

Elements of Federal

The Federal period, roughly from 1785 to 1820, was an exciting time for our young nation. The country's wealth was growing, trans-Atlantic trade was flourishing, and the nation's elite, along with an expanding middle class, had money to spend for homes filled with the finest furniture in the latest styles.

Despite the alliance with France during the War of Independence, when peace returned America looked to its roots and embraced English design trends that, unlike its own, had continued to evolve throughout the war. The Chippendale era had been usurped by an emerging neoclassicism, encouraged by the large-scale excavations of Herculaneum and Pompeii in 1738, cities that boldly displayed both Greek and Roman styling. The infant United States of America saw itself as the fulfillment of the noble ideals promoted by ancient Rome and felt it only appropriate to adopt its style.

Three of the most influential designers of the neoclassic period were Britons: Robert Adam, George Hepplewhite, and Thomas Sheraton. Their design books were highly influential on both sides of the Atlantic. In America, these craftsmen helped define the era: John and Thomas Seymour of Boston, Duncan Phyfe of New York, John Shaw in Annapolis, and the firm of Bankson and Lawson in Baltimore. Scores of lesser-known artisans made contributions, leading to one of the brightest and most sophisticated periods of American furniture.

I'll talk about the essential decorative features of the period, using pieces from Colonial Williamsburg's distinguished collection to illustrate the points.

If you're new to Federal, its feast for the eye may seem overwhelming. But there is no need to sample everything on the menu. For two centuries, designers have gone à la carte on the theme and it's fine for you to pick your favorite elements, too.

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1

Federal design is based on symmetry and straight lines. Chippendale's curvaceous style, loaded with heavy rococo carving, is replaced by a restrained serpentine front.



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Stringing is used to break up and differentiate flat surfaces.

5

Banding is a more ornamental form of stringing.

Take a walk through history and learn how to combine the classic elements

BY STEVE
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2

The gracious flow of a cabriole leg is replaced with the architectural feel of a tapered leg.

3

Solid wood is often replaced by a facade of impressive veneers.

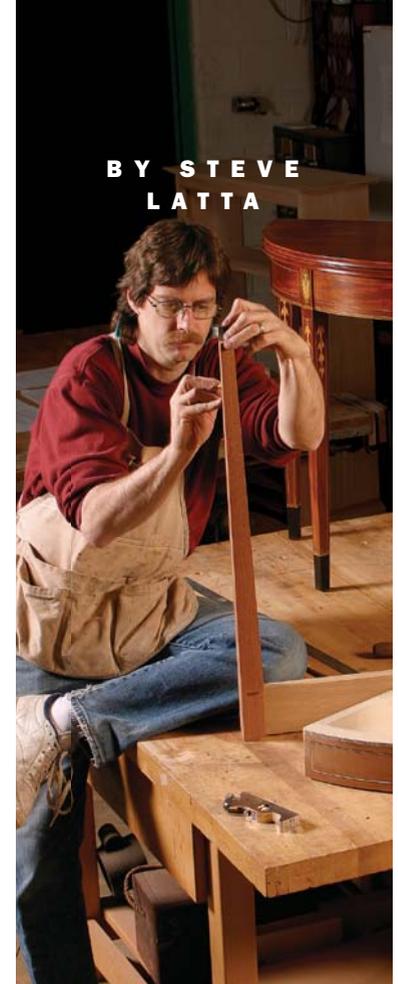


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Inlay, such as these quarter fans and oval paterae, replaces carving as decoration.

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Bellflowers are the most common form of leg inlay.



More than a fan. After building Federal-style furniture for 20 years, Latta recently did his master's thesis on the subject.

The sideboard epitomizes the period

If one piece of furniture has come to symbolize the Federal period, it is the sideboard. Like several types of furniture that developed during this period, its form followed function. As houses got larger and more fashionable, spaces for receiving guests and dining became separate rooms. Dining rooms led to dining tables, sideboards, marble-topped serving tables, and cellarettes to chill beverages.

This sideboard, made in Georgetown, S.C., sometime between 1795 and 1810, illustrates most of the elements that distinguish Federal furniture from prior periods like Chippendale and Queen Anne. The lines are much cleaner and more classical, while exotic veneers and inlay replace the ornate carving of the Chippendale era.

