

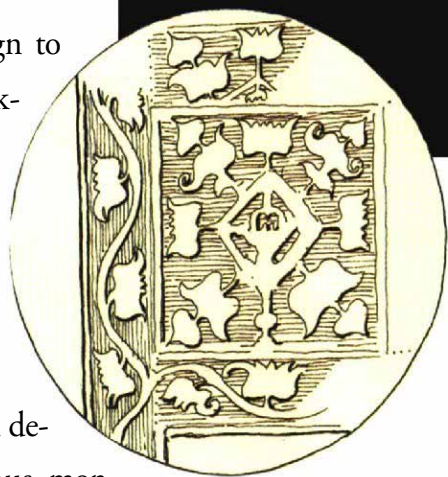
Since its inception 25 years ago, a vast range of furniture from various periods has appeared in *Fine Woodworking*. What follows is a condensed overview describing many of these various styles. I've tried to put them into a historical perspective based on their defining characteristics, but the process of design is continual and unending. Hepplewhite and Sheraton styles, for instance, were made during the Mahogany Period in England but weren't prevalent in the United States until after the Revolution, during the Federal Period.

Any attempt to categorize definitively the products of a given period is bound to be inexact. It is in the very nature of furniture design to evolve, often haphazardly, taking a little from here and a little from there, sometimes making a large leap with the invention of a new technique or a new material.

British furniture is most often described in terms of the various monarchs during whose reigns it was made, but for a more familiar division of furniture design in America, I've chosen more local names. Nevertheless, it remains true that most American furniture is very similar to the contemporaneous British styles. A great deal of furniture from the early periods made in the United States was built by craftsmen either trained in Britain or who used British patterns. By the 20th century the differences had more to do with individual makers than with national styles. □

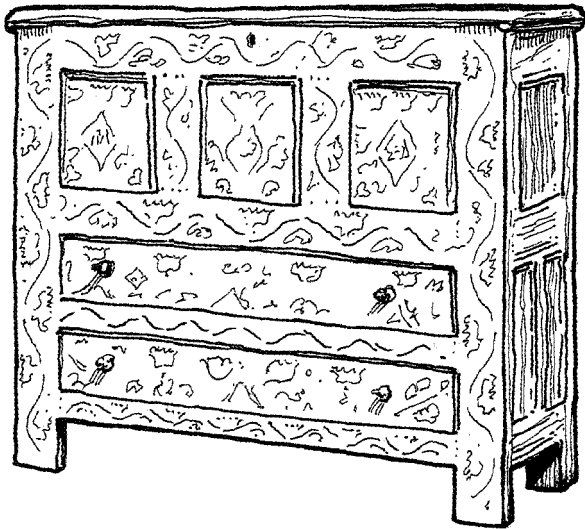
*Graham Blackburn is a furniture maker, author, illustrator and the publisher of Blackburn Books (www.blackburnbooks.com).*

# A Short History of Design



A visual guide to woodworking's enduring styles

BY  
GRAHAM BLACKBURN

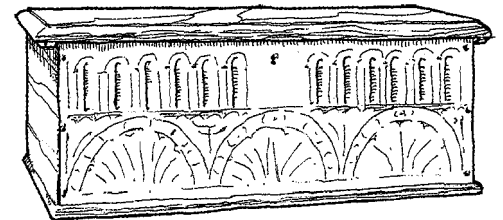


**THE NICHOLAS DISBROWE CHEST, 1660**

- Nicholas Disbrowe is the first known American maker
- Oak, frame-and-panel construction
- Uncompromisingly rectangular
- Similar to earlier English oak styles, but distinctive Connecticut Valley, Hadley style
- This piece shows the chest becoming a chest of drawers
- Tulip motif carved over entire foot

**The Pilgrim Century, 1620-1750**

Much early American furniture came here with the first immigrants, including, most famously, the Pilgrims. They brought—and then made—oak pieces typical of the Jacobean, William and Mary, and Carolean periods in Britain; pieces that retained a strong Gothic influence, sturdy pieces, heavily carved pieces, pieces with cup-turned legs and bun feet. Much of the work from this Early Colonial Period is representative of a utilitarian life.

