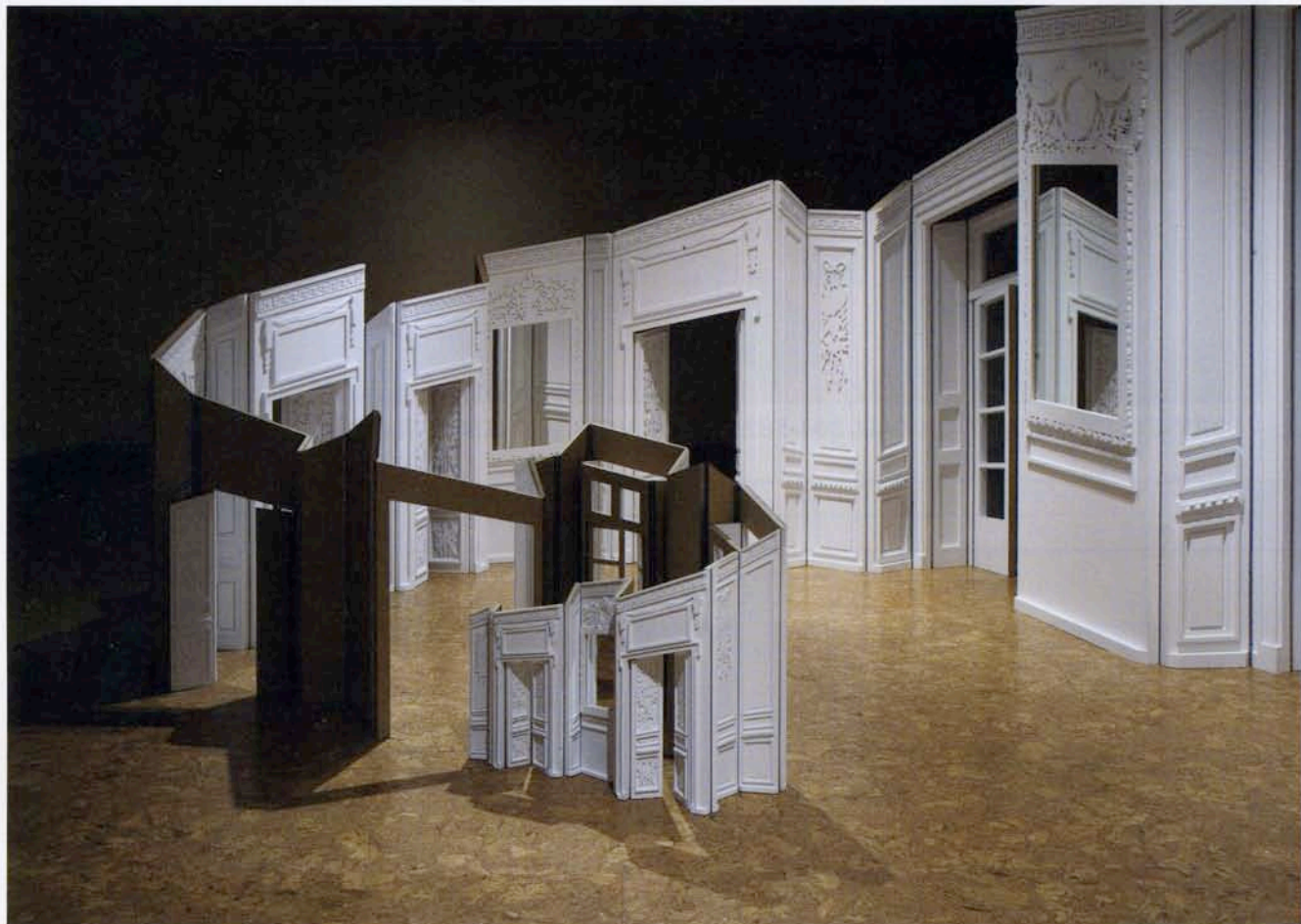


# Making It New

TWO OF THE MET'S PERIOD ROOMS GET A CONTEMPORARY REIMAGINING.



This page and opposite: Katrin Sigurdardottir, *Boiserie*, 2010 (in the north mezzanine gallery of the Metropolitan Museum of Art).

KATRIN SIGURDARDOTTIR, an artist born in Iceland in 1967, stands in one of her two installations in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, aptly titled *Boiserie*, meaning “decorative paneling.” What seems like a Japanese-style screen stolen from the set of an *Alice in Wonderland* film adaptation wraps around her. This screen is really a reinterpretation of the Hôtel de Cabris period room in the museum’s Wrightsman Galleries, a 1774 relic from Grasse, in Provence, with distinctive paneling carved, painted and gilded in Paris.

