

## **POTS AND DISHES: NEEDS AND WISHES**

Rich and poor households alike needed pottery to store, cook, and serve their food and drink. Pottery demonstrates changes in style, technology, trade, and diverse communities, but it also fulfills our most basic needs. The chamber pot, once common, is rare now because so few survived. A tin-glazed food warmer was expensive and rare when made, perhaps used in well-to-do households to keep special foods for the ill. The coffeepot was a new form for a drink introduced in the seventeenth century from Arabia and commonplace by the time this shell-decorated coffeepot was made.

## **JUST LIKE ENGLAND PLEASE**

Colonists who considered themselves Englishmen living in America were comfortable with and wanted to reproduce the style of home. British style spread to America in three common ways.

- Local American artisans copied imported objects.
- They studied fashionable English pattern books available in America.
- English woodworkers with their skills and knowledge immigrated to America.

## **THE NEW WORLD, WOOD AND WORKERS**

The two seventeenth-century New England chests, from the Thomas Dennis and Mason-Messinger workshops, represent sophisticated contemporary English styles, but their construction is typically American. In seventeenth-century America, wood was often riven (split) from a larger timber with large portions wasted, before being further reduced and shaped with finer tools. Riving was a quick one-man job; sawing required two laborers. Wood was cheap and labor was expensive. The scarcity of labor also meant that early American rural woodworkers worked at a wider variety of tasks than their English counterparts. The craftsman who made the chair might have also constructed houses, mills, or wagons.

## **NOT LIKE ENGLAND PLEASE**

Not everyone wanted the latest British styles. Many Americans who came from other European backgrounds made products that represented the methods and tastes of their homes. Europeans in isolated rural communities conserved these traditions much longer than their urban counterparts.

## **FROM TOWN TO TOWN**

Furniture in cities reflected British styles, but evolved in distinctive ways. In each city furniture-makers worked with particular designs and construction techniques, often in response to local consumer demands. Because only a few carvers worked in each city, we use the carving, such as on these ball-and-claw feet, to help identify regional origin.

## **IT'S AN ART AND A BUSINESS**

Successful artisans were both good craftsmen and good businessmen. They produced attractive, functional, and well-made products that appealed to buyers. Boston came to dominate colonial chair production because of efficient methods such as many shops making special parts. This assembly permitted substitution of more expensive carved parts or less expensive plain parts on the same chair to satisfy different customers.

## **YOU GET WHAT YOU PAY FOR**

Cabinetmakers' account books demonstrate that a piece of furniture's price was partially based on the patron's choice of features and details. Two different objects ornamented by Nicholas Bernard and Martin Jugiez of Philadelphia show more carefully and finely crafted (and hence more expensive) workmanship on the fire screen in contrast to the more quickly executed and less expensive tea table.

## **THE CUSTOMER IS ALWAYS RIGHT**

The tulip-and-leaf design on this chest survived with little change for seventy years on a large group of furniture made in a small area of rural western Massachusetts. This traditional dower chest, for storing goods for a woman's marriage, is the most common furniture with this ornament. An additional conservative influence is that local craftsmen were isolated from urban centers and interconnected by kinship, business ties, and shop traditions.

## **EUROPE GOES SHOPPING**

The great age of exploration resulted in distant parts of the world coming together through trade.

Europeans and colonists longed for exotic goods, especially from the Far East, such as porcelains, silks, and spices. Asian artisans produced special export goods for the Western market, and Western artisans imitated or adapted Asian motifs—a style that became known as “chinoiserie.” The resulting stylistic innovation offered a popular alternative to European decorative arts.

## **ALL THE BETTER TO SEE YOU WITH**

Europeans marketed prints in increased variety to colonial consumers. Artists and craftsmen of Europe and eventually the Americas used such new technologies to create a wider range of stylistic expression. The colonial print industry in America competed by presenting American people, scenes, topography. As the revolution loomed, printers used immediate events to affect political opinion.

Independence from Britain removed constraints against the native printing industry. While local events and scenes remained popular, American printers soon competed in a range of subject matter.

## ALL THE WORLD ON A PLATE

Most decorative English ceramics through the end of the seventeenth century were thrown on a wheel and glazed in the earthen colors: yellow, orange, red, and brown, such as plate 1993.23. Ralph Toft's dish was decorated by trailing a fine "slip" clay that left a raised relief after the ceramics were fired. In the early eighteenth century, such potters as John Simpson pressed clays into molds ("press molding") to create three-dimensional relief. Molding, rather than throwing ceramics, increased productivity and consistency for a larger audience.

Imported Asian porcelains caused a desire in the West for similar lightweight, white-bodied, hand-painted ceramics, such as the early attempt in plate 1992.23. By the middle of the eighteenth century, ceramics such as plate 1983.14.2 reflect enormous progress in the refinement of mold technology as well as the more naturalistic renderings of popular decorative motifs. This desire to reproduce accurately the same images onto the surfaces of large numbers of ceramics led to the invention of a method of printing on paper, then transferring a design to the ceramic. This resulted in a demand for designs like the George Washington plaque 1998.13. Improved British, then American, printing technology and a burgeoning market ultimately led to a far wider visual world for many Americans.

## **COOL DRINKS, HOT TIMES HOT DRINKS, COOL BEHAVIOR**

One example of the refinement of American behavior is the shift in popular entertainment. Seventeenth-century drinking vessels were commonly used to consume alcohol, made in forms that allowed more than one drinker to use a single vessel or to amuse the crowd by playing a joke on a drinker. Many ceramic forms in the eighteenth century were provided to drink tea—polite customs most often practiced at home. Tea drinking became so important that all the accouterments were wildly fashionable. This shift—from public and group to domestic and individual—is one of the most important changes in early American life, a story told well by material culture.

## A PLACE FOR EVERYTHING

Wooden boxes with hinged lids filled the storage needs of most seventeenth-century households. The abundance of new possessions in the eighteenth century—what historians have dubbed the "new consumerism"—required larger and more elaborate storage systems. To produce these refined forms demanded more sophisticated construction methods, such as the dovetail joinery found in the Marblehead joined chest. Flat polished surfaces eventually prevailed in forms such as the Christopher Townsend chest, allowing for a more delicate appearance than earlier massive and roughly carved chests. More capable of protecting and displaying the accumulation of colonial possessions, eighteenth-century case furniture also symbolizes an evolved material expression of refinement in a new consumer world.

Wealthy Americans collected small decorative figurines for display on mantels and in or on cabinets, such as the stepped shelves on the Newport high chest nearby. Some, like the monkey, were extremely whimsical.



## **MIRROR, MIRROR ON THE WALL**

The American ideal of opportunity for all opposed the European class system, but Americans did not abolish economic differences. People still wanted to distinguish themselves in appearance and behavior from others.

With more status-bearing goods available, fashioning a new identity became more common. In turn, the nuances of appearance became more significant as choosing more also meant choosing right.

## **LIFE PASSAGES**

The decorative arts are intimately tied to social needs and daily activities. The following reflect the trajectories of women's lives: the training of young girls and celebration of marriage, domestic management by wives, and the need for comfort and support during periods of delicate health.