landscapes, and it provided the impetus for a fundamental change to the National Trust's collections management policy: the addition of historic structures and landscapes to the collection and the extension of the use of disposition proceeds to the direct care of the entire collection, including the historic structures and landscapes.

The National Trust's collections management policy now incorporates a historic structure and landscape collection, as well as an object collection, which also includes archival and archaeological materials. Not all historic structures and landscapes of the National Trust will be included in this collection, however. The primary criteria for inclusion are that the historic structure or landscape feature must provide active public benefit by being accessible to and interpreted for the public. Degrees of significance or types of use are very purposefully not part of these criteria, in an effort to provide flexibility as sites develop new plans and programs.

This idea of a single collection that incorporates landscapes, structures, and objects recognizes the best practices of stewardship already in place at the National Trust. Individual staff members or interdisciplinary teams work cooperatively to care for buildings, landscapes, and objects. Planning for capital projects includes a careful examination of impacts on all three components and the identification of overlapping conservation issues. Interpretation and engagement benefit from identifying and exploring connections between these elements.

The National Trust recognized that such fundamental changes to its collections management policy would require full examination to ensure that the changes were consistent with ethical standards in the museum field and that there were adequate protections in place to mitigate any significant risks. In examining the applicable ethical standards, the National Trust reviewed the policies of the American Association for State and Local History (AASLH) and the American Alliance of Museums (AAM). Prior to initiating the changes, the National Trust explored the issues in sessions at the annual meetings of AASLH and AAM, as well as with the Accreditation Committee of AAM and the Standards and Ethics Committee of AASLH. As outlined in a position paper published in the June 2014 edition of *Forum*

The primary criteria for inclusion **ARE** that the historic structure or landscape feature must provide active public benefit by being accessible to and interpreted for the public.



Jeff Sturges

Journal, the National Trust concluded that the changes to the collections management policy were consistent with ethical standards. The organization reached this conclusion because the changes were grounded in the idea of public benefit (through public access and interpretation) as the criteria both for designating buildings and landscapes as part of the collection and for the use of disposition proceeds.[6]

As outlined in this article and in the position paper, the National Trust endorses the fundamental idea that the preservation of historic structures and landscapes interpreted to the public is its primary duty of care. The organization also recognizes—and embraces—the establishment of a standard of care for these resources that is comparable to the standard of care for objects. The National Trust also expressly prohibits the capitalization of historic resources as financial assets, a policy of the organization throughout its history.

The changes to the National Trust's collections management policy related to the use of disposition proceeds are also in keeping with the AASLH ethical standards, as outlined in *Forum Journal*.

> The AASLH *Statement of Professional Standards and Ethics* also includes the statement that collections shall not be deaccessioned or disposed of in order to provide financial support for institutional operations, facilities maintenance, or any reason other than preservation or acquisition of collections, as defined by institutional policy. The proposed changes to the National Trust's Collections Management Policy will encourage the application of this standard to the historic structures and landscapes, as well as object collections. This change provides equivalent treatment for buildings, landscapes, and objects as assets held for the benefit of the public.
>
> Prior to the change in the Collections Management Policy, proceeds from deaccessioning would only have been available for the preservation of collections objects, not the buildings or landscapes. This limitation did not recognize that the historic structures and landscapes are held for the benefit of the public in the same manner as the objects. In the event that objects are deaccessioned and disposed of, the proceeds will now be available for preservation or acquisition of structures or landscapes that meet the criteria of providing public benefit. Conversely, the proceeds from the sale of historic buildings or landscapes that meet these criteria would now be expressly directed toward the preservation or acquisition of other portions of the collection, such as furnishings and fine arts or other historic buildings or landscapes that provide public benefit. The application of these proceeds would be limited to the site where the deaccessioned item originated but, if that site ceased to be a part of the National Trust's collection, the proceeds could be applied to other sites owned by the organization.[7]

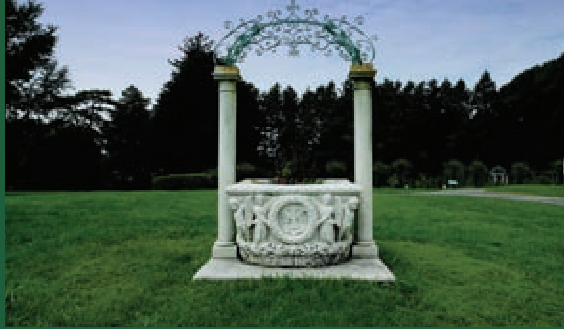
The AAM *Code of Ethics for Museums* begins with the statement that "Museums make their unique contribution to the public by collecting, preserving, and interpreting the things of this world." Like other organizations that own, operate, and interpret historic places, the National Trust recognizes

