



Museums for America

Sample Application MA-253203-OMS-23
Project Category: Collections Stewardship and Access

Victoria Mansion

Amount awarded by IMLS:	\$148,043
Amount of cost share:	\$148,043

Victoria Mansion will conserve the painted finishes in the second story of its grand central Stair Hall that date back to 1859-1860. The staircase paintings were completed by Giuseppe Guidicini, an Italian-born artist who emigrated to the United States in 1832 and later helped to disseminate a taste for Italianate fresco-style decoration in the nation's opera houses and theaters. Project conservators will address at-risk areas by stabilizing and cleaning the second story Stair Hall paint and reversibly in-painting small areas of loss. Conservation activities will take place in public view to further the museum's effort to promote education about conservation practices.

Attached are the following components excerpted from the original application.

- Narrative
- Schedule of Completion

When preparing an application for the next deadline, be sure to follow the instructions in the current Notice of Funding Opportunity for the grant program and project category to which you are applying.

1. Project Justification

Victoria Mansion proposes to undertake the conservation of the important original 1859-1860 painted decoration on the walls and ceilings of the second story Stair Hall and seeks \$148,042.59 in IMLS funding to support this work. The proposed project aligns with IMLS agency-level *Goal 3: Collections Stewardship and Access* and associated *Objective 3.2: Conservation Treatment*.

Built in Portland, Maine, between 1858 and 1860, Victoria Mansion (also known as the Morse-Libby Mansion) was the summer home of Maine natives Ruggles Sylvester Morse and his wife Olive Ring Merrill Morse. Ruggles Morse amassed a fortune as the proprietor of luxury hotels in New Orleans, Louisiana during the 1850s. Today, his summer retreat stands without parallel as a document of America's highest aspirations in architecture, interior design, and the decorative arts on the eve of the Civil War. A National Historic Landmark, Victoria Mansion has been open to the public as an historic house museum since 1941.

The building and its collections enjoy national significance on three main counts. It remains the best-preserved and least-altered building designed by New Haven, Connecticut architect Henry Austin, who worked extensively in the Italianate style. Victoria Mansion is the textbook example of Italian Villa architecture in the United States and is widely considered to be Austin's masterpiece. The building furthermore contains the earliest known and only fully intact commission by interior decorator Gustave Herter, who later went on to establish the storied Herter Brothers firm. The Mansion today retains over 90% of its 1860 contents, including furniture and interior architectural woodwork designed by Herter himself, as well as glass, ceramics, carpets, textiles, and lighting fixtures selected by Herter in consultation with the Morses. The building also contains a magnificent series of decoratively painted rooms that represent the last surviving commission of Italian-born artist Giuseppe Guidicini. Trained in architecture and ornamental painting at the prestigious *Accademia di belle arti di Bologna*, Guidicini emigrated to New York City in 1832. Working with a small troupe of fellow Italian artists, Guidicini helped set the standard for the decoration of opera houses and theaters in nineteenth-century America, disseminating a taste for Italianate fresco-style painting across the United States during the 1830s and 1840s. Of the more than 40 grand scale commissions Guidicini undertook before his death in 1868, buildings which included the Astor Place Opera House and Tripler Hall in New York City, Brewster Hall in New Haven, Connecticut, and Pike's Opera House in Cincinnati, Ohio, the nineteen rooms he decorated at Victoria Mansion represent the sum total of his surviving legacy apart from a single work on canvas and a frescoed altarpiece in New York City.

Victoria Mansion was conceived as a complex whole, with architect, interior decorator, and decorative painter working in collaboration to create a dynamic work of art reflective of the Morses' tastes and aspirations. As an almost fully intact document of 1860 high-style architecture and integrated design, Victoria Mansion has a "frozen in amber" quality that makes it an unusually evocative space for the visiting public to encounter our nation's past; but care of this artistic treasure takes careful planning and constant effort. The museum made great strides from the early 1970s through the early 2000s in solving major structural issues and sealing the building's weather envelope to protect the precious interiors within. A comprehensive historic structures report, completed by Ann Beha Associates in 1989, provided the organization with a prioritized roadmap for solving the building's major problems which remains relevant and in use to this day. With the completion of a full-scale restoration of the building's central tower in 2005, funded in part by a *Save America's Treasures* grant, the organization could finally direct significant attention and resources towards the conservation of interior spaces. Over the last 15 years, Victoria Mansion has assembled a skilled team of consulting

conservators to systematically stabilize and clean the painted decoration in the Mansion's principal rooms, focusing first on small spaces with active and disfiguring deterioration (Turkish Smoking Room, 2007-2008; Pompeian Bath, 2010-2012; Vestibule, 2013-2014) before moving on to larger and more complex projects in the grand public spaces of the first floor (Reception Room, 2016-2018; Parlor, 2018-2020). In each case, the results have been transformative.

