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Period Rooms Take on a Modern Gloss

By KEN JOHNSON 10/29/10

They have their charms, but the 18th-century period rooms at the Metropolitan Museum of Art are not the first place visitors are likely to go. Stocked with antiques that barriers prevent you from studying up close and dimly lighted in the interest of historical authenticity, they may be invaluable for decorative-arts wonks, but they can't compete for popularity with the Impressionist and Ancient Egyptian galleries.

The sculptor Katrin Sigurdardottir, an Icelander who lives and works in New York, evidently thinks otherwise. The latest in a series of midcareer contemporary artists to have solo shows at the Met, Ms. Sigurdardottir has created a pair of fanciful, quasi-architectural constructions — follies, you might say — inspired by two of the museum's French period rooms. Called "Boiseries," one is from the Hôtel de Crillon (1777-80) and the other from the Hôtel de Cabris (circa 1774). Both are Neo-Classical-style interiors with elaborately carved, painted and gilded walls and period-appropriate furniture.

Ms. Sigurdardottir's constructions are all-white abstractions of their models, made with exacting craft yet simplified details, like three-dimensional cartoons. They have a fine formal economy, but they are most interesting for their conceptual suggestiveness.

In the north mezzanine gallery of the Met's modern and contemporary wing stands a kind of elongated folding screen of 82 conjoined, snow-white panels with skewed top edges. They have moldings, floral reliefs, doors and window frames based on those of the Hôtel de Cabris's salon. The panels curve in a spiral arc ending in an S-shape, and they diminish in size in jagged increments from 8 feet to just 12 inches. Mirrors built into many of the panels further complicate the experience. It could be a set for a Modernist Alice in Wonderland ballet. Many of the panels have hinged doors, the smallest about right for a white rabbit.

The south mezzanine is occupied by an octagonal chamber. Inside are all-white replicas of the original room's furniture from the Hôtel de Crillon, including chairs, a love seat and a desk with a tilted mirror on top. As is often the case with period rooms, you cannot go into this one, but you can look through windows; because everything is white inside, it has a dreamy, glowing appearance, as if it were the ghost of the room it copies.

What you may not notice at first is that you cannot see out through the windows built into other walls of the room. They are not ordinary windows but one-way mirrors, which, viewed from certain angles, reflect one another into infinity.

What, besides cleverly revising the old interior designs, might Ms. Sigurdardottir's constructions mean? First we should take into account that the rooms she selected belong to the era of the French Enlightenment, a time when science, philosophy and other intellectual disciplines cleansed themselves of superstition and religion and opened up to pure reason. Hence the uncontaminated whiteness of Ms. Sigurdardottir's rooms. (The designer of the Hôtel de Crillon boudoir, Pierre-Adrien Paris, was a well-known architect with connections both to the king and to some of the most radical Enlightenment luminaries.)

You might think of the enclosed boudoir as a model of Enlightenment-style consciousness in which the mind, turning in on itself, reflects on its own nature and its epistemological capabilities. That is what thinkers like Descartes and Kant did. Kant concluded that you cannot know reality as it is in and of itself — naked, as it were. We perceive what impinges on us with our senses, which transform incoming information into neurological signals. The brain somehow clothes these signals in visual impressions, sound, taste, feeling and smell, which the mind organizes into an apparently coherent world. We live in a vale of illusions produced by our own brains.

But not everyone believes that so-called mind-independent reality is so inscrutable. Ms. Sigurdardottir's spiral construction, with its multiple portals, calls to mind something that William Blake wrote in 1790: "If the doors of perception were cleansed, everything would appear to man as it is, infinite. For man has closed himself up, till he sees all things through narrow chinks of his cavern."

The spiral, by the way, is a common symbol of spiritual progress — the soul's path as it travels in ever-widening circles, expanding its consciousness. But then, the doors in Ms. Sigurdardottir's spiral don't lead anywhere. If you pass through one, you find yourself on the other side of the facade, which turns out to be unpainted particle board. The outside of the enclosed boudoir is raw particle board, too.

Revealing the artifice in this way is a modern, pragmatic move; it is as if to say that the world is whatever we make of it. We are its constructors; there is no higher agency — divine, supernatural or otherwise — to be held accountable.

"Katrin Sigurdardottir at the Met" is on view through March 6 at the Metropolitan Museum of Art; (212) 535-7710, met.org.