

# Woodworking Revival at the Blacker House

*Jim Ipekjian's exquisite craftsmanship  
is replacing lost Greene and Greene treasures*

by Alec Waters

If you're an aficionado of American architecture and furniture, chances are good you've heard of The Gamble House. The national historic landmark in Pasadena, Calif., is famous for its Arts-and-Crafts furnishings as well as its architecture, and it may be the high-water mark of the Bungalow style in the United States. Designed by the Greene brothers, Charles Sumner and Henry Mather, for the Gamble family in 1908, the house has more than a dozen rooms graced by exquisite furniture.

You probably know all that. Maybe you didn't know that a year before the Gambles' house was built, the Greene brothers designed a home not far away that is even bigger and whose woodworking is every bit as impressive. Meet the Robert J. Blacker house, which sits majestically on a hill. At 12,000 sq. ft, it is about 20% larger than The Gamble House. Considering that the woodworking is on such a grand scale, it's amazing the Blacker house has received any less acclaim than its far more famous neighbor. One reason is that the Blacker house has not been open for public tours; another is a brush with disaster in the 1980s that skilled craftsmen are still trying to set right.

One of those craftsmen is Jim Ipekjian, who knows the woodworking in the Blacker house as well as anyone. He is helping to restore the home to its original glory. In an inconspicuous shop a few blocks down the road, Ipekjian is faithfully building a treasure trove of Greene and Greene reproductions (see the top photos on p. 82). As he described his work to me, it became clear that the Blacker home and its furnishings, in all their woodworking splendor, have a compelling story to tell.

## A house in need of attention

Like many homes that are pushing 90 years of age, the Blacker house is suffering from the effects of weather and neglect. The ends of the roof rafters, for example, have rotted from exposure, and the decay has spread into the roof itself.

Perhaps more disturbing than the disrepair of the structure is the remodeling and the disappearance of furnishings that have taken place under various owners. After the Blackers sold the house, the three subsequent owners made minor changes to the home. The last one sold some of the furniture and subdivided the property in

the late 1940s. Max and Marjory Hill occupied the house until about 1985. To that point, alterations had not been substantial. Then a pair of out-of-state owners had big ideas. The *Los Angeles Times* recounted the story in October 1985.

Barton English, an investor, and a partner, the late Michael Carey, an Arts-and-Crafts dealer from New York, bought the Blacker home for 12 million dollars. But they never moved in. Instead, they had all the light fixtures and several art-glass windows removed and shipped to Texas and New York City. Some pieces were sold. A few of the glass works were replaced with reproductions. A

neighbor, who noticed the front door being taken off its hinges, alerted the local historical commission, which tried unsuccessfully to halt the dismantling of antiques. The partners sold the house to the Poole family around 1987 but not before the damage was done.

## A perfect customer

The Blacker house changed hands once more. The present owners have lived in Pasadena most of their lives. They've been interested in living in a Greene brothers' house for a while. "Luckily for all of us," says Ipekjian, "they decided to purchase and restore the Blacker home."

Ipekjian sees the revitalization of the Blacker house as significant in both an historical and an architectural sense. "The clients are taking the care and spending the money to do the job right," Ipekjian says.

Repair work, which began in January 1995, has been extensive, including a complete seismic retrofit. The house is getting new rafter tails and an insulated roof, and its electrical, plumbing, heating and cooling systems also are being

