

# The Stature of American Furniture

by ALBERT M. SACK  
*Vice-President of Israel Sack Inc.*

American antique furniture of the 17th, 18th and early 19th centuries has joined the annals of great decorative arts of all eras. It has been honored by a major exhibition of American masterpieces in the Victoria and Albert Museum in 1976 and by two exhibitions in the National Gallery in Washington, D.C. An American masterpiece has just brought \$12,100,000 million dollars, the highest price ever recorded for a piece of decorative arts of any country.

In the past 30 years, new American decorative arts sections have been formed in Atlanta, Williamsburg, Winston-Salem, Dallas, Houston, Chicago, New York and Milwaukee, as well as the State Department and the White House. Beyond the museum world, private collectors have avidly sought and acquired the majority of outstanding pieces that have come on the market. In fact, several private collections formed in the past 30 years could form first-class museum sections of their own.

Equally impressive has been the scholarship and research in the field of American decorative arts. Not only has the American idiom been identified, but the distinct character of various Colonial centers been defined.

It has not always been thus. At the beginning of this century American antiques as a serious art form was virtually unknown. There were no museum collections and only a handful of dealers and collectors. While England and France had never lost identification with 18th century designs in the 19th century, Americans went full bloom into the Victorian era to the extent that its Colonial achievements were obscured. As the machine age created fortunes in America by the turn of the century, Americans

looked to Europe for culture. Wealthy Americans flocked to England and France to invade the castles and manor houses of those countries to bring back the rich creations of London and Paris. Since American furniture was so obviously derived from English furniture forms and period designations, few Americans recognized its individuality, creativity and quality and most important, its extent.

In the absence of pride and appreciation of the native artist – craftsman, Americans turned to identify the products of our rural charming and unsophisticated country furniture as our American artistic heritage. It became known as Early American. Many families that inherited fine Queen Anne and Chippendale furniture fashioned by our skilled artisans developed the conviction that their pieces were imported from England. A Salem Queen Anne lowboy (dressing table) (*Plate 1*) has a family inscription “a relic from England.” In 1909 Luke Vincent Lockwood published a book “English Furniture”. In 1913 he published “Colonial Furniture in America” in which many pieces that appeared in his earlier publication and designated as English were then recognised as Colonial achievements. In 1921 the director of the Boston Museum sent a memo to a curator asking if American furniture was of sufficient quality to be included in an American museum.

Still there were early believers. When Israel Sack arrived in Boston in 1903 as an immigrant cabinet maker from Lithuania, he went to work restoring furniture for an antique dealer. He came to admire the quality of craftsmanship and the understated elegance of American pieces that came in for



1 Queen Anne mahogany lowboy (dressing table). Salem, Massachusetts, circa 1740–1760. A family label reads “A Relic from England”. Courtesy Israel Sack, Inc.

repair and decided to open his own shop in 1905. Someone once asked him why he chose to deal in American furniture and he replied “When I came to this country, I went native.” In the first two decades of the 20th century, the embryo of the American definition began to take root. An ever growing number of devotees of the American interpretations began to collect at the then modest prices. Exhibitions such as the remarkable Hudson-Fulton Exhibition in 1909 showed items of exceptional merit for the time. The identification of the American theme gathered momentum, even though regional characteristics, later the subjects of intensive studies, were hardly discussed.

The 1920's exploded into a frenzy of collecting of Americana. Henry F. DuPont collected over one hundred rooms filled with many masterpieces, mostly in the twenties and early thirties. Henry Ford began trying to recreate America's past and refined his taste to amass an outstanding collection by our master craftsmen, now forming the Henry Ford Museum. Francis Garvan became a prodigious collector of American furniture and silver, now forming the Garvan

Collection at Yale. Miss Ima Hogg competed with these collectors to form the collection which she augmented in the 1950's and 1960's to form Bayou Bend Museum in Houston. The Metropolitan Museum, the Museum of Fine Arts Boston, Colonial Williamsburg all collected many masterpieces and several midwestern museums installed American sections. It is interesting to note that virtually all the major collections formed in that golden era of collecting of Americana became museum displays. Prices skyrocketed dramatically with this competition. "Antiques" Magazine began publication in 1922 and together with other publications produced many scholarly books and articles.

