The lone surviving pier table of the Bellangé suite served as a major inspiration in the updated White House during Roosevelt’s administration, but it was not immediately restored nor set out for display. Fortunately, in 1929, Congress passed an act preventing the removal of objects from the White House, as had happened in several administrations, including Buchanan’s: “[p]rior to the (law), the Presidents could either give away their White House gifts, take them home with them, or sell them at public auction.” Objects no longer actively used in the interiors were instead stored in the White House attic or in Fort Washington, Maryland—it is assumed that the Bellangé pier table went there following the 1902 restoration. The table’s removal from the White House erased its important rediscovery, thereby negating the Bellangé suite’s historical importance and rightful place in the White House.

The Bellangé furniture, once employed as symbols of American triumph and achievement, was now, once again, cast away from the White House. The pier table, as the last remaining representative of the entire suite, fell subject to a dusty storage building outside of Washington for some time before it was put to use years later. The pier table’s discovery already acted as the driving force behind McKim’s design for the Blue Room, but it fulfilled another important role fifty years later. This lone object initiated the return of the surviving Bellangé examples after 144 years and thirty Presidents.
Chapter 5: Royal Treasures

Years passed, and so too did Presidents. Many structural alterations were made to the White House through the early twentieth century, including modifications to some of McKim’s designs. In the 1920s, First Lady Grace Coolidge, initiated the first efforts to bring more appropriate and original antique furnishings into the White House (Figure 85). She organized a small committee to assemble a sizeable collection, but with as little government funding as possible. The collected furnishings, however, were not based on White House provenance. Rather, they were simply excellent examples of neoclassical furniture from the American Federal period. The quest to find other objects original to the house, like the original Bellangé pier table, must have seemed impossible and unrealistic as there was no indication that they even existed at this time. This was a constant problem for the many developing historic house museum collections at the time as well, so suitable antiques “of the period” were used in lieu of originals.

Collection expansion continued through the work of First Lady Lou Hoover in the 1930s. Hoover brought more antiques to the White House, but also elaborated on the same idea as the Roosevelts: reproducing furniture of the Monroe era. She, unlike her predecessors, was only interested in objects, original or reproduced, with specific historical associations. Hoover employed her secretary, Dare Stark McMullin, as the first unofficial curator of the White House. McMullin elaborated on research compiled from past efforts and searched through the White House inventory, looking at the records of old chairs and furniture identifying when they first came in and if they had significant history in the house. In addition to
searching the premises, Hoover and McMullin went to the White House warehouses, located in Maryland, to search for the other furniture saved by the 1929 Act of Congress. If, in fact, Hoover searched both the White House and all of the storage spaces, she would have come across the Bellangé pier table. An article, written by historian Hans Huth, recorded the pier table’s use in the “diplomatic assembly room,” now the Diplomatic Reception Room on the ground floor, up until 1945. It is certain then that Hoover used the pier table as she possessed an admiration for the Monroe-era objects, although it was never specified in her designs.

Besides the Bellangé pier table and Blue Room Marcotte reproductions, Hoover had The James Monroe Law Office as an excellent primary resource. The Monroe Law Office, later Museum and Memorial Library, opened in 1927 by the late President’s descendents in Fredericksburg, Virginia. Although there were no family members with pieces of the Bellangé suite, they did have other surviving examples of Monroe’s own furniture to display. Hoover commissioned Morris W. Dove, a Washington cabinetmaker, to remake pieces from these surviving Monroe furnishings. Hoover commissioned a copy of the French secrétaire à abattant on which Monroe wrote the “Monroe Doctrine.” (Figures 86 & 87) This desk, as well as other examples of Monroe-era furniture, stayed in a small room named the “Monroe Drawing Room” on the first floor. The room, filled with reproductions, was the first adaptation of a “period room” in the White House.

The 1930s decade turned into a busy period of ownership transfer for three separate examples of Bellangé furniture. Violet Blair Janin died in 1933 during the Hoover administration. This same year is when Kemper Simpson acquired his
armchair and probably the bérégère. Additionally, Henry Ford’s 1930 purchase of the settee at a Washington auction puts many significant transactions of the Bellangé furniture in a close time frame to one another. The Bellangé pier table’s continued presence in the White House, and the concurrent exchange of ownership of locally owned seating furniture, exemplifies the lingering apprehension and lack of resources First Ladies and White House staff had in finding any objects original to the White House, particularly furniture.

