ENGLISH FURNITURE AND DECORATION, 1680 TO 1800

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649133772

English furniture and decoration, 1680 to 1800 by G. M. Ellwood

Edited by Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd.
Cover @ 2017

www.triestepublishing.com

G. M. ELLWOOD

ENGLISH FURNITURE AND DECORATION, 1680 TO 1800

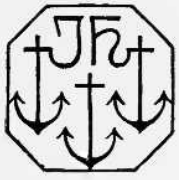
Trieste

ENGLISH FURNITURE AND DECORATION

1680 TO 1800

BY

G. M. ELLWOOD



PUBLISHED BY JULIUS HOFFMANN
STUTTGART MCMIX

ENGLISH FURNITURE AND DECORATION

BY G. M. ELLWOOD-LONDON

INTRODUCTION

It is the aim of this book to give some idea of the beautiful furniture produced in England between 1680 and 1800, including only what is good in design, and entirely ignoring the debased motives (Chinese and Gothic Chippendale and the work produced by Chippendale and Sheraton under direct French influence) that are of interest only to those who profess an admiration for anything that is old or of high value, however ugly it may be.

The photographs for convenience of classification are divided into broad periods, namely, William and Mary, Queen Anne, Chippendale, Adam, Hepplewhite and Sheraton.

The reign of William and Mary, extending from 1689 to 1702, is notable for the great changes made in the design, material, and construction of furniture owing to the introduction of foreign ideas by the Dutch craftsmen brought over by the King. In this minor art English craftsmen were compelled by the fashion to follow on similar lines, but the strong individuality of Sir Christopher Wren, who had already created a beautiful English Renaissance in architecture, developed, under the patronage of the King and Queen and great nobles, the essentially English style of interior decoration associated with the period. The walls of rooms were divided into dado and filling, and cut up into large panels with wide bevels, simply moulded in many cases, but elaborately carved in the more important rooms. Architrave mouldings, cornice mouldings, and friezes were all executed in oak and elaborately carved, so that the whole space from floor to ceiling was generally treated with ornamental woodwork, though sometimes, as in William III's state bed-room at Hampton Court, the space between dado and frieze was covered with tapestry. Doorways and overmantels seem to have been the architect's special care. In the best examples of the former richly carved and moulded architraves, and pediments supported by elaborate and beautiful trusses were used. For overmantels high relief festoons of flowers and fruit, exquisitely carved in lime-wood by Wren's famous contemporary Grinling Gibbons, framed a picture, mirror, or panel, the latter often quartered or inlaid in geometrical design. The actual fireplace was usually framed with a heavy bolection moulding without mantel-shelf. Dutch Chandeliers in brass or silver to hold from 3 to 30 candles were a feature of the time; their design consisted of a large metal ball or drum, with graceful curved arms spreading from the top or centre, the whole suspended by a cord or chain from the ceiling.

Furniture was made in oak, veneered with Italian walnut, banded with other woods and decorated with burr and marquetery in large naturalistic patterns of vases, birds, flowers, etc., tulips being much used.

The favourite piece of furniture was the large bureau, standing either on a chest of drawers or turned legs, the upper part made up of a number of small drawers and cupboard recesses beautifully decorated with marquetery, and enclosed either by double doors or large flap (to let down for writing) surmounted by an ovolo frieze, divided into two panels of marquetery. This frieze usually formed a secret drawer, such drawers and spaces being a feature of the period, and great ingenuity

was shown in their disposition and mechanical contrivances.

The revival of marquetry as a means of decorating furniture commenced between 1670 and 1680 with the decoration of small objects such as clocks, boxes etc. It differed from Stuart marquetry in construction, the earlier method being to cut out spaces and let in pieces of different material to fill them, the later to lay down pattern and background together as a veneer, necessitating large flat surfaces in the objects to be decorated. At first the marquetry was confined to Italian arabesques and birds, executed in brown on light yellow coloured wood, somewhat later developing into the bold Dutch style mentioned above. The two styles, amalgamating towards the end of William and Mary's reign, finally developed into a series of very fine Acanthus scrolls and geometrical patterns of lines and burrs. The presence of jessamine in the marquetery, represented in ivory, bone, or hollywood, dates the piece as belonging to the William and Mary period.

Though some very elaborate carved and gilded stools and settees were produced during the early part of this reign, the chairs most in vogue were developed from imported Dutch models. Stuart ideas influenced the alterations made in the upper part, and a new and eminently sane treatment of turning and square-cutting, used for the legs. These were connected by the graceful moulded underframing characteristic of chairs, cabinets and tables far into the next reign.

