“Designed in the Most Elegant Manner, and Wrought in the Best Marbles”:

THE CARYATID CHIMNEY PIECE FROM CHESTERFIELD HOUSE

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In a letter to his confidant Solomon Dayrolles, dated August 16, 1748 from London, the fourth Earl of Chesterfield wrote: “I am returned to a very empty town, which I can bear very well; for if I have not all the company that I could like, I am at least secure from any company that I do not like; which is not the case of any one place in England but London. Besides I have time to read and think; the first I like; the latter I am not, as too many are, afraid of. The rest of the day is employed in riding, and fitting up my house; which, I assure you, takes a good deal of time, now that we are come to the minute parts of finishing and furnishing.” The “minute parts” must have been more considerable than Lord Chesterfield imagined, for the winter had nearly passed before he moved into his new house (the first letter from “Hôtel Chesterfield” is dated March 13, 1749), and more than a year elapsed before he wrote to the Bishop of Waterford in December 1749: “I have not yet been able to get the workmen out of my house in town, and shall have the pleasure of their company some months longer.”

These observations of the letter-writing Earl serve to date the architectural fabric of Chesterfield House, London, which must have been standing in the late summer of 1748 when the first letter was written. Its insipid Palladian façade, the work of the architect Isaac Ware (Figure 3), was redeemed by an advantageous building site, which at that time dominated the terrain around it and made the house a cardinal feature of the landscape. Chesterfield House was situated on the corner of South Audley Street and Curzon Street in the sparsely inhabited quarter of London known as May Fair. The main block of its west front, flanked by colonnades and pavilions, rose above a walled forecourt and was clearly visible from Hyde Park, since the land to the west and north had not yet been built upon, while the back or east elevation jutted above the walls of an extensive garden laid out along Curzon Street behind the house.

Apart from its situation, the particular interest of Chesterfield House resided not in its exterior, but in the mixture of styles devised by Lord Chesterfield and his architect for the decoration of the inside. The delay in completing the house can perhaps be ascribed to a difference of opinion between patron and architect over the proper means of garnishing the interior, “the minute parts of finishing and furnishing” alluded to in the Earl’s letter. From his experience of foreign courts Lord Chesterfield had acquired a partiality for French society, letters, and cooking, which he extended to the rococo style, the latest French trend in room decoration. France and England had been brought into conflict during the War of the Austrian Succession (1740-1748), and Chesterfield was almost alone in insisting on the application of fully developed and unpatriotically French rococo forms to his interiors in town. His lead was followed by only one other great patron of the time, the Duke of Norfolk, who fitted up Norfolk House, London, with several rococo rooms.

Lord Chesterfield’s architect, Isaac Ware, on the other hand, was a confirmed Palladian, who believed in the application, to every part of a
building, of the balanced style derived from Italian high Renaissance and mannerist architecture and named after the Italian architect Andrea Palladio (1508-1580). Ware's book *A Complete Body of Architecture*, published in London in 1758, contains much Palladian cant and also a good deal of practical information about one of his most important commissions: the design and construction of Chesterfield House. In his text he treated this house as an object lesson (without specifically naming it or its owner), and allowed himself several stringent criticisms of his patron's French-directed tastes at a moment when his association with Lord Chesterfield in architectural schemes had ceased. The opposition of their points of view is epitomized by Ware's discussion of the ceiling for the Great Drawing Room: "Let us suppose him [the architect] engaged with some person of fortune and taste in building, and decorating a house of the most magnificent kind. One room must have the highest finishing, because one will be intended for superior elegance: this will be large from the nature of the edifice, and on this every decoration is to be bestowed, in the most profuse manner. The proprietor is to direct the nature of the operation, though the architect is to form the figures: we have expressed ... the two characters in which it may be executed, the noble or the fanciful: the former great and grave, the latter elegant and airy. We should always prefer the former, and advise the architect never to fail enlarging on its superior excellence; but still the choice is to be left to the owner. ... We suppose the proprietor dislikes the former kind; he thinks it too heavy; or he has corrupted his taste in France so far as to dislike the Grecian science. He desires to have a ceiling as rich as that proposed to him, but more airy; and he will have some of the French crooked figures introduced into it. In this case let the architect weigh every thing with care, and very attentively consider the whole, before he reduces any thing to paper." In this passage the epithets "noble ... great and grave" and "Grecian" apply to the Palladian solution, while "fanciful ... elegant and airy" and "French crooked figures" designate the rococo elements of the design, and the proprietor who has "corrupted his taste in France" is patently Lord Chesterfield. The Palladian solution won the day, and the ceiling executed for the Great Drawing Room followed the design reproduced in Ware's book, with only a few "French crooked figures."

