Anatomy of the Chair: American Regional Variations in Eighteenth Century Styles

by William R. Johnston
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The making of furniture was one of the first trades in which American colonial craftsmen achieved a marked degree of independence from their counterparts in the mother country. Aided by the availability of good woods—the native walnut, maple, and cherry, and the mahogany of Honduras and the West Indies—the manufacture of fine furniture flourished during the eighteenth century, especially in urban centers along the eastern seaboard. In general, American craftsmen followed English models and English fashions, but they often adapted these imported designs in their own way. Furthermore, through diversity in geography, economy, and cultural background, regional variations also appeared in the different centers of production.

These variations in style, both national and regional, are amply demonstrated by eighteenth

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century chairs in the American Wing. Side chairs are admirable documents of colonial tastes and techniques, in that they provide scope for a wide variety of skills: those of the turner, joiner, carver, and upholsterer. During this period, too, the side chair became a common article of furniture and underwent a succession of forms—from Queen Anne to Chippendale, from Chippendale to Hepplewhite and Sheraton—that have remained popular ever since.

Queen Anne furniture, which came into fashion in England around the turn of the eighteenth century, followed the trend toward refinement initiated by the returning aristocracy of the Restoration. The major innovation of the new style was the manner in which grace was imparted to the very forms of furniture by shaping the lines into subtle curves rather than by simply embellishing the surfaces with ornate carving. Compared with its rectilinear, cane-seated predecessors, the Queen Anne chair has a natural, almost organic appearance. The serpentine curve, called by Hogarth the “Line of Beauty,” predominates. It is a prominent feature of the back, both the central splat and the supporting stiles, and of the cabriole or “bandy” leg, which appears to bow beneath the weight it bears. Finally, in the shape of the back and construction of the seat, comfort, hitherto given scant attention, became a major consideration.

Although the style takes its name from the queen who reigned from 1702 to 1714, the colonial versions were made primarily during the second quarter of the century. Chairs made in America, moreover, were often smaller than their English counterparts, and to an even greater extent emphasis was placed on harmony of contour rather than on surface decoration. The carved masks and gilt of early English Georgian furniture are absent in America. The ball-and-claw foot, an Oriental motif common on English Queen Anne pieces, was slow to be adopted. It is less prevalent than the simpler pad foot, and when found usually indicates a late date of manufacture. The profile of the English chair is often elaborated by the use of cabriole legs in the back as well as the front, whereas the American model, apparently conceived from a more strictly frontal point of view, usually has simple rear legs.

The “Age of Walnut” is an epithet frequently applied to the Queen Anne period because of the popularity of this wood in both the mother country and the Colonies. The use of mahogany, however, was not uncommon in England, at least after the 1720s, and later appeared here as well. Maple, which had been employed here in the seventeenth century, continued to be used in some sections of New England, where, together with cherry, it was the usual alternative to walnut. Oak, the other principal furniture wood of the seventeenth century, declined in favor on both sides of the ocean.

Philadelphia was one of the most important centers of wealth and culture in America during the eighteenth century. That Quaker scruples against luxury in no way impeded a taste for so-
phisticated design is evident in a fine mahogany chair (Figure 1) of the 1740s. It is representative of the fully mature Queen Anne style in this city: the elimination of the straight line is almost complete. The splat and stiles of the back form a medley of subtly related curves. A horseshoe-shaped "compass" seat has replaced the plain square seat common earlier, and in this case is further enriched by an undulation in its front rail. A precedent was set in Philadelphia in the elimination of stretchers, members bracing the legs, which tend to detract from the clean lines of the piece.

Other recognizably Philadelphia features of this chair are the typical chamfered "stump" rear legs, and the trifid or drake feet, which are restricted, in America, to the Philadelphia area. The crisply rendered scrolls and naturalistic scallop shells—always a popular motif in this city—give evidence of the skill of Philadelphia carvers, which was later to rise to even greater eminence.

The Philadelphia chair is sturdy but some-

4. Mahogany chair in the Queen Anne style, New York, about 1740. Height 383/4 inches. Dick Fund, 40.100.1

what costly in its use of wood. If the slip seat is removed, one can see that the seat frame of horizontally laid boards, while elaborately shaped outside, is a simple square within (Figure 2). The molding that holds the seat in place is applied to the top of the frame, and the legs are attached with large dowels to the bottom. A prominent bulge in the knees of the front legs tends to conceal an almost total absence of the undercutting usually found on the inner surface of cabriole legs. The side rails of the frame are firmly attached to the stiles of the back by tenons, which in many Philadelphia chairs penetrate right through to the back for added strength.

