

BY CLAYTON DEKORNE

A Clear Understanding of American Trimwork

Few books about interior woodwork make sense of traditional design styles as well as *Traditional American Rooms* by Brent Hull and Christine G.H. Franke. The first 27 pages are worth the \$35 book price (from Amazon and others) for their concise encapsulation of the history of traditional architectural styles and lucid translation of the language of classical architecture. This language is what finish carpenters use to describe classical trim and period house styles, and what I, for one, haven't always used accurately. Any of us who ever refer to "colonial" house designs, or invoke Georgian and Federal style, or discuss the parts and pieces of the cornices, wainscot, and baseboard that we install, owe it to ourselves to read the informative explanations that Hull and Franke provide.

The history of the origins of classical architecture occupy only a few pages at the front of the book. It's an important introduction for trim carpenters to know. This is not a dry, academic treatment of history, but a succinct and direct tracing of the path from Vitruvius and Palladio—Roman authors who codified the classical orders—to the British architects who influenced Early American builders. For those, like myself, who have been hearing snippets of this history, it's a valuable synopsis. For me, it's the first time I've understood

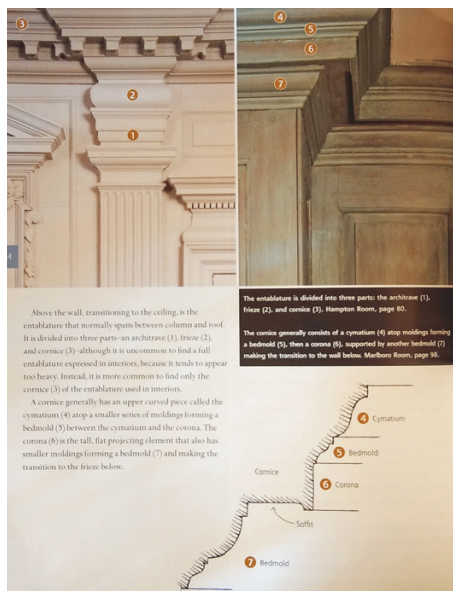
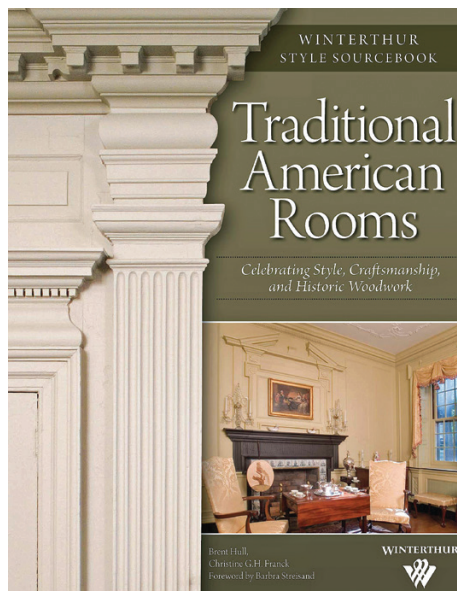
those Early American pattern books—the numerous Dover editions that many a carpenter has been inclined to pick up, such as Asher Benjamin's *American Builder's Companion* and William Ware's *The American Vignola*—that are fun to look at but not easy to apply to trimwork. This history addresses those, but even better than fitting them into the context of architectural history, Hull and Franke provide us with a simple, clear way to study the parts and pieces of a range of traditional American interiors.

After the 27 pages of introduction, *Traditional American Rooms* looks at each of the rooms in the vast museum mansion that is the Winterthur Museum outside Wilmington, Del. This is one of the buildings, along with Carpenters Hall and Independence Hall in Philadelphia, or the First Unitarian Church in Providence, R.I., that every carpenter should visit at least once to get a three-dimensional immersion into our traditional American building roots. The Winterthur estate was created by Henry Francis du Pont, who collected rooms, dismantling them from 17th- and 18th-century homes all along the East Coast and reassembling them in his sprawling 175-room ancestral home.

Hull and Franke look at a crisp selection of these rooms, providing photographs and section drawings of the various trim parts.

Their mission is tightly focused on demonstrating the classical language that they explain upfront, giving us a coherent understanding of how cornices, panels, and architraves in these select rooms are assembled and detailed. With parts numbered on photographs and corresponding drawings (see sample page at left), we are given a clear map to understand the terrain of the interior of the room, and once we get comfortable as readers with the terminology, quickly become well-versed not only in reading the room but also in comparing the styles in different rooms.

I found myself radically altering how I understood the more complex trimwork, so it no longer seems intimidating thinking of how it might be reproduced or adapted for a new space. This was a wonderful transformation in my thinking, and one that I hope many other carpenters can embrace.



The cover (above left) and a sample page explaining the parts of a classically designed wall (above right) from *Traditional American Rooms* by Brent Hull and Christine G.H. Franke. If you are to buy one book on traditional trimwork, this should be it.