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Patrick Phillips-Schrock provides a detailed account of the work of Pat Nixon and her decoration team. Thelma “Pat” Nixon is, in the author’s words, “a woman of good taste and high style”; she was “a strong team player”; she was “one of our kindest, most thoughtful first ladies” (pp. 197-198). The cliché'd generalities get a reader no closer to understanding Mrs. Nixon as a person. Readers looking for analysis of, say, the ways aesthetic value is constructed and maintained will find little here: furniture is often describe as “top quality” (p. 234n17), for example, with no analysis of what that meant, except that Henry Francis DuPont said it was so. The book's strengths lie with the careful, highly detailed discussions of what was changed in each room, and the political, cultural, and aesthetic calculus behind each decision.

Decoration of the White House is an ephemeral art. Administrations impose their aesthetic preferences; families redecorate the living quarters to suit their needs and tastes. Pat Nixon shifted the White House away from the cosmopolitan, French-inflected stylings preferred by Jacqueline “Jackie” Kennedy and her decorator, Stéphane Boudin, toward a stolid, pedantic décor of American antiques and museum-like rooms. In the private areas of the building, Pat Nixon was content to retain the décor of Jackie Kennedy and Lady Bird Johnson, only removing Jackie’s favorite shades of green and orange and replacing some of the furniture. In the public spaces, however, an overhaul was deemed necessary.

The French style of Boudin-Kennedy was viewed by this Republican administration as un-American and inappropriate to the house; in the Johnson years, furnishings had been worn out without replacement or repair and besides, Mrs. Nixon favored a formal style but with brighter colors. Clement Conger, Mrs. Nixon’s White House curator, was best known at the time for his installation of a colonial-themed décor in the sleek steel-and-glass State Department building.

Conger was skilled at extracting funds and furniture, dollars and artworks, from wealthy Nixon supporters. Many rooms were decorated with an eye toward television and print photographs. The Oval Office was redone in bright yellow and intense blue, “foreign” antique furniture was removed, and the memorable hand-hooked rug with its bright blue background and gold eagle in the center was handmade by two women. New curtains and valances for the three windows in the room created a dramatic stage designed for striking images of the president at work at his desk.

As the author explains, Mrs. Kennedy’s contribution was to restore the White House; Pat
Nixon’s was to redecorate. One of Mrs. Nixon’s achievement was, under the direction of Conger, to improve the quality (no reproductions) and number of antiques in the White House collection. True, the focus was narrow in period (colonial) and culture (only a few English or French antiques were allowed into the collection). Pat Nixon redecorated with an eye towards political statements of tradition, nostalgia, and formality.

The book is smartly arranged to reflect the building, with each major area of the house discussed room by room, with careful presentations of the before and after décor, detailed accounts of the decision process for each room, and when available, information about donors and costs. A careful reader, then, figuratively tours the building room by room, learning of the shifts in décor and use. There are some problems with the production of the book. The author acknowledges the poor quality of some of the images. There are typographical errors: Charles Willson Peale’s name loses the second “l” in the middle name; on a schematic drawing produced by the author a room is labeled “Orange Blossum” rather than the correct “Blossom” that appears elsewhere in the text; aesthetic is variably spelled.

The author’s artwork is often commendable. An image created by the author depicts the décor of the wall housing a portrait of Grace Coolidge in the China Room (so called because of cabinets housing china pieces). The Kennedy-Boudin choice of dull greige walls and dark gray curtain panels topped by a flat, severe scalloped valance contrasts with the Nixon-Conger choice of dark green curtain panels edged with red and topped with a draped and tasseled formal valance. The French, modern, slightly reserved sophistication of the Kennedy White House was supplanted by an elaborate, fussy vision of an imagined colonial past. Redecorating the house of the nation was to play high stakes indeed.