

The Columbus Museum Presents

Our Young Nation: American Federal Furniture and Decorative Arts from the Watson Collection

September 19, 2004 - January 9, 2005

Educators Guide

In the years following the American Revolution and creation of the United States in 1783, new designs for furniture and other decorative arts swept through the new nation. Based on English and European neoclassical interpretations, this new style featured colorful veneers and inlays, refined carving, geometrical shapes and an overall lightness and delicacy that contrasted with preceding styles. Drawing on more than 80 pieces of furniture and other decorative arts from the collection of Ronald Watson, this exhibition presents a comprehensive profile of furniture made in cabinetmaking centers from Boston to Charleston from the late 1780s to the 1820s. The selection of furniture in the exhibition in many ways reflects the evolving character of domestic life in America and the emergence of stylistic elements that are distinctly American.



This exhibition is made possible by Friends of the Museum.

All pieces in the exhibition are from the collection of Dr. & Mrs. D. Ronald Watson.

**The Columbus Museum · 1251 Wynnton Road Columbus, GA 31906 · (706) 649-0713
www.columbusmuseum.com**

Guide Objectives

Through touring this exhibition and use of this guide students will:

- relate world and national events to period objects
- sight characteristics of nationalism and the American Federal era and how they are reflected in objects from the period
- become familiar with the terms used to describe furniture and decorative arts from the Federal period
- examine the lifestyle of Americans during the Federal period

History Vocabulary/Terms

Articles of Confederation: first constitution of the United States (1777), creating an alliance of independent states

Artifacts: objects made or used by human beings now or in the past

Antifederalists: people who opposed the constitution and a strong national government unless a bill of rights was added

Federalists: supporters of the constitution that wanted a strong national government

Federal Era: the period of time just after the Revolutionary War

Nationalism: pride in the country; after proving themselves equal to a European nation, people identified as being Americans

Furniture & Decorative Arts Vocabulary/Terms

Antique: an item or object made at least 100 years ago

Artisan: a person that makes things by hand

Cabinetmakers: craftsmen who make case furniture such as cabinets, chests, or cupboards by joining thin boards together by means of dovetails rather than with the mortise-and-tenon joints, used at an earlier time

Federal Style: furniture that emerged after 1789 in America, sometimes referred to as *Sheraton* and *Hepplewhite* and is considered some of America's most valuable furniture. and was made in East Coast cities like Philadelphia, Boston, Baltimore, Newport and Charleston and is referred to as the neoclassical style outside America. Inspired by the classic elegance of first-century Roman objects that had recently been excavated at Pompeii and Herculaneum the (neoclassical) style of architecture and interior design originated in France.

Furniture & Decorative Arts Vocabulary/Terms continued

Finial: a small decoration or ornament at the top of a door, chest, or chair

Inlay: wood ornamentation set into the surface of furniture

History Painting (American): paintings that focus on a serious narrative or include exemplary actions; they are not necessarily an accurate or documentary description of actual events. Their didactic qualities through which moral, ethical, religious, or nationalistic philosophy could be shared challenged artists' abilities tremendously. Often large in scale, subjects derive from the Bible, mythology, secular literature, or historical events. As America became a unified nation, it was in need of painters skilled enough to represent its national heroes, figures, and ideologies on canvas in order to tell the world of the country's greatness.

Marquetry: designs in wood made by inlaying pieces of wood with different grain and color into other types of wood

Neoclassicism: style of architecture and art that developed in the late 19th century that reflects a new revival of interest in classical antiquities from the Greek and Roman cultures of the past

Portraiture: images or paintings of people. A portrait may be of the head, half-body, or entire figure of the subject. Paintings were limited to mainly portraiture in early America (1750s) and the artist was expected to show a likeness and the social position of the sitter.

Silhouette: an outline filled with a solid color, typically black on a white ground, and most often for a portrait. The term and what most people think of as silhouettes originated in the early eighteenth century in Europe. The first silhouettes may have been the profiles produced about 1700. Their popularity was established by 1720, and spread to France and to the United States later in the century. The first silhouettes were painted images, taken from a subject's shadow, and subsequently reduced in size, often with a pantograph. The medium of early silhouettes was lamp black (soot) on plaster or glass.

