

# DISORIENTING THE ORIENT

Reinvention and Retribution in  
Lockwood de Forest’s Teak Room

There’s a tremendous amount we can learn about people when we walk through their homes. This is perhaps most evident in the living spaces of the super elite and powerful, which frequently project a thorny mix of their authentic and aspirational selves. The homes of the most privileged are fascinating sites of conscious self-fashioning, replete with social and aesthetic complexity. For example, the Andrew and Louise Carnegie Mansion’s Family Library—conversationally referred to as the Teak Room—is a modestly sized room designed by the American adventurer, artist, and aesthete Lockwood de Forest in 1902. De Forest began working with Louis Comfort Tiffany in 1879 and, in the same year, traveled to British India for his honeymoon. British artists and designers had already pulled inspiration from Indian design for some time, but this was de Forest’s first direct encounter with it, which ultimately revolutionized his design practice. He amassed a number of objects in India to sell in the United States and, in partnership with the Indian philanthropist Mugganbhai Hutheesing, established the Ahmedabad Wood Carving Company in 1881, which employed Indian craftsmen to copy local architectural motifs and transform them into decorative items like folding screens, wall brackets, frames, and furniture. De Forest would go on to decorate and furnish some of the most spectacular American domestic and commercial interiors of the period, all marked with a distinctly Indian flair. Through a multitude of textures, colors, and materials, as well as a dizzying array of patterns, the de Forest “look” is perhaps best summarized in an expression coined by historian John Kasson: “Oriental orgasmic.”

SIDDHARTHA V. SHAH is the John Wieland 1958 Director of the Mead Art Museum at Amherst College. His academic and curatorial projects have focused on a range of Indian and South Asian diasporic subjects, including the appropriation of Indian ornament in Victorian design and conflicts and intersections of religion and modern art.



The Carnegie Family Library (Teak Room), 1938; Collection of the Museum of the City of New York

Indeed, some may find de Forest's Orientalist interiors to be visually explosive and exhausting in equal measure.

The Teak Room is the only expressly designed and commissioned space in the Carnegie Mansion, which makes it a surprising exotic counterpoint to the rest of the building that otherwise conveys the family's Scottish origins. It was designed as a well-appointed and inviting reading room outfitted with an impressive carpet, carved and upholstered furniture, books, framed paintings and photographs, and a Tiffany chandelier. Most of the room's original furnishings and objects are no longer present, yet one might still feel a sense of overwhelm upon examining the extravagant ornamentation and detail on virtually every surface. The wainscoting and doorframe are made of elaborately carved teakwood, used also to create the decorative brackets along the upper perimeter of the room, the beamed ceiling, a sideboard, and grand chimneypiece. The built-in sideboard features a register of scalloped arches pulled so directly from Mughal architecture that it looks as if de Forest has somehow miniaturized an Indian building and transformed it into a piece of furniture. The walls are covered in complex patterns stenciled in gold that evoke the same undulating floral motifs found on the wooden panels and beams throughout the room. The space is lush and extravagant, and transports visitors to a distant place. From one perspective, the room projects the Carnegies' awareness of and appreciation for global design. From another angle, it conveys their capacity to claim and displace the visual language of one location and reanimate it in another environment.

De Forest's design practice celebrated the craft traditions of India and brought the talents and virtuosic skills of native artisans into the private spaces of an elite international audience. But his work also exemplifies a complicated relationship that many Western designers have with Asia as a source of both inspiration and uninvited intervention. Patterns and symbols that may be deeply meaningful in their native vernacular somehow attract manipulation and reconstitution, whether they are lifted from a Hindu temple, the tomb of a Sufi mystic, or the home of a Parsi merchant. The emphasis is thus not on contextual integrity but on inventing something new and more palatable for Western consumers—something more “modern” and perhaps even improved. This fairly common practice homogenizes artistic and cultural distinctions and reduces them to a vague, nebulous fantasy of Asian design. In the Teak Room, for example, functional exterior brackets and window frames are brought indoors as nonfunctional decoration, and elements of Islamic, Hindu, and Jain architecture are reduced in scale and haphazardly collide in a secular space. This



CFGNY, Model, Study for Contrast Form Gestalt, New York, 2023

reduction and homogenization of aesthetic traditions is further complicated when such reinventions are rationalized within an equally jumbled rhetoric of authenticity, preservation, and care.