As the White House furnishings customarily changed with each administration, the structure also saw alterations with the addition of an indoor swimming pool, a third floor, and a third floor sunroom. Much of the updating improved the function and overall appearance of the White House, but in 1947 President Harry S. Truman moved into an outdated structure unable to receive many of the newly developed modern conveniences, like central air. The Roosevelt construction was hurried along, with not enough attention paid to the over 100 year old infrastructure, now weakened and unsafe. Unlike Roosevelt, Truman found the creaks and quirks of the house as a cause for alarm, instead of nostalgic reminders. Truman’s primary concern was to modernize the house for safety and security, rather than for design purposes. His plans involved the preservation of only the exterior shell of the house, thereby requiring the removal of everything - including the President (Figures 88 & 89). While Truman took up residency across the street at Blair House, the White House was remade, yet again.

The manner in which the White House was put back together, however, was the same structurally and similar to the 1902 McKim designs. The rooms, including
the Blue Room, were placed in their existing locations with their original dimensions (Figure 90). Truman had the Marcotte reproductions of the Bellangé furniture put back where the Roosevelts placed them – along the walls of the Blue Room (Figure 91). He was also able to secure the return of furniture from the Lincoln era to the home, which was removed by Mary Todd Lincoln following her husband’s death. These furnishings, as well, had been sold at auction and made their way to England. The following generations of owners donated them to the new White House.\textsuperscript{clxxiii}

One year after Truman entered office, construction persisted. In historian Hillary Murtha’s 2005 article, she states that the outbreak of the Second World War was a trigger for renewed interest in American decorative arts, “as the country sought to define what truly characterized an American national identity. New scholarship on early American material culture emerged....”\textsuperscript{clxxiv} In 1945, Hans Huth, a curator for the Art Institute Chicago, wrote an article on furniture of the Monroe era; appearing in the January 1946 issue of the \textit{Gazette des Beaux-arts}. Huth highlighted the many objects which came to the White House in 1817 under Monroe and documented their known history to-date. Surely he was aware of the work Hoover accomplished with her reproduction-Monroe furnishings, and the renewed focus of history in the White House. Huth was still wary of a disastrous historical repeat of furniture being lost with future interiors changes:

> \textit{[t]he necessity of keeping up the traditional appearance of the State rooms by precisely following President Monroe’s intentions, has been well recognized in recent years. It is to be hoped that such a policy be permanently assured, in order to preserve as much of the genuine White House tradition as possible.}\textsuperscript{clxxv}
Huth’s extensive research of Monroe-era bills and papers must have sparked his interest in Bellangé. As a librarian at Versailles in 1937, Huth may have already known a great deal about Bellangé; perhaps having seen the furniture he produced for the Grand Trianon. Huth’s article transformed the Bellangé suite into more than just an old pier table in the White House. It gave light to the Bellangé suite as a group of objects not only valuable in their Presidential history, but also within the context of furniture history and the art of nineteenth-century French cabinetmaking.

Huth included the surviving documented details describing the furniture's upkeep from the time of Monroe all the way to Harriet Lane’s disposal of the pieces at the McGuire auction in 1860. Huth thought that the furniture’s significance was not a factor in the minds of whoever purchased pieces of the suite:

> Mr. McGuire was himself a collector; his picture collection, as well as that of William Corcoran, were among the artistic attractions of the capital. However, he naturally did not have intuition—as nobody could have had in those days—to foresee that what he was going to sell was not old junk, but rather fine pieces reminiscent of the pageant that had passed through the White House for nearly half a century...it does not seem beyond the range of possibility that some pieces might turn up sometime, somewhere.