Victoria Mansion's 2023-2026 Strategic Plan, now in the final stages of ratification, reaffirms the organization's commitment to conserving the building and its collections to the highest standards. A critical part of this work will be the continued conservation of the house's decoratively painted surfaces. The plan gives highest priority to the decorative finishes in the Stair Hall, an acknowledgement of their prominent location, high degree of soiling, and active deterioration in certain areas. Under the leadership of professional museum staff, a committed Board of Trustees and Collections Committee, and a dedicated group of professional advisors, Victoria Mansion aims to accomplish this goal through the preservation of original material wherever possible. The Maine Historic Preservation Commission administers the federal easements on Victoria Mansion and must approve in advance all work on the interior as well as the exterior. Our conservation projects are undertaken in accordance with the American Institute for Conservation (AIC) Code of Ethics and the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation. We also follow the New Orleans Charter for Joint Preservation of Historic Structures and Artifacts, ratified by both the Association for Preservation Technology and the AIC, because it helps us think of the preservation of this site holistically, where the parts are inextricable and have their greatest meaning when seen as an entity.

In the fall of 2020, the organization turned its attention to the central stair hall, a soaring, three-story atrium that rises past two overhanging balconies to a monumental stained-glass skylight 40 feet above the ground floor (Image 1.). From a design standpoint, the stair hall is one of the most ingeniously conceived spaces in the house, with carefully calculated lines of sight offering glimpses into the eclectically decorated rooms of the first and second floors. Designed to create a stirring first impression for visitors, the stair hall's grand scale and sophisticated décor was almost without parallel in the private residences of Antebellum America.

The painted decorations found on the walls and overhanging balcony ceilings of the stair hall are among the most significant in the house, in part because they provide us with an indirect glimpse of the grand theaters and opera houses decorated by Guidicini during the second quarter of the nineteenth century. No photographic images documenting those lost interiors survive, though a rare print in the Mansion's collections depicts the auditorium of Tripler Hall, decorated by Guidicini in 1850 (Image 2). The resonances between Guidicini's work in Tripler Hall and the Mansion's stair hall are striking, particularly the use of paneling rendered in a *trompe l'oeil* or "fool the eye" style to frame colorful figural canvases on the ceilings and walls. Tripler Hall burned in 1854, a fate unfortunately shared by many of Guidicini's commissions. Victoria Mansion's stair hall today serves as an exemplar of an entirely lost tradition of architectural decoration, helping us interpret the dim reflections of Guidicini's work found in period descriptions.

As the most public space in the house, the Stair Hall contains iconography that speaks directly to the ways in which the Morses hoped to present themselves to the world. Of particular note is a centrally placed lunette above the stair landing depicting Columbia (Image 3), a female personification of the United States. Presiding over a pair of stained-glass roundels bearing the state seals of Maine and Louisiana, it was long interpreted as an indication of the Morses' hopes on the eve of the Civil War that the Union would remain intact. Recent research into the Morses' life and political activities in New

Orleans has confirmed that the couple enslaved at least 27 individuals during the 1840s and 50s and revealed that Ruggles Morse actively engaged in secessionist politics in the weeks leading up to Louisiana's vote to sever ties with the Union in January of 1861. Such "inconvenient" details have upended simple narratives about the Morses' political leanings, enriched our public interpretation of the Mansion's North/South story, and reaffirmed the importance of the house's painted decorations as vessels of meaning inviting conversations about our nation's past with museum visitors.

