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Abstract

Though a well-known decorative painter and muralist in the early 20th century, Robert "Bob the Sheriff" Chanler was an incredible personality and creative genius who has been largely forgotten over time. His work is representative of artistic innovation and experimentation that characterized the early 20th century, presenting a unique quality that can only be called 'Chanleresque.' This thesis intends to situate Chanler's interior decoration of the Whitney Studio within the body of Chanler's interiors, screens, and murals, to analyze the materials and structural system that compose the ceiling and present a proposal for the original color scheme based on the findings. The finishes present unique challenges, as they are primarily composed of metallic foils, which are then modeled with a series of glazes. Chanler's Whitney studio highlights a moment in America's artistic development that brought together the genius and patronage of Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney with the vision of a truly unique American artist. The interior's design elements are a true American hybrid composed of influences that span from French rocaille plasterwork to ancient Eastern philosophy to Native American spiritual beliefs. As the only surviving example of Chanler's work alone, it is a truly unique example of craftsmanship, and is one of the few surviving works by Chanler. This thesis attempts to (1) provide a historical framework to understand the artistic and technological aspects and significance of the Whitney Studio, (2) identify and analyze the finishes and materials used in the original production of the ceiling and propose a general conservation program for the ceiling, along with a digital reconstruction of the original color scheme and a partial mockup of the finishes originally employed. While this project is centered on the conservation of the Whitney Studio, the methodologies, techniques and approaches discussed can be used as a case-study for further conservation work in decorative plaster, early 20th century artist-designed interiors and Robert Winthrop Chanler's body of work.

Keywords

Historic Preservation; Robert Winthrop Chanler; Plaster, Whitney Studio, Ceiling, Conservation, Finishes, Sheriff Bob, World Monuments Fund, Architectural Conservation Laboratory

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