

# The Material World of John Drayton



## *International Connections to Wealth, Intellect, and Taste*

BY CARTER C. HUDGINS

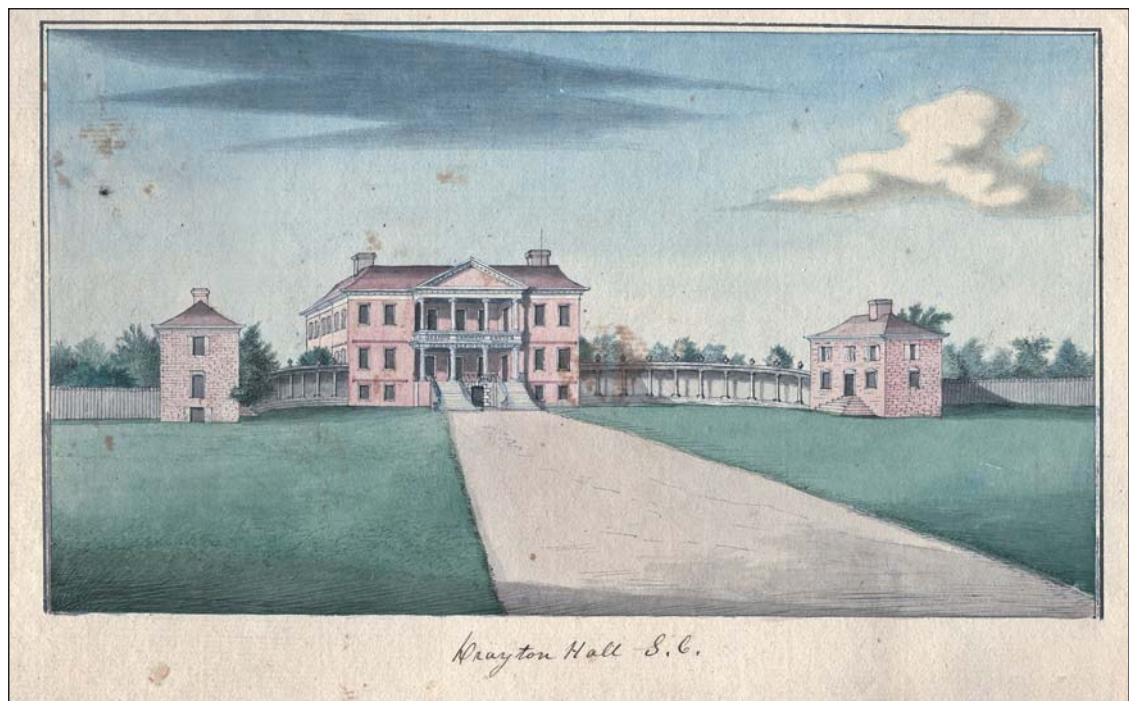
In the decades leading up to the American Revolution, Charleston, South Carolina, grew to become the wealthiest North American city in the British Empire. Conceived as the capital of the Carolina colony, the city was largely fueled by the wealth of its surrounding plantations, where enslaved Africans, African Americans, and Native Americans raised livestock for Caribbean markets and cultivated rice and indigo for European and North American exchange. Such agricultural endeavors, coupled with the trading practices of the city's merchants, resulted in levels of wealth and consumption unprecedented in the American colonies. More than two centuries later, surviving examples of Charleston's material culture are tangible reminders of the city's prosperity and its intimate connections to the eighteenth-century Atlantic World that fostered its economic and cultural development.

Drayton Hall is one of the region's greatest treasures (Fig. 1). Constructed between 1738 and 1742 as the home seat of John Drayton (1715–1779), the house and its flanker buildings are North America's earliest example of fully executed Palladian architecture. Equally significant are surviving decorative arts, archival materials, landscape features, and archaeological artifacts that complement the site's architecture. Together they illustrate Drayton's financial strength, sophisticated taste for developing British style, and his active participation in the intellectual pursuits popular among eighteenth-century elite British society.

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Fig. 1: Drayton Hall, Charleston, S.C., 1738–1742, built by John Drayton (1715–1779). Principal facade, 2010. Photography by Charlotte Caldwell.

Fig. 3: Pierre Eugene Du Simitiere (ca. 1736–1784), *Drayton Hall S. C.* Dated “1765” on reverse. Watercolor, pencil, and ink on laid paper, 8¾ x 12½ inches. Private collection.



