The Art of American Furniture
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A Portfolio of Furniture in the Collections of

The Bowdoin College Museum of Art

PHOTOGRAPHS BY WILLIAM POOLEY

COVER BY JOHN McKEE

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Furniture is new to the purview of Art History, but it should not be. The Renaissance made strong distinctions between artists and craftsmen. Before that era, the craftsman, painter, architect and sculptor stood side by side. In early fourteenth-century Siena, the man who built the frame for the Maesta, Duccio, who painted it, Giovanni Pisano, who designed the facade of the cathedral and Nicola Pisano, who carved the pulpit, were all considered equal participants in art. The main difference, as exemplified above, is that the names of the painters, architects and sculptors are known. Most craftsmen remain more anonymous. Few creators of the Decorative Arts have been the subject of monographic study.

For American furniture the problem is more complex. One must not only contend with a certain prejudice against furniture as works of art, but also deal with the notion that the American arts belong in a category even more removed from art than the European Decorative Arts. Nevertheless, furniture can be treated with the same art historical methods as painting, architecture and sculpture. It is, in fact, a partner with the other forms of art. In many cases Decorative Art is the leading avenue for stylistic development. New tendencies often appear first in furniture. It could be argued that the origins of the Renaissance are found in the revival of classical decorative cosmati work in the thirteenth century. (Some believe Giotto himself began as a cosmati worker in Rome.) The paintings by Agostino, Annibale and Lodovico Carracci explore new ground, but their decorations in the Farnese Palace forecast the Baroque to an even greater degree. In our own times, Art Nouveau and Abstract Art appear first as styles in the Decorative Arts and furniture.

American furniture before 1840 is basically a reflection of prevailing European styles. Native propensities toward greater simplification of surfaces and contours appear in American furniture. Some entirely indigenous designs occur, but the art of American furniture is best studied in relation to European styles. To accomplish this, European furniture has been juxtaposed to the American pieces. Furthermore, European furniture designs revealing the origins of many ornamental details and overall forms which appear in American furniture between 1650 and 1850 have been included. Some of the designs by Thomas Chippendale, George Hepplewhite, Thomas Sheraton and George Smith were used very consciously in America. Chippendale's Di-
rector may have arrived soon after its first publication in 1754 (possibly in New York) but it is certain that it arrived by 1763 when the English cabinetmaker, Thomas Affleck, brought a copy of the 1762 edition to Philadelphia. The Works in Architecture by James and Robert Adam was ordered by Benjamin Franklin even before it was published. Thomas Seymour, the renowned cabinetmaker who lived in Portland, Maine, and Boston owned a copy of Sheraton’s Drawing Book of 1791. Plates from Smith’s 1826 edition of The Cabinet-maker and Upholsterers Guide were used (or more exactly plagiarized) by the New York furniture firm of Thomas Meeks and Company in their broadside of 1833.

The present exhibition contains several works made by Thomas Dennis, perhaps the most famous seventeenth-century American cabinetmaker, as well as a Pennsylvania secretary from the Bachman school in Lancaster, a card table sometimes attributed to David Poignand, several pieces made in Maine, and works once owned by Eli Whitney and Nathaniel Hawthorne.

Research on furniture is lengthy. Many experts must be consulted. For that reason the full catalogue of the Bowdoin Collection will be published after the exhibition. In the meanwhile, this portfolio of photographs has been produced. Hopefully, its circulation will enable us to learn of new evidence and documentation which can be incorporated into our final catalogue. Additionally, it was felt that the photographs taken by Mr. William Pooley were so fine that the catalogue could be considered a portfolio of works in photography on their own. The Museum is deeply indebted to Mr. Pooley for his excellent work under difficult conditions and with limitations of studio equipment.

The Museum is most grateful to Mr. H. Ray Dennis, who has loaned a number of superb pieces, both European and American, to the exhibition. The works by his forebear, Thomas Dennis of Ipswich, are the greatest treasures of their kind in America. Special thanks are due to Mr. John McKee for the color transparency of the “President’s Chair” which appears on the cover, and Mrs. Samuel Z. Smith for her help on the check list. To the entire Museum staff, whose members have helped to move furniture, register it and prepare this catalogue, goes my sincere appreciation.

