

The Ryerss Museum: A Hidden Jewel of Global Philadelphia



The Ryerss Museum

By Carol Harris-Shapiro, Associate Professor, Intellectual Heritage Program

In the middle of Burholme Park in Northeast Philadelphia, adjacent to Fox Chase Cancer Center and Jeanes Hospital, sits an ornate Italianate mansion on top of a hill. Inside visitors can discover the fascinating story of an old Philadelphia family, (complete with scandal!) and two galleries stocked with remarkable artifacts gathered by Robert Waln Ryerss and his wife, Mary Ann Ryerss, indefatigable travelers and collectors from Asia, Europe and the Middle East.

The story of the Ryerss family is a story of economic and social changes in the Philadelphia area, from the first Waln's entrance into the colony as a friend of William Penn (and a Friend!) to the family's foray into railroads at the end of the nineteenth century.

Nicholas Waln (1650-1721), a Quaker, came to Pennsylvania with William Penn in 1682 on the ship *Welcome* to start a new life, purchased 1000 acres of land and became known as "the first [white] settler of Bucks County." His descendants played important roles in Philadelphia politics and business. Robert Waln, Nicholas's great-grandson (1765-1836), invested his time and fortunes in the early China trade, and led the way for more family members to take part. In the early 1800s, out of 75 male Waln descendants, 17 were engaged in the China trade, a risky but profitable enterprise.

At this time, it is estimated that up to one third of all American trade with China originated from Philadelphia entrepreneurs such as the Waln family. The family itself encapsulates the contradictions inherent in such endeavors; while Robert Waln's son, Robert Jr., lived in China

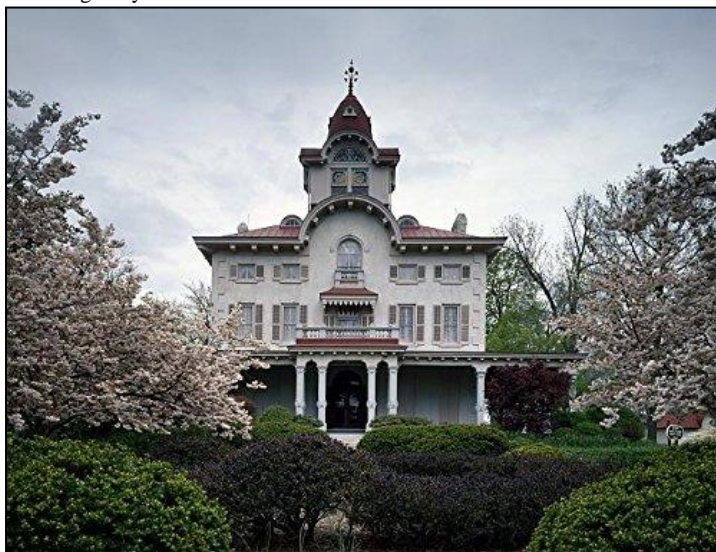


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for a time and authored a history (written in 1823) which sympathetically portrayed Chinese society, another Waln, William (in partnership with R. H. Wilcocks), began to smuggle opium from Smyrna, Turkey to China, to better compete with Britain in this lucrative but deadly trade. Some of the finest artifacts in the Asian gallery come from these earlier Waln excursions into China.

A later descendant, Joseph Waln Ryerss (1803-1868) married his cousin, Susan Waln and moved from the China trade to railroads, becoming president of the Tioga Railroad Company in 1852. He and his second wife built the country mansion of “Burholme” in 1859.

His son, Robert Ryerss (1832-1896) was educated as a lawyer, continued to look after his family’s investments, and was one of the founders of the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. He also traveled and collected antiques and artifacts. Ryerss was a bachelor for most of his life, but shortly before his death he married his longtime housekeeper, Mary Ann Reed, which scandalized his family and friends. When he died six months after the wedding, his widow inherited the estate for her lifetime (after her death his will proscribed that the estate be turned over to the City of Philadelphia to be used as a park, library and museum free to the people forever). After Ryerss’ death, Reed married Rev. John G. Bawn for “reasons of company and economy,” and together they traveled and added to the museum’s collections. It is estimated that eighty percent of the collection came from these later travels. Rev. Bawn later catalogued these items. After Reed died, the home and the collections were deeded to the City of Philadelphia and became the Ryerss Museum.



Burholme



Mary Ann Reed
Ryerss Bawn



Robert Waln Ryerss

The museum has preserved several rooms of the Ryerss residence, so that visitors can better understand how this wealthy industrialist family lived. The museum also has two extensive galleries added by the city in 1923, one with European and Middle Eastern artifacts, and the other Asian artifacts.

The Asian gallery, in which I worked during my sabbatical project, has a wonderful mix of treasures and what can only be described as “tourist curiosities.” Among these treasures are the contents of a thirteenth-century Japanese Buddhist temple, magnificent gilt Buddhas and scowling “guardians,” large Chinese wooden carvings of eccentric Taoist immortals, fantastic brass depictions of the fearsome and erotic deities of Tibetan Buddhism, incense burners and statuary, and delicate ivory and porcelain representations of many other deities (all of which Rev. Bawn referred to as “heathen idols!”). Items also come from Nepal, India, Java, and Myanmar, and include important images of deities from Confucian, Buddhist,

Hindu, Shinto, and Taoist origins. My work helped to identify these objects and provide the religious context for them, which helps visitor to understand these artifacts.

Secular items in the Asian collection are no less beautiful and interesting, including Japanese Satsuma pottery said to have been purchased at the United States Centennial Exhibition in Philadelphia in 1876, suits of samurai armor, official garb of Chinese officials, and (perhaps quite fittingly!) opium cabinets and opium pipes.





The European and Middle Eastern gallery, which includes everything from enormous vases, stuffed animals and a depiction of Jesus's crucifixion in a bottle (!) is also well worth visiting.

The museum welcomes visitors. It is free and open to the public Friday, Saturday, and Sunday from 10 AM to 4

pm. The Ryerss' train station (now on the Fox Chase line) is very close to the museum, and there is always free parking. It is a wonderful field trip for undergraduates, graduates and faculty studying American history, Asian history, Asian languages, museum studies, art history and religious studies, among other topics. It is truly a testament to Philadelphia as a nexus of global trade and global interest.

In addition, there are a number of research and service projects that could help the museum which could be tailored for undergraduates, graduate students, and faculty, from serving as docents, increasing our knowledge of the Waln and Ryerss family history, finding out more about the objects and their makers, and helping with publicizing the museum and its offerings through social media, grant writing, and planning exhibitions.

For more information about the museum, please visit the website at ryerssmuseum.org.

Please feel free to contact Martha Moffat, Site Director, at ryerssmuseum@gmail.com or (215) 685-0599 if you would like more information. I would also be happy to help with any questions about the Asian Gallery.

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