SOME RECENT GIFTS OF EARPY NEW ENGLAND FURNITURE

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In 1938 the character and importance of the exhibits of seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century furniture on the third floor of the American Wing increased considerably. At that time the Museum received as a loan the greater part of the early material from the distinguished private collection of American colonial furniture belonging to Mrs. J. Insley Blair. A result of many years of the most careful collecting, this loan replaced pieces of lesser quality and importance that had been on view since the opening of the American Wing. In the past few years Mrs. Blair has generously elected to make some of these items a permanent part of the Museum’s collections.

On the following pages are illustrated for the first time in the Museum Bulletin Mrs. Blair’s more recent gifts. Each piece is outstanding in its own right, being extremely rare and of a quality almost impossible to find today. All have one distinguished characteristic in common, their superb, nearly original condition.

These eight pieces of furniture are products of a period covering almost a hundred years, from 1650 to 1740. They therefore afford us an opportunity to study the changing tastes of this early period in our country’s history.

We know that immediately after the first landings and the creation of the first settlements along the shoreline of New England the house furnishings of our ancestors, with the exception of those possessions brought with them from England, were necessarily rather rough and crude. However, as time elapsed houses assumed an air of permanence and more effort was devoted to their decoration. By the middle of the seventeenth century a few fortunate persons in these coastal towns were in a position to demand furniture of quality for their homes. In response to the demand it was only natural that along with the imported material there should arrive artisans and craftsmen equipped with the skill and ability to create products from our native woods that rivaled the furniture from the old world.

New England furniture of the seventeenth century, which reflects the simplicity and austerity of its owners and shows a strong influence in tradition and style of the mother country, may not appeal to the tastes of today. Nevertheless it is hard to deny the charm and attractiveness of the early attempts at sophistication and ornamentation, the many variations of the turnings, the carved panels, rails and stiles, and the geometric placing of the moldings. All of this is well illustrated in some of our pieces—the dignified press cupboard, the bible box, and the small chest-on-frame.

The patience, skill, and nimble fingers of the ladies of these early colonial times have left us many colorful mementos of their era. Two fascinating examples are the quillwork sconces in their original gilded frames. Many hours of ex-
A four-drawer chest painted with floral and vine motifs carried out in shades of warm red, green gray, and brown. It was made possibly as early as 1680, about the time painted decoration came into vogue. Original examples are very rare because of the impermanence of the paint and the ravages of time. This form of ornamentation is a delightful change from the usual carving, applied moldings, half turnings, and "jewels." It seems to have been the forerunner of the more sophisticated japanning and continued in popularity during the xviii century.

acting work were necessary to create the intricate design, construct the figures, and painstakingly secure each piece in place. The fine needlework picture on the back of the Queen Anne armchair is another example. Such work was often done by young girls barely in their teens, as well as by their elders.

The splendid Brewster chair, the veneered highboy, and the painted chest are the finest examples of their types. The Essex County folding table ranks among the rarest and finest acquisitions in the American Wing to date.
This early xviii century William and Mary highboy is made of walnut veneered on pine. The herringbone inlay and handsome cup-turned legs give it distinction.
An extremely important oak and maple folding table with a single gate leg, from Essex County, Massachusetts. The upper side of the folding leaf is painted in an engaging simulation of marble, while the frame and legs retain the old red and black decoration. The heavy turned legs and jeweled ornamentation are in the manner of the cupboards and chests of the XVII century. There is little doubt that this table was made in the same period to accompany such pieces. Possibly only one other such table exists here and few in England.

Another Massachusetts table of extreme rarity. The popular cabinet woods of the XVII century, oak, pine, and maple, have been used in its construction, and on the skirt, scrolled brackets, and upper part of the turned legs there remain traces of the original painted simulation of wood graining. The top, constructed of narrow widths, is fastened together at the ends by cleats to prevent warping. The opposite edges are planed off with thumbnail molding, carrying out the design about the rim, a nicety of detail worth noting.
A xvi century press cupboard from Plymouth County, Mass., of oak, pine, and maple. Such cupboards were among the most imposing pieces of furniture in early households.
LEFT: A superb example of a Brewster armchair with the distinguishing spindles below the seat. From Massachusetts, about 1650. RIGHT: A rare carved and painted chest-on-frame, also from Massachusetts but dating later in the xvii century.
LEFT: An early easy chair with the desirable arched cresting and so-called Spanish feet that date it about 1700. The fringed blue and white linen is contemporary. RIGHT: Another comfortable easy chair, dating from the second quarter of the XVIII century, built of walnut and cherry. The only remaining piece of the original embroidered upholstery is on the back. A detail of it is shown on page 248.
ABOVE: A pair of sconces fashioned of quillwork, mica, and wax, by Eunice Deering, Kittery, Maine, 1720-1740. BELOW: Detail of needlework on the Queen Anne chair