If work on the interior schemes consumed much time and the furnishing of the house took longer than expected, it is still reasonable to suppose that these decorations were well under way early in 1750. The great housewarming party, however, was not held until February 1752, when the house was thrown open to view. Anticipation must have been high among the guests, who had only known Chesterfield House as an architectural landmark standing since 1748, and it seems likely that their hopes were not disappointed by the spectacle of its lavish rooms, hallways, and staircases. Even Horace Walpole, whose senses had been surfeited by too many routs, appreciated the "immense assembly at my Lord Chesterfield's, made to show the house, which is really most magnificent. . . ."

The Great Drawing Room, a room intended for company, which measured forty-two by twenty-
four feet and occupied the northern extension of the east or garden front of the house (designated on the plan, Figure 4, by the letter H), was thronged on this occasion. Ware had planned the room with great thoroughness. In an early chapter of his book he explained its purpose: "Our forefathers were pleased with seeing their friends as they chanced to come, and with entertaining them when they were there. The present custom is to see them all at once, and entertain none of them; this brings the necessity of a great room, which is opened only on such occasions, and which loads and generally discredits the rest of the edifice." In these measured periods Ware seems to be taking side in the age-old argument over the merits of mammoth stand-up parties versus small sit-downs, but his main interest was in fact directed at the problem of fitting an enormous reception room into a well-balanced Palladian house plan. Lord Chesterfield must have requested a room for such conspicuous entertaining, and Ware recounted the manner in which he solved the problem and obliged his patron in the section of his book devoted to the plans and elevations of "a town-house of the greatest elegance." His was a simple solution: two large rooms were provided (Figure 4, G and H), so that the unwieldy mass of the Great Drawing Room, placed in the northwest extension of the house, was balanced on the south by an equally large room, the Library. This straightforward device so pleased the architect that he burst into rhapsodic print: "Every one knows that in the large and essential parts of this kind in a structure, there should always be two, that one may answer another. . . . Thus, in the present instance these additions are two; they are alike, and they answer to one another. Instead of the common appearance of a large room added to the fabric, which is always that of a wart, deforming the whole, or of a wen, threatening to pull it down, these appear of a piece with the rest; no excrescences or unseemly parts, but a regular addition to a regular building." Having placed these two rooms on the garden front, Ware took precautions that their roofs did not project above the colonnades to break the regular outline of the main façade, which he smugly conceded to be "perfect without addition."

The fourth Earl's foible for rococo flourishes was much in evidence in the dining room, ante-room, and waiting room on the first floor and in the music room and other rooms on the second floor. Against Ware's best advice the walls and ceilings of these rooms (Figure 7) were "stragled over with arched lines, and twisted curves, with C's and C's, and tangled semicircles," but hardly a trace of this French extremism penetrated the two large and solemn rooms on the first floor. At Lord Chesterfield's behest the frieze of the Library was inscribed with a fragmentary couplet from Horace's Satires: NUNC VETERUM LIBRIS, NUNC SOMNO, ET INERTIBUS HORIS, DUCERE SOLlicitae JUCUNDA OBLIVIA VITAE ("... with old books and sleep and leisure, to mitigate the trials of an anxious life in happy oblivion"), while the decoration carried out in both rooms was clearly of Palladian inspiration.

