

decorative arts history. The constant reevaluation of the Bellangé suite's function in the interior has been dictated by the cultural trends its various owners subscribe to. The remaining examples of the suite's chairs and settees have been maintained well enough, in various environments and capacities, to survive one hundred and six years. Although only nine of the original fifty three pieces are now back in the White House, the chance that more survivors exist is still high enough to continue searching. The Bellangé furniture continues to evolve within the interior of the White House, preserved for future generations.

The donations of the nine original pieces, and the Adams reproductions, are still used in the Blue Room. Since the first Bellangé armchair returned in 1961, conservation of the seating furniture is a continuing concern (Figure 104). Reinforcements have been applied under the furniture's upholstery to uphold its utilitarian quality (Figure 105). Extensive reports are kept in the Office of the Curator at the White House, detailing the cleaning, regilding, reupholstering, and overall repair of the furniture since its arrival.

Its important place in the White House has not faded, as it once had. Formal receptions are held in the Blue Room, along with public tours (Figure 106). The furniture is seen and explained to those who encounter it, revealing a critical moment in United States history to White House visitors. Additionally, the chairs are used for special occasions, to provide seating for guests of honor. In 2000, the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the White House was marked with a variety of events in commemoration. To kickoff the historic milestone, Hillary Clinton updated the Blue Room with small refreshments to its overall aesthetic. Prior to Clinton's initiative,

little had been changed since the Kennedy-era besides the addition of more original Bellangé pieces and new wallpaper. Clinton selected another change of wallpaper and new draperies, and gave the Bellangé furniture new upholstery (Figure 107). The pattern of eagle and laurel wreath stayed the same as before, but the blue was enhanced to a richer, deeper hue (Figure 108). Following the completion of Clinton's adjustments, a formal reception, attended by Presidents William Clinton, George H. W. Bush, Jimmy Carter, and Gerald R. Ford was held in the White House. For this occasion, the Bellangé side chairs were moved about the house for the Presidents and former First Ladies to sit on for various events: to the State Dining Room for photo opportunities (Figure 109) and to the first floor passageway for musical entertainment and dancing (Figure 110).

Ten years later, *Condé Nast Traveler* magazine featured Michelle Obama on the May 2010 cover (Figure 111). The cover, and spread, showed Obama in the Blue Room next to a Bellangé armchair. Photographer Jonas Fredwall Karlsson was so taken with the room and its arrangement that the only photographs he took were in the Blue Room.<sup>ccxiii</sup> President Obama utilizes the room and chairs for more than just formal receptions (Figure 112). He takes meetings and interviews in the Blue Room, and actively uses the Bellangé furniture for seating and photograph opportunities.

The Bellangé suite, in partial, has also made its debut as true museum objects in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Members of the suite, an armchair and a side chair, have been on display at both the Smithsonian Institution's First Lady's Exhibit and in the official White House Visitor's Center (Figure 113). In the future, an example of the suite will join other significant objects from White House history

in the exhibit, “Something of Splendor...For the Credit of the Nation’ – Two Hundred Years of the Decorative Arts at the White House” in commemoration of the approaching 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the White House’s rebuilding and the fiftieth anniversary of the White House Historical Association.

*Conclusion:*

The long awaited return of the Bellangé suite to the White House was certainly a series of events President Monroe could have never imagined. Their meaning and importance has changed throughout their 196 year run. Many pieces remain missing, but there is still a chance they may be discovered one day, or even returned to the White House. Although the Roosevelts did not press to find any of the surviving examples of the furniture outside of the White House, decades later the Bellangé furniture survived in private hands. The donation of the seven chairs and settee were a product of press coverage and the endless efforts of Jacqueline Kennedy and the Fine Arts Committee. Kennedy's efforts to restore historicism into the White House ended up restoring the life of some of Monroe's suite.

