

European Influences on American and Colonial Design

Enhance research of period furniture by understanding its European roots.

The Society of American Period Furniture Society Makers was organized “To create a forum for the understanding and appreciation of American period furniture.” But to fully understand the evolution of both Colonial and American furniture designs, it is essential to include research on the influence of European designs from the same period.

The goal of this paper is to encourage SAPFM members with a specific interest in American furniture to include research into the direct and indirect influence of European design sources.

Several *American Period Furniture* articles address this topic (see **Resources**, page 9) and include important source material.

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Society of American Period Furniture Makers



By W. Patrick Edwards

“Early America is best understood as a colonial enterprise: an extension of European culture, at times a blending of European cultures, slowly altered by changing conditions over time.”

—Michael Conforti

Students of American decorative arts—and specifically SAPFM members—who specialize American period furniture can enjoy an exceptional opportunity to research and analyze the evolution of design during a limited historical period.

Compared with other nations and cultures, America is a young country, and its first century saw relatively little domestic production, due to the small number of colonists.

During the 18th century, there was significant growth in the economy and culture, but the majority of the citizens remained located along the coast or near



coastal waterways. However, immigration and internal migration of the population increased dramatically during the 19th century as roads, canals, and railroads were built. That allowed the settlement of cities



and towns throughout the Eastern United States.

When closely examining the early maps of communities, it becomes evident that the major colonies included settlers from England, Holland, Sweden,

France, Germany, and Spain. As these settlers migrated to new territories, they brought with them the established culture of their native lands. At the same time, the older settlements gradually became more urban,

European settlements in North America. Courtesy of Heritage History (heritage-history.com).

creating a blended mixture of different societies.

As author Michael Conforti observed in his essay, *The Transfer and Adaptation of*

European Culture in North America, "Early America is best understood as a colonial enterprise: an extension of European culture, at times a blending of European cultures, slowly altered by changing conditions over time."¹

During the first three centuries of American history, there was a direct relationship between the culture and the style of furniture made in this country and what was produced in Europe at the same time. Late in the 18th century and early in the 19th, imported furniture-design books by Chippendale, Hepplewhite, Sheraton, Smith, Hope, and others strongly influenced the American taste. Popular periodic publications such as *The Repository of the Arts* by Ackerman, contributed to this transfer of style, and can provide the researcher with important documents for analysis of design sources.

Experienced cabinetmakers find new markets

From the first settlements in the 17th century on through the mid-19th century, immigrants arrived from several European countries. They brought with them designs and construction techniques, along with the tools with which they were familiar.

Highly skilled craftsmen, who were trained to produce these designs, immigrated and set up shops, continuing the established European traditions. Famous cabinetmakers

including the Seymours, Roux, Phyfe, Lannuier, Quervelle, Affleck, and the Herter brothers were all trained in Europe before starting their careers in American shops.



Dutch influence

Kas, early 19th century. Wood, 81 x 62½ x 30½". Gift of Mr. W. C. Bunn, 21.438. Courtesy of Brooklyn Museum.



French influence

Armoire, 1770–1790, New Orleans. Jatoba, zebrawood, mountain laurel, Cedrela, white pine, yellow pine, cypress. Courtesy of Winterthur Museum.

These talented cabinetmakers found a ready market for their products, as the newly arrived settlers who were not skilled in woodworking brought with them a demand for their particular ethnic tradition and style. In some cases, they also brought furnishings, or had them imported once their new homes were established.

Those European examples served to further influence domestic design. Thomas Jefferson, who shipped home 86 crates of French Empire and Louis XVI furniture, provides the most famous example of European furnishings imported



German influence

Blanket chest, 1778, Berks County, PA. Tulip, poplar. Gift of Henry Francis du Pont, 1953.78.1. Courtesy of Winterthur Museum.

to our young country. When President James Monroe moved into the White House in 1817, he also installed new French furnishings.



American original

Shaker rocker made in New Lebanon, New York. Maple, birch; 38¼ x 22½ x 28". Friends of the American Wing Fund, 1966 (66.10.23). Courtesy of Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Original American design

One alternative to the influence of European taste—perhaps the most obvious example of original American design—was the furniture produced in several states by the Shakers during the 19th century. Shaker furniture remained simple and functional, without ornamentation. And since Shakers, a religious communal sect, believed that angels provided the original inspirations for their designs, there

was no need to change or adapt them to reflect outside influence.

One interesting aspect of the European influence was the periodic interest in Asian design, transmitted through European sources. During the Queen Anne period, there was a fashion for decorating high-end furniture with imitation Oriental lacquer. Later, the Chinese Chippendale designs revived elements of this taste, as did the Victorian furnituremakers during the third quarter of the 19th century. In addition, early in the 20th century, Charles and Henry Greene relied directly on Asian forms and decoration for their creations, which they produced with a combination of hand and machine techniques.