The Great Depression put a crimp in collecting for the thirty years that followed, namely: the 1930's, 40's and 50's with a corresponding sharp drop in prices. It was a period for regrouping, for research and for establishing the identity and the importance of collections that had been formed. There was much intellectual discussion of what was Americana, why was it different, was it a copy of English furniture, or was it a significant entity on its own merit? The definition of the American contribution became a subject of intense introspection. The flavor of the understated American furniture attracted many Americans and when the quality of its finer products became more evident, Americans began to take pride in their artistic heritage. When the inflation of the 1960's took hold, the field was ready for its tremendous expansion. The rest is history - thirty years of a growth of a field rivalling that of French Impressionists. With its blossoming into a serious art form came the need for definitions - what had been an instinct of early believers in American creativity became refined, studied and brought into focus. Israel Sack was once asked how he distinguished American furniture from English, he replied

"That's easy, by its accent." It is that accent we will attempt to define.

The Golden era of English craftsmanship in the 17th, 18th, and early 19th centuries is unsurpassed in the magnificence of its creations. The finest craftsmen were employed by the nobility and the landed gentry for the castles and the great manor houses. The center of this output was London. The emphasis was on opulence. Superb carvings, gilding, rich veneers and inlays adorned the compositions. In America life was simpler and the Colonists, in the main, shunned the ostentation of court furniture. While there are examples of American furniture that emulated the opulence of English rococo, such as the Pompadour highboy, the Cadwalader furniture, and even some Boston masterpieces, they were the exceptions. The finest craftsmen in the Colonies used their talents to fashion simpler furniture. With the absence or minimum use of ornament, the development of form, line and proportion became more important. And here lies the basic difference in English and American furniture forms. In judging an English masterpiece, one reacts first to the richness of its ornament, secondarily to the form. In judging an American masterpiece, one judges the success of the form, the ornament, if any serves as an accent. It does not dominate the composition. Thus, in observing a successful American piece, one does not focus on any one element, but rather in the composition as an integral unit. Carving or inlay, if present, must blend into the total design. A second basic difference between American and English design is in proportion. Perhaps due to the expansiveness of English interiors or for whatever reason, English furniture is generally broader in scale and accentuates the horizontal proportion. In the Colonies, there developed a preference for the vertical proportion. Case furniture forms

became more compact, the cabriole leg became taller and more sinuous.

The Colonists love of the vertical proportion led them often to sacrifice practicality in favor of grace and lift in the design. This led to the popularity of the bonnet top and scroll top highboys (high chests) which found expression in great quantities and varieties in most Colonial centers except New York and the South. It is interesting because the scroll top highboy is unknown in English design. (Plate 2)

Until very recently, American furniture designs have been compared to the magnificent rococo and ornamented masterpieces of London. Throughout the 17th and 18th centuries, London attracted the greatest carvers, mastercraftsmen, specialists in gilding, inlay, rich veneers, and inlay to accommodate the incredible luxury of that Golden Era. Occasionally, but rarely, did the Colonial craftsmen rival the richness of great Court furniture or try to.

A recent extensive study of English sources of American furniture forms has opened up an alternative to comparison of American furniture to London designs - "American Furniture and the British Tradition" by John Kirk.

His book established for the first time that American furniture is more directly influenced by the rural furniture of England than by the masterworks of London. Outside of the London metropolis the furniture of rural England, Ireland, Scotland and Wales tended to be simpler and more closely allied to American designs. Yet the related urban American pieces were fashioned by America's best skilled artisans, many of whom had been trained in London. The comparisons brought into focus the mastery of line, form and proportion of the American pieces in relation to the designs that



2 Queen Anne walnut veneered bonnet top highboy (high chest) with gilded shells.  
 Boston, Massachusetts, circa 1735-1750  
 Courtesy Mr and Mrs George M. Kaufman

characterized the work of these lesser craftsmen in rural England. This evidence led to a new set of comparisons. No longer was it necessary to compare American furniture achievements with the opulent masterpieces of London. Each is superlative in its own emphasis.