Lyndhurst's grand picture gallery

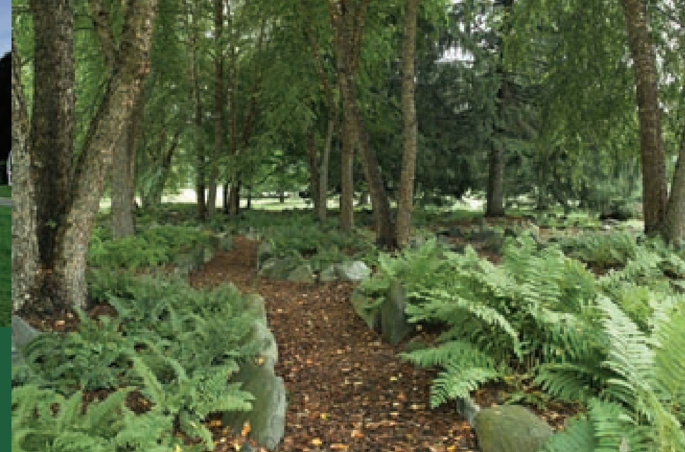
…displays Jay Gould's prize painting, Bouguereau's "Premiere Caresse." The decorative scheme of the room includes c. 1840 decorative plaster corbels of notable authors and a c. 1865 painted cast iron radiator cover. Although extremely rare, the decorative work in the room could not be restored using de-accession funds under the previous policy.

…designed by Alexander Jackson Davis, is filled with railroad baron Jay Gould's paintings collection. Under the National Trust's prior collections management policy, de-accession funds were used to restore the paintings, but could not be used to restore the monumental stained glass window, which is believed to be an early work of Louis Comfort Tiffany, and which is integral to the experience of the space.

…shows the conserved paintings around a marble mantel and original faux painted wall surface designed by Alexander Jackson Davis, c. 1840. Although the Metropolitan Museum of Art holds drawings of the mantel in its collection, the mantel and early faux painted surfaces would not have been eligible for restoration using de-accession proceeds under the National Trust's previous collections policy.



Carol Highsmith



Carol Highsmith

***The nineteenth-century fern garden and Renaissance-style well head* ARE elegible for conservation as part of the collection, under the new policies.**

that the historic structures and landscapes it owns are among the primary "things of this world" that the organization preserves and interprets. The National Trust's congressional charter states that the purpose of the National Trust is "to facilitate public participation in the preservation of sites, buildings, and objects of national significance or interest."[8] As discussed in *Forum Journal:*

> The AAM *Code of Ethics* states that "disposal of collections through sale, trade, or research activities is solely for the advancement of the museum's mission. Proceeds from the sale of nonliving collections are to be used consistent with the established standards of the museum's discipline, but in no event shall they be used for anything other than acquisition or direct care of collections." The National Trust and other organizations that own historic sites recognize that the historic structures and landscapes are part of the collections that they hold for the benefit of the public and their care fulfills the organization's preservation mission. In applying this standard, the National Trust's proposed revisions to its Collections Management Policy, which would establish criteria for a historic structures and landscapes collection, would also permit the use of disposition proceeds from collections objects for the direct care of historic structures and landscapes.[9]

In considering these changes to the collections management policy, the National Trust acknowledged that permitting disposition proceeds from objects to be used for historic structures and landscapes raised two primary concerns. How could the objects collection be protected from being "cherry-picked" to raise funds without considering the integrity of the entire collection? And how could the organization model best practices in preservation while ensuring that disposition proceeds would be used only for "direct care" and not for operating expenses or facilities maintenance?

To avoid cherry-picking, the policy offers guidelines for the de-accessioning process. An object is only eligible for de-accessioning if it is found to be damaged or destroyed, is determined to be unrelated to the scope of collecting for that site, does not support the mission or interpretation of the site, or has been irreversibly altered beyond interpretive use. As part of the proposed revision of the collections management policy, de-accessioning must be reviewed and recommended for approval by the organization's Collections Committee (which includes the Vice President of Historic Sites and other staff representatives of the National Trust and co-stewardship partners), the Chief Preservation Officer, and a subcommittee of the Preservation and Historic Sites Committee of the Board of Trustees. (An option for the subcommittee to refer the matter to the full Board of Trustees is also included in the revised policy.)