## JOHN DRAYTON THE ARCHITECT

Born the youngest of three sons to Thomas and Anne Drayton at the family’s Magnolia Plantation in 1715, very little is known about John Drayton’s upbringing. In 1738, the twenty-three-year-old Drayton entered the public record through his purchase of a 350-acre tract of land located next to his birthplace on the Ashley River. Here, Drayton constructed Drayton Hall, a masterpiece of colonial architecture that was influenced by the classical design principles originally published by the Italian Renaissance architect Andrea Palladio (1508–1580) in *I Quattro Libri Dell’Architettura* (1570). The architect of Drayton Hall remains a mystery. The recent discovery, however, of a list of early eighteenth-century pattern books present within Drayton Hall’s eighteenth-century library—works by Colen Campbell, William Salmon, Isaac Ware, James Gibbs, Batty Langley, and William Halfpenny—suggests that John Drayton played a central role in the building’s creation.<sup>1</sup> Current research is beginning to expose how such pattern books were not only used, but were in fact adapted to create the first fully executed Palladian structure in colonial America. Accordingly, John Drayton is reemerging as one of North America’s earliest exponents of Anglo-Palladianism (Fig. 2).

Shedding further light on John Drayton and the eighteenth-century appearance of his home seat is a newly discovered watercolor by the Swiss-born artist and naturalist Pierre Eugene Du Simitiere (1736–1784) (Fig. 3). Executed during a visit to Charleston in 1765, the work captures the Palladian five-part plan of Drayton Hall, complete with flanker buildings to the north and south and ornamental colonnade walls connecting the three buildings. Today, the colonnades no longer stand, perhaps due to the damage inflicted by Hessian soldiers who camped onsite during the American Revolution, and the flanker buildings were destroyed by a major earthquake and a hurricane in the last decade of the nineteenth century. Du Simitiere’s watercolor also documents the now missing Doric entablature above the first floor of Drayton Hall’s

Drayton Hall, circa 1738, located about twelve miles up the Ashley River from Charleston, remained in the Drayton family for seven generations until it was acquired by the National Trust for



Frances Edmonds, then president of Historic Charleston Foundation, with Vice President and Mrs. Gerald Ford and Senator Ernest Hollings at Drayton Hall during the Foundation’s campaign with the National Trust to acquire the property. Courtesy, Historic Charleston Foundation.

Historic Preservation and the State of South Carolina in 1974, thanks to the vision of the Drayton family and a campaign led by the Historic Charleston Foundation. The Trust took a radical approach for the time, which was to “preserve,” or stabilize, the site, instead of restoring it to a specific time period. As a result, visitors to Drayton Hall have an opportunity to experience a centuries-old timeline of change and continuity in the American South. The Trust did not acquire original furnishings, and so, initially, exhibited the house unfurnished, highlighting its architecture and authenticity. Over the years, Drayton Hall has acquired a remarkable collection of objects original to the site, and planning is underway for funding initiatives to secure their future and display them in a museum and interpretive center that will contain exhibit space and educational areas.

— George W. McDaniel, Executive Director, Drayton Hall



two-story portico. The first of its kind in colonial America, Drayton Hall's projecting and recessed portico has long been regarded as one of the building's most Palladian details. The original entablature—shown in the watercolor with triglyphs, metopes, and paterae—makes further connections to the Anglo-Palladian movement. Not only can comparable entablatures be found in such pattern books as James Gibbs' *Rules for Drawing the Several Parts of Architecture* (1732), but the overall arrangement of Drayton Hall's portico and entablature is similar to the garden front of Palladio's own Villa Pisani (1552–1555).

### JOHN DRAYTON THE NATURALIST

John Drayton was also active in the transatlantic intellectual community as a collector and supporter of works in natural history, as evidenced by his collection of forty-eight ornithological watercolors painted by George Edwards (1694–1773), the father of British ornithology (Figs. 4–7). Rediscovered in 1969, these rare watercolors were originally part of a portfolio complete with a frontispiece marked with the name of John Drayton and the date 1733. Today, twenty-one of these watercolors survive as part of Drayton Hall's collections.