This inspiration extended to Ware's design for the massive, white marble chimney piece (Figure 6), now in the Metropolitan Museum, that stood against the east wall of the Great Drawing Room. Lord Chesterfield must have seen and approved this design (Figure 5), which incorporates a caryatid order of standing draped women supporting the mantel. Italian Renaissance sculptors had established the precedent of using the human figure for this structural purpose on chimney pieces: in the 1460s nude statues of Hercules and

4. Plan of the first floor of Chesterfield House. Plate 60 in Ware’s book
Iole were carved on the jambs of a marble chimney piece in the Sala della Jole at the Palazzo Ducale, Urbino, and a century later the Venetian sculptor and architect Jacopo Sansovino carved a pair of standing draped women as supports for the shelf of a marble chimney piece in the Villa Garzoni, near Padua. This device, which had been current for a hundred and fifty years, was not mentioned in architectural treatises until the appearance in 1615 of a book entitled *L’Idea della architettura universale* by a pupil of Palladio’s, Vincenzo Scamozzi. This architect prefaced his chapter on chimney pieces with a few general remarks: “It is well known that men cannot lead orderly and comfortable lives without the warmth provided by fire, and for this reason fireplaces have come into common use, chiefly in temperate countries like Italy and France. It is therefore proper that fireplaces and chimney pieces should be the theme of this chapter since there are no traces of them in ancient buildings, and modern architects have written most sparingly on the subject.” Scamozzi went on to add that these chimney pieces could be decorated with “statues, terms, columns, and similar devices.” He illustrated his thesis with an engraving of an elaborate chimney piece supported by male nudes (Figure 9), which closely resembles the chimney piece, executed in the 1570s, that he designed for the Sala dell’ Anti-Collegio in the Palazzo Ducale, Venice. According to the author such chimney pieces were suited only to the residences of “princes and important personages,” and were not for the lesser ranks.

In his long chapter devoted to the subject, Isaac Ware brought Scamozzi’s ideas on chimney pieces up to date. He entered into the problem of their design and decoration, and discussed the caryatid order, which was evidently a favorite of his for he remarked that “nothing that can be used . . . is more delicate” than “the Persian and Cariatick order in the decoration of chimney pieces.” Ware explained the terms “Persian” and “Cariatick” (designating, respectively, male and female supporting figures) in the section of his book dealing with types of architectural orders. According to his explanation, the caryatid order consisted of “female figures . . . used to sup-
port an entablature. . . . Caryatids are women dressed in long robes, and, in every respect, in the Asiatic manner; this corresponds with the origin of the device, which was this: The Carians had long been at war with the Athenians, but at length were thoroughly vanquished. The Greeks took their city, and led away their wives captives; this was a very signal victory as it put an end at once to a very troublesome war: and to perpetuate the event, trophies were erected, in which women dressed in the Carian habit were represented supporting the entablature, as the Persians; and serving in the same manner in the place of columns. . . . We use Caryatids sometimes now, but the idea of slavery in women is so improper, at least in our civilised times, that the hands are not ty’d before them, as they were in the old Greek Caryatic, nor do they resemble slaves in any manner. We use them as emblems of the virtues, and they have an air of great delicacy.”

This version of the origin of the caryatid order, which was current at the time when Ware wrote it, was in fact derived from a passage in Vitruvius, whose theories on the subject have since been disproved.

Though he drew on Vitruvius in describing the caryatid order, Ware based his discussion of the design and construction of chimney pieces on personal experience. He illustrated his design for Lord Chesterfield’s caryatid chimney piece and prefaced his account of it with a warning to budding architects: “Let the architect who proposes a chimney of this kind to his proprietor, or who receives the proposal from him, first represent to him the expence. This is a very needful article at first setting out, for if it be omitted, he must expect, either that the owner will be startled at the charge, or that the work will disgrace

him.” These remarks may contain a veiled allusion to a difference over price, another cause of dissension between the architect and his patron. Lord Chesterfield's complaints, expressed in his letters, about the high costs of building Chesterfield House were countered by Ware's argument that fine workmanship depended upon the patron's liberality: "The figures in such a chimney are near the eye, so that every defect will be seen as well as every beauty; and they are of the nature of those other elegancies in the art which had much better be omitted entirely, than done in a slight manner... but the needful expence is, that the chimney-piece be of sufficient extent and bigness, that the materials be good, and that a full price be allowed the sculptor. He must finish his work according to the price, and there is none too great that is within the bounds of reason; for there is no occasion on which his art ought to be displayed so perfectly.”