Granted, Huth had the foresight to predict the rediscovery of the Bellangé furniture, but he underestimated the “intuition” of those who purchased the furniture at auction. Even in 1860, Adams, Janin, Galt, Hines, and others knew the underlying worth of the pieces. Unfortunately, by the 1940s, a generational disconnect left several of the furniture’s inheritors with little information of the important historical association. Huth’s article was the first documented history of the suite, and it would later act as the second most important catalyst, behind the pier table, for an international hunt to recover the seating furniture (Figure 92).
Following the Truman work on the White House in the 1940s and 1950s, Mamie Eisenhower took on the duties of the First Lady in 1953, which by now, unofficially, required the work of putting the White House back in a semi-historical order. The collection slowly began to resemble a museum in its accumulation of priceless works of art and historical furniture, added with each new administration. Eisenhower assumed the role of historian and mystery-solver without hesitation, making significant strides in the acquisition of more antique furnishings and artwork.

With the Trumans, the search for the Bellangé seating furniture, once again, fell short of any real success for its efforts for its return to the White House. By now, former First Lady Edith Bolling Galt Wilson acquired her armchair from her former sister-in-law. Wilson lived in a home enshrined with an assortment of presidential memorabilia from her husband’s own term in office. The Bellangé furniture’s disassociation with her own stay at the White House may have made it among the least important objects to her. By 1919, the Daughters of the American Revolution Museum acquired their example of the Bellangé armchair without any Presidential furniture association. Less than half a mile away from its original location, the DAR displayed their armchair for a year then transferred it to Smithsonian Institution storage from January until April of 1920 due to renovations at the museum. It may have found a happier home in the White House than in storage, but its history was a mystery at the time. Although these two examples were located just minutes from the White House, they would prove to be two of the largest obstacles in the efforts to return the Bellangé suite to the White House.
On December 9, 1960, Mamie Eisenhower escorted Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy through the White House as a pre-inspection before her family moved in, in January. From that moment on, Kennedy was on a quest to revitalize the White House even before she arrived in 1961. Kennedy was so horrified by the state of the White House that she reportedly cried, admitting to Helen Thomas, a United Press International correspondent, that she saw the White House as, "a hotel that had been decorated by a wholesale furniture store during a January clearance." As a student of history, Kennedy took on a major restoration plan of the interiors. She already had a fondness for French design and antiques from her exposure to them as a young child, with the collection her great-uncle, Michel Charles Bouvier displayed in his Manhattan home. She learned a great deal from his collections of antiques, tapestries and paintings. The Bouvier’s French heritage also acted as an inspiration, having immigrated to the United States from France in the early 1800s. Kennedy was also fluent in French from a young age and spent time in Paris as a young adult.

"Mr. West, could you come up here a moment?" These words, uttered in 1961 by Kennedy to Chief Usher, J.B. West, forever changed the history of the Bellangé suite, beginning with the pier table. When she called for West, Kennedy had been reading Hans Huth’s 1946 article. According to West’s account in his memoirs, the photograph in Huth’s article of the Bellangé pier table started it all:

‘Do you know anything about this table?’ she asked. ‘I’m sure I can find it,’ I answered, ‘for the White House keeps an annual inventory of all its possessions... Sure enough, in the Fort Washington warehouse, we found the Monroe pier table, dusty and rickety, with the gilt peeling off... she was delighted. ‘We must have it restored,’ she exclaimed."
West had been at the White House since Franklin D. Roosevelt’s administration and knew more about the inventories and location of objects than most others.

The discovery of the Bellangé table in storage launched the Kennedy administration projects for finding more appropriate period objects. Although largely viewed as a luxurious project, it came with great difficulty for if it was an easy task, it would have been completed already. According to West the, “lack of success in finding historic furnishings in the warehouse [other than the pier table]... only made Mrs. Kennedy determined to bring in outside help to carry out the project.”

Following in the footsteps of both Grace Coolidge and Lou Hoover, Kennedy assembled a group of well-respected decorators, collectors, and historians to form her Fine Arts Committee. The Committee advised the execution of Kennedy’s French-themed vision for the White House. In order to properly manage the collection, the Committee hired an official White House curator. The White House was to now act as a shrine and a museum for all Americans to visit and witness their country’s history. President Kennedy described the efforts his wife was taking on as a contribution to all Americans:

But I think if they [the American public] can come here and see – alive – this building and in a sense touch the people who have been here then they’ll go home more interested and I think that they’ll become better Americans and some of them may want to someday live here themselves which I think would be good.

