

France Invades the 1961 White House

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Throughout its history, America's White House has undergone many changes through its many administrations. While a select few presidents worked to improve it, most others merely neglected it. No one, however, worked harder in restoring the White House interior than Jacqueline Kennedy, wife of President John F. Kennedy, who occupied the Executive Mansion from January 1961 until November 1963.

Soon after Kennedy's election to the presidency in November 1960, a pregnant Jacqueline Kennedy visited the White House, as per protocol, and was given a tour of her soon-to-be-home by the outgoing First Lady, Mamie Eisenhower. "Jackie's first visit to the White House was her coming-out party as the next first lady."¹

After viewing the condition of the White House, Mrs. Kennedy was appalled by its drab furniture and design. She was shocked that the White House interior, that of America's preeminent home, had been so woefully decorated. To her, it was nothing short of a national disgrace.

Soon after taking up residence in the White House, both the President and his First Lady were struck by how depressing, drab, and tasteless the home appeared. Furniture in rooms did not match with each other, nor did paintings adorning the walls. There were no unifying themes in individual rooms or the mansion as a whole.

"To her dismay she found the upstairs family quarters decorated with what she called 'early Statler'; it was so cheerless and undistinguished it wasn't even worthy of a second-class hotel. The upstairs Oval Sitting Room, she complained, was "like the Lubianka," alluding to the great Moscow prison. Certain bedroom curtains she termed 'seasick green,' and certain curtain fringes looked to her like 'tired Christmas trees.' The First Lady's sitting room was filled with 'Mamie's ghastly pink.' The ground floor looked like 'a roller skating rink.' And the East Garden was 'atrocious.'"²

She could not believe there was so much cheap looking furniture in the home. She found reproduction furniture and imitation Renaissance damask on the walls in the state rooms. As far as 'antiques', there were two white pottery Scottie dogs with philodendron coming out of them on the mantelpiece in the East Room. "Antiques? Well, they must have been at least ten years old."³

She knew what must be done. With her vast knowledge of interior design, doing nothing to remedy the situation would have been even more unforgivable than allowing it to get into its then-present condition.

¹ Laurence Leamer, *The Kennedy Women: The Saga of an American Family* (New York: Villard Books, 1994), 514.

² John H. Davis, *The Kennedys: Dynasty and Disaster 1848-1983* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1984), 393.

³ Carl Sferrazza Anthony, *As We Remember Her: Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis in the Words of Her Friends and Family* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1997), 139.

She lobbied the matter with her husband, President John F. Kennedy, a man who also had a passion for history and understood the significance of what his wife wished to undertake. It was decided that she would be given control of redecorating the interior of the White House. Her goal was to transport the interior back to the time of President James Monroe (1817-1825), when it was wholly decorated in the then-fashionable French style.

If there had ever been a First Lady perfectly suited to restore the interior of the White House, it was Jacqueline Kennedy. She was born Jacqueline Lee Bouvier and was educated at the best private schools. Among her hobbies while she was growing up were riding horses, writing poetry, and studying ballet. She was named “Debutante of the Year” during the 1947-1948 Season and studied at Vassar. After traveling abroad extensively, she developed a particular affinity for France.

With the arrival of Jacqueline Kennedy at the White House came a cultivated taste, elegance, intelligence, and beauty. Dreading the mundane tasks required of the First Lady, Mrs. Kennedy found something that held more meaning and value than the numerous banquets, receptions, and speeches she would be required to participate in while she occupied the White House. She even despised being referred to as First Lady and insisted that staff call her Mrs. Kennedy. The renovation project, although a daunting task, proved to be just what Jackie needed as a means of avoiding the more uninspired duties associated with her new title. With the restoration of the White House interior Jacqueline Kennedy discovered a labor of love which would keep her motivated and more than busy.

Within six months of assuming the role of First Lady, Jackie formed several committees, including a Fine Arts Committee, which Henry Francis du Pont agreed to chair. Du Pont, of the wealthy chemicals family from Delaware, was an authority on antique American furnishings.

“And in charge of restoring the décor to the French style of Monroe’s presidency, she chose a renowned decorator from Paris, M. Stephane Boudin. With a French chef loose in the kitchen, and a French decorator loose in the rest of the White House, Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy had embarked on the Frenchification of the Executive Mansion, just as President Monroe had done 144 years before.”⁴

Fully aware that many Americans would take issue with the possibility of the Executive Mansion becoming too French, Mrs. Kennedy took the necessary precautions so as to avoid controversy. John Walker, who was Director of the National Gallery of Art, stated “She would summon [decorator Boudin] to her assistance, but because the thought of a Frenchman doing over the White House might possibly cause some question among 100 percent Americans...his visits were not publicized. It is not true, as Washington gossip related, that he was carried into the White House wrapped in a rug.”⁵

She busied herself with overseeing every minute detail of the restoration. Fully involved in the massive project, she explored all fifty-four rooms of the White House, along with the warehouses of Fort Washington.

