Upon entering the Warne Ballroom, members and guests might be forgiven for thinking they have wandered into an antechamber of the palace at Versailles. After all, the 18th-century France of Louis XV was inspiration for the ballroom designed for Mrs. Townsend at the turn of the 20th century. Although the architecture was not altered, over the years the beauty of the room had been diminished by wear, neglect and questionable repairs, until a major restoration was undertaken in 2011-12. According to Andrea F. Schoenfeld, vice-president of the Cosmos Club Historic Preservation Foundation (CCHPF), “It took 6,000 linear feet of gold, $2 million, eight and a half months of work [exclusive of the draperies] and six years of planning to restore the Warne Ballroom to its former glory as one of Washington’s finest Gilded Age salons.” [Cosmos Club Bulletin, March 2012.]

Since the ballroom reopened in February 2012, the meticulous restoration has dazzled visitors. Now, it has been recognized with a District of Columbia Award for Excellence in Historic Preservation in the Stewardship category. Beginning in 2003, the District’s Historic Preservation Office has sponsored an annual awards program to honor outstanding preservation projects and exceptional contributions by individuals and organizations in support of historic preservation in the District. This year’s presentations were made on May 23 at DAR Constitution Hall.

A panel of District historic preservation officials and outside experts
selects award recipients from submitted nominations. For the Warne project, the co-nominees were the Cosmos Club Historic Preservation Foundation, which provided the leadership and the bulk of the finances; the Cosmos Club, owner of the mansion; Whiting-Turner Contracting Company, general contractor; John Milner Associates Preservation, architects for the restoration; and John Canning & Company, the principal contractor for architectural finishes (painting, gilding, plaster, woodwork and floor restoration).

The nomination package, which is available on the Club’s website, included a 24-page heavily illustrated document that opens with historical notes about Mrs. Townsend’s showpiece and architects Carrère and Hastings and designer Jules Allard & Fils, who created it for her. It also describes the extensive research done by CCHPF and the experts they engaged both before the project was authorized by the Club’s Board of Management and throughout the restoration process. Black and white photos taken about 1910 are juxtaposed with color images of completed work. The magnitude of the challenges encountered are described in words and in close-up photographs. Just a few are mentioned here.

The artwork, some reworked 18th century paintings and some thought to be original to the ballroom, had been dimmed by grime and smoke. All were carefully cleaned and, where needed, inpainted.

Water leaks had also damaged both the flat plaster areas and some of the intricate plaster work. Past attempts to patch the damage had been crudely done; thus, replication of some of the design was required.

Bronze radiator paint had been used to cover some areas where gilding had worn away; not all of the paint could be removed. Where possible, the gilding was restored but in other areas new gold leaf had to be applied.

Two happy coincidences added to the splendor of the restoration. First, one of the original chandeliers was returned to the Club in sufficiently good condition to allow it to be restored. Its mate was replicated in a workshop in France. Then, a 12-foot repeat of the original fabric for the draperies was located. It was used as the master for looming the fabric in France. Historic photographs guided the hand-embroidering in India. (See April 2016 Bulletin for details of this multi-year project.)

Although the restoration of the architectural finishes and paintings was completed in early 2012, the award nomination was held until the draperies were installed in 2016 so that the unusual history of their production could be included.

At the awards ceremony, Andrea F. Schoenfeld accepted the award on behalf of the Foundation, and J. Stephen Huebner ('73), who oversaw the ballroom restoration on behalf of the Club, accepted the Cosmos Club’s award certificate.