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# Second Interview with Ann Davis Thomas

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# 2nd Interview with Ann Davis Thomas

Conducted by Meghan McCluskey
November 9, 2005

**1. Frequently, one finds a combination of Louis XIV, XV, and XVI, along with Tudor and other English styles all in one ship. Do you have any idea why ships done by other designers followed similar decorating schemes?**

Not Tudor, Georgian. That was later, when they were working on the RAC [Royal Automobile Club]. To begin with, because of his training at the École, and his association with Mèwes, they both worked in what they called it the Louis Ritz style, which actually in the Ritz was, all Louis XVI; this was Mèwes idea that it had to be all one French Louis style; whereas in doing the Ritz in Paris he used a mixture of all three Louis styles. Then when it came to the RAC, there is a bigger mixture. I have quite a lot of materials on the old war office buildings on Pall Mall that were pulled down to build the RAC, which were in the George III style, and my father may have felt a sort of guilt about pulling them down. He took the ceiling of one of them and put it into the RAC. It's probably a copy of it, it's not exactly the same, we have photos of the original ceiling. I'll have to look up the name of the architect of the well known Georgian who did one of these houses, most of them were done for the brothers of George III. I think that got him interested in the Georgian style. Later when he got back from the war he did buildings like the Fred Needlestreet building based on Italian models, so he was always bringing in new things. I don't think he ever did anything in the tudor style.

**2. Did your father ever mention his feelings about English styles; Tudor, Elizabethan, Jacobean, etc. as opposed to French styles?**

I don't think so. I think what he did was to see how various styles were appropriate to the type of building he was doing. If he was doing a bank he would look to Florence or Rome for Renaissance banks as an appropriate model. That would have been his way rather than putting one against the other. In his second period of work after the first war, he did a lot of work in the city, he became very impressed by the work of Wren and felt that one had to accommodate or fit in with what there was in the area. So I don't think it was ever very academic. But he was always very concerned with the plan; the inside of the building; how is it appropriate for what the function of the building is. He wrote an essay, "The Plan is the Thing".

**3. In your father's article on ship design, he mentions a lot of work by other designers. Was he extremely competitive? How did he feel about the work done by others?**

No not at all. Cunard wanted him to do the work on two of the other liners, the *Mauretania* and the *Lucitania.* He was then working with Mèwes on the German Liners and they refused to release him. So they then went to these other people [designers] and he lists them in the article. No, he was far from being competitive at all. Then about

eight or nine years later when the *Aquitania* came up the Germans did release him and he was able to do it. That article is indicative of his generosity.

**4. Do you know of any other contemporary designers working in the same time that he respected?**

Lutyens was a great friend. His greatest friend, Herbert Austin Hall, who was doing work in the city in the west end, was probably his closest friend. Oliver Hill was a great friend who worked in a very different kind of manner. But no, there was no competitiveness and there was a lot of interaction, particularly with Lutyens. Richardson was also a very great friend. There were many of them. They used to come around the house, I was dangled on Lutyens' knee and so on.

**5. Did he actually see the interiors of all of these ships he mentioned?**

Of course the *Aquitania* he saw, and he would have seen the German ships; the Mèwes ships that he mentioned. Perhaps not the *Admiral von Tirptitz*; the Mèwes ships, the *Bismarck* and the *Admiral von Tirpitz* were completed just before the war and never actually sailed. But he would certainly have seen the *Vaterland* and the *Imperator*. With Mèwes, he was not allowed by the Cunard Hamburg arrangement, to work together on the later German ships. They worked on the earlier ones, the *Amerika* and the *Kaiserin Auguste Victoria*; but the later ones when he was doing the *Aquitania* there was this arrangement between Cunard and the Hamburg line that they were not to work together. But once when he was working there was a letter in the Cunard file in which he says he has to go over to Germany and see something there.

**6. Do you know if he saw the *Lucitania* and the *Mauretania*.**

I don't know. I think he would have seen them from the photos but he wouldn't necessarily have been on them. He was so busy with the *Aquitania* that I do not think he had time to do anything else.

