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Read House to Stage Modern Photography Exhibit in Historic Mansion

New Castle (DE) - The Read House & Gardens is looking to show historic houses through new sets of eyes. A National Historic Landmark campus of the Delaware Historical Society, the federal-style mansion has a long history in front of the camera. But in an exhibition planned for Spring/Summer 2020, DHS will feature photographs from area artists that bring new life to spaces that are too often presented as frozen slices of history.

The Read House is currently selecting photographers, models, and stylists from throughout the Midatlantic region to stage creative shoots in and around the historic mansion. Artists included in the project will be provided with a rare level of access and curatorial support to bring their creative visions to life. Anyone interested should inquire by emailing RHinfo@dehistory.org by Wednesday, January 22, 2020 with a link to their portfolio or Instagram. Preference may be given to models and stylists who are already paired with a photographer.

The mansion has been a frequent subject in photo shoots. Throughout the twentieth century, the house appeared in dozens of taste making magazines like *Town & Country*, *House Beautiful*, and *Mademoiselle* and even served as a backdrop for fashion and wallpaper catalogues. The 14,000-square-foot mansion was built between 1797 and 1804 for the family of George Read II, whose father was a signer of the Declaration of Independence and Constitution and an early governor of Delaware. Read's obsessive attention to design and craftsmanship makes it one of the most significant examples of Federal-style architecture in America. Photographs from the 1880s show the house filled with decorative objects from East Asia, presumably brought back by its second owner, an import/export merchant named William Couper.

House museums often feel like time capsules, but in fact modern curators have staged them to look that way. Even with cutting-edge research, these stagings are products of the people and times that created them. To demystify that vibe, the Read House has been turning to photographs from its years as a private residence, which it will put on view alongside brand-new images from the current initiative. The house's most photographed years were between 1920 and 1975, under the ownership of Philip and Lydia Laird, when antiques and early American architecture were trending in contemporary design. The Colonial Revival was as much about imagining the past as it was about preserving elements from it.

In 2020, antiques and historic interiors are on the rise once again. Some of the same magazines still hold sway over popular taste, but new digital channels like Instagram have transformed the landscape of visual culture. People sift through hundreds of images every day on their phones, and the word “curate” has entered the common lexicon as something we do with our homes, feeds, and social lives. Fashion writers have called this the “big flat now”—a world where we reach for styles and objects from myriad times in the past, assembling them into an eclectic world that has personal meaning for us. Much like the Laird years, the Read House of today continues to offer raw historical materials to inspire people’s imaginations. It speaks to themes ranging from comfort to enslavement and from the grandeur of entertaining to the labor involved in crafting the house and maintaining it as a functional residence.

“We’re excited to connect with the photography community that has become so vibrant on Instagram, VSCO, and other contemporary channels,” said Brenton Grom, director of the Read House. “We want to offer up this spectacular house as a fresh source of inspiration, and we’re looking forward to finding out how artists capture these rooms through their own eyes.”

About the Delaware Historical Society

The Delaware Historical Society owns and operates the Delaware History Museum; the Jane and Littleton Mitchell Center for African American Heritage; a nationally recognized Research Library; Old Town Hall; Willingtown Square, four 18th-century houses surrounding a picturesque urban courtyard located in downtown Wilmington; and the National Historic Landmark Read House & Gardens located in New Castle. For more information, call (302) 655-7161, email deinfo@dehistory.org, or visit www.dehistory.org.

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