Sigurdardottir, who is the seventh artist to participate in the Met’s series of solo

exhibitions featuring the work of mid-career contemporary artists, is explaining the inspiration for her dazzling installations (on view through March 6). “This museum is so much about connecting with the past. Here, there are two convergent spaces, the one you are really in and the one you remember. This is a common thread running through my work, one that I identify with—I was born in another country than I live in.” For the mix of tourists, day-trippers and transplants lucky enough to hear the artist (a New York City transplant herself) discuss her work, this statement is greeted with “oohs,” “ahhs” and nods of



agreement—evidently they, too, have come to the Met to find both a window on the past and a new vision of the present.

This site-specific installation in the museum's northern mezzanine gallery is a chain of 82 stark white panels connected by hinges. Each panel is at a different scale—beginning with 100 percent at its opening gate (where the panel reaches to the eight-foot ceiling), and slowly decreasing to around 12.5 percent scale (just 12 inches) as it winds around the room. Sigurdardottir describes it as a “very mathematical work.” The panels are adorned with the same intricate patterns as those in the room in Grasse—smoking incense burners, laurel sprays and torches. However, the artist

has rendered the bronze-gilt filigree in pure white using a literally cutting-edge technology in which computer-guided blades incise the patterns in pieces of fiberboard that are then applied to the panels in three layers.

Sigurdardottir has added hinged doors and window frames to mimic those of the Hôtel de Cabris, but it is the mirrors implanted in some of the panels that elicit an immediate response from the museum group. Each visitor can see herself and her fellow observers clearly inside the space—something that the Met's roped-off, barely-lit period rooms could never permit. The installation sympathizes with the child-like urge to cross the velvet barricade, observe the furnishings in the round, tread on the



delicate textiles and generally party like it's 1774. The project is a meditation on "inclusion and immersion," Sigurdardottir says. "This room permits access, but with every step the scale changes and your spatial relationship changes and becomes problematic."

In the artist's other installation, situated in the middle of the Lila Acheson Wallace Wing's south mezzanine gallery, the viewer is conspicuously absent. Inspired by an angular compartment in the Hôtel de Crillon on the Place de la Concorde in Paris (1777–80), Sigurdardottir has constructed a completely enclosed white room that is accessible to the viewer only through windows. The windows are really one-way mirrors, infinitely regressing into a pristine oblivion.

The room is 85 percent scale to the Met's original. "This is the proportion of first-grade furniture," jokes Sigurdardottir,

Above: *Boiserie* (south mezzanine). Below: The Crillon Room, Paris, 1777–80, in the Met's Wrightsman Galleries for French Decorative Arts.





“but my intention was not for a child-like world.” The ornate details of the room’s Neoclassical furniture are rendered perfectly in snowflake white. Sigurdardottir explains that her decision to replace the Hôtel de Crillon’s powdery pastels and vibrantly fecund chains of decorative flowers with white was based on her need to establish the work’s sense of modernity. “Everything in the room is so ornate. But even if this work references a historical period, it’s still a contemporary work and environment,” she says. “A contemporary art space is bare and white, and I wanted to relate this to a contemporary area for art.”

The installation is as tall as the ceiling, and fluorescent lights line the tops of its walls. The light tumbles faintly into the otherwise dim exhibition space, creating the illusion of a glowing mosquito-lamp at dusk off a summerhouse’s deck. Sigurdardottir elucidates the effect: “You can notice

*Boiserie* (south mezzanine). Below: The Cabris Room, Paris, 1774, with later additions, in the Wrightsman Galleries.





Above: *Boiserie* (north mezzanine). Below: *Boiserie* (south mezzanine).



how we are directed by the lighting in a museum—we look towards the light. But these fluorescent lights are very flat and dead. There's nothing natural about them, and looking in the room, we really have no sense of day or night."

As the group prepares to scatter, the artist imparts a final thought: "There's a longing to want to go into this beautiful space. We think it's real and want to go in, but then we realize that we can't—it's a singular world, and there is nothing before or after it." While we know or can at least imagine the sparkling pasts of the Met's period rooms, their present fate, beautiful as they are, is to collect dust and be seen from far away. With her installations, Sigurdardotir has breathed new life into at least two of them. And until March 6, everything old is new—and white, and mathematically manipulated to an enlarged or shrunken scale—again. —SARAH E. FENSOM

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