**7. Was the *Queen Mary* the only project on which your father used modern design/architecture?**

Yes I think so. And he hated doing it. He didn't like the style. I always thought that the original American architect perhaps originated the style but there's no indication that he did. I always thought that he [Ben Morris] was much younger than my father; but he was a bit older. They were both at the École though I think Ben Morris never completed his course but he was there more or less at the same time as my father. But they were in different Ateliers. So this has always been a bit of confusion because I thought that he originated or he worked in that style. I'm sure that he did, he did work on a building which I'm still trying to find pictures of in New York; which was the headquarters of the Cunard line in America. It was a very excellent Beaux-Arts building and it was that success which made Cunard accept him as their first architect. And then I think he found that he could not manage the practice on both sides of the Atlantic and he suggested that

my father work with him on the *Queen Mary*. Again there is quite extensive correspondence with Cunard in which my father says 'well Ben Morris has just come over but gone back' that suggests that he wasn't doing as much as one thought he might have been doing. But I don't think there was any ill feeling or anything. In our house at home we had a very nice sketch that Ben Morris did of the *Queen Mary* under construction, but I don't know where it is now.

**8. Was Davis a very traditional man in ways outside of architecture? If he were still designing today, would he be using computers or would he stick to traditional drafting?**

That would be very hard to say I think. For instance his old house in Mayfair is sort of in the Georgian style. He had a very open mind and in the last year of his life and he was in a very severe depression, I took him on the backs of the tents to look at the Festival of Britain, which would have been very advanced; the dome of Discovery and all this stuff, and I asked him what he thought of it, and he said 'I honestly can't give you any opinion. It's as though it's architecture on the moon'. And that was his attitude; he always considered things. For instance, when I went to the Louvre once and saw the Victory of Samothrace, he said 'you know why it's such a success, because she hasn't got any arms. But she has wings, and wings are arms. That's why angels and things are all wrong because they have an extra pair of arms or wings.' A satyr is fine—the body of a human and legs of a goat. But a centaur is all wrong because you have two torsos—a man's torso and a horse's torso. This is the way he looked at things.

**9. How was your father raised? What were his parents like? Religions, traditions?**

I know very little about it. They were both dead before I was born and three of his four brothers were dead. I think that his father was a merchant, they were both Jewish. His father came from Canada and his mother from Australia. They were a very civilized family. They lived in Brussels a lot of the time, they left England when he was ten and they moved to Brussels when his youngest brother was four. His youngest brother was a very well known concert pianist. It seems to have been a very civilized family. We've been to the house where he was born and where he lived in London, which was in Leinster Square which was a late Georgian or early Victorian Terrace house and it had very steep stairs. I really kick myself because I know very little about his family. I think the loss of so many of them must have been very hard on him. His youngest brother Eddie did live after the war and I think I met him and his wife, then he died. They seemed to have a heart condition in the family. But they were all part of a very intelligent Jewish enclave, and this is something which he kept to himself. A lot of his friends were Jewish but he didn't mix this up with his English friends.

**10. Were you raised Jewish?**

No.
He did work on two synagogues in London after the first war. I don't know if he was the primary architect. One church that he did is a very tremendous success; it was an

Armenian Church [St. Sarkis Armenian Apostolic Church] in the square in Kensington which he did for Calouste Gulbenkian**,** a very rich oil man. It's a wonderful church. What shows how very scholarly he was is that he took a bell tower of an early church in Armenia and almost transported it to Kensington with all the detail and everything on it. The thriving Armenian congregation was offered a much bigger church but they wanted to keep their services there. Again, he built a model that worked extremely well for the purposes of the building.