“And what treasures she came up with! In a closet off the dressing area of a downstairs White House men’s room she found stained and chipped white marble busts of George Washington, Martin Van Buren, Christopher Columbus, John Bright, and Amerigo Vespucci. Sculpted in the Greek style in the early nineteenth century, they had been completely forgotten. In the White House basement she found a darkened, stained gold and silver flatware service that President Monroe had ordered from Paris in 1917.”⁶

It was becoming apparent that a central theme was emerging in Mrs. Kennedy’s plans for the White House. Although there were other styles being incorporated, it was French design that was steadily becoming dominant. It was the style she had grown to appreciate in her many travels while younger. It was also a calculated risk. Many Americans would disapprove of America’s most important and famous residence being so thoroughly decorated with the style of a nation of which America had had increasingly strained relations with on the political front. Yet Mrs. Kennedy pressed on, not letting political motivations hinder what she believed to be best.

⁴ Davis, *The Kennedys: Dynasty and Disaster*, 393-394.

⁵ Anthony, *As We Remember Her*, 139.

⁶ Davis, *The Kennedys: Dynasty and Disaster*, 394-395.

Wealthy and prominent citizens from around the country began, at the First Lady's request, to make donations. Secretary of Treasury Douglass Dillon and his wife gave a mahogany library table made by the renowned Charles Honore' Lanvier, a French-born cabinetmaker who had worked in New York in the early 1880s. Among other items loaned was a pier table that had belonged to Joseph Bonaparte at Point Breeze. A Mr. and Mrs. T. MacNeill of Whiteford, Pennsylvania, donated two maple chairs in the Empire style made by Jacqueline's own great-great-grandfather, Michael Bouvier, circa 1820.

The goal of Jacqueline Bouvier in the Kennedy White House was to restore America's castle to a place where extraordinary parties and entertainments would be held, while at the same time restoring the White House interior to its original glory after years of mistreatment and neglect.



Mrs. Kennedy receives a pitcher for the White House. (Dec. 5, 1961)⁷

The French were consistently on her mind. "Down the hall from the library, items began coming into the curator's office, Jackie often moving objects around herself to see where they looked best. 'When it is done,' she declared, 'de Gaulle would be ashamed of Versailles.'"⁸

"Outside the Red Room stands the pier table which Joseph Bonaparte brought to the United States. It is pure French Empire. The Egyptian-Greek head carved at the top of the leg is a caryatid; a design which had been introduced at the end of the eighteenth century."⁹

Speaking of Napoleon and his influence on furniture design, Mrs. Kennedy stated: "The somber wood was a perfect background on which to hang bronze ornaments, and the gorgon, the sphinx; all had specific meanings, recalling Emperor Bonaparte's consulship, conquests, and coronation. The Empress Josephine chose the swan as her emblem. The furniture was not intended to be comfortable."¹⁰

A pertinent question would be why the French furniture became a part of the White House early in the nineteenth century. There are a few reasons. In the first decade of the 1800s America was violently anti-British and strongly pro-French. Our Revolution was followed by the French Revolution and

⁷ Available from <http://www.jfklibrary.org/Historical+Resources/JFK+in+History/The+White+House+Restoration+Page+2.htm>; Internet. Accessed 25 November 2007.

⁸ Anthony, *As We Remember Her*, 141.

⁹ Perry Wolff, *A Tour of the White House with Mrs. John F. Kennedy* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1962), 123.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 125.

sympathy could be felt across the Atlantic. Another factor was that the French Empire line appealed to the rising merchant class within America. A new class of solid citizens wanted likewise furniture. A final reason was economic in nature. Competition had begun for the expanding American furniture market. Federal furniture required careful cabinetmaking. In comparison, Empire was easier to carve.

Of all the rooms restored, it was the Red Room that was the most redecorated. Referring to a small table in the Red Room, Mrs. Kennedy remarked “This little table, for instance; it’s by Lannuier, a French cabinetmaker who came to America. Not many people know of him.” Even the walls were altered. “The scrollwork on the wall fabric matches the design of the upholstered sofa and chairs. It is derivative of the Pompeiian decorations which so strongly influenced the French Empire period.”¹¹



Red Room (1963)¹²

The desk against the back wall, sitting between the windows, in the figure shown of the Red Room (below) is French Empire. It contains secret drawers, which were fairly common before the mastery of safemaking.

The refurbished room she took most pride in was the Blue Room. In it, she felt that she had met her objective in capturing the Monroe era of French furnishings and the subtle influence of Napoleon’s Egyptian campaigns. Privately, she had reservations over her decision in making the room more white than blue. Still, she decided it best to follow the example of President Monroe, who also had the White House interior decorated with the style of the French, a country he too greatly admired.

Du Pont and Boudin often clashed over design decisions. “The greatest conflict between Boudin and du Pont involved the Blue Room, whose walls the French decorator insisted on painting white, and the Green Room, whose walls were to be done in chartreuse. ‘They’re too *French*,’ duPont gasped when

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 130.