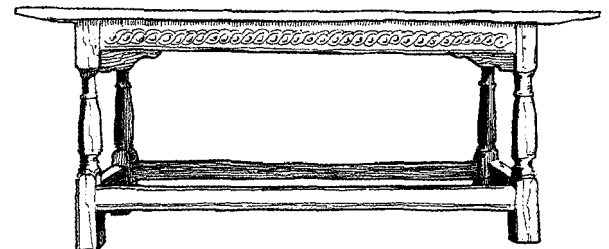
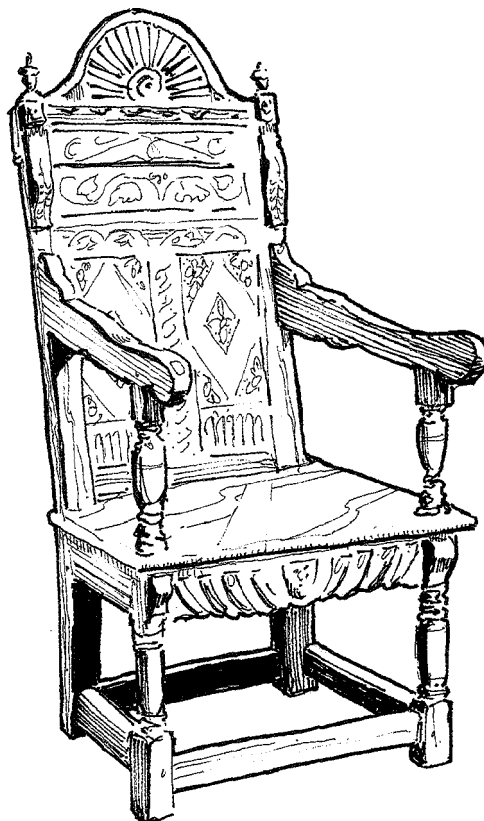


**"BIBLE" BOX, 1670**

- As with most boxes of the period, this one is nailed together
- Oak throughout, but many boxes were made of pine or with top and bottom of pine
- Lunette and flute carvings were simple and geometrically based
- Overhanging, cleated top

**THE ELDER BREWSTER CHAIR, ca. 1650**

- Wainscot constructed oak (wainscot means "wagon oak" and refers to the paneling)
- Joiner's work
- Framed construction, pinned for strength
- Bold turnings
- Heavily carved
- Stout stretchers
- Less-heavily carved chairs of the same construction are common
- Reminiscent of earlier British chairs in the Gothic style

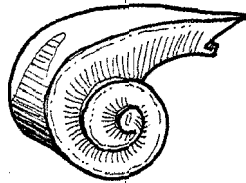


**DINING TABLE, ca. 1700**

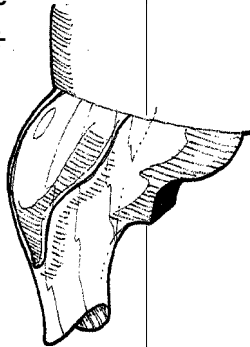
- Oak
- Strap carving on front apron
- Simple turning with square ends on legs
- Stout stretchers
- Edge-joined top
- Pinned mortise-and-tenon construction
- Bracketed legs
- Post-assembly carving (as on old chests)

## The Mahogany Period, 1702-1780

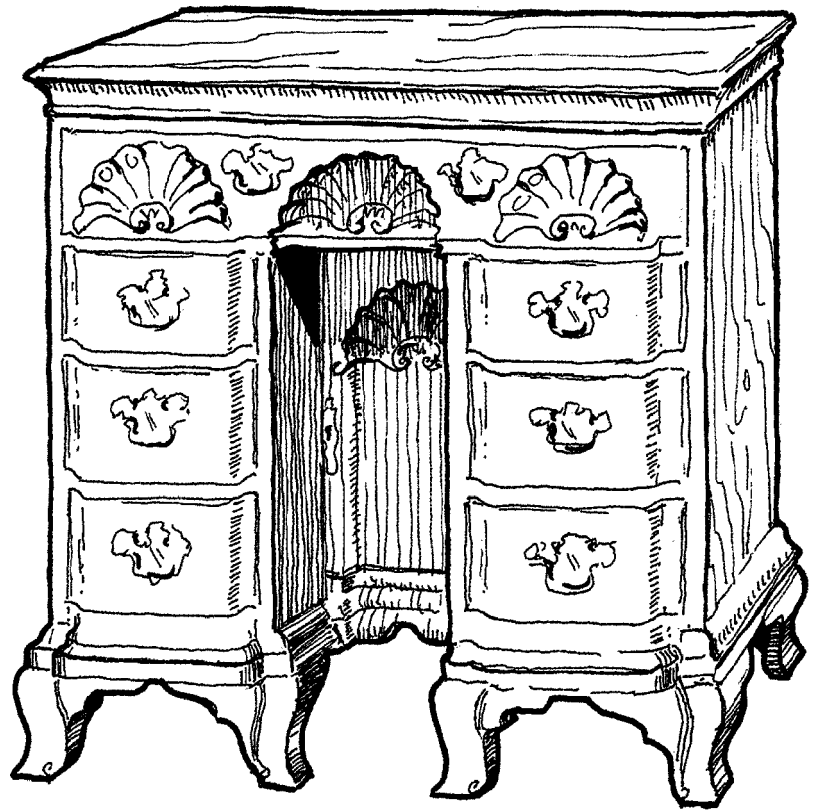
The Mahogany Period (late Colonial), covering the first half of the 18th century, roughly parallels the periods known in Britain as Queen Anne and Georgian. Walnut gave way to mahogany as the predominant wood, and the beginning of the period saw a sudden simplification of style into a less ornamented and more severely elegant aesthetic. Perhaps the most typical element is the cabriole leg, at first plain and finished with a simple turned pad foot, and later developing into a highly carved element complete with ball-and-claw, hairy-paw or lion's foot. Furniture was made by cabinetmakers rather than joiners, and the list of American Chippendales is long (Thomas Chippendale was the most famous English cabinetmaker of the period and by whose name furniture of the middle of the period is often known). It includes the Goddards and Townsends of Newport, R.I., and many notable Philadelphia makers, including William Savery, Thomas Affleck and Benjamin Randolph.