Veneers allow exotic wood to shine



Gorgeous grain dominates the design. On this Baltimore chest of drawers, book-matched mahogany on the drawer fronts is surrounded by contrasting lighter wood. Veneer is used on every surface, including the faux columns on the legs, the oval inset in the top, and the design on the lower apron.



Technological advancements in blades and sawmills increased the availability of veneers, and ornamental veneer work became the true hallmark of the Federal period. Designers combined exquisite mahogany, figured maple, satinwood, and other exotic veneers in geometric patterns to break up the potential monotony of the rectilinear neoclassic form. The fact that solid wood could not be used in this way underlined Federal style's break with the past.

The technique is superbly illustrated on this Baltimore chest of drawers (1795–1810), where the use of veneers gives life to the basic box with a serpentine front. The book-matched mahogany drawer fronts and the edge of the top are bordered

with a contrasting lighter wood. The scrolled leafage wrapping around the pulls on this piece was executed in-house and reflects a skill level not found in most shops of the day. The leg faces contain faux fluting bordered on top and bottom by fielded inlay panels. The lower apron presents three pictorial inlays nicely balanced. All in all, the piece contains a thematically linked and exquisitely executed use of veneers.

The clock, originating from Virginia, tells a similar story with its wealth of architectural elements. These include dentil molding, columns, corner columns, and rosettes. While they would have been carved during the Chippendale period, creating a genuine three-dimensional effect, the same goal is achieved here with creative veneer work. The dentil molding is particularly brilliant.

Veneers stand in for carving, too. Besides the crotch mahogany on the front of this clock (Virginia, 1805–1815), veneer is used to imitate dentil molding, quarter columns, and rosettes.

Stringing is the tie that binds

One of the most widespread methods of ornamentation was stringing. It broke up large flat planes such as table legs and added a three-dimensional effect when used to border doors, drawer fronts, and table edges and tops. Typically made from holly, boxwood, satinwood, or dyed pearwood, it added elegant contrast and vitality to the work.

Stringing could be done with relative ease and consequently was often used to fill spaces in lieu of more expensive details such as bellflowers. I borrowed the single stringing pattern as well as the other ornamentation on my Pembroke table (right) from an 18th-century Connecticut original. Although easy to execute, the stringing adds to the overall whimsical feel of the table.

Depending upon the application, stringing could be a single, double, or treble line. White/black double stringing is used between dark and light veneers, while treble stringing, typically consisting of white/black/white, is appropriate when separating two darker woods, as seen on the sideboard on pp. 64-65.



Decorative banding. Sometimes used in place of stringing, banding defines edges such as tabletops, acts as a border for contrasting inlay, and breaks up large surfaces.

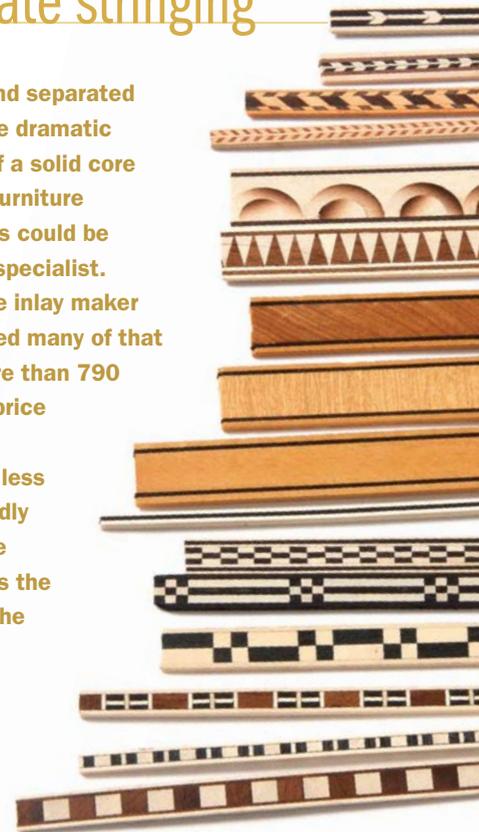


Single, double, and triple. Where the stringing divides contrasting woods, a double line is used with the holly adjacent to the dark background and the ebony or dyed pearwood next to the lighter background. In a uniform background, a single line of contrasting stringing (as seen here) is the most usual, but more fancy pieces sometimes use white/black/white stringing.