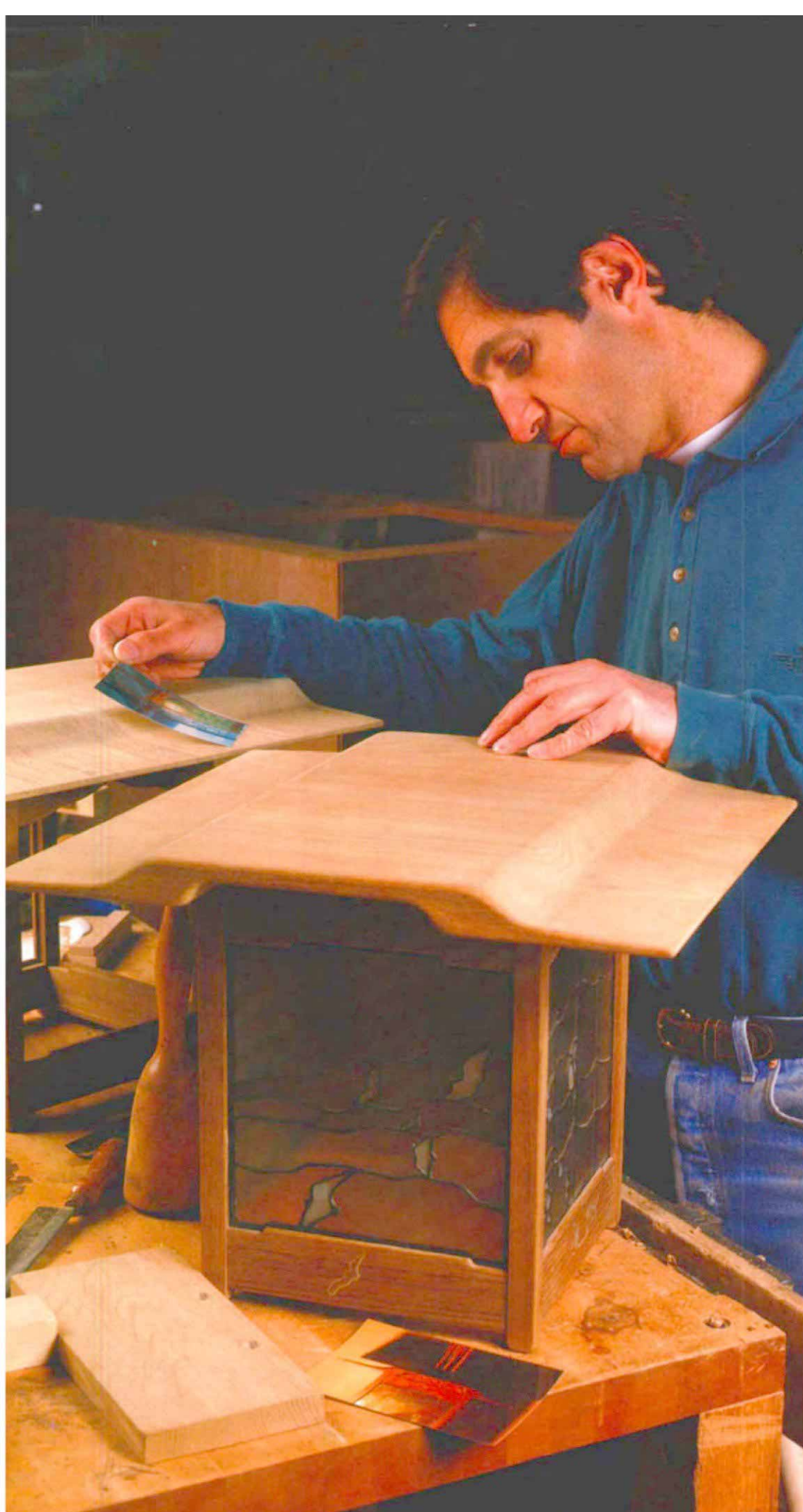
replaced or overhauled. For the most part, the alterations will be unseen or done in a way that will preserve the house's authenticity.

Only a tiny portion of the woodworking being done is not considered exact replication. For an upstairs dressing room, Ipekjian is building new cabinets adapted from other furniture in the house. The kitchen is getting reproduction cabinets, with modifications, by another contractor. Despite the number of trades involved, all the work is being done in the spirit of the original house. To make sure this happens, the owners put together a three-party team.

The planners of the Blacker restoration are Randell Makinson,



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**Comprehensive restoration**—Jim Ipekian reproduces teak lanterns for the Blacker house (left). Exterior work includes 250 new rafter tails and a new roof. A refurbished Arts-and-Crafts fireplace surround glows in afternoon sunlight (below).







**Greene furniture is exquisitely reproduced.** More than 180 pieces of inlay go into a Greenebrothers' reproduction sideboard by Jim Ipekjian (above). A mahogany side chair (far right) matches the sideboard. The flower in the chair's top rail (right) has rosewood roots, white oak twigs and leaves, padauk buds and stem, and petals of New Zealand abalone.



*Visible joinery is everywhere. The Blacker house entry (left) is graced by scarf joints and pegged mortise-and-tenon joints. Ipekjian fired new glass to create iridescent transoms. He leaded the glass to match original Tiffany glazing. An exaggerated boxjoint (above) makes a handsome cornice.*



the architect, Julia Lyman and Bill Searle, the owner's representatives, and Ipekjian, who is responsible for the woodworking, the wood finishing and the reproduction light fixtures. Ipekjian is hopeful that some furniture commissions will come his way, too.

Ipekjian and Makinson have worked together on various projects for almost eight years. Makinson is the author of *Greene and Greene, Architecture as a Fine Art* (Gibbs M. Smith, Box 667, Layton, UT 84041) and the former curator of The Gamble House. Makinson is a big plus for this job because he is able to share more than 25 years worth of knowledge about the Greenses.