Arm terminal volute

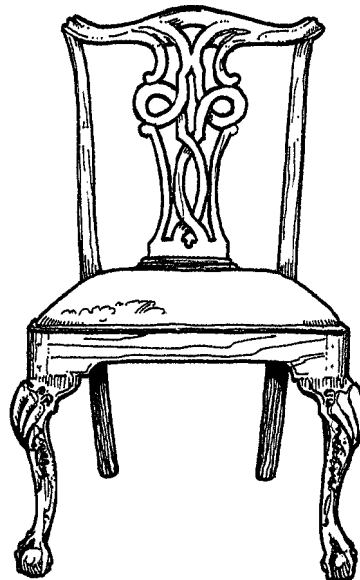


Savery-style "tongue" carving on knee



KNEEHOLE DESK (BUREAU), ca. 1765

- Made by John Townsend of Newport, R.I.
- Mahogany, with poplar as a secondary wood
- Block and shell front
- Shell-carved knee-hole door
- Bracket feet
- Solid top
- Single, wide drawer
- Two tiers of narrow drawers
- Closely related to the highboy on the opposite page, this is essentially the lower half of a chest on chest with a knee-hole cupboard

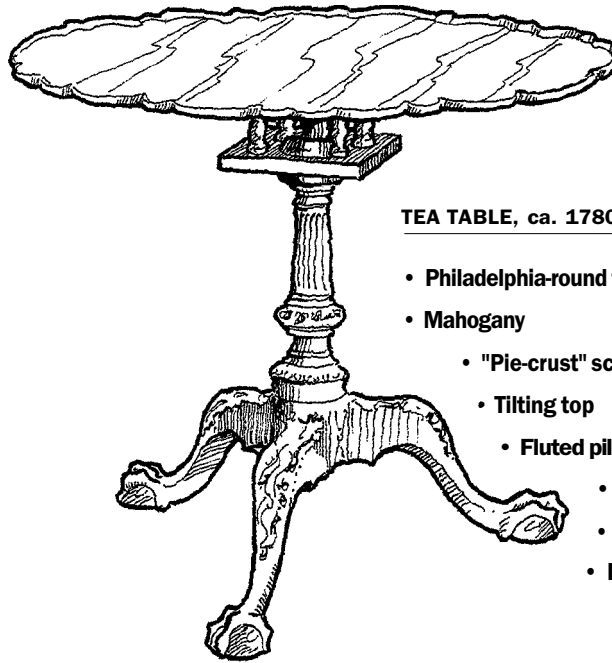
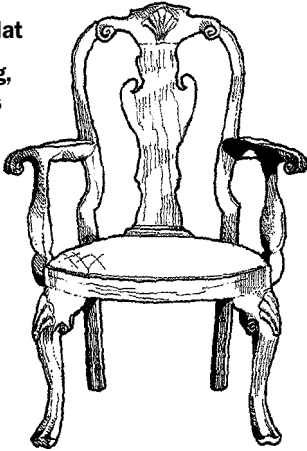


SIDE CHAIR, ca. 1780

- Typical Chippendale style
- Mahogany
- Square back
- Cupid-bow crest rail
- Pierced and carved splat
- Highly carved, squared-off cabriole front legs
- Ball-and-claw feet
- Stump rear legs
- Rectilinear seat

**WILLIAM SAVERY ARMCHAIR,  
ca. 1750**

- Typical Queen Anne style
- Mahogany
- Rounded back
- Plain, profiled splat
- Not much carving, except for volutes and shells
- Cabriole front legs
- Simple trifold feet

