NEWLY ACQUIRED JEWEL BOX AND “ELEGANT ENTERTAINING” AT MAYMONT MANSION

There’s always something new to see and discover at Maymont Mansion. A porcelain Sèvres-style jewel box is the most recent item to adorn the 1893 house museum, and coming in March, guests will find vintage photographs and luxury clothing on temporary display in a special “Elegant Entertaining” exhibition that brings to life the social whirl of Gilded Age Richmond.

The jewel box once belonged to Sallie Dooley, the lady of the house from 1893 to 1925, and was handed downed through her family before the Maymont Foundation acquired it at auction in November. It can now be seen on permanent exhibit in Mrs. Dooley’s Swan Bedroom. The piece has a bleu-celeste ground with colorful enamel decoration and is set in elaborate, Rococo-style ormolu mounts. The top is decorated with a large cartouche painted with a bucolic, Watteau-esque scene. This piece joins a number of Sèvres porcelain pieces as well as pieces in the style of the famous French porcelain maker in the core Maymont Mansion collection. The purchase of the jewel box was made possible through a special donation from the Rock Foundation to the Maymont Council – the fundraising group for Maymont’s historical preservation and restoration.

Mrs. Dooley may have kept any number of jewels in the box, perhaps her Tiffany & Co. 23.64 karat single diamond brooch or the black cameo surrounded by diamonds worn in her 1889 portrait. Whatever she kept there, they were surely pieces she would have worn during her own “elegant entertaining,” from social calls and teas to receptions and dinners.

From March 11 to June 22, Maymont Mansion explores the elaborate social occasions that were carefully planned, flawlessly presented and carried out by a host of well-trained servants in an era when entertaining was a fine art. The “Elegant Entertaining” exhibit illustrates a variety of events that took place in the Dooley’s home at Maymont. The Pink Drawing Room is ready for one of Mrs. Dooley’s “At Home” teas, and there, guests will see a vintage photograph of May Handy, a well-known Richmond society belle who assisted Mrs. Dooley in receiving guests at an 1892 tea. (Photo courtesy of The Valentine Richmond History Center.) The Dining Room table is set with gleaming silver and elaborate china for a November 1912 dinner during which the Dooleys hosted Governor and Mrs. William Hodges Mann. Musicians’ instruments and gilded chairs are staged on the second floor in preparation for a lavish reception. Throughout the mansion, lush floral arrangements decorate the mantels, large urns, fireplaces and staircase.

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On the second floor, the fashions for “Elegant Entertaining” take center stage. In the Swan Bedroom, guests can see Mrs. Dooley’s Irish crocheted gown, circa 1905, an example of what she may have worn during a tea or social call. Other gowns on display show fashionable choices for dinner attire in the early 20th century. A delicate salmon-colored silk evening dress and a black silk chiffon dress with metallic embellishments reflect the upper-class styles of the era. (Gowns on loan from The Valentine Richmond History Center and Shippensburg University collections.) Men’s evening fashions are exhibited in Major Dooley’s dressing room.

Described as “brilliant” by the local Richmond newspaper, Mrs. Dooley’s “At Homes,” receptions, dinners and teas were renowned for a crush of appreciative attendees, exclusive guests, elaborate decorations and receiving lines filled with the City’s elite. Whether experiencing the Richmond scene, the extravagances of Newport’s millionaire set or the fantasy world of “Downton Abbey,” the “Elegant Entertaining” exhibition draws back the curtain to allow a glimpse of an era of gracious living, conspicuous consumption, and scrupulous attention to the details of domestic service and etiquette.

Special Exhibition and Program Series

ELEGANT ENTERTAINING AT MAYMONT

Tuesdays-Sundays, March 11-June 22, Maymont Mansion

Guided tours available every half-hour beginning at 12pm; last tour begins at 4:30pm. $5 suggested admission. Related programs include a lecture, “The Great Houses of Gilded Age Newport,” presented by Dr. Laurie Ossman on March 11, family friendly tours and activities during “Visit the Victorians” on May 10, and a “Mother’s Day Tea” on May 10. For information, visit www.maymont.org or call 804-358-7166, ext. 329.

Maymont is a 100-acre American estate, an extraordinary gift given to the community by James and Sallie Dooley. Whether strolling in the gardens, touring the mansion or watching river otters play, there is something for everyone to enjoy. Maymont Mansion is located at the Hampton Street entrance at 1700 Hampton Street in Richmond, Virginia. For more information on the estate, call 804-358-7166, ext. 310 or visit www.maymont.org.