Everyone looks forward to the prompt publication of the full catalogue so that we may share our collection with those unable to visit the galleries and provide, in some small way, more information for those engaged in the all-important pursuit of furniture research. We hope the catalogue will make more clear the art of American furniture.

R. Peter Mooz  
Director
CHECK LIST

Measurements of objects are overall and in inches.
Dates, in five year segments, indicate the generally accepted earliest and latest dates for the style adjusted to the place of origin.
By means documentary evidence establishes the maker.
Probably means the style and construction, indicates a certain place of origin or maker.
Possibly means historical or stylistic evidence, suggests an attribution to a place of origin or maker.
About means the usual date accepted for similar objects.

American Furniture

1. BOOKCASE
New England, 1750-1825
Pine
Top height 43½; width 52½; depth 12½
Base height 39; width 53½; depth 13½
Transfer to collections. 1974.2

descendant of Thomas Dennis, this chair is referred to as the “President’s Chair.”
Gift of Mr. E. Wilder Farley. 1872.1

2. BOX
Ipswich, Massachusetts, 1665-1675
Oak
By Thomas Dennis (1638(?)-1706)
Height 14; width 25½; depth 17½
History: The box, which contained Dennis family documents, descended directly from the maker to its present owner.
Lent by Mr. H. Ray Dennis. 5.1965

3. ARMCHAIR (WAINSCOT)
Ipswich, Massachusetts, 1665-1700
Oak
By Thomas Dennis (1638(?)-1706)
Height 48½; width 25½; depth 15½
Note: Since its presentation to Bowdoin by a lineal descendant of Thomas Dennis, this chair is referred to as the “President’s Chair.”
Gift of Mr. E. Wilder Farley. 1872.1

4. ARMCHAIR
Massachusetts (?), 1805-1830
Mahogany
Height 42½; width 25½; depth 21
Note: While popularly called a “Martha Washington” today, these chairs were originally termed lolling chairs.
History: Miss Dorothy Giddings (1785-1870), Exeter, N. H. and Brunswick, Me., to Alexander F. Boardman, Brunswick, Me. (1870), to Miss Edith J. Boardman, Brunswick, Me.
Gift of Miss Edith J. Boardman. 1935.19

5. ARMCHAIR
Probably Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, about 1840
Mahogany
Height 34½; width 23½; depth 22
Note: A brass plaque on the crest rail is inscribed, “This chair belonged to Theophilus Walker. It
was in his counting room in Boston during his whole business career."

Gift of the Misses Mary and Harriet Walker. 1896.6

6. SIDE CHAIR
Connecticut, possibly Milford, 1710-1780
Maple
Height (including finial) 44½; width 19½; depth 14½
Note: The crest rail has been cut down.
Museum purchase. 1973.8

7. SIDE CHAIR
Massachusetts, probably Boston, 1730-1760
Walnut
Height 39; width 21¼; depth 17¼
Gift of Mr. Henry Gilman ’97. 1968.115

8. SIDE CHAIR
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, about 1770
Mahogany
Height 40½; width 22¾; depth 17¾
Note: The splat is a replacement.
Gift of Mr. John H. Halford, Jr. ’38. 1966.57 a & b

9. SIDE CHAIR
Probably American, 1760-1850
Mahogany
Height 37; width 21¼; depth 22
Note: An example of so-called “Country Chippendale,”
this rural chair could have been made anywhere
from Virginia to New England.
Bequest of Mrs. Sylvia E. Ross. 1963.17

10. SIDE CHAIR
Probably Connecticut, 1820-1830
Soft Maple
Height 31½; width 19¾; depth 15¾
Note: One of the varieties of so-called “fancy chairs,” it
is virtually identical to chairs by Seymour Watrous,
who advertised in Hartford, March 2, 1824.
Bequest of Miss Mabel S. Davies. 1947.22

11. SIDE CHAIR
New England, 1825-1860
Stenciled, probably Maple
Height 31¾; width 17¾; depth 20
Note: The legs were sawed off by Joseph Griffin.
History: According to tradition the chair was owned
by H. W. Longfellow while a student at Bowdoin.
Longfellow gave it to Joseph Griffin, an early
Maine printer. It was given to Mr. Marrett by
Charles Griffin, who inherited it from Joseph.
Gift of Mr. Walter H. Marrett ’76. 1926.11