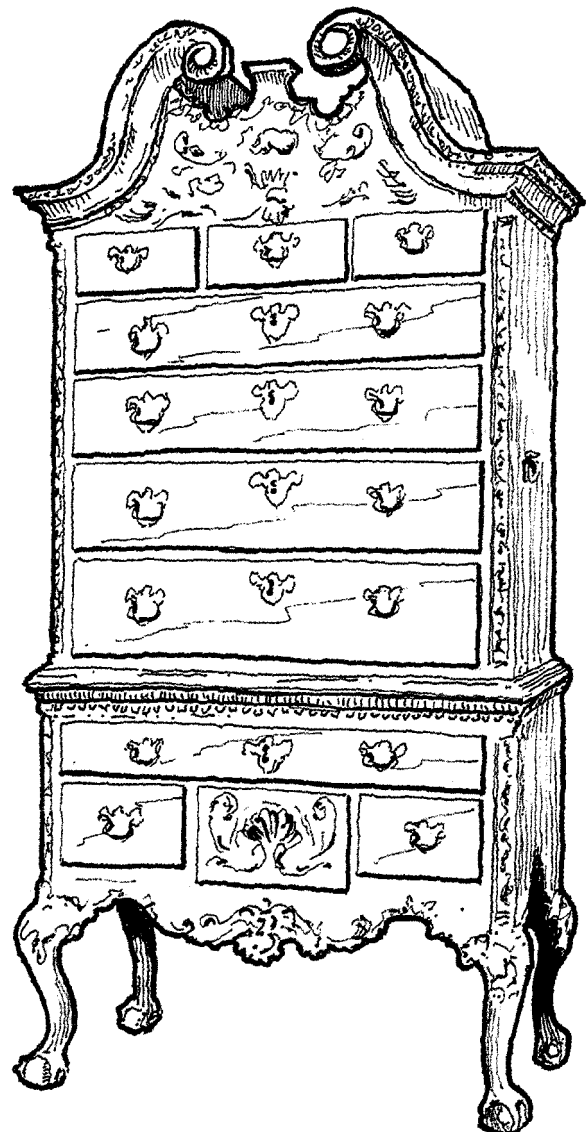
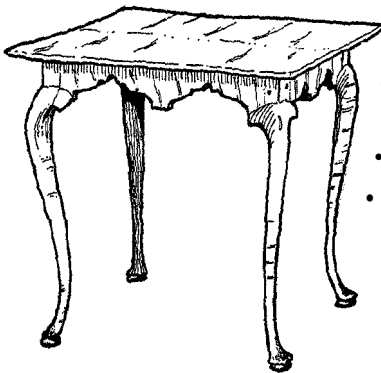


**TEA TABLE, ca. 1780**

- Philadelphia-round type
- Mahogany
  - "Pie-crust" scalloped edge
  - Tilting top
  - Fluted pillar
- Richly carved legs
- Tripod legs
- Ball-and-claw feet

**TEA TABLE, ca. 1750**

- New England-rectangular style
  - Maple; originally painted red
  - Markedly slender cabriole legs
  - Pad feet
  - Deeply scalloped apron

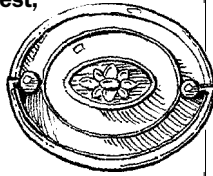


**HIGH CHEST OF DRAWERS (HIGHBOY), ca. 1770**

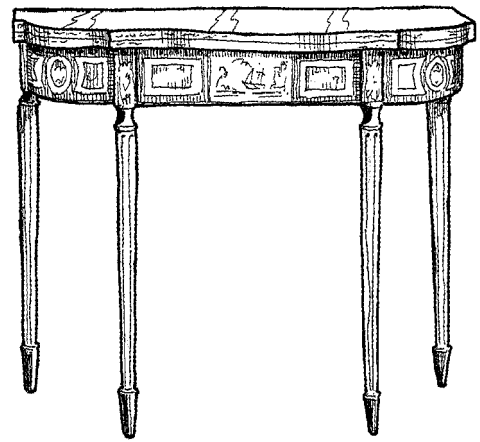
- High-style work typical of Philadelphia cabinetmakers
- Chest-on-chest, double-case construction
- Richly carved, broken scroll bonnet
- Carved corners
- Carved cabriole legs with ball-and-claw feet at front and back
- Sophisticated proportions, progressively graduated drawers
- Veneered casework

## Federal Period, 1780-1840

After the Revolution, American tastes and sympathies transferred from Britain to France, especially with regard to furniture styles. The French Empire style planned and fostered by Napoleon was adopted and distinctively modified by American cabinetmakers and is typically known as Federal style. In comparison to the light and well-proportioned furniture typified by the Hepplewhite- and Sheraton-style pieces of the end of the Mahogany Period and the early days of the Federal Period, much Federal furniture is dark, heavy and vulgar. The finest, however, is often superb and owes much to one of the most famous of all American cabinetmakers, Duncan Phyfe, a New York woodworker possessed of great taste and a wonderful eye for proportion.