On February 23, 1961, the White House announced Kennedy’s plan to restore “historical integrity” to the State Rooms of the ground and first floors. Kennedy’s White House plans extended throughout her two-year tenure, and well after she left.
Kennedy began to request loans from outside institutions which had furniture of the historic periods she felt appropriate for the interior: American Federal, American empire, and French empire. To begin with, Kennedy did not see caché in American furniture, and instead preferred to only collect French examples. Members of the Committee disagreed with her approach and intended to show Kennedy the beauty of American-made objects. Fine Arts Committee Chairman, Henry Francis du Pont, had his own ideas on how to arrange the State Rooms to make the White House a showcase of American craftsmanship (Figure 93). According to an article written in the 2007 Winterthur Magazine, du Pont was a major influential force:

Early in their collaboration [Kennedy and Committee Chair, Henry Francis], du Pont invited Mrs. Kennedy to Winterthur. ‘I have a feeling that her real interest is in French things,’ Sweeney recalls du Pont saying. ‘She doesn’t believe that you can have a really swell house with American furniture, and I want her to see that you can.’

Winterthur was the du Pont family’s former country estate, which Henry Francis turned into a 175-room museum (Figure 94). Each room showcases original architecture, fine art, and decorative art made in the United States from the late-seventeenth century until the early-nineteenth century. Upon touring Winterthur, the Kennedy’s were impressed with du Pont’s collection and with the beauty of the American aesthetic. As chairman, he reviewed the letters sent to the White House by the dealers and collectors with objects to offer for the new interiors. He was aware of the variety of objects available, including furniture made by Duncan Phyfe, Charles-Honoré Lannuier, and Thomas Seymour—all among the greatest cabinetmakers of early nineteenth-century America. Kennedy began to understand and respect du Pont’s ideas for the White House, resulting in his assemblage for the
Green Room (Figure 95). Here he assembled the donated and purchased objects from the American Federal period, 1790-1810, from Philadelphia, Baltimore, and New England. Kennedy, however, still held close to her love of the French.

Unlike du Pont, one of the interior designers Kennedy hired to execute the redecorating, Stéphan Boudin, had little respect for American objects and overruled many of the American-based suggestions committee members presented. Boudin catered to an elite clientele, made up of New York society and Parisian wealth. He was well versed in the delicacy of decorating historic structures, having just finished the restoration of Château Malmaison outside of Paris. His work at Malmaison reflected the Charles Percier and Pierre Fontaine’s designs for Napoleon, and he planned to incorporate similar design concepts in the White House. The second interior designer hired, Sister Parish, collaborated with Boudin on many of the rooms, but added little to his future vision for the Blue Room besides a center table (Figure 96).

The historic furniture offered to the White House, and then chosen by du Pont and the Committee, began to arrive as early as 1961. The American furniture entering the house reflected, "historically accurate objects [of] the illustrious history of the White House." In essence, the Kennedy plans were much like Hoover’s, but on a grander scale. The interior of the White House was transforming into a series of historic period rooms. The President’s residence operated as one part office, one part home space, and one part living museum. The major difference between the State Rooms and the period rooms of an institution like the Metropolitan Museum of
Art was the active utilization of the historic furnishings. The spaces and furniture had to be functional as well as beautiful.

One of Kennedy’s greatest challenges rested with the issue of a government-provided budget. She, however, had a distinct advantage as she had other readily available resources at her disposal. Foremost, she was acquainted with the wealthiest and most prominent families and individuals in America. She grew up as a socially elite New Yorker, and then married into one of Massachusetts’s, and America’s, most well-known families. These associations, however, came with a catch making her a target of the media. Fortunately, Kennedy learned to use the press to her advantage. Following the regilding and restoration of the Bellangé pier table by Paul Manno in 1961, a member of the Maison Jansen firm that also employed Boudin, the White House issued a press release regarding the table’s discovery. Newspapers across the country printed the story with photographs showing the table back in the Blue Room. In the release was a brief historical anecdote, including the commission by James Monroe, and Kennedy’s plans for the White House. *The New York Times* article of April 15, 1961, stated:

> Mrs. John F. Kennedy, in her search for authentic White House antiques, has found a historic pier table in the presidential mansion. The French table, originally ordered by President James Monroe in 1817, is in the White House carpenter’s shop being refinished at the First Lady’s direction. It soon will be returned to the Oval Room on the first floor, where it stood in Monroe’s day. The White House announced that Mrs. Kennedy found the once-handsome gilt pier table last week.