The Bellangé furniture has endured a continuous fluctuation of value in its lifetime. Its initial role as symbolic, patriotic furniture also came with harsh criticism. The furniture was admired for its beauty and political message, but also abhorred for its high cost and foreign origination. This suite of furniture inspired laws to be written and affected the reputation of several Presidents. Although it endured criticism, the Bellangé suite carried out its intended role as impression-making furniture for several years. The negative attention, however, contributed to a lessened effort to maintain the furniture's stability and appearance. In addition, the new styles of the nineteenth century forced the Bellangé empire aesthetic out of favor. For the next several decades, the furniture no longer acted as the prime centerpiece of the elliptic Blue Room. By 1860, the Bellangé suite's original placement in White House and presidential history was forgotten.

The sale of the Bellangé furniture was a turning point for the furniture. In leaving the White House behind, the furniture exited its intended interior context and utilization. Upon entering private homes, the furniture earned an entirely new historical significance. The “history” it now represented was a reflection of its owners, and not the President or the White House. Through subsequent generations of ownership, the furniture acted as family, not national, relics, forever tying these individuals to Washington society and history.

Although the Bellangé suite’s physical presence never totally left the White House, due to the pier table’s existence, its absence from the elliptic Blue Room rewrote its importance as furniture. The rediscovery of the original bills and the pier table by Glen Brown in 1902 began the resurrection of the Bellangé mystique for the White House. Although the majority of the suite resided outside of the President’s residence, the Marcotte reproductions made in the suite’s honor helped to reestablish its significant place in White House history. Unfortunately this historical awareness did not extend past the walls of the White House. No efforts were made to find these priceless antiques. The progressive efforts of the First Ladies in the twentieth century all contributed to the groundbreaking Kennedy administration redecoration projects. The return of the first chair marked the pinnacle of modern museum collecting. The reentrance of the first Bellangé armchair to the White House was 100 years in the making, and reinstated the furniture’s original intended use as iconic furniture, showcasing America as a country of prosperity.

The homecoming of nine pieces of the original fifty-three piece suite is not the conclusion of the Bellangé suite's historical journey. The unlikely discovery of any existing pieces in 1902 was proved wrong in 1961. Therefore, the search continues into the twenty-first century. The twentieth century recollection of the missing French and Bohlen chairs indicates other examples survive; and it is possible the suite has been disbursed throughout the world. The missing *bérgère*, settee, chairs, stools, and fire screens still hold an incomplete context just as the other pieces had prior to their return. Their mysterious absence continues the quest to find the suite in its entirety and bring pieces back to their original location, thereby returning their intended function.

Today, tour guides demonstrate to White House visitors a significant history lesson through the Bellangé furniture's two journeys to the White House. This impressionable journey catches guests' attention, creating an identifiable relationship between the White House and the Bellangé furniture. This relationship is further demonstrated through book covers, articles, and ceremonial photographs. The Bellangé furniture's presence in the White House today reinforces the words Monroe once spoke on their behalf: "[t]he furniture in its kind and extent, is thought to be an object, not less deserving attention, than the building for which it is intended... Both being national objects...." (Figure 114).<sup>ccxiv</sup>

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- <sup>xii</sup> Nii, 2010.
- <sup>xiii</sup> Monkman, 90.
- <sup>xiv</sup> *Antique Monthly*, 16A.
- <sup>xv</sup> Chevalier, 30 -31.
- <sup>xvi</sup> *Ibid*, 31.
- <sup>xvii</sup> *Antique Monthly*, 16A.
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- <sup>xx</sup> *Ibid*, 28.
- <sup>xxi</sup> Seale, *The President's House, Volume I*, 139.
- <sup>xxii</sup> John Pearce, conversation with the author, March 20, 2010.
- <sup>xxiii</sup> Chevalier, 28.
- <sup>xxiv</sup> Seale, *The White House: The History of the American Idea*, 96.
- <sup>xxv</sup> Department of State, Division of Language Services LS NO. 17482 R-XXXIV.R-IV French.
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- l Charles Ogle, "Silver Spoon Oration" 53.
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