Typical Hepplewhite pull



TABLE, ca. 1810-1820

- Reminiscent of the Sheraton style
- Pier-type table with ovolo corners
- Mahogany and maple painted black with gilt and polychrome
- Harbor view painted on center of apron
- Typical of Baltimore Federal-style painted furniture
- No stretchers, Sheraton-style tapered and fluted legs
- Inlay and banding
- Tapered feet

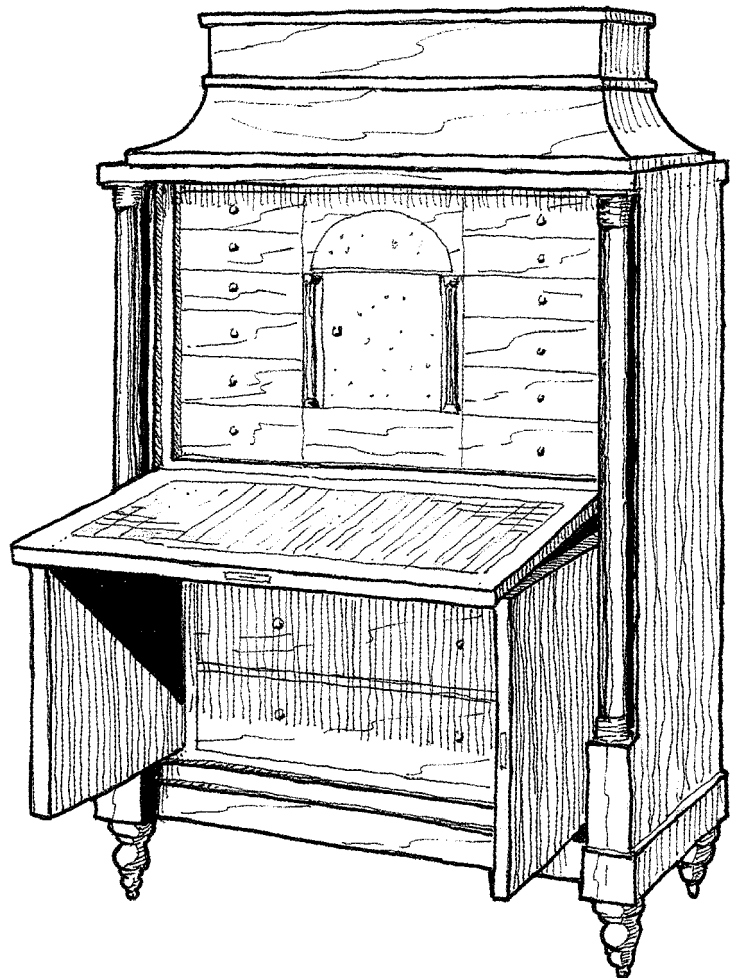


LYRE-BACK SIDE CHAIR, ca. 1815

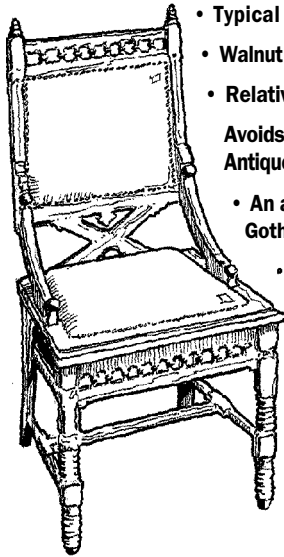
- Klismos-type chair with classical details, made by Duncan Phyfe
  - Mahogany
    - Shaggy front legs
    - Hairy-paw feet
    - Lyre splat
  - Heavily reeded
  - Graceful curves
  - Light, stretcherless construction