Within weeks of the printed announcements, the White House received dozens of letters from all across the world, from people believing they had objects original to the White House. Catherine Bohlen contacted the White House almost
immediately with a photograph of her example of the Bellangé chair. After Bohlen’s example was confirmed to be from the White House suite, she proceeded to donate the chair.

Kennedy also employed television to nationally broadcast a tour of the interiors as she worked on them. Both the Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS) and the National Broadcasting Company (NBC) aired *A Tour of the White House with Mrs. John F. Kennedy* lead by Kennedy and journalist Charles Collingwood on February 14, 1962 (Figure 97). Along the tour, numerous pieces of Monroe-era objects were pointed out. Kennedy made special mention that each State Room had an object in it from the Monroe administration. Once the tour reached the Blue Room, containing the pier table and Bohlen’s chair, Kennedy described it as, “the only one of the originals that Monroe ordered from Bellangé in Paris, so Charles Francis Adams, who’s a descendent of the Presidents, who is on my Committee, had all the others copied, so now this room looks as it did under Monroe.” However, she tactfully failed to mention Charles Francis Adams, III’s two original side chairs at the Adams Historic Site in Quincy, Massachusetts, he declined to donate. In lieu of donating the actual chairs, Adams commissioned reproductions of four side chairs and seven armchairs for the White House by the Yorkville Furniture Manufacturing Company of New York in 1962.

Once the optimism of recovering original furniture from the Monroe era set-in, more time was invested to find where these objects might be. The first curator of the White House collection, Lorraine Waxman Pierce, heard of a possible match to the suite at the DAR. She arrived unannounced to tour the museum and quickly
identified the Bellangé example located in the museum’s Tennessee Room. Once the Fine Arts Committee approached the DAR for an indefinite loan of the chair to the White House, the DAR museum swiftly denied the request, just as Adams had. The institution cited they were unable to make a loan on such a significant piece, particularly because the members of the DAR did not approve.\textsuperscript{cxxix}

Soon, Kennedy learned of Wilson’s armchair in her home at 2340 S Street in the Kalorama neighborhood of Washington, DC. From First Lady to First Lady, Kennedy’s inquiry earned her an invitation to lunch with Wilson. The two must have had a great deal to talk about and reminisce over plans for the interiors. Kennedy went with the intention of coming home with the chair, but unfortunately all she left with was a cordial meeting and luncheon. Wilson did, however, loan the armchair to the Smithsonian Institution’s National Museum of American History’s First Lady exhibition for a brief period. Following her death in 1961, Wilson bequeathed her home and its contents to the National Trust for Historic Preservation, for use as the Woodrow Wilson House. Kennedy fell short of success in some of her attempts to retrieve examples of the Bellangé suite for the White House. The clever use of the media had average citizens realizing they had their own examples of White House furniture and reach out to the First Lady.

The unlikely possibility of ever finding even one existing Bellangé chair was dismissed with the surprise of the DAR, Wilson, and Bohlen’s chair—and the family’s recollection of another missing matching chair. The Committee, and Kennedy, pursued the mystery of the Bohlen chair, hoping their luck would change with a great discovery. Unfortunately, in a letter from Avis, the daughter-in-law of
Catherine’s Aunt Tina who once owned the chair, to Henry du Pont, she explained that neither she nor her husband, had any recollection of what happened to it. The unfortunate loss of the other Bohlen chair was overlooked as the sudden increase in correspondence from other owners of Bellangé furniture came to the White House. Additionally, people wanted to give money towards other acquisitions of whatever examples became available for purchase in the future. Within a year of airing the *A Tour of the White House*, the Fine Arts Committee and Kennedy raised the necessary funds to complete specific projects, and to purchase examples of the furnishings that owners would not donate.