Veneer: thin layer of wood permanently bonded to a thicker core. The most beautiful grain patterns are used for the outermost layer (or face veneer) of furniture piece; greater strength is achieved by bonding woods at right angles to each other.

Federal Furniture Arrives in America:

A new era began in April 1789 after George Washington took the oath of office promising to uphold the newly ratified Federal Constitution. As America began to take shape a new style in furniture emerged. Federalist furniture takes its name from the **Federal** period and the Federalist party and was made during the period immediately following the establishment of independence from England. It represents the first stage of neoclassicism in America. Although the **neoclassical style** which included elements such as square, tapered legs and classical figures was prominent throughout England in 1770, it took longer to come into fashion in America, as the Revolution and gaining independence from Britain took a forefront to taking on a style that had been embraced by the enemy. In the 1780s cabinetmakers in London were developing new designs. George Hepplewhite and Thomas Sheraton are names often affiliated with Federal furniture in America. While they are not the inventors of the style, they were noted practitioners and craftsmen. Each published books (Hepplewhite's *The Cabinet-Maker and Upholsterer's Guide*, 1788 and Sheraton's *The Cabinet-Maker and Upholsterer's Drawing Book*, 1791-3) which brought the new styles to America.

The Federal style was not adopted until after the Revolution and the depression that followed the war. After a federal government was established prosperity seemed to be arriving in America. The population and size of the new nation was growing; by 1808 the first newspaper west of the Mississippi River was in circulation. Immigrants were arriving regularly and the theme of nationalism emerged in both the arts and daily life. This encouraged Americans to build new homes which required new furniture.



Side Chair (one of a set of five)
Philadelphia, late 1780s-1800
Mahogany, hard pine; Atlantic white cedar



Lady's Writing Table, Philadelphia, 1805-15
Mahogany, satinwood, mahogany veneers; tulip poplar, Atlantic white cedar, white pine; brass pulls, eglomise panel

Federal Clues

How can one attribute a piece of furniture to the Federal period?

Craftsmen in this time borrowed iconography from the Greeks and Romans.

Remember-The neoclassical style debuted in France after the discovery of first-century Roman objects that had been excavated at Pompeii and Herculaneum.

Look for:

| | | |
|-------------|-------------------|---|
| Bellflower | Ribbons | Classic, Simple Designs |
| Caning | Shields | Clean Cut Edges |
| Cornucopias | Swags | Flat Veneers |
| Drapery | Urns | Smooth Planes |
| Eagles | Bunches of Grapes | Straight lines |
| Fans | Fruit Baskets | Contrasting Light and Dark Veneer and Inlay |
| Festoons | Half Moon Inlay | Light Blue Painted Interiors |
| Ribbons | Shafts of Wheat | |

Timeline

July 4, 1776 Americans declared their independence from British rule

1778 France recognizes American independence from Britain

1779 Spain enters war against Britain

1783 Britain recognizes American independence in the Treaty of Paris

1788 Constitution is ratified

1789 Electoral college elects Washington the nation's first President

1791 Bill of Rights guarantees individual rights and freedoms

1801 Thomas Jefferson becomes President

1803 Louisiana Purchase

1804 Lewis and Clark expedition began

1811 Battle of Tippecanoe

1812 War of 1812

1823 Monroe Doctrine

Discussion Questions

- What is an antique?
- How might one identify an object of furniture to be from the Federal period?
- What are characteristics of Federal period furniture and other decorative items?
- What events or changes helped to establish a desire for a new style of furniture in America?
- What events inspired the designs and motifs presented in Federal period furniture?
- What role did the artisans and craftsmen play in the developing of the new nation?
- After examining an example of early Federal furniture (late 1700s), how does it compare with a piece intended for similar use from the latter half of the period (1820s)?
- Furthermore, how do they both compare with furniture intended for similar use from this century?

Activities

Silhouettes

Create your own silhouette with a friend's help. Stand to your side with a light shining on your face against a piece of black paper. Using a piece of chalk or a pencil trace the shadow of your face and neckline on the paper. Cut out your image and affix it to a white background.