In the fall of 2020, Victoria Mansion invited Gianfranco Pocobene, the Chief Paintings and Research Conservator at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum and principal of Gianfranco Pocobene Studio, Inc. to undertake a series of condition assessments and test cleanings on the first and second floors of the stair hall, the two levels open to the visiting public. He found major and disfiguring accretions of grime and soot, the latter a legacy of a coal-fired heating system which circulated coal dust throughout the building into the 1970s. This omnipresent gray veil both dulls and alters the colors in the painted canvases attached to the plaster walls and ceilings and washes out the light and dark contrasts which make the *trompe l'oeil* moldings and sculptural elements emerge convincingly from flat surfaces. Areas of the oil painted walls exhibited extensive flaking, particularly in the northwest and southeast corners, where past episodes of water infiltration saturated the plaster beneath. Mr. Pocobene further found a majority of the 17 paintings on canvas on the first and second stories, which depict such varied subjects as the cardinal virtues, female personifications of flowers, and idyllic vignettes of country life, to be in varying stages of detachment from their plaster substrate, an issue previously encountered and corrected elsewhere in the house.

An unanticipated discovery was that the first-floor walls had received a coat of natural resin varnish some years after their original decoration circa 1860. This was, on the balance, detrimental, as the varnish was carelessly applied with a full brush, causing unsightly sags and runs in many areas, and had yellowed significantly through the years, completely changing the complexion of Guidicini's work beneath. A small silver lining was that the varnish had created a barrier of separation between original paint and layers of surface grime. By contrast, the walls on the second-floor balcony level remained unvarnished and therefore unprotected.

The discovery of this divide between the first and second floors led us to approach their conservation as two distinct projects, each attuned to the specific needs of the finishes to be stabilized and cleaned. In the summer of 2021, Gianfranco Pocobene and his colleague Corrine Long undertook a pilot project aimed at gathering further information about the composition of the decorative finishes on the first floor and the techniques best suited to their stabilization and cleaning. Through careful experimentation, project conservators developed a custom mix of solvents capable of safely removing surface grime and dissolving and lifting away the non-original varnish without damaging original finishes. This work is now proceeding apace, with additional foundation and private support underwriting continued work across the first floor.

Conservation of the decoratively painted surfaces on the second-floor balcony level (Image 4), which is the subject of this proposal and which we hope to commence in the fall of 2023, will require a wholly different approach. Areas of soluble emulsion paints (pigments in a protein binder with the addition of a drying oil) are generally in a good state of preservation, with only minor areas of loss and abrasion. These will be cleaned with vinyl sponges, which mechanically lift away grime without dissolving the finishes beneath.

Certain areas of the walls, however, will pose unique challenges. Test cleanings undertaken by Mr. Pocobene and Ms. Long in the fall of 2020 showed that sections of the heavily trafficked second story

balcony, particularly expanses of wall within easy human reach, have a layer of oily residue mixed in with the ever-present soot, the result of touching hands as well as misguided attempts at cleaning during the early 20th century. Solvents successfully employed in the cleaning of oil-painted surfaces elsewhere in the Mansion required prolonged and repeated applications to cut through these oily residues, resulting in a problematic, if temporary, softening of the original painted surface (Image 5). Additional approaches to cleaning these areas will therefore be tested at the outset of the proposed project.

Museum visitors often comment on compromised grandeur of the stair hall and wonder when its turn will come for conservation treatment. Successful paint conservation efforts in the adjacent areas have only highlighted the soiling and peeling which disfigure the decoratively painted walls and ceilings of this most public space (Image 6). The sheer scale of the stair hall, along with the challenges inherent in scaffolding areas that serve as major arteries for the circulation of visitors, led the organization to delay major work until funding opportunities could be identified and plans could be made to balance needed work with public access. Upon completion of a two-year, full-room conservation effort in the Parlor, Victoria Mansion's Board of Trustees and Collections Committee decided to make this critically important work the organization's next priority.

2. Project Work Plan

The second floor of the stair hall encompasses just over 500 square feet of floor space, including a 60 square-foot stair landing five steps below the balcony level. A 6' x 28' opening at the center of the space creates a gallery with views to the first floor below and narrow balconies along the east and west walls providing access to second floor rooms. The space contains wood-grained dados anchoring walls adorned with *trompe l'oeil* paneling and a series of six colorful canvases depicting idyllic rural scenes. The walls terminate in a frieze delineated by cast plaster moldings and framing a series of painted lozenge motifs. Above, the underside of the third-story balconies project outwards, supported by elaborately carved wooden brackets and hung with pendant plaster ornaments. The overhead balcony ceiling also carries the painted lunette depicting *Columbia* and four gold leaf cartouches bearing the initials "RSM" for Ruggles Sylvester Morse, the house's original owner.