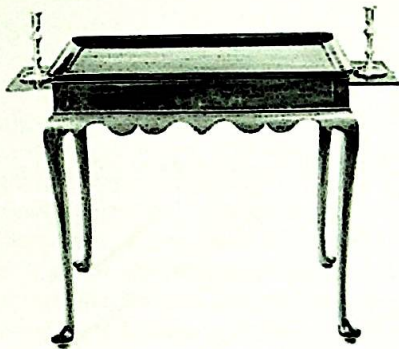
Just as Colonial furniture departed significantly from its English prototypes, so did each main center develop distinct and different character and forms. The study, literature and identification of each of these centers and even individual master craftsmen and carvers has been intense. A capsule overview of each of these main centers may be useful.

#### MASSACHUSETTS

The seacoast centers of Boston, Salem, Marblehead and Newburyport, as well as Portsmouth, New Hampshire produced the greatest amount and variety of urban furniture of all the colonies. These Massachusetts centers are also the only centers that created major art achievements in every period from the Age of Settlement through the Classical period. While the Philadelphia and Newport masterpieces are better known, the many original, creative and highly competent forms of Massachusetts origin continue to assume greater importance.

The Age of Settlement products are sometimes called Pilgrim furniture. Great chairs of Elizabethan form with massive posts and fine turned spindles are called Carver and Brewster chairs after early Governors. Carved oak chests and press cupboards with geometric panels and ebonyed spindles differ only from the English by the use of native oak, and pine tops and structural woods. Little butterfly, trestle tables, joint stools, etc. are rare and highly prized. Some few examples retain their original paint. The early collectors prized this furniture above the formal 18th century as it reflected the pioneer spirit of the Pilgrims. The Willam

and Mary period was responsible for choice crotch and burl veneered highboys, lowboys and slant top desks (called bureaux in English terminology). Some important carved crested banister back chairs and gateleg tables exhibited fine turnings of native walnut or maple. A highly important transitional group emerged combining Queen Anne elements of curvilinear formation with Jacobean elements – particularly in chairs and tables. Successful New England merchants and shipowners demanded understated furniture of high standards that depended on integrated curves and graceful lines, and they employed skilled artisans to accomplish this. It resulted in a prolific production of delicate tray top tea tables, (Plate 3)



3 Queen Anne tray top tea table with slides. Boston, Massachusetts, circa 1740–1760. Private collection

lowboys and highboys with high perched cabriole legs integrating with scrolled aprons. The highboys and lowboys had central carved fans and shells from which the designs radiated. The Queen Anne cabriole leg, with its high knee, serpentine bend and wafer pad foot was so admired by the New Englanders that it continued to be favored throughout the Chippendale era up to the Revolution. This is evidenced by the relative scarcity of claw and ball foot highboys and lowboys compared to the prolific pad foot group. While we date Massachusetts Queen Anne furniture 1735–1760, there is no question that the dates of many

examples, including balloon seat side chairs extended beyond. The importance of the many superb original forms created by Massachusetts master craftsmen has yet to be fully evaluated. Here the many centers produced major case forms. Case pieces were fashioned into block front, bombe, oxbow or double serpentine and serpentine forms fashioned from the solid with bracket, ogee bracket or claw and ball feet. The block front chests of drawers, kneehole desks, chests-on-chests and secretary desks are not as famous as the Newport block and shell group, but number among them many masterpieces. They outnumber Newport production by scores in each form. The prized bombe furniture of Boston and Salem was confined to Massachusetts. The bombe chest of drawers with serpentine front is a tour de force, eliminating any tendency of mass. Considering that these pieces required the skill of master craftsmen, the quantity and

variety surviving is impressive.