**11. You and your father were in England during the abdication crisis of Edward VIII and the American divorcee Wallis Simpson. Do you remember following that as it developed?**

I was probably in school then. And he may have been in the hospital for his depression. I can't remember that being of any concern. We both were in the Blitz in the war together in London and he was very concerned about what was going to happen after the war to the city because it had been so badly destroyed. He did a wonderful drawing of St. Paul's, which had been cleared by the bombing and all the buildings around it, and what he thought it should have been like. Of course it wasn't built because all the buildings were put back. He drew up a plan for the city of London because he knew it would take forever to be rebuilt and there would be a lot of arguments. He thought it was a waste of this valuable space that was full of weeds and it could be used as a temporary area until a proper design could be made. He took it to the city planners; he worked on it for quite a long time and they said 'well Mr. Davis this is fine, a very good idea. Now go out and raise the money for it'. And he said 'you are rich, why don't you raise the money'. Of course nothing was done. Then early in the war, when it was decided to tear down all the railings around the parks which kept them safe at night, to make ammunition, he said it was terrible. The amount of metal that would be provided was very slight and it would cause damage to the park and he was absolutely right. They've really never recovered. So he was into what was going on, particularly as it affected architecture.

**12. You said that your father was hospitalized. Can you tell me about that?**

Yes, he was manic depressive and I've inherited it from my father. I think it produced some of his tremendous waves of creativity like the Ritz. And it also produced very severe depression. After Mèwes' death in 1914 he enlisted in the army in the first war; and we've now found out from Cunard correspondence that he [Davis] was in the intelligence because he spoke French as well if not better than English. He apparently had a terrible experience in France and was hospitalized at the big hospital [Lockhart Hospital] in Scotland for shell shock and was there for many months; when he came out he was nursed by his friends. Then he started up another really great period of creativity with banks in London, the *Queen Mary*, and some houses. I don't think he was in shell shock, but he was in areas of France when the Germans launched their last big attack. People have said architecturally that he was never the same again after the first great period of buildings. But the second wave was great in other ways. The whole atmosphere after the first war was not so much luxury, it had calmed down. But he did these great banks, one of which won the bronze medal; he did the Armenian Church and

the *Queen Mary* which he hated doing and had a breakdown doing it. I don't know of any other architect that suffered from this inherited condition. At the very end of his life he came out of his post *Queen Mary* depression and did some other work. He did a very pretty bank for Barkley's which is his last building and is still there as something else. You can follow his career partly though this condition which he may have inherited from his mother, and passed on to me, so I have understood it better.

**13. You mentioned that your father served in the army…**

An architectural historian pointed me towards correspondence between he and the chairman of the Cunard Line, about this Cunard building which he'd been working with another group of architects in Liverpool, saying that he was leaving to join the army. Then there was some of his letters to the chairman describing how he was in the intelligence and that he'd been up to the front line. So for me all this research pays off when you find things you don't know about. I think that I was saying that he was in the hospital at the same time as two well known poets Siegfried Sassoon and someone much more famous. But I don't think he ever met them, it was a very big hospital. Lutyens didn't serve in the army but he was almost the official war cemetery designer during the war. And it was very hard for him because a lot of his clients fought and died in the war.

**14. In many architectural partnerships, Adler and Sullivan, Burnham and Root, one partner was the businessman and one was the designer. Was that the case with Mèwes and Davis?**

No, absolutely not. You simply cannot tell who did what. They both worked so closely together that you really can't tell. Creatively you can occasionally find what Mèwes did. There's a book written by Cesar Ritz' wife, which is a very nice book about Cesar Ritz, and it describes how Mèwes walked out of the room with the Ritz' there, leaving his plans behind. They were all the plans for the festoons of the grand chandelier in the dining room. Ritz and some of the people there said 'oh my goodness this is going to cost Mèwes a fortune and they called it Mèwes' folly. And then there is Christoph that I think still makes Mèwes' silverware. In my father's sketches and notes to Christoph in French, there are drawings of the silverware. They both worked closely together and there was nobody who managed the finances at all. I imagine they were managed by the directors and people like that. And you simply cannot tell which is Mèwes and which is Davis. I think that in the RAC you can tell a bit more of Davis simply because as you pointed out, the Georgian influence which wouldn't have been Mèwes. In the RAC there are a lot of French influences as well. The fact that they both studied under Pascal—the same Atelier, they both loved French things and collected engravings, it was a very close relationship.