The first version of Kennedy’s Blue Room had the Adams reproductions and the Bohlen chair upholstered in a coordinating blue silk fabric. Keeping with Mr. du Pont’s lessons on American-made objects in mind, Kennedy insisted the textiles be American-made. Boudin’s New York firm, Jansen’s, initially commissioned Franco Scalamandre to create a period textile suitable for the suite. This project proved tireless, with the rejection of many designs, even those created by Boudin. The designs did not add up for Kennedy, but fortunately the new White House Curator, William Voss Elder III, recognized the decorative details of the 1822 John Vanderlyn portrait of Monroe, now in New York’s City Hall. The painting depicted Monroe with the fictional oval-backed Bellangé armchair with identical carving, only upholstered in red. This now being the only visual primary resource available for the project, Scalamandre traveled to New York City to study the Vanderlyn painting. Scalamandre’s study revealed the seat back’s red upholstery had a two-toned gold eagle, clutching a cluster of arrows, surrounded by a laurel wreath. The designer
drafted more samples for the Kennedy’s approval, but his renditions still could not capture Kennedy’s vision for the furniture. Elder noted the rejected samples, at one time stating, “as you can see…the eagle for the chair back looks more like a plucked chicken and the weaving is too coarse.”

The pressure to present the American public with Kennedy’s expensive and lavish projects was high and therefore extremely taxing. All eyes were on the young First Lady, although not all decisions made were completely hers. The final outcome, however, had the Kennedy name attached to it. Criticism of White House projects was nothing new, as it existed with Monroe, van Buren, Lane, and Roosevelt. However, public opposition could be more widely spread in the 1960s due to radio, television, and the printed press. Under pressure from the public’s eagerness to see the project results, and unhappy with Scalamandre’s work, Kennedy gave the Bellangé textile commission to the French firm of Tassinari and Chatel. Although not an American company as Kennedy wanted, the firm had been in operation since the eighteenth century, and continued to produce their textiles with period techniques. The choice was not too far off, if following the furniture's history, as the first upholsterer for the Bellangé furniture was a Parisian tapissier, M. Leveissiere, in 1817.

November 23, 1963, was a day much like January 1, 1818—the redecorated White House was ready for public viewing. After all of the difficulties involving the upholstery for the Bellangé chairs, the Tassinari and Chatel upholstery was not ready for the opening. Instead, a blue taffeta sufficed as an effective slip covering until the order’s delivery (Figure 98). Monroe’s chairs were originally upholstered
in a crimson fabric, but as the rooms had now been officially designated by colors (red, green, and blue) they remained as such. Although the final product was not meant to be a copy of James Monroe’s elliptic room, it certainly echoed that era’s arrangement in presenting the President’s House as a grand and ceremonial residence. The Blue Room in Monroe’s time had all of the chairs around the wall, according to General Alexander Macomb, a distinguished War of 1812 veteran who visited the house in 1825, “the chairs are alternately armed and single so that in the arrangement of the chairs around the room there appears to be no confusion of arms, but a resplendency and simplicity which is very admirable.” In the final 1963 refurnishing, Boudin and Kennedy also positioned the chairs against the wall all around the room. The addition of a center table was not a recorded Monroe placement, but inspiration must have come from period paintings and seemed appropriate (Figure 5).

The Roosevelt-era Marcotte adaptations of the Bellangé suite continued their tenure in the White House, but now they lined the transverse hall of the first floor, that connects all of the State Rooms (Figure 99). Kennedy wanted only antique furnishings to occupy the State Rooms, but the Marcotte reproductions were now very much tied to the history of the White House; their production prophesized the resurrection of the Bellangé furniture’s historical importance. Following their production, it took another fifty-nine years for the first chair to return, but soon the other privately owned examples returned to fill the Blue Room, substituting for the reproductions Charles Francis Adams, III commissioned.
Following the first chair’s donation by Bohlen, the McCalla side chair returned in 1962. The remaining fabric accompanied the chair’s arrival at the White House, and with it came a full timeline of the furniture’s evolution in the White House’s interior from James Monroe until James Buchanan. Helen Goldsborough informed the Office of the Curator about Mrs. Fisher’s side chair, which was then given to the White House soon after that same year. Both of these chairs, unlike the Bohlen example, were purchased from their owners with funds procured by the Fine Arts Committee. As Kennedy and members of the Committee were likely overwhelmed that these two chairs even existed, purchasing them was not a waste of funds.