SECRETARY, ca. 1820

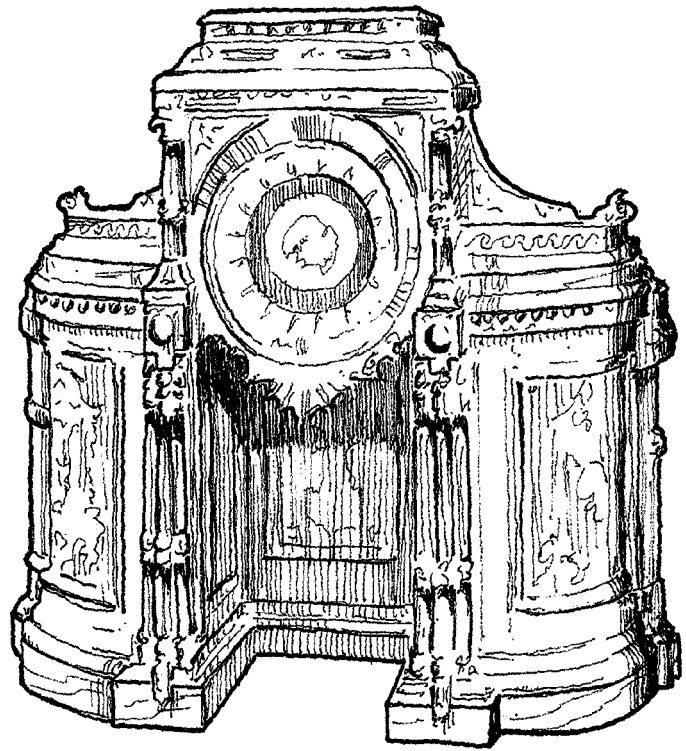
- Highly varnished
- Veneered construction
- Massive in scale and proportion
- High-style Philadelphia Federal bureau, French Empire-inspired
- Mahogany and bird's-eye maple



SIDE CHAIR, ca. 1880

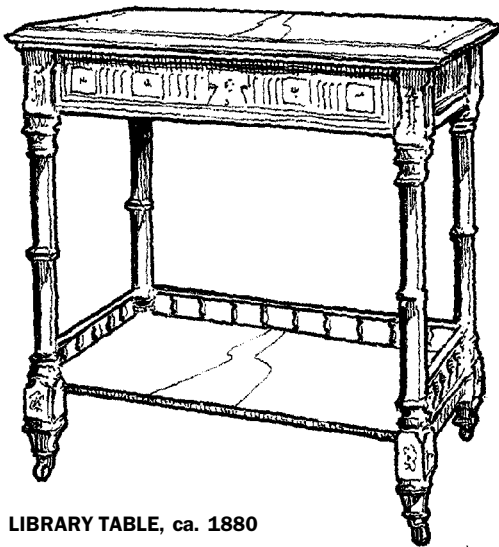


- Typical Eastlake style
  - Walnut and leather
  - Relatively simple lines
- Avoids excesses of French Antique style
- An attempted return to Gothic design principles
    - Carved design
    - Spindled crest and apron
    - Partially turned front legs
    - Squared-off stretchers



CABINET, ca. 1876

- Classical motifs
- Elaborate marquetry panels
- Typical of Renaissance Revival style
- Carved, curved and applied gilt ornamentation
- Maximum opulence
- Rosewood



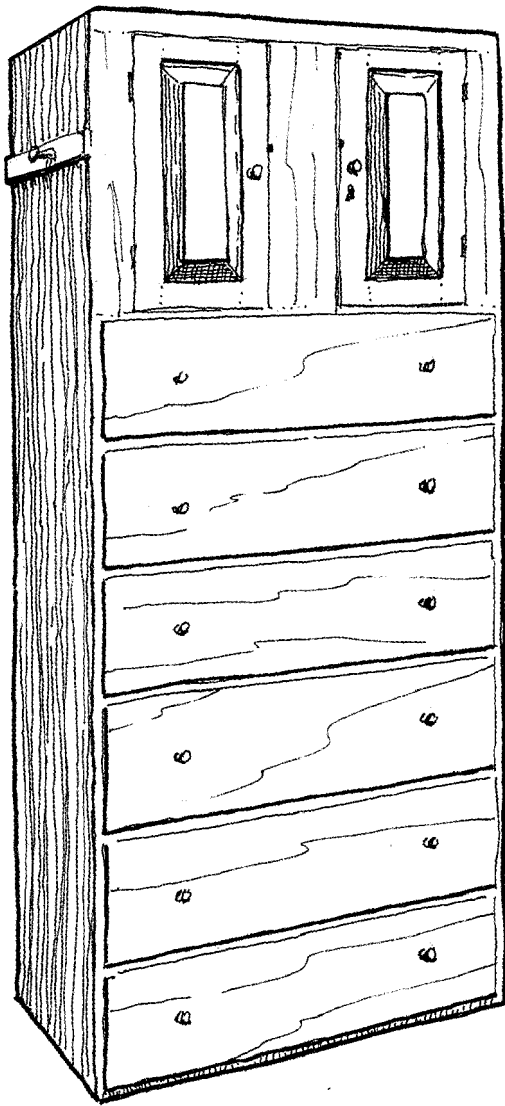
LIBRARY TABLE, ca. 1880

- Typical of the Modern Gothic style
- Ebonized cherry
- Inspired by the craft traditions of the Middle Ages
- Supposed honesty of construction and materials
- No applied ornamentation