An antithetical version of the Queen Anne style is a severe New England chair (Figure 1) attributed to the Southmayd family of Middletown, Connecticut. Although cherry was the most usual wood in Connecticut, this piece is of painted maple, a common rival to walnut throughout New England. The tall back of this chair is devoid of ornament; its stiles lack any lateral curvature and sweep down to simple, square back legs. Its central splat presents the slender, spare outline typical of Connecticut. Other regional features include the uncompromising square seat, with its neat, geometrical, cyma-curved aprons. The molding was simply gouged out of the frame, rather than applied separately. The seats of New England chairs (Figure 3) contain less wood than those of Philadelphia; the boards are laid vertically, and the corners are formed by the legs. The front legs, in fact, continue right through the frame, a more customary construction than the doweling used in Philadelphia. Leg stretchers, a conservative feature, were retained in New England throughout the Queen Anne period. The generously proportioned ball turning on the cross stretcher of this chair is indicative of its Connecticut origin, and, like the simple pad feet and the absence of carved ornament, is in keeping with its rural character.

Queen Anne furniture produced in New York approaches the elegance of form of Philadelphia work, but in construction adheres more to the techniques of New England. The seat of one typical chair (Figure 4), for example, is a modified version of the horseshoe shape favored in Philadelphia, but its frame is composed of vertical boards, connected to the legs in the New
England manner. The carving has the richness of that executed in Philadelphia, but seems shallow and indecisive by comparison. New York craftsmen did follow one Philadelphia precedent closely, however: they frequently omitted stretchers bracing the legs.

A piece of furniture from New York can often be identified by its ample size. The seat of this chair is eighteen and a half inches deep, whereas those from Philadelphia and Connecticut are each only seventeen inches. Another characteristic feature is the emphatic alternation of concave and convex curves of the back, with the contours of the broad, vase-shaped splat echoed by the stiles.

There was apparently a somewhat closer imitation of the original English models in New York than appears in examples from the other colonies. The ball-and-claw foot makes a comparatively early appearance in New York, rivaling the pointed and shod pad foot in popularity. The English practice of shaping the ends of the rear legs into pad feet, furthermore, is common in New York, although rare in the other colonies.

Newport, Rhode Island, the Quaker stronghold in the North, was a major center for the production of fine furniture, until the town’s prosperity was ruined by the Revolution. Much Newport work is associated with two closely allied Quaker families, the Goddards and the Townsend. Though less responsive to fluctuations in fashion than their brethren in Philadelphia, they produced furniture of comparable quality and, at times, of greater originality. The mahogany chair in Figure 5 is believed to have been made about 1760—the end of the Queen Anne period in America—by John Goddard. The unusual anthemion pattern on the knees is often found on Goddard’s desks and tables, and the sharp edge of the knees themselves are typical of Goddard’s work, though not of most surviving Rhode Island chairs. Features heralding a major change in style include the piercing of the splat, which otherwise has the broad, simple vase shape typical of Rhode Island, and the use of the square seat, for in Rhode Island, as in Philadelphia, the horseshoe seat was often favored.

The scallop-shell pattern, however, so often found on Newport chairs, differs radically from that carved in Philadelphia. A good deal less naturalistic, the shell is treated as a broad, fan-shaped abstraction, devoid of flanges. Newport craftsmen also departed from Philadelphia influence in retaining stretchers connecting the legs. In this case the thick, flat stretchers used earlier have been replaced by a turned variety. An idiosyncrasy of Rhode Island turning is the addition of extra rings to separate the sections of the stretchers. The most significant regional trait of all, however, is the extended grip of the claws of the ball-and-claw (Figure 11); in some chairs the claws are undercut so that an open space is created between them and the ball.

In London in 1754 appeared the first edition of The Gentleman and Cabinet Maker’s Director, by Thomas Chippendale. So immediate was its success that it was reprinted the following year and issued in an enlarged edition in 1762. Chippendale’s work was, in England, the most influential
in promulgating a new decorative style, which combined a return to somewhat more angular lines with an even greater delicacy of form and decoration. But Chippendale was not so much the originator as the popularizer of the style that bears his name: a number of other drawing books and catalogues were published within a decade or so, including those of Robert Manwaring, Thomas Johnson, and Ince and Mayhew, plus the standard trade guide of the period, *The London Book of Prices and Designs of Cabinet Work*.