¹² Available from

<http://www.jfklibrary.org/Historical+Resources/JFK+in+History/The+White+House+Restoration+Page+2.htm>;
Internet. Accessed 25 November 2007.

he first saw them. President Kennedy was equally distressed. ‘The Blue Room should be blue,’ he insisted, ‘and the Green Room should be green. Have them redone.’ Jackie refused, insisting that the new colors were more historically accurate than the old.’¹³



Blue Room (1963)¹⁴

In the Green Room, one of three state parlors on the first floor, is a sofa that once belonged to Daniel Webster. It is an American adaptation of a Sheraton style.¹⁵ The room is a mixture of Louis XVI, Directoire, Shraton, and American local influences. The walls were covered with moss green watered-silk fabric suggested by Boudin and approved by Mrs. Kennedy. President Kennedy himself considered this room to be the most attractive and relaxing on the state floor. The eagle, America’s patriotic symbol, was a popular motif during the Federal period and is featured throughout the room.

¹³ C. David Heymann, *A Woman Named Jackie* (New York: Carol Communications, 1989), 323.

¹⁴ Available from <http://www.jfklibrary.org/Historical+Resources/JFK+in+History/The+White+House+Restoration+Page+2.htm>; Internet. Accessed 25 November 2007.

¹⁵ Wolff, *A Tour of the White House with Mrs. John F. Kennedy*, 156.



Green Room (1963)¹⁶

As for the Diplomatic Reception Room, “The furniture dates from the Revolutionary period. The chairs are sometimes called ‘Martha Washington,’ but this is the name given to a style of Federal chair, rather than indicating that Mrs. Washington owned them. The sofa is the Hepplewhite white line. The round table is a Pembroke, or drop leaf, breakfast table. The oval rug has a border encompassing fifty stars and seals.”¹⁷ As for the wallpaper, “Printed in 1834 by Jean Zuber, these French made papers are a fanciful study of famous American scenes. The wallpaper shows a European view of America in the nineteenth century.”¹⁸

Yet again, Mrs. Kennedy’s love for French design permeated another room. Combining old French design with American history was giving the White House its own style, which is still admired to this day.

¹⁶ Available from [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Green_Room_\(White_House\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Green_Room_(White_House)); Internet. Accessed 23 November 2007.

¹⁷ Wolff, *A Tour of the White House with Mrs. John F. Kennedy*, 52-53.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 53.



Diplomatic Reception Room (1963)¹⁹

In the East Room, a previous President, Harry Truman, had replaced the mantels with antique marble mantels of soft brown-red. Mrs. Kennedy had them painted and planned to replace them with the same Georgian design that was used in the 1902 restoration. Except for the elimination of some Chippendale furniture, which did not fit the overall décor of the room, Mrs. Kennedy did little to the East Room.

It was the East Room in which President Kennedy's casket was placed following his tragic assassination in November 1963.

¹⁹ Available from <http://www.whitehousemuseum.org/floor0/diplomatic-room>; Internet. Accessed 23 November 2007.



White House staff pay their respects to JFK in the East Room. (November 1963)²⁰

The Treaty Room has often been utilized as a presidential study over the years. However, during the Hoover administration it was converted into a parlor and decorated with Colonial Revival furniture. Its name was changed to the Monroe Room. During the Kennedy administration its name was changed to the “Treaty Room” due to so many important deliberations held within it, including the Partial Nuclear Test Ban Treaty, which was signed in October 1963.

“To restore the Treaty Room, Jackie lobbied Capitol Hill to ‘cut all the red tape’ and have a Grant chandelier returned to the White House from the Capitol, prompting Senator Mike Mansfield to introduce a bill to establish a curator of the U.S. Capitol Building.”²¹

²⁰ Available from <http://www.fiftiesweb.com/kennedy/kennedy-assassination-23.htm>; Internet. Accessed 26 November 2007.

²¹ Heymann, *A Woman Named Jackie*, 142.



The First Lady opens the refurbished White House Treaty Room. (June 28, 1962)²²

During a period of three days in January 1962, CBS correspondent Charles Collingwood was taken on a tour of the newly-designed White House interior by Mrs. Kennedy as a film crew followed from room to room. During the tour, Collingwood interviewed Mrs. Kennedy about the history of each room and the changes that were made. On Valentine's Day the hour-long special was broadcast on all three major television networks, which approximately 56 million Americans viewed. Three out of four television viewers that night watched the broadcast. It was a ratings smash and Mrs. Kennedy received much praise from various circles. In recognition for her successful televised tour, she was awarded one of the first Emmy Awards.

With the 1961-1962 restoration of the White House, French designs and motifs from the distant past were brought back to the forefront in a powerful young nation's most famous residence. The United States of America, a nation of immigrants, was paying tribute to the design flair and ingenuity of a nation to which America has always had strong ties across the Atlantic.

"For, in the last analysis, what Jacqueline gave the American people was precisely that which they so sorely lacked: she gave them beauty, elegance, grace, a high style, and a sense of the past."²³

²² Available from <http://www.jfklibrary.org/Historical+Resources/JFK+in+History/The+White+House+Restoration+Page+2.htm>. Internet. Accessed 25 November 2007.

²³ Davis, *The Kennedys: Dynasty and Disaster*, 397.



First Lady Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy (1962)²⁴

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²⁴ Available from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jacqueline_Kennedy; Internet. Accessed 23 November 2007.

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