12. CHEST
Massachusetts, 1675-1700
Oak
Attributed to Thomas Dennis (1638(?) -1706)
Height 31; width 45¾; depth 19¾
Lent by Mr. H. Ray Dennis. 5.1965

13. CHEST OF DRAWERS
(BLOCK-FRONT)
Boston or Rhode Island, 1740-1765
Walnut
Height 30; width 37; depth 21¾
Note: The brasses are original.
Gift of Mr. John H. Halford ’07 and Mrs. Halford. 1964.39
14. CHEST OF DRAWERS
(ROUND-FRONT)
New England, probably Maine, 1790-1820
Mahogany and Pine
Height 33 1/2; width 38 7/8; depth 21 3/8
Gift of the Honorable Percival P. Baxter '98.
1962.32

15. HIGH CHEST OF DRAWERS
Massachusetts, about 1750
Mahogany
Height 87; width 40 1/4; depth 22 1/2
Note: The brasses are replacements.
Gift from the Chase House. 1964.28

16. DESK AND BOOKCASE
Pennsylvania, probably Lancaster, 1765-1790
Walnut
Bookcase height 56 3/4; width 38 1/2; depth 11 1/2
Desk height 44 3/4; width 42 1/2; depth 22 3/8
Note: The feet are restored.
Gift of Mrs. Charles F. Parker, Jr. 1966.17

17. DESK (OXBOW-FRONT)
Massachusetts, about 1770
Mahogany
Height 42 7/8; width 45 1/4; depth 22
Note: According to tradition this desk was once owned by the author Nathaniel Hawthorne, Bowdoin '25.
The brasses are not original.
Gift of Misses Mary and Harriet Walker. 1897.2

18. TAMBOUR DESK
Boston, Massachusetts, 1800-1825
Mahogany
Height 48 3/8; width 40 1/2; depth 20 3/8
Note: According to tradition this desk once belonged to the inventor Eli Whitney.
History: Eli Whitney (1765-1825), Westboro, Mass.; George H. Whitney, Westboro, Mass. to Mrs. George H. Whitney (1882); Humphrey Moore Tyler (1885), Milford, N. H. to Mrs. H. Tyler Broad, Springvale, Me.; Mrs. Sylvia E. Ross, Bangor, Me.
Bequest of Mrs. Sylvia E. Ross. 1963.14

19. LOOKING GLASS
Possibly Philadelphia, 1760-1790
Mahogany
Height 34; width 19 5/8; depth 7/8
Note: Frequently looking glasses in this style were imported from England.
Bequest of Mrs. Sylvia E. Ross. 1963.27

20. LOOKING GLASS
New England, possibly Boston, 1815-1830
Gilded Pine
Height 45 3/4; width 28 1/4; depth 5 1/4
Transfer to collections. 1974.5

21. LOOM
Ipswich, Massachusetts, 1665-1700
Oak
By Thomas Dennis (1638(?)-1706)
Length 38 1/2; width 9 3/8; depth 5 3/8
Lent by Mr. H. Ray Dennis. 4.1965
22. MIRROR
   New England, 1825-1850
   Pine, painted black and gold; metal rosettes
   Height 22½; width 15⅞; depth 2¼
   Gift of Mr. Henry Gilman '97. 1968.112

23. SOFA
   Probably Maine, 1820-1840
   Mahogany
   Height 35; width 61⅜; depth 22⅜
   Gift of Miss Edith J. Boardman. 1935.41

24. CARD TABLE
   Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, 1765-1785
   Mahogany and Oak
   Height 20; width 34⅜; depth 16¼
   Gift of Mr. John H. Halford '07 and Mrs. Halford. 1964.38

25. CARD TABLE
   New England, probably Rhode Island, about 1790
   Mahogany
   Height 29; width 36; depth 16¾
   Note: The table has been attributed to David Poignand (act. 1787).
   Bequest of Mrs. Sylvia E. Ross. 1963.15