The *Director* and its competitors soon made an appearance on this side of the ocean, and the years of fruition for the Chippendale style here were between the late 1750s and the end of the Revolution. It should be noted that the introduction of a new style required acquiescence by the patron as well as boldness on the part of the maker. Ample evidence indicates that throughout the eighteenth century earlier fashions of furniture not only remained in use, but continued to be made. In America, in fact, the term “Chippendale” can by no means be restricted to designs derived directly from the English source books. The features distinguishing an American Chippendale chair from a Queen Anne include the piercing and carving of the splat, and the use of a square rather than rounded seat. Otherwise the transition was gradual, and without radical structural innovation. Although after the mid-1760s the straight leg came into more use, the cabriole leg and the ball-and-claw foot remained popular throughout the Chippendale era, even though the latter was supplanted in Chippendale’s designs by the French scrolled foot. Colonial craftsmen also differed from the English in their preference for an angular rather than a rounded profile of the back. The crest rail is usually shaped in a double curve with protruding upturned “ears” at the ends.

Mahogany, increasingly available through the flourishing trade with the West Indies, largely

names in American decorative arts. Their work fused sophistication of form with unexcelled quality of carving, as exemplified in a fine mahogany chair (Figure 6) whose legs and stiles are carved with burgeoning decorative foliage, and whose splat is shaped into a harmonious pattern of curving strapwork. Apart from certain details of the interlaced crest rail, adapted from Chippendale's Director, the design is original to Philadelphia. Among the clues to provenance are the prominent ears at the corners of the back, the cyma curves of the front seat rail, and the stump rear legs. The Philadelphia treatment of the ball-and-claw foot can often be distinguished, as in this example, by the firm grip of the claws around a slightly flattened ball (Figure 9).

A practice in construction peculiar to Philadelphia, continued from the Queen Anne period, is the use of long tenons protruding to the back.

7. Mahogany chair in the Chippendale style, Boston or Salem, Massachusetts, about 1765-1770. Height 38 3/8 inches. Gift of Mrs. Paul Moore, 39.88.2

replaced walnut during the Chippendale period, both here and in England, possibly because of its rich color, possibly because of its suitability for intricate carving. In this country the maker often economized on the construction of the seat frame by utilizing readily accessible local woods, and a knowledge of these secondary woods can sometimes help in determining where a chair was made. In chairs thought to be of Philadelphia origin, pine is looked for; in New York, ash; and in New England, cherry, maple, or ash. In view of the brisk trade in wood this method of identification is not altogether trustworthy; craftsmen were apparently accustomed to using whatever was around the shop in the nonvisible parts of furniture, and one chair in the American Wing contains no less than four varieties of wood.

Regional variations remained important in the Chippendale period. A major efflorescence of the widely adopted style took place, as might have been expected, in Philadelphia. The Philadelphia craftsmen of this time—Savery, Gillingham, Randolph, Affleck, Trotter, and the rest—would be included in any list of the greatest

8. Plate 9 from The Cabinet and Chair Maker's Real Friend and Companion (London, 1763), by Robert Manwaring. Rogers Fund, Library
of the rear legs to fasten the legs to the seat frame. This provided additional strength at the main point of stress, and was an optional feature available at a slightly higher price.

That Robert Manwaring wished to appeal to the craftsman rather than the cultured nobility becomes apparent in comparing the title of his book, Cabinet and Chair Maker’s Real Friend, with Chippendale’s Gentleman and Cabinet Maker’s Director. It was perhaps this pragmatic approach that caused his book to be especially popular in Boston, where it was introduced in 1767, two years after publication in London. An application of one of his designs (Figure 8) can be seen on a chair (Figure 7) probably made in Boston. It has a seat upholstered over the frame, a serious rival to the slip seat only in Massachusetts. Also characteristic of Massachusetts work are the comparatively lean proportions of the piece. The seat frame is lighter than is common elsewhere. The knees have a sharp, square edge and are carved with shallow, rather stringy leaves. Deep undercutting emphasizes the inward curve of the delicately attenuated cabriole legs. This chair has no stretchers, but they are not uncommon in this region. The Massachusetts variant of the ball-and-claw foot can be recognized by the widely spread, rather knobby claws that curve sharply backward (Figure 12).