Most of the Blacker house blueprints are still available. But the original drawings show little or no detail of the furniture. Ipekjian has never found any of the shop drawings. So to answer questions, he occasionally visits nearby Huntington Library to see its collection of archival photographs and drawings (see the photo on p. 80).

To better understand the importance of the Blacker house restoration, it's helpful to know about the men who built it.

### Brotherly involvement at the Blacker residence

Pasadena was a small resort community when Robert Blacker decided to build a home there in 1907. Blacker was a turn-of-the-century lumberman, which may explain his appreciation of skillful woodworking. He hired architects Myron Hunt and Elmer Grey to design a home for his property in the prestigious Oak Knoll subdivision. After seeing their initial design, Blacker was concerned the house might not withstand an earthquake. (The 1906 San Francisco quake had just occurred.)

Blacker was aware of the Greene brothers' reputation as sound structural designers, and he liked the homes they had designed in the area. So he decided to hire them as new architects for the project. At the time, the Greenses were coming into their own as architects, trying new details and including crafted wooden elements in their work. Influenced by the Arts-and-Crafts movement, particularly the furniture of Gustav Stickley, the Greenses raised the level of craftsmanship by adding Oriental motifs and subtly textured surfaces to their designs. (For more about the Greene and Greene style, see *FWW* #106, pp. 67-70.)

The Greenses stuck with the basic Hunt and Grey floor plan, but the Greenses totally changed the character of the house. A large overhanging roof, framed with heavy Douglas fir timbers, added shade to the surrounding porches and gardens, making the home more informal and in keeping with the hot, arid climate. Exhibiting qualities of Japanese, Swiss and Spanish Mission architecture, the exposed timbers in the Blacker house would become a hallmark of the Greenses' designs—in particular, what Makinson calls the Ultimate Bungalows, all built between 1907 and 1909.

The Greene brothers weren't the only siblings who worked on the Blacker house. If it weren't for John and Peter Hall, and the accomplished craftsmen they employed, the Greenses' visionary designs may never have left the drawing board. Whatever the Greenses designed, the Halls' workshop managed to build. In the furniture pieces, for example, the Halls hand-tooled all surfaces.

Corners and edges were rounded, and inlays were carved and shaped to give a soft, tactile feel to the wood (see the top center photo on the facing page). Charles Greene, I'm told, was particularly fond of the Halls' craftsmen. He stopped by their shop and the job site regularly to learn about their techniques and to check the progress of the work.

Ipekjian believes many of the same craftsmen employed by the Hall brothers worked on both the Blacker house and The Gamble House. "Because similar methods were used at each residence, it's logical the same craftsmen's hands performed the work. What's astonishing is the Gamble work was completed in just two years."

### Ipekjian's path follows the Greenses and the Halls

Like the Greene brothers who designed the Blacker house and the Hall brothers who built it, architect Makinson and woodworker

Ipekjian are working closely together to restore the house. They continue to be inspired by the craftsmen who worked at the Halls' workshop. "Every time I'm doing work at the Blacker house," says Ipekjian, "I notice some design or construction detail that I hadn't seen before." When I asked him what he finds most challenging about mimicking those details, he says simply, "the subtleties."

Ipekjian has worked in his present shop for almost eight years. The 5,500 sq. ft. of space includes a combined office and drawing area and a small showroom that's usually jammed with his own work as well as originals from which he takes measurements and studies details. His lumber sheds add another 2,400 sq. ft. of space, which sounds luxurious. But having a large selection of premium and figured stock—mahogany, white oak and teak—is essential for the kind of work he's doing.

The shop is equipped with vintage machinery, which he has acquired, restored or modified over the years. Like the Halls, Ipekjian uses large, basic stationary tools in the shop and mostly hand tools on the job site. But of all the tools at his disposal, he prefers his own two hands. A self-taught woodworker, Ipekjian explains that the most effective way to learn about building in the Greene and Greene style is through hands-on experience. "I am fortunate in being able to examine and touch many original pieces," says Ipekjian.

Ipekjian builds one reproduction at a time. He works between 55 and 60 hours per week, assisted by his wife, Kate. Judging from the number of pieces I saw in his shop, he gets a lot done. He doesn't consider himself fast, though he attributes production to having good tools. "It's great to be able to do all the work—except the sanding," he said.

When I asked which aspect of his work is most difficult, his collected response resonated with Greene and Greene ethics: "Nothing is hard. Some things just take longer than others." He estimates that he has between six months and a year's more work to go. "I'll bet he'll be savoring every minute of it."

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*Alec Waters is an associate editor of Fine Woodworking. Special thanks to Skip Lauderbaugh, Lon Schleining and Edward R. Bosley.*



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