The Federal period in Massachusetts continued to produce fine original forms in considerable variety and quantity. Beautiful card tables, candlestands, glass door secretary desks, tambour desks, and clocks exhibited well placed inlay and graceful shapes. The use of figured satinwood or birch of carefully chosen flaming patterns ornamented many forms. The Sheraton influence abounds with beautiful delicate forms, also employing the exciting figured veneers and inlays.

Many great artisans have been identified and research and documentation continue. The names of Benjamin Frothingham, John Cogswell, John Seymour, Samuel McIntire, William Hook, the Willard clockmakers and many other stand out as rivalling the great masters of England in their own mediums. (Plate 4)



4 Hepplewhite mahogany inlaid tambour desk, made by John Seymour and Son, Boston, Massachusetts, circa 1794–1800. Courtesy Cleveland Museum of Art

## NEWPORT

The thriving port of Newport in the second and third quarters of the 18th century germinated a phenomenon. Two families of master cabinetmakers emerged to dominate a superb school of unique American design. They were, particularly, John Goddard and various Townsends who created the magnificent block and shell carved case pieces. It is a fact that over 50 other cabinetmakers were responsible for some of these designs, but there is no question that the Goddards and Townsends were responsible for most of the finest examples. The block front form, which probably originated in Boston, was here capped by carved shells of serpentine radiates emanating from an arced transition line. This design was incorporated into chests of drawers, kneehole desks, chests-on-chests and secretary-desks. The quantity of surviving examples is relatively small but its importance to furniture design cannot be overestimated. The achievements reach their highest expression in ten great secretary-desks, nine of which contain six shells and one of nine shells. They are majestic in their formation. The problem of integration of the upper case section with the three panels of the desk section in solved by a hinged blocked door containing two panels and a single blocked door to continue the line of three blocked panels in both sections. The secretary-desk which has just placed American decorative arts in a new dimension is one of that group.

The Goddard's and Townsend's were responsible for other great original forms, namely: the open claw furniture. These took the form of cabriole leg furniture with open taloned claw and ball feet. (Plate 5). This form was expressed in bonnet top highboys, a few lowboys, card tables, a few great tea tables and marble top console tables. The cabriole leg was formed from the square which allowed the ridges of the cabriole to unite with the



5 Chippendale mahogany open taloned claw and ball foot card table. Attributed to John Townsend, Newport, Rhode Island, circa 1760-1775  
Private Collection

outline of the front and side aprons, a brilliant solution of integration. The twin panels of the arch of the bonnet top highboys served to unite the curve of the arch with the squareness of the case.

The Newport craftsmen created great forms using plain polished surfaces of stark simplicity and power in contrast to the great Philadelphia rococo masterpieces.

## CONNECTICUT

Connecticut had no main centers of the size of other colonies but many smaller centers such as New Haven, Hartford, Litchfield, Wethersfield, Norwich and New London. The Connecticut Valley was responsible for the Pilgrim chests and cupboards of the first distinctly American group - the Hadley and the tulip and sunflower carved chests. The block and shell design was also interpreted in

Connecticut but with the usual interpretive variations. Roger Williams rebelled against the conservatism of Massachusetts, and Connecticut artisans continued their rebellion in producing varied and highly individualistic designs. While they adapted designs from other Colonies such as Massachusetts, Rhode Island and Philadelphia, they interpreted them in their own way, using cherry as their favorite medium. The variation of designs was infinite and experimental, and when this creative and innovative force was successful, it produced vibrant, exciting and highly important creations. Many of the forms continued to be produced decades after the style influences of the larger centers had changed. Queen Anne and Chippendale pieces can date anywhere from 1740-1820. The Queen Anne form assumed great delicacy, graceful curves, and exotic fans and shells and other motifs of great variety.