Federal Housing

Draw a picture of a typical room of a house from the American Federal period. You may wish to include items that tell about the people of family that might live in the house. Pay careful attention to the needs of the family and the environment in which they live. Visit Federal period house museums online for information and inspiration. To see a Federal era house and furnishings, visit the Walker-Peters-Langdon House, a simple Federal cottage built in 1828. The house is located at Historic Columbus's Heritage Corner, at the corner of 7th Street and Broadway in Columbus' Original City Historic District.

What does it mean?

Find books and other resources about American symbols. Research a symbol. Find out its history, why it became important to the nation, what it symbolizes and how it has served to unite the nation. Look for examples of how the symbol has been used throughout American history and write a composition on the symbol. As an extended activity select or design a symbol that could represent America today. Where would the symbol be used and what messages would people understand when they see it?

Federal Style

What kind of impact did the Federal period have on artists, writers, architects and craftsmen of the period? Find a building, work of art or literature from the American Federal period. Analyze the impact the issues facing the nation had on the work's outcome. Write a composition detailing your findings and be sure to include information about both the intention of the work and its creator or designer.

Furniture Stories

Select an object from the exhibition and tell its story. Where was it made? Was it ordered or ready-made? Who used this piece? Has its use changed over time? What repairs and changes have been made? Share the furniture's story in a composition. Use historical information to guide and reference your creative writing.

History Painting

History painting grew in popularity during the Federal period. Select an artist from the time whose art helped to enhance the American ideals. How did their artwork have an impact on our vision of early American life and heroes? Prepare a presentation on your artist and their work as a history painter. Consider what other means of expressing Federal ideas and interests were utilized during the Federal era. How does the work of your artist compare?

Federal Artists in the Museum's Collection

Charles Willson Peale

Charles Willson Peale 1741-1827
Elizabeth Michael Snyder. Ca. 1790
Oil on canvas, 27 ¼ X 23
Museum purchase 83.37



Prior to becoming a painter Charles Willson Peale worked as a clocksmith, silversmith and saddler in Annapolis, Maryland. In 1767, he traveled to London to study with the American artist Benjamin West. He focused on portrait painting and believed that anyone could become an artist if they were willing to learn the fundamentals and work. Two of Peale's brothers and several of his children, many of whom were named for noted painters, also became artists. Peale worked primarily in Maryland and Philadelphia and created the public Peale's Museum (the Philadelphia Museum) in 1778 which held a collection of natural specimens and portraits. In 1795, he decided to discontinue his work as a painter and focus solely on his museum. Peale disliked idealization and his preference for painting a truthful representation can be seen in his painting of Elizabeth Michael Snyder.

Thomas Sully

Thomas Sully 1783-1872
Mrs. Caleb Newbold and Her Son Thomas, 1813
Oil on canvas, 35X 40
Museum purchase made possible by the Edward Swift
Shorter Bequest Fund 93.8



With the exception of Gilbert Stuart, Thomas Sully is considered to be the most popular portrait painter of the Federal period. He was born in England in 1783 and moved with his family to Charleston, South Carolina at the age of nine. As a child he spent all of his spare time drawing. He moved to New York City at the age of 23 and worked as a portrait artist. He traveled to London and under the instruction of Benjamin West he excelled and became a proficient and sought after portraiture artist after his return to Philadelphia. In 1835 he was elected to membership in the American Philosophical Society and was believed to be unsurpassed by any living American in the field of portraiture. The intimacy between the mother and child shown in Sully's painting *Mrs. Caleb Newbold and Her Son Thomas* contrasts with the restraint of most American portraits of the day. This may indicate that the painting was not intended for a public audience.

Gilbert Stuart

Gilbert Stuart 1755-1828
Mrs. Edward Stow, 1802-03
Oil on cradeled panel, 29 ¼ X 23 ½
Museum purchase made possible by the
Endowment Fund in honor of D.A. Turner 2000.1



Born in Rhode Island, Stuart's first attempt to learn the skills needed to become an artist sent him to Scotland with his teacher, but he was stranded there when his teacher died. He eventually returned to America where he painted portraits. In need of more training, he left for London in 1777. He was eventually taken in by Benjamin West and mastered the skills necessary to succeed as an artist. Having excelled in portrait painting he soon opened what became a lucrative studio of his own in London. He preferred portraits as they were completed quickly and profitable. Stuart's debts from his extravagant lifestyle caused him to flee to Ireland where he worked from 1787-1792, where his success as an artist again did not outweigh his debt. To avoid prison he returned to America in 1793 where his portraits were soon in great demand. Probably his portraits of George Washington are those that gave him the most acclaim; however his impatience and lifestyle led him to leave many commissions unfinished. His approach of painting directly on the canvas rather than carefully sketching may offer an explanation to the awkward nature of the sitter's right hand.