These watercolors were completed ten years before the publication of the first volume of Edwards' *A Natural History of Uncommon Birds* (1743) and are the oldest of their type to survive in North America. Indeed, one of the only comparable assemblages exists as part of Sir Hans Sloane's collection in the British Library. Essential to the production of Edwards' published works was monetary support gained through subscriptions to each of his volumes. As indicated at the beginning of each volume, such prominent aristocrats, political officials, and intellectuals as Carl Linnaeus, Lord Burlington, Hans Sloane, and Mark Catesby made contributions to Edwards. Significantly, John Drayton was the only North American subscriber to Edwards' first volume of *A Natural History of Uncommon Birds* (1743). Seventeen years later, Drayton

**Fig. 2:** The withdrawing room, Drayton Hall, Charleston, S.C., 1738–1742. Photography by Charlotte Caldwell.



subscribed to Edwards' *Gleanings of Natural History* as did two additional Americans: botanist William Bartram and Benjamin Franklin of Philadelphia. Given their early date of acquisition, the Drayton collection of watercolors may have been a gift from Edwards in return for continued financial support. Such an association extends beyond a reflection of Drayton's wealth to his keen awareness of British scientific efforts to classify and profit from wildlife identified within the expanding British Empire, further placing him within an elite network of eighteenth-century intellectuals.

**WATERCOLOR GROUPING,  
CLOCKWISE FROM UPPER LEFT:**

**Fig. 4:** George Edwards (1694–1773), drawing of a Carolina parrot, ca. 1733. Inscribed upper left: 9. Watercolor and ink on laid paper, 10½ x 8¾ inches. Courtesy, Drayton Hall, a historic site of the National Trust for Historic Preservation.

**Fig. 5:** George Edwards (1694–1773), drawing of a little owl, ca. 1733. Inscribed upper left: 8. Watercolor and ink on laid paper, 10½ x 8¾ inches. Courtesy, Drayton Hall, a historic site of the National Trust for Historic Preservation.

**Fig. 6:** George Edwards (1694–1773), drawing of a red-winged blackbird, ca. 1733. Watercolor and ink on laid paper, 10½ x 8¾ inches. Courtesy, Drayton Hall, a historic site of the National Trust for Historic Preservation.

**Fig. 7:** George Edwards (1694–1773), drawing of a Chinese pheasant. Inscribed upper left: 18; lower left: *S* and *pheasant*. Watercolor and ink on laid paper, 11 x 8⅞ inches. Courtesy, Drayton Hall, a historic site of the National Trust for Historic Preservation.

George Edwards was born in Stratford, Essex, to a middle-class family. Following his early schooling and a seven-year apprenticeship in business, Edwards left England for mainland Europe, where he traveled extensively and became an expert in drawing natural history specimens. Such works were highly desired by wealthy collectors, such as Sir Hans Sloane, the President of the Royal Society and the Royal College of Physicians. Sloane quickly became Edwards' most significant patron and appointed him as the Bedell of the College of Physicians in 1733. While holding this position, Edwards furthered his studies in natural history and produced etchings of his work (Fig. 9). His first publication, entitled *A Natural History of Uncommon Birds*, was printed in four volumes between 1743 and 1751, and the three volumes of his subsequent work, *Gleanings of Natural History*, were published in 1758, 1760, and 1764. In total, Edwards produced seven volumes containing 362 etchings and detailed descriptions detailing recently identified natural specimens collected from the British Empire.

**Fig. 8:** George Edwards (1694–1773), *The Black and White Chinese Cock Pheasant, with its Hen*, plate 66, from *A Natural History of Birds, Most of Which Have Not Been Figured or Described... Part II*, 7 vols. (Royal College of Physicians, 1747).



## JOHN DRAYTON THE COLLECTOR

To its eighteenth-century visitors, Drayton Hall was an architectural marvel representing the owner's wealth, status, and connections to contemporary English design. A South Carolina newspaper advertisement from 1758 described Drayton's home seat as a "palace," and following his travels through New York, Philadelphia, New Jersey, Baltimore, Washington, and Virginia, British traveler John Davis noted that Drayton Hall was "the largest house and gardens in the United States of America."<sup>2</sup> However, in addition to his powerful architectural statement, John Drayton broadcast his prosperity and refinement through a variety of other physical mediums. Surviving furniture, metal objects, ceramics, and glassware exhibit the lengths that Drayton went to furnish his house with imported objects that befitted the lifestyle of one of colonial America's most significant merchant planters and, just as important, were in keeping with the latest fashions in British society.

