

A Very Gingerbread Piece

Martha Washington's Wax and Shellwork Tableau

One-hour house tour followed by 45-minute illustrated curator's lecture.



In 1783, George Washington formally released his Revolutionary War officer corps in the New York City tavern run by Samuel Fraunces. To mark the occasion, Fraunces presented the general with a handcrafted tableau he described as a “small piece of Shell-Work which I have lately completed for Mrs. Washington purposely.” The delicate waxwork piece would survive a journey of several weeks, via ship and carriage, to reach Mount Vernon, and where it was displayed for many years before coming to Tudor Place.

The waxwork's thorough and ongoing conservation is yielding new knowledge about a popular 19th-century pastime and the culture it represented. Set in a handsome wood box, Fraunces's miniature figures depict an allegory for the Washingtons: Hector of Troy bidding his family farewell as he heads to war. The figures stand in a lush landscape of wax animals and flowers made from hundreds of tiny seashells. Recent study of the piece has revealed insights into the crafts of wax modeling and lace making, the interest in botanical specimens from the New World, and the impact of public theater and pleasure gardens in the private home in England and early America.



Tour with lecture: \$20.00 per person.

For information and to book your tour, contact Visitor Services Director Jeralynn Graham: jgraham@tudorplace.org, ph: (202) 965-0400, ext. 115.