During these first centuries, the furniture was built in small shops, typically under the control of a master craftsman, either working alone or assisted by a handful of journeymen and apprentices. This environment produced the latest fashion of designs that collectors today refer to as *period furniture*. It is important to understand that this latest fashion reflected the popular designs of the old countries, modified by the needs and materials found in the new.

Victorian influences

During the Victorian period, the majority of the design elements were based on historical European sources. In many cases, the resulting furniture incorporated new manufacturing techniques and materials



Asian influence

Pimm high chest, 1740-1750, made by John Pimm, Boston, MA. Soft maple, black walnut, white pine, mahogany, brass. Gift of Henry Francis du Pont, 1957.1084. Courtesy of Winterthur Museum.

developed during the Industrial Revolution. Thus it was difficult for the smaller workshops to produce the same type of products, because they relied on the tools and methods used in traditional craft procedures.

By the end of the 19th century, the extreme disruption and economic transformation of the entire country during the Civil War signaled the final chapter in the history of traditional furniture making, although the European designs remained influential.

Impact of price books

The shift from craftsman to entrepreneur became more evident after the American Revolution, as major cities supported larger furniture companies, and

the emergence of price books began to transform the business completely². These price books were a direct reflection of the troubles that had developed between labor and management, and indicated a major turning point in the Industrial Revolution.

The price books elaborated in great detail exactly how furniture was to be built and how much it would cost. Since small individual workshops were becoming larger warehouses and eventually factories, it was essential that there be a uniform standardization of the work product.

Many price books reduced the regional characteristics that had existed during the Colonial period, due to the relative isolation of the settlements.

Fifty years of rapid transformation

The first half of the 19th century was the most transformative | period of American furniture history. In an amazing stretch of just 50 years, the population increased by 400 percent. Settlements—which in 1800 were essentially within a stone’s throw of the coast—ended up scattered across the states, from New Orleans to Chicago and from Philadelphia to Saint Louis. At the same time, household furnishings were either transported by water or over land, or made on site in new workshops that were set up in each town.

It was during this period that the traditional historical process of working wood

evolved into a more efficient and productive business model that could supply the larger population centers across large distances.³



Made in America, designed in Europe

Meeks Broadside, New York, 1833. Hand-colored lithograph illustrating 44 pieces of furniture adapted from English Regency furniture. Gift of Mrs. R. W. Hyde; 43.15.8 Courtesy Metropolitan Museum of Art.

A good example of this was the creation in 1818 of the Hitchcock Chair Factory in Riverton, Connecticut. Hitchcock was producing 15,000 chairs a year by the late 1820s, and transporting them all across the country. In New York, the firm of Meeks and Company published the first American broadside, advertising ready-made furniture, available for immediate delivery. Most of the Meeks

designs reflected the popular European taste of that period.

Mechanic or manufacturer?

In 1836, a distinction was made between the two different methods of work: “A ‘mechanic’ is one who operates in his trade by the use of implements applied by the hand—one who uses his appropriate tools with appropriate skill. This is sometimes called ‘handicraft’. A ‘manufacturer’ is one who by skillful use of machinery produces from the raw material articles which usually pass through the hands of the mechanic before they are applied to the purposes of life⁴.” This definition provides important insight into the impact of the Industrial Revolution

on the role of the worker.

By 1850, these manufacturers of household goods began to dominate the national market, capitalizing on the relatively cheap cost of transporting inventory, as well as abundant native timber, improved wood-working machinery and semi-skilled labor.

As an example, the city of Cincinnati advertised itself in 1846 as the “largest furniture manufacturing city in America, with 136 establishments, 1,156 hands and furniture with a market value of \$1,660,000 annually⁵.” Although the process of fabricating the furniture had changed dramatically, the

sources of overall design and individual decorative elements continued to be principally influenced by European fashion.

Other design influences

There are many factors to consider when looking at an example of American period furniture. Obviously, the selection of wood species is generally considered important as evidence of what region of the country the piece originated, excluding those specific woods, like mahogany, which were imported. However, it is equally significant to analyze the construction methods and design elements as a reflection of their European heritage and influence.

In any discussion of Colonial and American period furniture, one must also determine how the furniture was produced. For the Colonial period, it is assumed that the original pieces were made in the early small traditional workshops, normally with a master, several journeymen, and apprentices.

Of course, factory-made furniture of the 19th century and later is also considered “period,” but since the production methods were on a large scale, and the regional characteristics reduced or eliminated, those objects fall into a different category for analysis.

In either case, it is important to realize that European design sources have always influenced

pre- and post-Revolutionary period furniture—with notable exceptions—modified by the use of native woods and the skills, as well as the demands of the American craftsman.

The ultimate reward for students of the decorative arts—and everyone who appreciates furniture as an art form—is successfully discovering the essential European form hiding beneath the American design.

This area deserves more research and *American Period Furniture* is the perfect venue for this research. ♦



Resources

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End Notes

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English influence

Windsor armchair, 1790–1800, Providence, RI. Soft maple, white pine, ash, oak, paint. Gift of Charles K. Davis, 1954.74.7. Courtesy of Winterthur Museum.