Less than a dozen examples of eighteenth-century furniture remain within Drayton Hall's collection as the bulk of this material

was destroyed during the American Revolution, exchanged with family members following his death, or suffered indeterminate fates. The surviving furniture indicates that Drayton directed an extraordinary level of attention to commissioning the most current furnishings for his residence. Elaborate marble-topped tables (Fig. 9) fabricated from mahogany were imported from Europe along with a settee and at least ten matching side chairs. A rare bureau bookcase (Fig. 10), complete with tortoiseshell and mahogany inlay and gilt mounts may have been obtained from the mid-eighteenth century workshop of London furniture producer John Channon.

Portable examples of Drayton's interior design included pyramids of glass salvers as well as an extensive collection of Chinese export porcelain. Of particular note is a set of surviving porcelain plates decorated in the famille rose pattern, using overglaze polychrome floral designs and gilding, such as were produced during the Qianlong period of the Qing dynasty, in the middle of the eighteenth century (Fig. 11). The set descended in the Drayton family until its recent donation to Drayton Hall. Complementary examples of porcelain include a three-piece garniture set

adorned with underglazed, overglazed, and gilded decoration, and a host of porcelain vessels recovered during archaeological campaigns, which were severely impacted by their many years below ground, but nevertheless demonstrate the breadth of Drayton's collection and the many showpieces with which he surrounded himself. Tea bowls decorated with cranes and mosquitoes (Fig. 12), for instance, have been excavated alongside matching saucers and waste bowls. The conservation and analysis of additional garniture sets, tea services, and a host of other showpieces are furthering the understanding of how Drayton displayed his exquisite taste.

## JOHN DRAYTON AND HIS PLANTATION LANDSCAPE

The material world of John Drayton extended to the surrounding ornamental gardens and the extensive plantation landscape where enslaved peoples provided the means to luxury and conspicuous consumption. Ongoing research of Drayton Hall's landscape is only beginning to identify how the architecture and grounds of John Drayton's home seat were conceived as a single design, exhibiting Drayton's desire to connect the built environment to its natural



**Fig. 9:** Marble slab table, English or Irish, mid-eighteenth century. Mahogany. 55¼ x 30 x 31¼ in. Donation of Charles H. Drayton. Courtesy, Drayton Hall, a historic site of the National Trust for Historic Preservation. Currently stored at the Heyward Washington house in Charleston, South Carolina. Photography by Carter C. Hudgins. One of three related tables in Drayton Hall's collection.

This example and two others in Drayton Hall's collection consist of a rectangular mahogany frame with four-leaf and rocaille carved cabriole legs containing foliate elements in combination with C-scrolls terminating in hairy paw feet exhibiting four toes each with one joint and a claw terminus; fetlock at foot rear. All three tables have associated gray, brown, and white marble slab tops above an apron consisting of Greek key fretwork and a lower apron that is both pierced and ornately carved.



**Fig. 10:** Bureau bookcase, John Channon, London, England, mid-eighteenth century. 39 x 22 x 96 in. Original brasses and escutcheons. Donation of Charles H. Drayton. Courtesy, Drayton Hall, a historic site of the National Trust for Historic Preservation. Currently housed within the collections of the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, Williamsburg, Virginia. Photography courtesy George Williams.

Constructed in two parts, the upper section of this rare example is topped with a broken pediment with a flush-mounted plinth in the center. The tympanum and frieze display a series of moldings composed of egg-and-dart, dentil, foliate, and Greek key motifs. The pediment surmounts an upper case with a single door flanked by two engaged Corinthian pilasters. The lower case consists of two-over-three graduated drawers below a fall board, decorated with cockbeading and veneered in mahogany. All associated rococo brasses and escutcheons are original. The desk interior exhibits a temple form prospect enclosing a compartment having an inlaid floor and a mirrored interior. The prospect assembly is in two parts, both removable. The upper portion is a drawer, the lower is a dovetailed case containing three small secret drawers at the rear. The prospect is flanked by projecting curvilinear sections containing pigeonholes, small drawers, and valance drawers. The drawers are veneered, inlaid, and crossbanded. The associated base repeats the leaf-carved molding of the pediment on carved ball-and-claw feet.

surroundings. As demonstrated in Du Simitiere's watercolor of Drayton Hall and surviving manuscripts, formal visitors were greeted at the land-front portico and conveyed through the decorative interiors prior to reaching the fashionable riverfront gardens, which were adorned with both native and imported botanical examples, many of which can be seen in the 1765 watercolor just above the colonnade walls, their natural arrangement suggesting that Drayton subscribed to contemporary English landscape principles.