The second story of the stair hall is carpeted but unfurnished, making setup and protection of the space relatively straightforward. Robert Cariddi of R. Cariddi Fine Woodworking will install custom foam barriers to protect a stained-glass window and two cast plaster figural torchieres during conservation of adjacent surfaces. The project will begin with thorough photo-documentation of existing conditions of the walls and ceilings by Mr. Pocobene. This will include infrared reflectography, a technique capable of peering beneath painted surfaces to record any under-drawing that may be present.

In order to deal with stubborn, oily deposits on the lower walls, we have invited Chris Stavroudis, a nationally respected paintings conservator and conservation science expert, for an on-site consultation. Mr. Stavroudis has wide-ranging expertise in the use of aqueous and solvent-based gels in the gentle cleaning of decoratively painted finishes. Working with the team of Gianfranco Pocobene Studio, he will undertake a series of test cleanings in small windows adjacent to the stair landing. The goal is to tap into Mr. Stavroudis' knowledge to expand the range of options at the disposal of project conservators, improving outcomes in the careful cleaning of the second story stair hall and beyond. Indeed, Mr.

Stavroudis lectures and publishes widely, and our hope is to partner with him to share the results of this consultation beyond the confines of our own organization.

In past paint conservation projects at Victoria Mansion, rooms were completely scaffolded, and work proceeded from top to bottom, i.e., ceiling to floor. Given the layout of the stair hall and the flow of visitor traffic through this very public space, this arrangement will not be practical for the proposed project. Work will therefore proceed in stages, with conservators working from ceiling to floor in roughly seven-foot-wide sections dictated by the width of the scaffolding tower.

Conservation proper will begin with the consolidation and re-attachment of loose and flaking paint and gilding using Berger Ethylene Vinyl Acetate (BEVA), a stable, reversible adhesive with a more than 50-year track record in the field. Any loose or friable plaster encountered will be reattached to its supporting lath with appropriate adhesives.

The balcony ceilings above the second story of the stair hall as well as the cornice/frieze immediately below were decorated with soluble emulsion paints and will therefore be cleaned using latex sponges, a technique that has proved highly effective in six previous projects at the Mansion (Image 7). Relief brackets, which support the projecting ceilings, will be cleaned with soft brushes and vacuuming prior to the consolidation of flaking gold leaf, and with latex sponges thereafter. The oil finishes of the walls will then be cleaned using the gentlest effective means, to be determined in consultation with Mr. Stavroudis.

The six paintings on canvas attached to the plaster of the second story stair hall walls and the image of *Columbia* on the landing ceiling will be consolidated and cleaned in-situ. Failure of the bond between these canvases and their plaster substrate will be dealt with on a case-by-case basis (Image 8). In instances of minor separation around the margins, a conservation-grade wheat starch paste adhesive will be brushed behind the loose edges to effect re-attachment. In instances of near-complete separation, canvases will be gently loosened from the plaster substrate with thin spatulas and hand tension so that adhesives can be applied to the entire back surface.

Two figural plaster sculptures bearing wall sconces on either side of the stair landing will be cleaned using low concentration citrate solutions (Figure 9).

Once stabilized and cleaned, all decorative finishes will be treated with Paraloid B-72 resin, a reversible, conservation-grade varnish capable both of consolidating desiccated emulsion finishes and providing a barrier ensuring the reversibility of in-painting. With this barrier in place, the in-painting of minor losses and abrasions will commence with non-yellowing acrylic paints.

Mr. Pocobene will provide a detailed report describing pre-treatment conditions, the results of all tests conducted on the decorative finishes, and the materials and techniques used during consolidation, cleaning, protection, and in-painting. The report will further provide recommendations for the ongoing care and preservation of the treated finishes. Appendices will contain all pre and post treatment photography.

While all testing and hands-on conservation work will be undertaken by Mr. Pocobene, Ms. Long, and Mr. Stavroudis, project oversight and support will be provided by Project Director and Victoria Mansion Executive Director Timothy Brosnihan. Employed at Victoria Mansion since 2002, Mr.