Banding is just elaborate stringing

Like stringing, bandings also broke up and separated large surfaces, but they did so in a more dramatic way. Although basic bandings consisting of a solid core bordered by stringing were often made by furniture makers, more complex, geometric bandings could be imported from England or made by a local specialist. During the final estate auction of Baltimore inlay maker Thomas Barrett, whose sales ledger boasted many of that city's most successful cabinetmakers, more than 790 yards of banding were sold for an average price of 8½ cents a yard.

The small work table at left contains no less than five distinct bandings, many undoubtedly purchased as prefabricated strips. The wide cuff banding at the base of the legs grounds the table while the zigzag along the top edge, the arrow on the apron's lower edge, the rope bordering the oval, and the block framing the simple rectangular paterae all add movement and energy.





Intricate ornaments. Small, decorative ovals, known as paterae, are a hallmark of Federal furniture. The “squid” paterae on this Baltimore sideboard employ sand-shading for a three-dimensional appearance.



Geometric or pictorial representations were made by cutting veneers into delicate pieces that were dipped in hot sand and then reassembled. This process, called sand-shading, adds a three-dimensional effect.

Oval inlays were off-the-shelf

Because of their relatively low cost, stock ovals, often referred to as shells or paterae, often were imported for resale to local cabinetmakers. Scholars often try to attribute a furniture piece to a specific

region based on the paterae, but the effort is often misdirected because of their wide distribution by wholesale suppliers. Thomas Barrett had more than 1,300 “shells” listed in the estate inventory taken after his death.



Bellflowers vary by region

Another classic form of Federal ornamentation, the bellflower, provides much better clues to a piece’s origin. The most basic three-pointed bellflower is punched from a



Rural version. The bellflowers on Latta’s dressing table (left) reflect a rural version with simple, two-petal flowers strung together, known as vinework. The bellflowers on the South Carolina sideboard on pp. 64–65 (above) were stamped from one piece of veneer.

single piece of veneer and then set into the solid-wood leg using the same gouge. This style, shown on the South Carolina sideboard on pp. 64–65, is also seen on rural sideboards in New Hampshire and Connecticut.

More sophisticated bellflowers are also punched out with a gouge but these three-petaled flowers (right) are sand-shaded and displayed in a graduated pattern. On Baltimore bellflowers, the center petal always goes in last, in contrast to a Boston bellflower where the center petal always falls behind the two outside leaves.



Boston bellflowers. The petals on these bellflowers are punched out with a gouge and sand-shaded, and display a graduated pattern. They are inlaid with the two outer petals overlapping the center one, the reverse of bellflowers on Baltimore furniture from Baltimore and the mid-Atlantic region.





The sophistication of the paterae varied considerably: The thistle pattern (upper right photo) I used on a Baltimore-inspired card table was patterned after a widely used original from the period. However, shops that did not have access to ready-made shells

drew on their ingenuity and created nice alternatives. The paterae (lower right photo) on my Connecticut Pembroke table, also based on an original, is dramatic but requires minimal skill when compared to a classic eagle or thistle.



Urban sophistication. This thistle design is typical of the ones that were created by professional paterae makers and then sold to furniture makers in the big cities.



Country cousin. Rural furniture makers, unable to easily buy ready-made, high-style paterae, often came up with their own designs, such as this one, which relies on sand shading for its detail.

Carving adds detail but doesn't dominate

Although carving was key to the Chippendale period, it played a diminished role during the Federal era, supporting the work rather than dominating it. Even so, it had its champions in such masters as John and Thomas Seymour, Duncan Phyfe, and architect/carver Samuel McIntire in Salem, Mass. Federal carving portrays classical themes and often stands in low relief. The carving on this Norfolk armchair is typical, showing swags, a low-relief corner fan, small rosettes on the arms, and carved spade feet.

The crest rail on the back of the sofa (1815–1825), attributed to William King of Georgetown in Washington, D.C., provides a wonderful example of an extended low-relief run showing vines, grapes, and other foliage with a punch-work ground. The overall form of the piece shows the pronounced impact of classicism on the designs of the period. This sofa, clearly in the Grecian mode, sports a reeded frame, saber-shaped legs, and scrolled arms ending in floral rosettes.



Neo-classical masterpiece. This Grecian sofa contrasts a simple, reeded frame with the carved vine leaves and grapes along the crest rail.



Carving is refined. This armchair from the 1790s displays many carved elements found on Federal furniture. These include the classical swags hanging on the shield, the corner fan, and the floral motifs near the top.