RECENT ADDITIONS TO THE AMERICAN WING

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“Great chairs,” or turned chairs, like the one illustrated here were of continental origin but were known and used in England from the XVI century on. Horace Walpole sought them for his Gothic cloister at Strawberry Hill, having “long envied and coveted” such chairs, “loaded with turnery . . . in the most uncouth and whimsical forms.” The famous President’s chair at Harvard University would have delighted his collector’s heart. The armchair shown above is built of ash and is heavier and simpler than the more numerous Governor Bradford chairs of Pilgrim Massachusetts. It may have belonged to Jacob Strycker, a great burgher in New Amsterdam from 1653 to 1660 and orphan master in 1663. The Museum acquired it from his descendants.

The elegance of the primitive furniture of colonial America is apparent in this desk, or “scrutoir,” as Phillips’s New World of Words defined the type in 1706. It is the earliest form of desk, the portable writing box of mediaeval origin raised upon a frame. The wood is entirely bilsted, or red gumwood, often used for the early furniture and interior trim in New York houses. Double-arch moldings frame the pigeonholes of the interior, a detail that can be dated about 1700. The elongated urn of the turned legs also appears in the famous gate-leg table in Albany once owned by Sir William Johnson and occasionally on XVIII century Manhattan silver. Under the lid is an inscription in XVII century Dutch which seems to record a business transaction with one of the numerous Schenck families in Kings County. The Museum is grateful to M. M. Lourens of the Netherlands Information Bureau for assistance in translating it.

The furniture illustrated here is part of a special exhibition in Gallery M 15 C.
The lid of this walnut desk is inlaid with the date 1786, the year it was made in New York, and the initials of Goldsmith Davis, an ancestor of Jeanette N. Bedell, who gave it to the Museum. The proportions and moldings recall earlier Dutch cabinetwork.
We know of little furniture made especially for children in the colonial period, except infants' chairs, and this Queen Anne walnut desk, barely three feet high, is probably unique. Upon it the Pennsylvania cabinetmaker expended an expert talent, setting fine checker inlays around the drawers and on the lid and carving tripod feet to terminate the firm cabriole legs.

Before the day of mass production the designer and the maker of furniture were the same. There was thus an endless variation from standard patterns, which makes the study of early American furniture of inexhaustible interest. Two maple chairs from New Hampshire are typical of the variety achieved. At the left is an unorthodox Chippendale design which may be attributed to Samuel Dunlap of Salisbury; the same “sea horse” scrolls, fans, and scallops are his hallmarks carved on several signed maple high chests. This chair is one of a pair presented by Mrs. J. Insley Blair last year. The chair at the right was found near Exeter and probably made there about 1725. It combines William and Mary and Queen Anne styles in a lively way.
In 1762 Ince & Mayhew, the authors of a popular book on furniture design, declared that the “Cabinet and Upholstery Branch” was “at present raised to a very high Pitch,” a fact as general along the Atlantic seaboard as in London before the Revolution ended our colonial period. Although the chairs shown here all have touches of the “Gothick” style made popular in the English colonies by Chippendale’s first edition of the Director in 1754, they also offer a valuable comparison in regional differences. The one at the right came from Philadelphia, the other two from Boston. The lean refinement of Massachusetts proportion is evident and the use of stretchers as under-bracing is typical; stretchers were almost never used with the cabriole legs of Philadelphia Chippendale chairs.

A book of reference much used by Boston cabinetmakers was Robert Manwaring’s Cabinet and Chair-Maker’s Real Friend and Companion, published in London in 1765. The chair at the left is a free interpretation of plate 39; its maker perhaps drew courage from the preface concerning “Hall, Gothic and Chinese Chairs” in which “the Author has the Boldness to assert that, should the ornamental Parts be left out, there will still remain Grandeur and Magnificence behind, and the Design will appear open and genteel.”
This "horse" fire screen—so Hepplewhite's Guide describes a screen upon four feet—has been improved by a New York cabinet-maker with the addition of a serpentine shelf and two drawers. The contemporary fabric on the sliding panel is English, printed in a red design showing Washington in an allegorical role. The screen was made for the Hardenbroeck family about 1790.

Commodore Samuel Woodhouse, U. S. N., of Philadelphia, who was active in the War of 1812, first owned this card table, one of a pair. It is made of rosewood and mahogany; the painted gilt ornament, derived from Hope's Household Furniture and Interior Decoration (1807), shows the Greek-inspired style that flourished in the United States in the early XIX century.

The chair belonged to Captain James Lawrence, one of the great heroes of the War of 1812, whose last command, as he lay dying aboard the frigate Chesapeake, was "Don't give up the ship." His ship was captured by the British frigate Shannon, but three months later Commodore Oliver Perry displayed the famous motto from the mainmast of his flagship during the victorious battle on Lake Erie. A descendant of Captain Lawrence, Dr. Eugene H. Pool, recently gave two chairs to the Museum, each from a large set owned by his ancestor. They were probably made in New Jersey about 1790.
The question is often asked where Americans of former centuries stored their clothes, as few houses were built with adequate closet or drawer space according to present-day standards. A solution is provided by this great mahogany linen press, probably made by Charles Honoré Lannuier, who came to New York from Paris in 1805 and worked here until 1819.