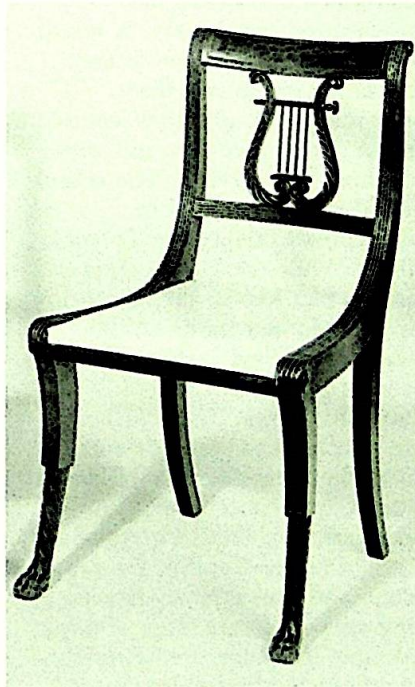
6 *Hepplewhite mahogany serpentine front sideboard, labelled William Whitehead New York City, circa 1785-1800*  
*Courtesy High Museum of Art, Atlanta, GA*

## NEW YORK

New York did not achieve high stature in its furniture forms until after the Revolution with some notable exceptions. These were an important group of Queen Anne balloon seat chairs capped by shells and a group of five legged claw and ball foot card tables of powerful serpentine contour. The case furniture in the main was square and boxy. The Revolution created a tremendous prosperity and spawned a large group of highly competent craftsmen. The result was a prolific production of beautiful Hepplewhite and Sheraton chairs, inlaid pembroke tables, card tables and a superb group of serpentine sideboards. (Plate 6) These sideboards had tall slender legs in contrast to the English counterparts with canted center legs and recessed cupboards combined with well-placed inlaid accents to effect beautiful original compositions.

The Classical period produced a world class master, Duncan Phyfe, (Plate 7) who worked in three design periods – Sheraton, Classical and Empire. His uniformly superior craftsmanship, selection of the choicest mahogany

and creative successful designs provide one of America's most important groups. In recent years, discoveries have uncovered other masters of equal stature such as Charles Honore Lannuier and Michael Allison.



7 *Classical mahogany side chair. Made by Duncan Phyfe, New York, circa 1810-1815. Private collection*

## PHILADELPHIA

By the third quarter of the 18th century, Philadelphia was the third largest city in the English speaking world.

While the dominant influence was English, it had an admixture of Irish, German, French, Swedes and Dutch. Each of these cultures had input into the furniture designs and interpretations resulting in a distinct Philadelphia stamp in its output. There is very little 17th century furniture extant from this area and while some fine William and Mary examples are evident, the production of forms of this period are far more limited than those of New England. In the second quarter of the 18th century, the first important group of Philadelphia furniture emerged, adopting the newly introduced cabriole leg form. The greater variety, quantity and quality was in the chairmaking group. The newly introduced curvilinear form of the Queen Anne influence provided a perfect medium for the Colonial emphasis on beauty in line and form.

The sculptured finesse achieved in the many variations of side and armchairs is justly admired for its mastery of proportion and its weaving of complex series of curves into integrated units. The favored primary wood was walnut.

The seat frames were hewn from 3 to 5 inch beams of solid walnut, the splats hewn from 2 to 3 inch beams to achieve a serpentine curve in profile. The strongest influence was Irish rather than English. The chairs developed a vertical emphasis. Shell motifs and scrolled volutes accented on the crests and knees. The Philadelphia armchair in this period is a tour de force of the curvilinear form. It is fashioned from five or six planes of curves into a single dynamic, integrated whole with each plane blending into the other in perfect harmony. The sculpting of the mass to eliminate bulk was skillful.

The armrests were chamfered to a knifeblade effect and ended in a "knuckle" terminal. The arm supports were serpentine, usually with a molded facade. As the Chippendale era of carving emerged, a small but highly important group of chairs incorporating sophisticated carving and claw and ball feet, using the Queen Anne form as its medium was developed.

Two superbly carved armchairs in the Metropolitan and Bayou Bend Museums represent the ultimate in the Queen Anne form emphasizing carved elements.

