

## **The East Duke Parlors**

The East Duke Building, built at the turn of the century, contains two spacious ground floor reception rooms that have played a central part in the life of Duke University. A meeting place for faculty, students, alumni and University guests, the rooms have provided a gracious environment for receptions and seminars.

The parlor on the right-hand side of the main entrance to the building was originally decorated in 1921 to honor Anna Branson, the late wife of James A. Thomas, tobacco merchant in China and close friend of the Duke family. The room was decorated with Chinese pieces including the beautiful blue rug, reflecting their interests in the Orient.

In 1937, the class of 1939 asked Mr. Karl Bock, a prominent New York City decorator and personal friend of Mrs. Mary Duke Biddle, to assist in the redecoration of the parlor. They wanted the rooms readied for Duke University's Centennial Celebration during the 1938-39 academic year. Mr. Bock maintained the Chinese pieces as the focal point of the room while adding Victorian furnishings to create the atmosphere of a Victorian sitting room. The room was dedicated in a ceremony on February 15, 1938 in which Elizabeth Shortlidge (Surla), junior class President, presented the room to President William P. Few.

Mrs. Biddle enjoyed the redecorating of the Anna Branson parlor to such an extent that she decided to undertake the development of the Alumnae Room, located just across the hall on the left-hand side of the main entrance. She asked Mr. Bock to establish a French motif, following the design of her favorite period, which they had used in her homes in New York City, Irving-on-Hudson, and Pinecrest in Durham. The Alumnae Parlor was used for three decades by members of The Woman's College for functions of every variety.

After Mrs. Biddle's death in 1960, Mr. Bock decided to honor Mrs. Biddle by refurbishing the rooms. He upgraded the Victorian room, again retaining the Chinese influence. In redoing the Alumnae room, he donated many pieces from his own collection and added several more treasures from the Duke family homes. The rooms were dedicated in honor of Mary Duke Biddle in a ceremony on March 16, 1963 presided over by Ellen Huckabee, Dean of the Woman's College. The ceremony was the final event in a symposium on women in the contemporary world attended by outstanding women from around the country, including anthropologist Margaret Mead.

In 1986, as a part of their 40th class reunion, under the leadership of Dorothy Lewis Simpson, a member of the Board of Trustees a group of alumnae from The Woman's College class of '46 made additional upgrades. This group included Betty Ann Taylor Behrens, Margaret Otto Bevan, Martha McGowan Black, Mary Ann Cassady Crommelin, Cornelia I. DeVan Hargett, Norine E. O'Neill Johnson, Barbara Gosford Kinder, Willa Lee Church Koran, Elaine I. Rose, and Elinore K. Nicholl Wren. The Mary Duke Biddle Foundation provided additional funds, enabling the project to be completed for the class reunion on November 7, 1986. At that time, a brief ceremony was held to rededicate the rooms to the women they honor and to reaffirm the place of the rooms in the life of the university.

In 1988, as a part of its celebration in Duke's sesquicentennial year, the Women's Studies Program honored twelve women students, faculty, and administrators who established unprecedented firsts as women at Duke and expanded the roles of women within the institution by adding their portraits to the walls of the Victorian parlor. In 1991, the portraits of the University's first women graduates in Engineering were added to the collection. Biographical information about these fourteen women and their achievements is contained in the "Portraits of Women Firsts" information sheet available in the parlor.

The "Women Firsts" project was made possible by a research project in the Women's Studies Office, conducted by Dr. Jean O'Barr and Melissa Hendrix, through funding by Elizabeth Shortlidge Surla, now retired in the Durham area.

A portrait of Mary Duke Biddle hangs in the French parlor; a photograph of Anna Branson sits on the marble table of the Victorian parlor. Plaques documenting the history are hung in each room.