After these pronouncements Ware embarked on a set of directions for carving the caryatid figures, with obvious reference to those on Lord Chesterfield's chimney piece. The directions become very circumstantial on the subject of the figures' arms and legs. Ware began with a plea for slender proportions: "No great weight is to be supported; and consequently, no robust limbs are necessary to the purpose," he wrote, and added an injunction against allowing these limbs to project needlessly: "When figures are raised to a height which places them out of the way of accidents, their limbs may be disposed with a freedom which cannot be admitted, where they are in reach of blows: nothing can be more in the way of these than a figure which makes part of the ornament of a chimney, because the persons who sit near the fire, will lean or rub against it; and the continual business of servants in managing the fewel [fuel] will carry them also for ever into the way of touching it.” The architect then discussed the most suitable and rational disposition of these limbs: “The first thought would be to throw both arms close to the body: but that would be at once ungraceful and improper. It is natural that a person loaded upon the head, although but lightly, should raise one hand to support the weight... The proper posture of a caryatid figure at a chimney is, to have one hand close to the body; and the other raised to assist in the imagined support of the mantle-piece.” Ware then described arrangements for the hands and fingers that depended closely on the attitudes of the figures now at the Museum (Figure 6): “The hands must be delicate, to correspond with the general figure, and they will require the best touches of the sculptor's chissel, because every eye will naturally be thrown upon them. The fingers must be small to answer to this general design; and those of the lower hand will be exposed naturally to blows and injuries; while those of the upper will not be altogether exempt. The design of the architect is to shew his judgment in securing them gracefully; as the sculptor does in forming them. The hand that is carried up to support the entablature may very properly be placed upon the freeze; and in this case, the projection of the cornice will give it a great security... the cornice would not be its only defense; for the fingers might be united to the body of the freeze, and thus would have a strength that they never can when loose. This hand being so securely disposed, let the student consider what can be done to preserve the other; it is more in danger because it hangs lowest, but there is an easy way to defend it. Nothing can be so natural an em-

7. Ceiling of the music room of Chesterfield House. Plates 81-82 in Ware's book

9. Chimney piece and overmantel. Plate on page 167 of Part II of L'Idea della architettura universale (Venice, 1615) by Vincenzo Scamozzi. Dick Fund, 42.60.2

ployment for this hand, as holding up a part of
the robe; and this may be its security. There will
naturally be a fold and a rising in the part held
up, and these may be wrought tho' with the ut-
most delicacy, yet with great substance. In the
hollow under the rising may be placed the hand,
in which the most delicate touches of the chis-
el may be shewn, while it is thus preserved in the
greatest security."

Having described the attitudes of the caryatid
figures, Ware went on to define their dress. His
argument in this passage seems to be based on
prudish dictates of the time, for he began by
censoring any display of caryatid nudity: "Mod-
er sculptors are fond of nudities; but in a chim-
ney-piece they would be abominable: they would
shock the delicacy of our sex, and could not be
seen by the modesty of the other . . . None can
dispute, but that the more perfectly cloathed fig-
ure is the more elegant, as well as the more mod-
est. . . . Let the drapery be executed well, and
the limbs will be seen through it: there will be
at once elegance and decency." The parallel be-
tween these pious remarks and the figures at the
Museum is again undeniably close, for the lower
parts of these figures are heavily swathed in dra-
pery through which the outline of a knee may
be seen. This drapery is drawn skin tight, how-
ever, over their bosoms, and a breast of one of
the figures has been left bare, possibly at the
insistence of Lord Chesterfield and in spite of
Ware's protestations.

It is to be regretted that Ware, having entered
into great detail about the carving, never men-
tioned the name of the man responsible for it.
His only allusion to the craftsmen who worked
on Chesterfield House is maddeningly vague,
couched in his high-flown prose: "The rooms
upon the principal floor and that above it, have
all expensive and rich ceilings and chimney-
pieces, designed in the most elegant manner, and
wrought in the best marbles; and all by the first
artists in their several professions." Whatever his
name, the "first artist" who carved the chimney
piece took considerable liberties with Ware's de-
sign. He introduced a delicately chiseled wave
pattern along the top and sides of the fireplace
and replaced the etiolated garlands and mortu-
ary urn that Ware designed for the frieze with
robust swags and a basket filled with fruit and
flowers (Figure 13). Though he may have drawn
on his own experience when he improvised these
happy effects, the same sculptor scrupulously fol-
lowed Ware's design in the carving of the three
recessive moldings on the cornice.