26. CARD TABLE
   Massachusetts, probably Salem, 1795-1815

27. CARD TABLE
   Boston, Massachusetts, 1790-1815
   Mahogany
   Height 29¾; width 36⅞; depth 17¼
   Bequest of Mr. Bernard Samuels, Wiscasset. 1960.40

28. CARD TABLE
   Probably Boston, or Philadelphia, 1820-1835
   Mahogany
   Height 29; width 35½; depth 18
   Note: Formerly attributed to Duncan Phyfe.
   History: Miss Dorothy Giddings, Brunswick, Me. to Miss Edith J. Boardman, Brunswick, Me.
   Bequest of Miss Edith J. Boardman. 1936.11

29. PIER TABLE
   New York, possibly Albany or Rochester, 1825-1840
   Grained Pine
   Height 36¾; width 42; depth 18
   Note: The gilt decoration is original.
   History: The table was brought to Maine from Rochester by Mr. Lee.
   Bequest of Mr. F. C. Lee, Wiscasset. 1964.12
European Furniture

30. ARMCHAIR
   English, 1780-1800
   Mahogany
   Height 36¾; width 23¾; depth 17
   Bequest of Mrs. Sylvia E. Ross. 1963.23

31. ARMCHAIR
   English, 1795-1810
   Mahogany
   Height 35; width 23¾; depth 17½
   Bequest of Mrs. Sylvia E. Ross. 1963.24

32. SIDE CHAIR
   English, 1725-1740
   Walnut
   Height 42; width 22; depth 19½
   Lent by Mr. H. Ray Dennis. 6.1973 & 7.1973

33. SIDE CHAIR
   English, 1805-1815
   Mahogany
   Height 36½; width 20½; depth 18
   Note: Sometimes called a Trafalgar chair, the motifs derive from a suite owned by the Prince Regent (George IV) at Brighton made to honor Lord Nelson's Victory at Trafalgar.
   Bequest of Mrs. Sylvia E. Ross. 1963.18

34. CHEST (CASSONE)
   Italian, 16th century
   Walnut
   Height 22½; width 72; depth 22½
   Gift of the Honorable Percival P. Baxter. 1962.33

35. CHEST OF DRAWERS
   Flemish or Italian, 17th century
   Oak and Walnut
   Height 37½; width 49; depth 22½
   Gift of Miss Susan D. Bliss. 1948.24

36. CHEST AND STAND
   French, 16th century
   Oak
   Chest height 14½; width 22; depth 16½
   Stand height 13½; width 23½; depth 19½
   Note: The lid is replaced; the stand is rebuilt.
   Gift of Miss Susan D. Bliss. 1948.22 & 1948.23

37. CLOCK
   English, about 1680
   Walnut
   By Christopher Gould
   Height 8½; width 18¾; depth 9½
   Note: The works were made in London.
   Gift of Mr. John H. Halford, Jr. '38. 1966.85

38. COMMODE
   French, 1740-1770
   Fruitwood, Oak, Marquetry and Ormolu
   By Joseph Baumhauer (d. 1772)
Height 33½; width 56⅜; depth 25

Note: JOSEPH is stamped on the frame under the marble top.

Gift of Miss Susan D. Bliss. 1948.25

39. LOOKING GLASS
Italian, 18th century
Gilded Wood
Height 55; width 26½; depth 1⅜

Bequest of Mr. Bernard Samuels, Wiscasset. 1960.20

40. LOOKING GLASS
English, 1780-1800 (?)
Gilded Wood
Height 45; width 18⅞

Gift of Mrs. Sylvia E. Ross. 1959.1

41. SETTEE
Portuguese, about 1770

Mahogany
Height 53; width 71⅜; depth 23⅜

Gift of Mr. John H. Halford, Jr. '38. 1966.84

42. SIDEBOARD
English, 1790-1810
Mahogany
Height 38½; width 57⅞; depth 22

Note: The design follows illustrations in The Cabinet-Maker's London Book of Prices (1788), by Thomas Shearer.

Bequest of Mrs. Sylvia E. Ross. 1963.13

43. CHAIR OF STATE (STALLE)
English, 16th century
Oak
Height (including finials) 72½; width 27¼; depth 17¾

Gift of Mr. Herbert H. Richardson from the Estate of Mr. Curtis Appleton Perry '77. 1931.14
PLATES