Although considerable diversity exists among
13. Mahogany chair in the Chippendale style, New York, 1760-1770. Height 38\(\frac{1}{4}\) inches. Gift of Mrs. George Sands Bryon in memory of her husband, George Sands Bryon, 46.152.1

14. LEFT: Mahogany chair in the Hepplewhite style, New York, about 1795. Height 38\(\frac{3}{4}\) inches. Gift of Mrs. Screven Lorillard, 52.195.12. RIGHT: Mahogany chair in the Hepplewhite style, Baltimore, about 1790-1800. Height 38\(\frac{3}{4}\) inches. Rogers Fund, 52.20
surviving Chippendale chairs from New York, they generally have the same heavy, broad proportions as their Queen Anne predecessors. Some are almost direct copies of English designs; the decorative motifs of one example (Figure 13)—of a type owned by several important New York families, among them the Van Rensselaers—largely derive from English furniture of the beginning of the reign of George II (1727-1760). Among these is the pendent tassel in the center of the splat, which also occurs in chairs of Philadelphia and Boston, but which, in combination with the ruffle below it and the flanking acanthus scrolls, is distinctive of New York. In the English fashion also are the tapered rear legs ending in pad feet, a design in continued use in New York from the Queen Anne period.

The thick crest rail terminating in broad ears is one of the specifically regional traits of this chair. So are the thickness of the frame, its rounded corners, and the gadroon molding along its bottom, although the latter is occasionally found on Philadelphia furniture as well. On the broad knees of the cabriole leg are carved acanthus leaves that fall between the abstract schematism of Massachusetts and the naturalism of Philadelphia. The claws for the foot—so useful a clue to origin—project outward at right angles to the leg, giving the foot an almost cubical appearance (Figure 10).

In more remote areas, where pattern books were unavailable, the provincial craftsman, relying on his ingenuity, often produced personalized and highly fanciful variations upon the Chippendale theme. From a chair (Figure 6) of a type often associated with the Dunlaps of Salisbury, New Hampshire, one can glean that New Englanders were not given to lolling in their seats. The angularity and rigidity of this chair also bespeak the regular occupation of its maker: the Dunlaps were known not as chairmakers but as cabinetmakers, whose reputation rested on their maple chests. The deep intaglio carving of the fan pattern, the S-scrolls in the splat, and the cyma curves of the apron are all motifs found on Dunlap chests.

While colonial craftsmen continued to work in the Chippendale style well past the third quarter of the century, European tastes were undergoing a major transformation, stimulated in part by such discoveries in the new field of archaeology as Pompeii and Herculaneum. Robert Adam, upon his return to England in 1758 from four years’ study in Italy, initiated a classicizing trend in England, which continued to grow in the following decades until its dominance was assured, in the eighties and nineties, with the publications of Hepplewhite and Sheraton.

Why the Colonies remained so long aloof from these developments is problematical. Perhaps it was because the Adam brothers were primarily architects, and their works did not include design books that might have been of assistance to colonial furniture makers. Perhaps the rift with England, expressed as early as the 1765 boycot
of English goods in reprisal against the Stamp Act, contributed to the isolation of the American craftsman.

But once the Revolution was over, the ascendancy of Chippendale was ended by the new, more delicate style. The leading sources for furniture of the Federal era were the design books of George Hepplewhite and Thomas Sheraton, including Hepplewhite's *The Cabinet-Maker and Upholsterer's Guide*, published posthumously in 1788 and republished in 1793 and 1794, Sheraton's *Cabinet-Maker and Upholsterer's Drawing Book* of 1794, *Cabinet Dictionary* of 1803, and the first volume of his *Encyclopedia*, unfinished at the time of his death in 1806.

The transition from Chippendale to Federal not only involved changes in decoration and proportion, but also innovations in structure. In chairs the back splat had formerly run all the way from the crest rail to the seat rail, but in both Hepplewhite and Sheraton designs it was suspended above the seat rail, so that the back was supported only by the stiles. The upholstered seat generally replaced the slip seat.

Federal chairs are often, and rather arbitrarily, defined as Hepplewhite or Sheraton simply on the basis of whether their backs are shaped in the curvilinear shield, oval, or hoop patterns associated with Hepplewhite, or in the more rectangular shapes predominating in Sheraton's early designs. American Sheraton furniture, furthermore, is often thought to be later than Hepplewhite. In actual fact, however, "round" and "square" backs can be found in the designs of both men, and American chairs of both patterns were produced at the same time.

In the last decade of the century there occurred a shift in regional production. Several prosperous localities—Baltimore and the Boston-Salem area in particular—attained their zenith in fine cabinetwork, and furniture of excellent quality continued to be made in Rhode Island, Connecticut, New Jersey, and New York. Philadelphia's long supremacy, however, began to wane in the nineties, with the loss through death and retirement of many of its greatest carvers. Although exceptional furniture was still made there, such as the two chairs from Elias Hasket Derby's mansion in Salem displayed in the Salem Alcove of the American Wing, the individuality of the furni-

ture from the "Athens of America" nevertheless declined.