More Artists of the Federal Period:

| | |
|------------------------|-----------------------|
| Washington Allston | Henry Benbridge |
| Thomas Cole | John Singleton Copley |
| Ralph Earl | Sarah Goodrich |
| Emanuel Gottlieb Leutz | Charles Bird King |
| Samuel F. B. Morse | Frances Bond Palmer |
| Sarah Perkins | Ellen Sharples |
| Jane Stuart | John Trumbull |
| Benjamin West | |

Writers of the Federal Period:

Philip Freneau (1752-1832)
Washington Irving (1783-1859)

Web Resources:

Gunston Hall <http://www.gunstonhall.org/>

Heartland Hills <http://www.geocities.com/Heartland/Hills/6365/stuarthist.html>

Locust Grove <http://www.morsehistoricsite.org/>

Tudor Place <http://www.tudorplace.org/>

National Portrait Gallery <http://www.npg.si.edu/edu/brush/guide/index.html>

For an e-interview with an American Period Furniture Maker:

<http://www.sapfm.org/sapfm2003/einterview/headley/introduction.asp>

Definitions from PBS: <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/roadshow/speak/index.html>

<http://decorativearts.library.wisc.edu/resources.html>

lesson on furniture:

<http://www.coe.uh.edu/mayerweb/Education/Source/extncbench/neoclassical.html>

Other helpful websites:

<http://www.americancenturies.mass.edu/home.html>

<http://www.scils.rutgers.edu/~christym/final/federalist/peale.html>

<http://arapaho.nsuok.edu/~sharp/1113syl.htm>

Curricular Connections:

Language Arts 9-12

American Literature and Composition; 29, 30, 33

Writers Workshop; 26, 27

9th Grade Principles of Literature and Composition; 47, 48, 50

Literature and Composition 9; 39, 40, 42

Literature and Composition 10; 53

Core Skills; 19

Journalism I; 34

Journalism II; 34

Social Studies 9-12

American Government; 6, 7, 8

Civics/Citizenship; 3, 14

Constitutional Theory; 4, 5, 6

Humanities; 2, 33, 34

Sociology; 8



Secretary Bookcase, Eastern Massachusetts, 1796
Mahogany, white line inlay; white pine

How To Book a Tour of this Exhibition :

Call the Education Department at (706) 649-0713 ext. 39 or email tours@columbusmuseum.com to schedule a tour with a museum guide, or for a self-guided tour. Have ready:

1. Group name and mailing address.
2. Choice of ideal dates.
3. The age or grade level of your group.
4. The size of your group (maximum of 60 per tour).
5. The type of tour desired.

Please note transportation assistance is available on a first-come, first-served basis. Requests and arrangements for transportation assistance must be completed 3 weeks prior to scheduled tour.

Resources Available to Borrow from the Museum's Teachers Resource Center:

American Family of the Federal Period Paper Dolls in Full Color, Tom Tierney

Classic America: The Federal Style & Beyond, Wendell Garrett, Paul Rocheleau

Common Sense, Thomas Paine

The Declaration of Independence and Other Great Documents of American History, 1775-1865, John Grafton

Everyday Life in the 1800s: A Guide for Writers, Students & Historians, Marc McCutcheon

The Reshaping of Everyday Life 1790-1840, John Larkin

Resources Used in Developing this Guide:

American Art History and Culture, Wayne Craven

Four Centuries of American Furniture, Oscar P. Fitzgerald

Pioneering Spirits, Abby Remer

Images pictured on the front of this Guide:

(from left to right)

Side Chair (one of a set of five) Philadelphia, late 1780s-1800

Mahogany, hard pine; Atlantic white cedar

Secretary Bookcase, Eastern Massachusetts, 1796

Mahogany, white line inlay; white pine

Lady's Writing Table, Philadelphia, 1805-15

Mahogany, satinwood, mahogany veneers; tulip poplar, Atlantic white cedar, white pine; brass pulls, eglomise panel

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