Brosnihan has been intimately involved in numerous paint conservation and documentation projects. He will be joined by Siobhan Lindsay as Project Coordinator. A professional paint conservator with over 25 years of experience, Mrs. Lindsay worked on several projects at Victoria Mansion including conservation of the Turkish Smoking Room, Pompeian Bath, and Vestibule, before joining the Mansion staff as Consulting Conservator in 2015. Together, Mr. Brosnihan, Mrs. Lindsay, and Mr. Pocobene will form a critical triangle, conferring weekly to monitor progress against the proposed timeline and deal with the inevitable questions of approach which arise when unexpected challenges present themselves.

The project work plan and timeline has been carefully arranged to maximize opportunities for our visitors to witness conservation in action while providing for the safety of all persons involved. Unimpeded access to all public spaces on the second floor will be preserved during our open seasons of visitation. This is a delicate balancing act, but well worth the effort required. We have found over the last 15 years that visitors are fascinated to see firsthand the type of work that normally happens behind closed doors in conservation laboratories. Their engagement with the house's artwork and their appreciation of its overall state of preservation deepens as they observe the painstaking efforts required to care for it.

The stair hall poses unique challenges for public conservation work, but through careful planning and experimentation we have been able to carry out uninterrupted work on the first floor through our busy May – October 2022 regular season, during which time we welcomed over 23,000 visitors through the space. Appropriate scaffolding has been critical. In April of 2022 Victoria Mansion invested in a special set of rolling staging tall enough to provide access to overhanging balcony ceilings but narrow enough to fit into the stair hall's tightest spaces. This will be invaluable on the second floor. Those few areas that cannot be treated without impeding access to public spaces will be carried out during our January-March closed season.

This past spring the organization acquired ventilation equipment capable of conducting airborne solvents through portable ducts which can be directed to exhaust through windows and doors. While the use of potentially harmful solvents will be limited and timed for our closed hours, these ventilation upgrades will keep both our consulting conservators and staff safe throughout the project.

3. Project Results

A more than fifteen-year partnership between Gianfranco Pocobene Studio and Victoria Mansion has resulted in six successful full-room paint conservation efforts, preserving, and revealing the artistic genius of Giuseppe Guidicini, a man recalled in the 1880s as “the most celebrated Italian artist in the country” of the 1840s and 1850s (*Brooklyn Eagle*, June 10, 1888), but whose legacy has all but disappeared. This long track record of fruitful collaboration gives us every confidence of success in the conservation of Guidicini's work in the second story of the Stair Hall.

Over the last decade, Victoria Mansion has made significant infrastructure investments to improve interior air quality with the primary goal of insuring the long-term preservation of decorative finishes post-treatment. In 2016 we installed an air handling system which regulates both temperature and humidity in museum spaces, levelling out the seasonal fluctuations which strain both woodwork and paint. Better still, this system obviates the need to open windows during the hot summer months, removing a source of interior dust and grime. Additionally, Ultraviolet-blocking films have been installed

on exterior windows throughout the house to inhibit fading and degradation of the Mansion's furnishings and decorative finishes.

The principal beneficiaries of the conservation of the painted finishes in the stair hall will be the upwards of 30,000 annual visitors who come to Victoria Mansion to admire the house and its interiors as a complex and cohesive work of art and to contemplate the many meanings embedded in its interior decoration. Like the building as a whole, the second story Stair Hall is a carefully conceived expression of integrated design. But the many visual "rhymes" and harmonies found between its architectural ornamentation and painted decoration are muted by flaking finishes and 160 plus years of accumulated soot and grime. Professional conservation will not only preserve these important examples of mid-19th-century decorative art for future generations, but also make the original intent of architect, interior designer, and decorative painter more comprehensible in the present. And as more spaces within the Mansion receive conservation treatment, the loftier aim of Austin, Herter, and Guidicini's decorative program comes into focus, with harmonies not only within but between individual rooms beginning to resonate.

Our organization takes seriously its responsibilities as steward of one of the most remarkable series of Antebellum decorated interiors in the United States and prioritizes their preservation and care above all else. For our visitors, these spaces represent not only beautiful works of art, but also windows into our nation's past. The proposed work in the second story Stair Hall is the carefully considered next step in an overarching conservation program that aims to stabilize and clean decorative finishes throughout the house. We respectfully submit this request for \$148,042.59 in IMLS funding, half of the overall proposed cost of conservation treatments in the second story Stair Hall.