John Drayton also carried on commercial agriculture within his network of plantations that totaled more than 76,000 acres and stretched across the colonies of South Carolina and Georgia. This commercial landscape not only made possible Drayton's luxurious lifestyle, but brought together the international cultures of the Atlantic World which also contributed to the creation of a unique Lowcountry society. The plantation workforce was made up of enslaved Native American, African, and



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**Fig. 11:** Plate, Chinese export porcelain, Qing dynasty, Qianlong period (1736–1795). Part of a twelve-piece set originally associated with ownership by John Drayton in the mid-eighteenth century. Famille rose pattern. Overglazed polychrome floral designs with gilding. Flat plate with raised shoulder and cylindrical foot rim: Diam. 8 $\frac{7}{8}$  in.; foot rim diam. 4 $\frac{7}{8}$  in., H. 1 in. Donation of Anne Drayton Nelson. Courtesy, Drayton Hall, a historic site of the National Trust for Historic Preservation. Photography by Carter C. Hudgins.


**Fig. 12:** Pair of porcelain tea bowls and a saucer, with matching overglazed decoration of a crane, mosquito, and floral motifs, mid-eighteenth century, Yongzheng period (ca. 1722–1750). Tea bowl rim: Diam. 2 $\frac{3}{4}$  in.; foot rim diam. 1 $\frac{1}{2}$  in., H. 1 $\frac{1}{4}$  in. Saucer rim: Diam. 4 $\frac{1}{2}$  in., foot rim diam. 2 $\frac{3}{4}$  in., H.  $\frac{3}{4}$  in. Courtesy, Drayton Hall, a historic site of the National Trust for Historic Preservation. Photography by Carter C. Hudgins.

These rare examples were excavated with four additional matching tea bowls, saucers, and a waste bowl.



**Fig. 13:** A collection of reconstructed colonoware earthenware ceramic vessels recovered at Drayton Hall through archaeological excavations. The jug at the top is a traditional African form and has a rim diameter of 5 inches with an estimated height of 6 inches. The three bowls all have flat bottoms demonstrating a European influence. The vessel in the center is decorated with a “pie-crust rim” reminiscent of the rim treatment on English Staffordshire combed slipware vessels of the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. From left to right: Diam. 8 $\frac{1}{4}$  in., H. 1 $\frac{1}{2}$  in.; Diam. 7 $\frac{1}{2}$  in., H. 2 $\frac{1}{4}$  in.; Diam. 9 $\frac{1}{4}$  in., H. 2 $\frac{1}{2}$  in. Courtesy, Drayton Hall, a historic site of the National Trust for Historic Preservation. Photography by Carter C. Hudgins.

African-American people who shaped their own material worlds through the continuation of traditional craft methods and the blending of them with European fashions. Tangible reminders of this intersection of cultures at Drayton Hall are in the form of colonoware (Fig. 13) recovered through archaeological campaigns; a low-fired earthenware ceramic locally produced using African and Native American technologies, and commonly decorated and shaped in both traditional forms and in imitation of European vessels. Such ceramics were used by plantation slaves within their own homes, but also to prepare foods for plantation owners. Like John Drayton’s taste in architecture, landscape design, and decorative arts, and his interest in natural history, these colonoware

examples not only represent the choices of their historic owners and users, but the cultural traditions responsible for their creation and the connections between the Old World and the New. Through such surviving examples of material culture, it is evident that Colonial Lowcountry plantations like Drayton Hall, were by no means isolated on the frontier, but instead were distinct reflections of the Atlantic World and its socioeconomic development throughout the eighteenth century. 

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*Carter C. Hudgins and George W. McDaniel will speak on the topic of this article at the Winter Antiques Show, January 22. For information, visit [www.winterantiquesshow.com](http://www.winterantiquesshow.com).*

1. See Patricia Ann Lowe (master’s thesis, 2010), “Volumes That Speak: The Books of the Drayton Library Catalog and the Design of Drayton Hall” on file at Drayton Hall.
2. John Davis, *Travels of Four Years and a Half in the United States of America* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1909).