A Collaboration between Clay, Latrobe

Description

By Wendy Bright

Despite Henry Clay's implementation of designs by the most progressive professional architect in America, his substantial Kentucky home was popularly perceived as being unpretentious and dignified as its owner.

"The mansion itself is a plain two story brick building with wings, without the appearance of parade or pretension," a contemporary wrote "…for all the world, without knowing its occupant or owner, it is just the spot one would take for the home of an intelligent and thriving farmer."

But Latrobe's plans for Ashland's wings were anything but plain and uncomplicated. While his style was unornamented and deceptively simple, it was based on complex concepts. He had brought sophisticated European ideas and extensive experience as an architect and engineer to bear on his American designs. Henry Clay wanted to exploit these in the creation of his home.

Architectural historians Fazio and Snadon note that Clay tellingly made one major adaptation to Latrobe's plans, a change that exemplifies Clay's very public style of hospitality: Latrobe had originally designed "four, giant three-part 'Venetian' windows" for the rear façade of the house which faced the pleasure lawn, with "small single windows and loggia-like arcades" on the entrance façade. Latrobe probably believed a "more closed character" was appropriate for the front as larger windows were for the "'garden front.'"

But Henry Clay wanted to reverse that, instead locating the four giant windows on the front façade and the smaller openings to the back. He oriented his house – its public face – to the outside by situating the largest windows in front. Clay's home was, in more ways than one, oriented toward the public.

For more on Henry Clay and Ashland, go to http://www.henryclay.org/

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