Because of an even stronger dependence on pattern books than in the Chippendale period, regional variations in Federal furniture are of a more subtle nature. The suave contour of the chair on the right in Figure 14 bespeaks its origin: it is a variant of the shield design favored in Baltimore. So rapid was the growth of this city after the Revolution that its population more than doubled in the decade of the nineties. Its furniture excels in its harmonious, flowing contours and superb inlays. The patriotic eagle clutching an arrow in its talons and a ribbon in its beak, which is inlaid on the back of this chair, is a very common motif in this area. The low

point of the long shield, almost reaching the seat, is characteristic of Baltimore work, as are the prominent outline moldings and the serpentine bulge at the front of the seat. The tapered legs are spaced wide apart in front, but raked close together in the rear. The legs of Baltimore chairs usually have convex faces, and are often braced by light stretchers.

Two tall, stately chairs represent the flourishing furniture trade of post-Revolution New York. The sturdiness of Hepplewhite construction in one (Figure 14, left) is masked by the pronounced curves of its shield back, suspended well above the seat rail, and by the unusual splayed front legs. Inlay is sometimes found on New York pieces, but the delicately carved ornament on this example distinguishes it from that made in Baltimore. Details typical of New York are the

17. Mahogany chair in the Hepplewhite style, Salem, Massachusetts, about 1795. Height 37 7/8 inches. The Friends of the American Wing Fund, 62.16

lotus buds on the bars of the back, the husks on the central bar, and the palmette at the base of the shield.

The other New York chair (Figure 15), labeled Sheraton because of the predominantly rectilinear composition of its back, has a similar bold scale. The seat is broad and ample, and, as is customary but not invariable in New York construction, a pair of ash braces run across the bottom of the frame from front to rear. The pierced, urn-shaped splat and flanking swags of drapery are clues to the origin of this chair; the Prince of Wales plumes were often used in America, but especially in New York, despite their Tory connotations.

Use of the old-fashioned splat, running all the way from crest to seat, occasionally survived in Connecticut and New Jersey, and more frequently in Rhode Island, as in the elegant example in Figure 16. The combination of the kylix and pendent bellflower on its splat is typical not only of Rhode Island, but of Massachusetts and
Connecticut as well. Curiously enough the seat is connected to the stiles by the long, protruding tenons previously associated with Philadelphia chairs. Evidently this strengthening device—referred to as “through bannisters” in notices of the day—was sometimes adopted in the northern Quaker center. The prominent bulge in the front of the seat results not from the shape of the rail itself, as is customary elsewhere, but from a curved block doweled to it. The legs of Rhode Island chairs, as in this example, have a pronounced taper and are usually braced by stretchers.

The singular design and fine carving of another Hepplewhite shield-back chair (Figure 17), a superb recent acquisition through the generosity of the Friends of the American Wing, link it with the influential Salem architect and craftsman Samuel McIntire. The vase-shaped splat, flanked by curved bars and drapery swags, is found on a large number of such chairs. A comparison between the chair and the original Hepplewhite design from which it is adapted (Figure 18) is favorable to the maker. The straight, tapered front legs, ending in ebony-veneered spade feet, are also characteristic of chairs of this group. The low, broad seat, comparatively short, wide shield, and the outward curve of the rear legs are regional traits of Massachusetts pieces. The most outstanding feature of this chair is its naturalistic carved ornament of wheat sprays and bunches of grapes; identical details are found on other pieces of furniture known to have been made by Samuel McIntire.

The delicate, profusely inlaid Sheraton chair in Figure 19 has been attributed to a member of the Seymour family in Boston, whose work is distinguished by just such refinement of form and wealth of contrasting inlay. The turned front legs, although typically Sheraton, also have a number of details associated with the Seymours, such as the three rings at the top, the delicate reeding, and the complex turning of the foot. The bosses carved on the corners of the frame and on the ends of the crest rail, and the quatrefoil rosettes on the posts of the back are also typical of Seymour work. The reeding of the seat rails is used not only by the Seymours but also by Duncan Phyfe in New York.

In the complex composition of its back, and in the noticeable bow curve of its stiles, the Seymour chair departs from those of the early Federal period. At about this time, the neoclassicism of both Europe and America became at once more severe and more eclectic, and this approach is apparent in Sheraton’s later designs and in this example. With this chair we enter the nineteenth century.

The foregoing article is based on an exhibition that was arranged with the help of the staff of the American Wing.

19. Mahogany chair in the Sheraton style, attributed to one of the Seymours of Boston, about 1800. Height 36 inches. Gift of Mrs. Russell Sage, 10.125.312