Although the Daughters of the American Revolution were uninterested in gifting their Bellangé armchair to the White House, another historical institution, the National Society of Colonial Dames celebrated their Golden Jubilee in 1963 (Figure 100). To honor this occasion, the Dames purchased Shirley Austin’s Bellangé armchair and then donated it to the White House collection.

This gesture, as an ode to patriotism and historic preservation, was becoming a trend in the Washington area and other branches of the federal government began assembling their own collections of historic furnishings and artwork. The renovation of the United States Department of State’s Diplomatic Reception Rooms began in 1961, although with a more focused interpretation plan: American art objects and architecture from 1740-1840 (Figure 101). Additionally, the Blair House, used as lodging for foreign heads of state, was outfitted with American Federal, English Regency and Victorian fine and decorative arts (Figure
Most of these furnishings, approximately one third, were already present when the house was given to the federal government, but the collection’s evolution has followed similar style aesthetics.

The White House received the side chair and bérgére, once thought to be owned by Violet Blair Janin, from the estate of Kemper Simpson. Both chairs were sold as a part of Simpson’s estate at an Adam Weschler & Sons Auction in 1971 and then purchased by Peter Hill of United States Antiques. Hill, a major player in the Washington antiques market, outfitted many of the area’s premier collections including the United States Department of State Diplomatic Reception Rooms, the Society of the Cincinnati’s Anderson House, the Stephen Decatur House, and the Octagon House. Hill wanted to see the return of the Bellangé furniture to the White House, but as an antique dealer he also wanted to make a profit from his investment. Correspondence between Hill and the White House Office of the Curator transpired for a year until a purchase price was agreed upon and an anonymous donor supplied the funds for acquisition in 1972.

The last example of a Bellangé chair to return was in 1973, by purchase from Eugene Douglas Birchby of Kensington, Maryland. Birchby’s quiet life revealed little about his association with the chair, and prior to his death in 1980, no conclusion was ever made. Birchby was aware of the chair’s importance during the Kennedy administration and was encouraged, at that point, to donate the chair. Ten years after the Kennedy-era, in his correspondence with Clement Conger, he decided he would sell the chair to the White House if they had interest. Conger solicited an anonymous donor to provide $7,500 for the transaction.
Another Bellangé example arrived in 1979, but as an outright gift from the former owner, Henry Ford’s Edison Institute of Dearborn, Michigan. Much of Ford’s collection went to his Henry Ford Museum and historic Greenfield Village, both operated by the Edison Institute. Here, the Bellangé settee stayed from its acquisition in 1930. Like the National Society of Colonial Dames’ gift to the White House, the Edison Institute’s gift was in commemoration of the Institute’s 50th Anniversary. The Institute felt the settee’s rightful home was with the President, rather than in Michigan, far removed from its original context.

All of the known original Bellangé furniture was now back in the elliptic room, except the DAR and National Trust’s versions, transcending its perception as worthless objects in 1860. The century-long journey of the furniture was marked by several phases in the use and interpretation of the chairs, settee, and pier table—each beginning as highly valued objects, both intrinsically and symbolically. The surviving chairs and settee are testaments to the developed appreciation and respect Americans have for their past. The Bellangé pieces are now relics from the great national shrine, the White House.

Kennedy was the most instrumental individual in the return of the Bellangé furniture. Without her perseverance and charisma as First Lady, these few surviving pieces may have gone unnoticed until their eventual destruction (Figure 103). Although the journey home began with Theodore Roosevelt and the Marcotte reproductions of 1902, Kennedy’s execution of the White House renovations produced the historical alterations. The many roles which the Bellangé suite has taken on, under various ownerships, outline this furniture’s unique placement in