## The 19th Century, 1840-1910

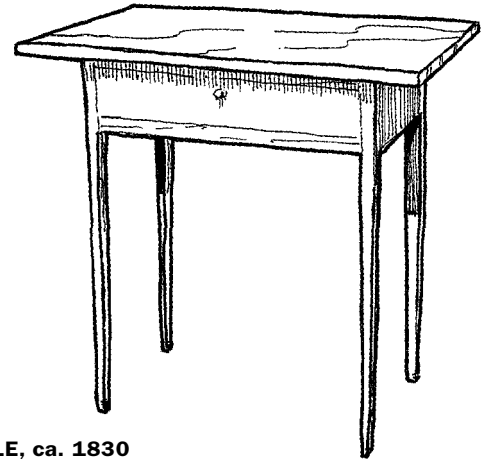
The mid-19th century saw mass-production become the norm in all areas of American life—from farming to high-end furniture making. Some furniture historians refer to this as the era of the "degraded style," and while commercialism certainly resulted in a lot of cheap, shoddy and undistinguished work, there also was a remarkable burgeoning of vigorous new styles, some unabashedly derivative, including Rococo Revival, Egyptian Revival, Gothic Revival and Italian Revival.

Nineteenth-century furniture (which is often referred to as Victorian—after the reigning British monarch) tends to be thought of as extremely ornamented, overstuffed and often in terrible taste, but it also includes much innovative elegance, typified by pieces from makers such as Emile Gallé, Louis Majorelle, Michael Thonet, Charles Voysey and Charles Eastlake. There is, in fact, no one common characteristic of the period other than that of diversity.



**CUPBOARD-CHEST,**  
ca. 1830

- Pine; originally painted red
- Simplicity of form offset by sophisticated joinery
- Raised panels
- Pinned mortise and tenons
- Turned pulls and pegs
- Molded-lip drawer fronts
- Fully dovetailed drawers

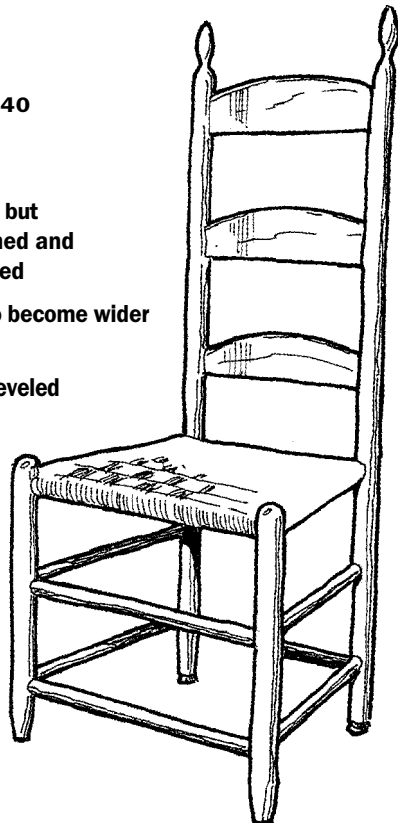


**SIDE TABLE, ca. 1830**

- The quintessential Shaker table
- Cherry, with pine interiors
- Tapered legs, turned at feet
- Large top with wide overhang
- No molding, carving or Inlay
- Fully dovetailed, flush-front drawer

**SIDE CHAIR, ca. 1840**

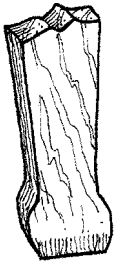
- Woven tape seat
- Seemingly simple, but thoughtfully designed and carefully constructed
- Slats graduated to become wider from bottom to top
- Tops of slats are beveled
- Back legs outfitted with "tilters" for greater comfort (tilters allow you to lean back in the chair without damaging it)



## Shaker, 1800-1900

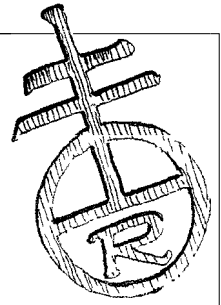
Throughout the 19th century, the Shaker communities were producing furniture so different from everything else being made that the furniture is now recognized as a major American style. Its essential quality is simplicity. Eschewing ornamentation, the Shakers made furniture that not only was eminently practical and honest but also possessed a restrained elegance. Often giving the appearance of great delicacy, Shaker pieces are nonetheless constructed on sound and sturdy principles and have been the original inspiration for many a woodworker attracted by their straight lines and lack of ornamentation.