This complexity—of disparate artistic and cultural traditions converging in a vaguely Indian aesthetic—is precisely what drew the artist collective

CFGNY to the Teak Room, which today functions as a flexible exhibition space activated through interventions that either engage with or evade its Orientalist aesthetic. CFGNY is a particularly apt group to reanimate the room, given the New York-based artists' ongoing engagement with the phrase “vaguely Asian” through various mediums including video, performance, painting, sculpture, and architectural installation. Founded in 2016 and composed of four artists—Daniel Chew, Ten Izu, Kirsten Kilponen, and Tin Nguyen—CFGNY's response to de Forest's room employs a practice and methodology that, in rather piercing ways, replicates his own.

Titled Contrast Form Gestalt, a bespoke acronym of CFGNY, the group's intervention in the Teak Room is an exercise in obscuration, making the room look more like a construction zone than a library and giving the appearance of a work still in production. Like de Forest's original commission, the installation is framed by and around wood, but the opulence of carved teak is replaced by the brazen simplicity of two-by-four lumber beams. Plastic sheets are stretched across these wooden frames to form walls that cover the space almost entirely—a conspicuously unadorned and unrefined response to de Forest's densely worked surfaces. Small windows cut into the plastic walls offer visitors their only opportunity to view portions of de Forest's original stencil designs and wooden details, and highlight paintings collectively produced by CFGNY. Each work is a unique composition based on paintings from de Forest's extensive world travels, using his oeuvre as an open archive. His hours of labor and body of work are thus reduced to a sourcebook of impressions; references to specific sites in Egypt, India, Mexico, Greece, and California are intentionally obscured, privileging CFGNY's clever alterations above de Forest's originals. The artists have broken de Forest's paintings into fragments, like puzzle pieces dislocated from their origins, and reassembled and painted them into entirely new visions. CFGNY's relationship to



CFGNY, Drawing, Study for Composite 1, 2023

de Forest's work as both source of inspiration and subject of their manipulation is incisive, ironic, and utterly disorienting. The freedom and power to choose and (re)invent is in their hands alone, and the installation feels like karmic retribution for de Forest's own appropriation of Indian design in the Teak Room.

At the center of CFGNY's project is a humanlike figure composed of disparate objects from Cooper Hewitt's collection,

all sourced from places de Forest once visited—India, of course, as well as China, Japan, and Egypt. In this instance, the museum itself serves as the archive from which the artists extract materials and recontextualize them into a figure who occupies the space like a god in its temple. Illuminated within a stark, industrial installation, the form feels miraculous and otherworldly, somehow divine. Like the wooden pillars, scalloped arches, and flower-laden architectural brackets in the Teak Room, the figure's parts have been dislodged from their original sources and transformed into an outsider's unconventional vision. A fourth-century Roman glass vase, Indian jewelry, a Japanese opium pipe, a Chinese snuffbox, and various curiosities comprise this ghostly "body," which can be read as a metaphor for the Western construction of the exotic that subsumes places and peoples as diverse as Japan and India and reduces them to "the Orient."

The artists' intervention is indeed an exercise in obscuration just as it is one of revelation, directing attention from the hypervisible opulence and excess of the "vaguely Asian" Teak Room to all that is hushed and unseen beneath the surface—distinct cultural identities, labor, appropriation, and assimilation. Grounded in the reflexive relationship between Asian and American design, and somewhere between deconstruction and reconstruction, the project unsettles, destabilizes, and lays bare the long, dark shadow of certain forms of cross-cultural exchange. The installation prods visitors to carefully and thoughtfully consider the spaces that surround us, perhaps even in our own homes and rooms. Where have the many parts of our spaces come from? What do they say about our desires, aspirations, and values? Whose lives and stories are embedded within them, and what is it that they may wish to say?