**15. What materials did you get at the Musee d'Orsay in Paris?**

They had quite a lot, well not very much on Mèwes, particularly Mèwes' earlier work in France and Alsace which would be very hard to get. They did have some very interesting material on the French, Paris exhibition in 1900 and the sketches which Mèwes did for

the Petit Palais and the Grand Palais; which looking at them, I think my father did. Mèwes took my father out the École and brought him there to be his draftsman because he was a very good draftsman. And if you see Mèwes' drawings, they are quite a different style. This is the sort of material they gave me. I gave them a lot of material that didn't have which they copied and now have.

**16. Why did you go to South Africa?**

My father died very suddenly and I was wondering what to do and London was very ernst, dark, and gloomy. A young man was getting engaged to someone else. I did have one or two cousins from my mother's side in South Africa. I went out to dinner with a friend one night and she told me to go, so I did and it was a very great experience. I was working at the British Council at the time and I simply walked into my boss' office and told him I was leaving in a week. I went to my father's lawyers and told them I wanted money for the trip and off I went.

**17. How long did you travel?**

For about five months or so, then I'd met David in the mean time and he told me to come back, so I came back and we got married and immediately went to over to the states to Cambridge where he spent two years at the Harvard business school.

**18. Where there any particular places that your father loved? Argentina?**

I don't think he ever went to South America at all. I think their [Mèwes and Davis] partner did work there. They had a partner called Robert Francis and he was a very good architect and he did work there for Mèwes and I think my father helped him. But my father loved France, he simply loved it. And he loved Italy. He spent his honeymoon in Egypt and in Algeria and he liked the Middle East too.

Mèwes had a very international practice. He designed a hotel in St. Petersburg which I don't think was ever built but we've got drawings of it. He designed hotels in Spain; of course he did the Ritz in Madrid which is still a very successful hotel. At Plymouth again, I'm still trying to get a lot of drawings from them. It's a wonderful hotel and it was proposed by King Alfonso XIII. He felt there should be a good hotel in Madrid. It's also the first steel frame building in Spain. He did hotels in Hamburg, Germany. They're things that I still don't know enough about. He died quite young, suddenly after an operation; probably from overwork. He had poor health anyway. He was a widower with 3 or 4 children and it was one of the great losses of my father's life when he died.

**The one great gap in my research, or one of many, is how the Ritz got to be a steel frame building. Who suggested it? Whether Daniel Burnham was consulted. Which of the directors proposed this. I can find actually no indication. Who decided this? The directors had done the Carlton which was the hotel before the Ritz. It was not built from the ground up, it was already there. Mèwes and Davis did the interiors. My father, at a

very young age did a lot of the interior work. I've got letters from him to the Director's secretary. They terminated his commission and then they put him on again. But that was a different thing. The Ritz was entirely from the ground up. The directors were the same as for the Carlton and we know who they were; they were men of the court and well known in society. But who suggested the steel frame? And who got Sven Bylander in? Now I haven't yet been to Bylander Waudell which is still the office and see if they have any idea.

Burnham worked on Selfridges, the big department store. I think he worked initially and somebody else took over. That was just after the Ritz. Selfridge himself went to the opening dinner at the Ritz so there was some knowledge and connection. But it was such a major development, the use of the steel frame, that somebody must have suggested it, and got the name of Sven Bylander. I just don't know who it was. It doesn't seem to be likely that it was the architects, but it might have been. My father went over to New York on the *Hamburg Amerika* ship on the insistence of Mèwes. I think about then, while the Ritz was in progress, or just before, to see what it was like to travel on a liner. In his photo album, there are photos of him on the Hamburg in what has been identified to me as New York Harbor. He looks a very young man, and it is very likely that he went into New York, I don't know for sure. And perhaps saw the Burnham Flatiron building, which other people have said remind them of the Morining Post building. This is on the same kind of site as the Morning Post, which I think was done in 1908.