

Narryna coming up trompes

writer *Chris Champion*

photographs *Simon Cutbbert*
courtesy of the *Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery*

Put Scott Carlin inside a house built in 1840 and redecorated a dozen times since, and you have a man in his element. He can expertly point out all the changes to the original. He is not judgmental and his nose does not turn up, but one is left with the feeling that the act of making those changes is barbarism of the most preliterate kind.

Carlin is Manager of House Museums for the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery (TMAG). He was formerly a curator and property manager with the Historic Houses Trust of NSW for 22 years. He is a civil celebrant for heritage buildings, marrying their exteriors to their long-lost interiors.

Narryna, in Hampden Road, Battery Point, was completed in 1840 and became a museum in 1955. Its drawing room has just been renovated – again – but apart from some freshening touches





The imposing Greek Revival facade of Narryna. The drawing room is located on the ground floor front at the left of the front door. photographer Peter West



The drawing room mantelpiece in its raw timber state during the restoration



The drawing room showing the completed mantelpiece, left, with faux marbled finish. The piano, centre, ordered by Lady Franklin from John Broadwood & Co., London, circa 1837, was later at Ellensthorpe Hall near Ross. It is believed to be the instrument used by artist and composer Henry Mundy to compose his quadrille music, which has been rediscovered recently. The piano is on loan from a private collector.

down the years, this should be the last time, because it takes us back to the first time.

Carlin stands in that room, the man in his element, and says, “While all the evidence we have followed is specific to Hobart and Narryna itself, the overall effect is similar to American pre-Civil War interiors.” What he’s talking about is a range of faux finishes typical of 1840s tastes in interior design: marbling, wood graining and a wallpaper printed to resemble silk hangings. These *trompe l’oeil* effects have a contemporary following.

Narryna, an independent community museum, has TMAG as its landlord. Then TMAG director Bill Bleathman was of the view that the building, in its 58th year as a museum, was showing its age. “Narryna is an architectural gem,” he said, “[but] we felt that we needed to refresh what we are showing the public. It was time to reveal Narryna’s quality as an early colonial merchant’s house rather than it just being a venue for a collection.”

Detailed investigation of the drawing room’s original joinery, plasterwork and fittings provided crucial evidence that guided a range of rare Tasmanian heritage skills in the recreation of original elements.

Narryna’s drawing room fireplace surround, installed about 1840, had been marble and the uneven floor had been chiselled out to accommodate it. This gave us the original profile where the hearth was flanked by pillars mounted on blocks, echoing the portico at the front of the house. The marble mantelpiece was removed about 1946 when Narryna became a medical facility. The reproduction mantelpiece was made in pine by Tony Colman, a furniture restorer for TMAG.

The recreated fireplace has been marbled (ie, painted to resemble white Carrara marble) by artist and master painter, John Murphy, known as The Trompe, working with Pelham Painters, a specialist Hobart painting and decorating

business. Murphy hails from Yorkshire, England, and became versed in 19th century *trompe l’oeil* effects through his involvement in the restoration of Ayers House, Adelaide. Hobart has been his home for the past 15 years. TMAG found him through his work at Port Arthur’s Separate Prison.

Narryna’s joinery is a combination of pine and cedar, and so intended to be painted. Between 1840 and about 1925, it was grained, a faux finish, emulating timbers such as oak and bird’s eye maple. The Narryna bird’s eye maple graining was also carried out by John Murphy with a panel of the original left on view.

For Narryna’s drawing room, Alan Townsend reproduced a wallpaper from Summerhome in Moonah, one of Tasmania’s intact historic properties, built in 1844, and an archive of Tasmanian domestic life of that era. The wallpaper resembles a silk held in place by cords and decorative rosettes. As an English version of a

French wallpaper, it is in the tradition of Pompeian wall decorations commissioned by the Empress Josephine from Percier & Fontaine for the Château de Malmaison outside Paris in the early 1800s. Townsend spent many hours refining the four subtly different shades of grey to achieve the highly illusionistic effect. He was so successful that many visitors to Narryna can be seen trying to smooth out the ripples in the wallpaper.

Townsend is the Heritage Officer for Clarence City Council and is involved in Southern Midlands Heritage Centre programs. His interest in historic wallpapers stems from the discovery of fragments in his 1820s Kempton home, from which he recreated a room setting. He has also recreated wallpapers for the Oatlands Gaoler’s residence and for Leo Schofield at Dysart House.

Narryna’s drawing room is the setting for a collection of Huon pine furniture assembled by George Burrows and presented to TMAG by



MONA's David Walsh. Light-coloured timbers such as Huon pine were in vogue for drawing rooms, which were regarded as feminine domains owing to the custom of ladies withdrawing from the dining room ahead of the men after dinner. The Narryna drawing room is an excellent place for studying women's history. Mrs Haig established a ladies' academy there in an attempt to support her husband through the 1840s depression. Its curriculum no doubt reflected the "feminine accomplishments" associated with the drawing room such as music, dance, elocution, romantic languages and conversation.

Narryna's faux finishes are in complete contrast with the arts and crafts aesthetic of 1920s Markree (the second Hobart house museum managed by Carlin), where the emphasis was on Tasmanian oak joinery and quality blackwood furniture. Carlin says, "It's worth seeing both places on the one day for a sense of changing tastes over 100 years."

It is. **45**



Reduced price joint tickets are available to view TMAG's house museums Narryna and Markree. Guided tours of both properties for groups can be booked. For more information:

www.tmag.tas.gov.au/narryna

www.tmag.tas.gov.au/markree

opposite top: The warm gold tones of the bird's eye maple graining enhance the gold 'cords' of the wallpaper design. A sample of the original graining has been retained on one of the door panels.

above: The beginning of the faux graining process. Murphy applied shadowing to suggest the maple's medullary rays then continued the graining lines from the original sample.

*left to right
John Murphy, aka The Trompe, graining the joinery
photographer Peter West*

Alan Townsend hanging his reproduction wallpaper above the chimneypiece. Alan cut with scissors because of the problems of damp paper and a room with few right angles.

Scott Carlin, Manager of House Museums for TMAG