The finished chimney piece must have fulfilled
Ware's claims and satisfied his employer, and it
stood in the Great Drawing Room until 1869,
when the first of a series of changes befell it and
the house for which it was made. In that year the
heirs of the sixth Earl of Chesterfield sold Ches-
terfield House to Charles Magniac, who consoli-
dated the house by tearing down the pavilions
and reorienting the colonnades (compare Fig-
ures 3 and 14), and who rented the ground on
which they had originally stood, as well as the
gardens behind the house, for development. Be-
fore the sale, a few of the contents of the house
were transferred to Breby, the country seat of
the Earls of Chesterfield in Derbyshire, inherited
by Evelyn Stanhope, the seventh Earl's sister
and heiress, who had married Henry Molyneux,
fourth Earl of Carnarvon. Among the contents
of the house that were consigned to Breby was
the caryatid chimney piece, which was uprooted
from the Great Drawing Room and began the
first leg of the journey that was to take it to the
Metropolitan Museum. The space vacated in the
Great Drawing Room was not allowed to remain
empty, however, for shortly thereafter an exact
replica of the chimney piece was carved for the
room by the nineteenth century sculptor Sir
Joseph Edgar Boehm. This replica is illustrated
in photographs of the room taken before Chester-
field House was demolished in 1934 to make way
for an eight-story apartment building, called
"Chesterfield House Flats," which can be seen
on the site today. It has not been determined
whether Boehm's replica escaped the almost com-
plete destruction that engulfed Lord Chester-
field's and Isaac Ware's splendid creation at this
time. Meanwhile the original caryatid chimney
piece was again on the move. In 1923 the Earl
of Carnarvon sold the house at Breby, which
was subsequently converted into a hospital, and
the chimney piece, together with other furnish-
ings of the house, came onto the market and was

11. Detail of the caryatid chimney piece from Chester-
field House
bought by William Randolph Hearst. It was given to the Museum in 1956 by The Hearst Foundation, Inc., and is now on exhibition in English Furniture Gallery Sixteen, where its handsome carved figures add a resonant note to collections that are sadly wanting in other major examples of English eighteenth century sculpture.

The fourth Earl of Chesterfield, who had reputedly spent twenty-five thousand pounds of his wife’s fortune on the building of Chesterfield House, lived twenty-four years to enjoy it. In his late forties when the idea for a splendid town house occurred to him, he was on the verge of retirement from affairs of state and envisaged a congenial and leisurely social life that would pivot on this mansion. “The pleasant company of friends is one of the delights which is only available to me in great cities,” he wrote on July 31, 1747 to Mme de Monconseil in Paris, “and for the sake of this company I am ruining myself in building a beautiful house here, which will be finished in the French manner, with an abundance of carving and gilding.” Such hopes were destined for disappointment. Six weeks after his housewarming party, he recognized symptoms of deafness. As these symptoms became more pronounced, he felt debared from the company of friends and renounced the life of receptions and social intercourse that he had planned to substitute for politics. Therefore the Great Drawing Room, which had been designed for company, can never have served its purpose, and it was Ware’s other “great room,” the Library, that became the resort of Lord Chesterfield’s declining years. “I read with more pleasure than ever,” he wrote to the Bishop of Waterford in 1757, “perhaps, because it is the only pleasure I have left. For, since I am struck out of living company by my deafness, I have recourse to the dead, whom alone I can hear; and I have assigned them their stated hours of audience. Solid folios are the people of business, with whom I converse in the morning. Quartos are the easier mixed company, with whom I sit after dinner; and I pass my evenings in the light, and frivolous, chit-chat of small octavos and duodecimos. This, upon the whole, hinders me from wishing for death, while other considerations hinder me from fearing it.”
13. Detail of the caryatid chimney piece from Chesterfield House

14. West front of Chesterfield House about 1922. Photograph: Country Life