



MCNY Investigations

New York Interiors: Furnishings for the Empire City

Discussion Questions for Middle and High School Audiences

The following questions may be used in discussion with students before, during, and/or after a self-guided visit.

1. The Cherry Street label text tells us that “Immigrants and other settlers traveling far from home often bring the architecture and design of their place of origin with them. This,” it continues, “is particularly true in regard to domestic environments, where a sense of comfort, of being “home,” is strongly based on visual association.” In your opinion, which alcoves in *New York Interiors: Furnishings for the Empire City* best illustrate this argument? What architecture and design elements can you identify that appear to have been “brought” by immigrants or other settlers?
2. The Pierrepont Alcove includes a sofa and two chairs that were awarded first prize in 1876 at the Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia (the nation’s 100th birthday party). What elements can you identify in these three pieces that evoke uniquely American symbols or styles? Do you think design can reflect a national or cultural identity? List other examples that prove or disprove this point.
3. Reflect upon the fact that each of these alcoves includes art and decorative furniture pieces from merchant or upper class homes. Why might these items, as opposed to those owned and used by working or lower class New Yorkers, remain in such pristine condition? Similarly, why might museums be more likely to own rare or one-of-a-kind pieces in their collections and not possess more common or “everyday” objects?
4. How does viewing these depictions of interiors from New York City’s past make you conscious of the stories our own personal objects, possessions, and material culture tell others about us? Are these stories, when inferred by strangers or outsiders, always accurate? Test this with a simple exercise: show a classmate or friend a personal object of your own. Do not give them any context for this object or explain anything about where you got it, how you use it, or what it is worth to you. Challenge them to use it as a clue to tell a story or make an inference about you. Without your help or input, is the resulting story entirely accurate? Does it fully illustrate you and your life? Why or why not?
5. Work with a partner to brainstorm furnishings in an alcove that you think would accurately portray a “typical” room in a contemporary New York residence.

What challenges presented themselves as you attempted this project? How did you and your partner address these? Discuss your process with the whole class and present the results of your work and vision.