## Arts and Crafts, 1890-1920

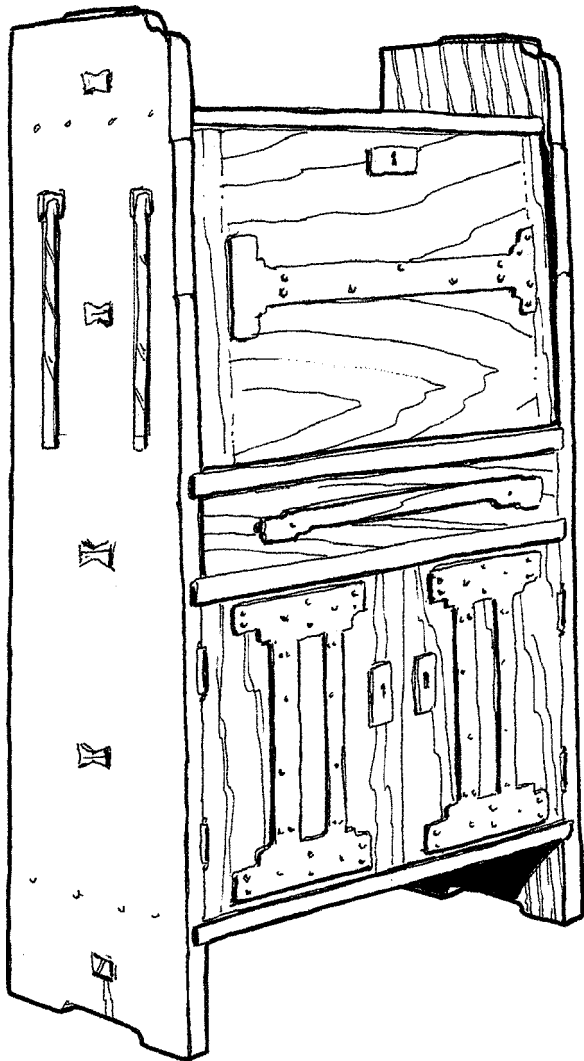


Signature Roycroft bulbous foot on tapered leg

Reacting against the fashionable excesses and often shoddy work of mass production, the English designer William Morris inspired a generation of American furniture designers dedicated to honesty, utility and, above all, good-quality workmanship. Charles and Henry Greene, Gustav Stickley, Ralph Whitehead (who founded the Byrdcliffe Arts Colony) and the anonymous craftsmen of the Roycroft Community in East Aurora, N.Y., produced a body of furniture variously known as Mission, Arts and Crafts, and Craftsman furniture, which has remained popular—and distinct in style—to the present, taking its place as a legitimate major American style.

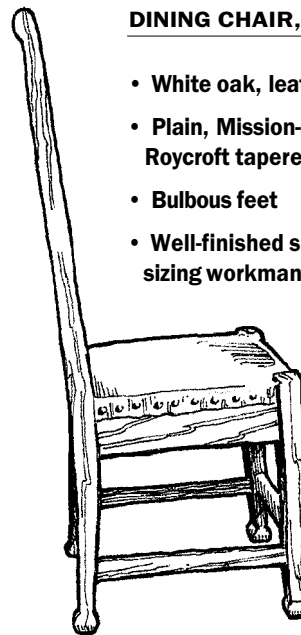


Roycroft logo, stamped on most pieces



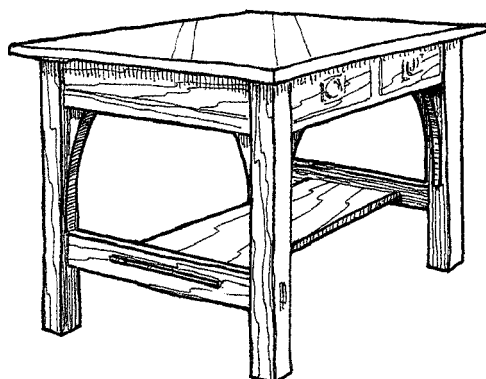
### DESK, 1904

- Design by Greene and Greene
- Structural elements emphasized as design features
- White oak
- Protruding dowel ends
- Through-tenons
- Oversized battens
- Locking escutcheons
- Butterfly keys
- Proud partition edges



### DINING CHAIR, ca. 1910

- White oak, leather seat
- Plain, Mission-style joinery with distinctive Roycroft tapered legs
- Bulbous feet
- Well-finished surfaces, with design emphasizing workmanship



### LIBRARY TABLE, ca. 1910

- Fumed white oak typical of Stickley furniture
- Rectilinear, with reverse flying-buttress corbels
- Exposed mortise-and-tenon joinery
- Structural integrity embodied by post-and-lintel design system
- Handwrought hardware