

COLLECTIONS NEWS: CHRISTOPHER MURPHY, JR. DRAWING
HE WAS "SAVANNAH WHEN SAVANNAH WASN'T COOL . . ."

Last year when Pat Kelly and I attended the Christopher Murphy exhibition at the Telfair Academy we were struck by the straightforward, unsentimental, views of Savannah in the 1920's and 30's. Included in the exhibition were scenes depicting the riverfront, abodes both modest and grand, country as well as town scenes of Savannah and the low country. There were a few portraits in pastels or oil of Savannahians – again straightforward in the muted costumes of the era. [The proverbial “good tailoring well-worn” and pearls – I could almost hear a Gershwin tune and smell the cigarettes.] But mostly the exhibit contained etchings rendered with architectural sensibility. For the student, the show offered a take on the Barbara Mandrell song, *I Was Country When Country Wasn't Cool*. Only Murphy's was “Savannah when Savannah wasn't cool.” Literally, in the days before air conditioning and the Interstate highway, Savannah was a hard scrabble seaport with a collection of architectural survivors being saved from neglect.



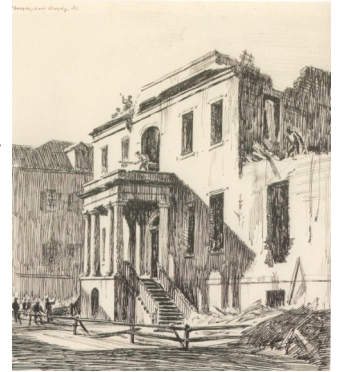
Davenport House, Entrance. Ca. 1927.
Graphite on paper.

Being “cool” was not on Murphy's mind - he was documenting what he must have sensed could become a hot topic. His work conveys a sense of place at a time when our old city was in jeopardy through the indiscriminate hand of “progress.”

For the preservationist his work is a true gift and why, when given the opportunity, the museum acquired its own Murphy drawing depicting the front façade of the house in 1927. In June the DH purchased *Entrance, Davenport House* (Detail), which is an original graphite drawing on paper. Soon it will hang in the hall as a reminder of a time before the preservation movement when Savannah was losing its architectural character willy-nilly.

A Savannah native, Murphy provides an artist's impression of our city pre-preservation movement and beyond. He understood its distinct architectural environment was threatened as his drawing *In the Name of Progress* conveys. It shows a great early 19th century urban house being dismantled for “who knows what” . . . a parking lot perhaps. Over his long career, spanning from the late 1910s until his death in 1973, Savannah was his changing constant. He lived to see “the beautiful woman with a dirty face” city give rise to Historic Savannah Foundation and become posed for tourist destination stardom. The 2009 ex-

hibit and accompanying catalog the Telfair put together entitled Picturing Savannah: the Art of Christopher A. D. Mur-



In the Name of Progress. Picturing Savannah, p. 70

phy was the first retrospective of the artist and focused on views throughout his lifetime of his muse, Savannah, even though he captured many other places.

In the 1920s early in his career, Murphy produced a set of drawings he titled “**Five Beautiful Doorways at Savannah**”, one showing the Davenport House entrance, thinking they would sell well to tourists, but they did not prove to be profitable. [Maybe he would have appreciated Ben and how he continually maneuvers the fickle fingers of retail in our tourist destination!] In 1947, Savannah: Etchings and Drawings by Christopher Murphy, Jr. was published with text by Walter Charlton Hartridge [whose name should be included in every trolley tour as a founder of HSF but I guess “the seven ladies and Walter Hartridge” is too many words . . .] Savannah, which is out of print but which can be viewed in the Georgia Room of the Live Oak Public Library, has many of

the same images which appeared in the Telfair exhibit including the view of the DH entrance. And, interestingly, both images – the one in the exhibit catalog and the Savannah book – show the DH front door with the hinges on the left and the image the DH now owns shows them on the right. Maybe the door used to be hung differently, maybe the prints in the catalogs are reversed or maybe there was an artistic reason for the variation. And, he was used to making variations of the same subject as he wrote, “*It is common practice with me to use the same subject in a variety of ways.*”

A son of artist parents from a middle class background, Murphy was not a hobbyist - he was a serious professional artist. As a child he was exposed to art in the home and studied art formally at the Arts Students League in New York in the 1920s. Becoming interested in architectural drawing he studied with Lloyd Warren, director of the Beaux-Art Institute of Design. He mastered the involved process of print making. Though DH views in the Telfair show and the Savannah book are engravings, what the DH purchased is not an engraving but an actual drawing from the artist’s folio – which is a rare and wonderful thing.

Scholar Feay Shellman Coleman offers that the DH image, which appears in the Telfair exhibit and which is very similar to the one the museum owns, shows his development as an artist, writing, “*Murphy took a different, less straight-forward approach to depicting a Federal doorway for the etching **Entrance, Davenport House** (then the view of Oglethorpe and Drayton Streets). In this composition, he introduced a strong diagonal element that extends from the bottom of the stairs at the lower left along the edge of the shadow on the upper right side of the composition. The diagonal draws the viewer’s eye to the elliptical fanlight. . . . Murphy repeats rectangular forms in the shutters, door and window frames. But in **Entrance, Davenport House**, he invents more subtle variations by placing the door frame off-center and showing the window shutters in a variety of positions. Similarly strong contrasts of light and dark lend an asymmetrical balance to **Entrance, Davenport House**.*”

Recently the Davenport House Committee agreed to an addendum to its Collections Policy to clarify what the museum collects in addition to the items on Isaiah Davenport’s inventory. It reads: “***The Davenport House Museum’s collection***

shall include artifacts related to residential history and the institutional history of the house in addition to artifacts related to the its role in the preservation movement.” Our new drawing fits squarely with our intention to understand the house’s role in the preservation movement as an artist’s subject, a survivor and a player in the movement.

One hundred years after Isaiah Davenport’s death his home continued to move people. Its stately but neglected façade inspired Christopher Murphy, who has been called “*Savannah’s Artist*.” The artist, his work and the house all played a role in the storied tale of the birth of historic preservation in the city - something Isaiah could not have imagined!

Jamie Credle