An additional safeguard lies in the policy's specific separation of the de-accessioning process from the process of determining the application of the proceeds. The policy states that no decision shall be made as to the use of funds from the sale of de-accessioned objects before the Collections Committee approves the de-accessioning and that the committee must approve the specific use of any proceeds, which will ensure that proceeds fund direct care rather than operations or facilities maintenance. The policy expressly states that funds from the sale of de-accessioned objects shall be used only for the replenishment or direct care of collections.

Ultimately, the National Trust determined that the definition of direct care should be interpreted by the professional expertise of the Collections Committee on a case-by-case basis, with an additional check provided by notification to the Chief Preservation Officer. The organization will provide guidance to the Collections Committee related to the standard operational expenses of the site where the proceeds are to be used and allow those sites to make a fact-based case for the particular use of proceeds.

The National Trust is uniquely situated to build a body of practice around these decisions and their implementation that can serve as a model for the entire portfolio, as well as other organizations. In addition to being the owner of twenty-one historic sites and three million objects and artifacts, the National Trust works closely with talented preservation and conservation tradespeople, builders, architects, and engineers across the country to develop technical solutions that preserve beauty and protect authenticity. The National Trust is also working to make its cyclical maintenance planning just that—planning that is consistently proactive, rather than reactive, particularly for major capital preservation projects. The practical experience of these stewardship obligations—combined with the expertise of the interpretive, curatorial, and buildings and grounds

Preserving Lyndhurst

The fern garden at Lyndhurst, installed in the 1880s, could be conserved using disposition proceeds under the new collections management policy. This ninteenth-century Renaissance-style well head in the collection at Lyndhurst was damaged in a storm and subsequently repaired using disposition proceeds because it was formally accessioned into the collection.

staff members and board members from across the National Trust's portfolio—promise a lively and ultimately beneficial debate around each decision to de-accession and each decision regarding the use of proceeds.

Ultimately, the National Trust believes that these changes to the collections management policy more fully acknowledge the importance of structures and landscapes as primary historic resources and that these changes will enhance the public's appreciation of these significant, meaningful, and beautiful places. While the changes made by the National Trust may not be the best course of action for all historic sites and house museums, they offer a model that could be used for a wide variety of organizations that serve as stewards of historic landscapes, structures, and objects.

Stay tuned, the National Trust will be reporting on the implementation of the policy changes through the Preservation Leadership Forum, AASLH, and AAM—and expects to see the benefits of this holistic approach to the stewardship of its sites and their rich history. ◉

Katherine Malone-France is the Vice President for Historic Sites at the National Trust for Historic Preservation, providing leadership to the National Trust's twenty-seven historic sites as places of national significance or impact where a variety of ownership, stewardship, business, use, and engagement practices flourish to advance the National Trust's mission and model the many options for preservation. She can be reached at kmalone-france@savingplaces.org. Thompson M. Mayes, Deputy General Counsel for the National Trust for Historic Preservation, is the principal lawyer for the National Trust's twenty-seven historic sites. A recipient of the Rome Prize in historic preservation, he has spoken and written widely about historic preservation and historic house museums. He can be reached at tmayes@savingplaces.org.

[1] Bob Beatty, telephone interview, April 2, 2014.

[2] Carrie E. Villar, e-mail interview, May 20, 2014.

[3] James Vaughan, "Introduction: The Call for a National Conversation," *Forum Journal* 22, no. 3 (Spring 2008). http://www.preservationnation.org/leadership-forum.html.

[4] Howard Zar, e-mail interview, May 20, 2014.

[5] Ibid.

[6] Katherine Malone-France and Thompson M. Mayes, "Expanding the Collection to Include Historic Structures and Landscapes," supplemental online content to *Forum Journal* 28, no. 4 (Summer 2014). http://www.preservationnation.org/leadership-forum.html.

[7] Ibid.

[8] American Alliance of Museums, "Code of Ethics for Museums," (adopted 1991, amended 2000, accessed May 15, 2014), http://www.aam-us.org/resources/ethics-standards-and-best-practices/code-of-ethics.

[9] Malone-France and Mayes, "Expanding the Collection to Include Historic Structures and Landscapes."