By the time the Chippendale influence arrived, Philadelphia was a prosperous, sophisticated urban center serviced by hundreds of cabinetmakers, joiners, chairmakers and carvers, many having been trained in England, France and even Italy. The many forms produced in Philadelphia between 1750-1780 include one of the largest number of native masterpieces. The distinctly American Philadelphia highboy and lowboy featured a carved shell and vine in the central drawer usually with carved knees (*Plate 8*). The highboy had a scroll top and in its highest development had applied carving in the scrollboard. The emphasis was on the vertical with compact proportions and fluted quarter columns to relieve the squareness. On successful examples the carving when present, served to accent the composition, never to dominate it. The chair group is also highly important. The chairs are sometimes attributable to known makers such as Thomas Affleck or James Gillingham and the identification of certain carvers goes on apace. The chair group was the closest thing to a guild in the Colonies. Its output was prolific and the highest achievement of any chair group in this country. Other important forms combined the rococo into magnificent forms such as piecrust tables, clocks, marble top console tables and a superb group of claw and ball foot wing



8 Chippendale mahogany lowboy (dressing table). Philadelphia, circa 1760-1780. Private collection

chairs that stand proud like thoroughbred race horses. A group that became an alternate to the cabriole leg group was the Marlborough group which featured straight legs, cuffed feet and with or without fret carving. The school reached its highest level in documented examples by Thomas Affleck. While the Philadelphia school is best known for its carving, many unadorned forms of high quality and skilled craftsmanship abound to be admired by Americana lovers. These include little dish top candelstands and tables, chests-on-chests, shell carved lowboys, quarter columned chests of drawers, etc. Outlying regions, such as Chester County, Delaware Valley, and South Jersey boast many exciting forms often of more Germanic influence. Philadelphia was adversely affected by the Revolution and Maryland production in the Federal period assumed greater importance.

## BALTIMORE & ANNAPOLIS

The new prosperity of Baltimore and Annapolis after the Revolution resulted in an important group of Federal furniture. The medium of inlay was employed to combine with beautiful forms to result in many original and varied designs. Distinctive bellflower inlay, American eagle and floral paterae and other ornaments adorned mahogany pieces of elegance. While the designs did not depart radically from English prototypes, they evidenced more virility, substance and directness than English examples.

## THE SOUTH

The South consisted mainly of plantations. With the exception of Charleston and the recently identified centers of Williamsburg

and Norfolk, the widely dispersed plantation homes could not support groups of master craftsmen. Much of the furniture in the magnificent homes of the wealthy Southerners was imported from Northern centers, or from England. The local furniture had a regional charm but was more rural in its formation. This has led to a depreciation of Southern products by Northern sophisticates and an inferiority complex by Southerners of their heritage. This gap has been brilliantly addressed in recent years by intense scholarship and research by two groups - 1) The Museum of Southern Decorative Arts led by the devotion of Frank Horton and 2) discoveries of a Williamsburg and Norfolk group by Wallace Gusler. Many sophisticated and high quality forms have been discovered

and catalogued. A new appreciation is unfolding and the stature of Southern decorative arts is finally being reevaluated.

#### FOLK ART

American folk art has as many definitions as there are objects. Whatever the definitions, there is no question that its many original expressions reflect an important part of the American character that cannot be ignored. It reaches the core of American individuality, daring innovation, zest for life, the willingness to dare, to innovate and interpret life beyond the main academic centers. It has, and deserves, a place among its more polished neighbors in this exhibit.

#### SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Americans can be proud of the intensive research, literature and identification of these and other centers of Colonial craftsmanship. Even though each area developed its own distinct character, certain common threads show through. There is a vitality and integrity to American furniture creations. Unbound by the convention of the Old World, men were free to use their creative talents to innovate, imagine and develop new forms and variations. These many experiments vary in their success but, when successful, are inspiring, beautiful and important. The quintessence of American furniture contribution is summed up in this verse; "Rich, but without show. Plain, but with a glow."