Lacquered furniture, now much in favour, was another importation of the King's from Holland to which country Eastern workmen had been brought to teach their art. This influence founded a style of ornamentation destined to obtain a strong hold in many English homes for the next fifty years. Walnut chairs and stools were painted in black and gold to harmonize with the larger work.

In the next period, associated with the reign of Queen Anne from 1702 to 1714, the cabriole leg, another great innovation derived from antique forms, but reaching us again through Holland, where it had been revived some years previously, became the almost universal support for all kinds of furniture for the next sixty years. Previous to its introduction, in the early part of Queen Anne's reign, twisted turning on Stuart lines was used as the support for cabinets and tables; at first very heavy, and with an ugly increase in the size of the turning as it descended; but at its best, extremely good and varied in detail. Several examples of the period exist executed entirely in silver.

In the accompanying series of photographs of Queen Anne furniture the simpler forms of the period are mostly given, as showing more plainly the assertion of English ideas of design suggested by the work of the famous contemporary architects. Rooms were more lofty, and, the walls being still covered with panelling, cabinets in proportion were called for. Therefore tall pieces with beautifully designed pediments became popular, and some of the finest cabinet work in history was expended on these.

The familiar bureau with book-case over and sloping writing flap covering drawers and pigeon holes was introduced, also corner-cabinets with wooden or glass panelled doors, used to store the china and silver used in the social functions more and more coming into fashion. Settees with backs formed as two chair backs, and top rail fashioned from one piece of wood, appeared then and have been used in some form ever since, soon extending to three backs, and in Sheraton's time six or seven forming the one settee.

All furniture, though retaining similar outlines, became more elaborate as the reign progressed, expert carvers becoming more numerous. This was especially the case with chairs, which developed very elaborate and ornate ornamentation in comparison with the simple carved shell that had so far been the characteristic decoration. In the earlier years of the period chairs were also ornamented with inlay on the back, the top of the cabriole and round seat frame, later by a small inlay panel in back only, and finally, for the reason above referred to, by carving alone. Cabriole legs and ends of arms terminating in animals and birds heads or claws were universal now, some being very ugly. The idea, though gaining great popularity for a time, soon died out, leaving only the lion's claw and ball foot so much used by Chippendale.

The whole effect of rooms of this period must have been very picturesque, — colour was more general, rich silks, damasks and velvets being much used for hangings and coverings, doubly rich against the fine deal wainscot. This was usually painted some pale colour as background to the dark-toned walnut or gorgeous lacquer furniture in red, green or black, ornamented in gold and further enriched by hinges and lock plates of chased brass.

INTRODUCTION

The period directly following Queen Anne and preceding Chippendale is usually referred to as "Georgian", which term is also used by some to denote the whole ground covered by this book. It was essentially a continuation of the precedents already set, interpreted by new men and much elaborated. The bold "Grinling Gibbons" carved festoons of fruit, flowers and masks, hitherto used only as architectural accessories, were now freely, often too freely, introduced into furniture, which was frequently heavily gilt. Candelabra finely designed and executed in wood shared with elaborate arrangements in cut glass the favours of fashion, and side tables with marble tops were largely made.

Mahogany was first used in furniture making between 1710—1715, having previously been employed only in small quantities for decorative purposes; by 1720 it was in general use. Quite naturally the early furniture made in mahogany was similar to that previously made in walnut, early Chippendale chairs being practically identical in design with early Queen Anne models.

The Chippendale style embraces about fifty years, from 1730 to 1780. Though Thomas Chippendale was at work some time previous to 1730 his influence was hardly fully felt until about 1740. Thenceforward he became the undisputed leader of public taste in furniture until his death, having countless imitators and elaborators, but no serious rivals. It is worthy of note that at the early period of his sway wall-papers were coming into use, taking the place of silks used hitherto. The usual method of decorating a room intended for the reception of Chippendale productions was to run a panelled dado round it, have a classic mantelpiece, architraves and frieze, and fill the wall above the dado with a large patterned silk or paper designed in harmony with the furniture. Some quaint things were perpetrated in connection with the Chinese period, walls being covered with pagodas and figures suggesting tea advertisements.

Beds during the early part of the 18th century were always of the four poster kind, very elaborately curtained and decorated in the larger mansions. In the William and Mary and Queen Anne periods these curtains completely enveloped the structure; later on, in Chippendale's time, the posts were in evidence and beautifully carved. The wooden superstructure then added to carry the short valence that supplanted the heavy draperies of the earlier periods was also carved. The hangings for beds were frequently embroidered by the womenfolk of the family owning them, and were of such elaborate design that they must have occupied, and well repaid, many years of patient work.

The backs and legs of chairs were generally treated in relation to one another by Chippendale; the Queen Anne vase-shaped splat was pierced and carved into strap work arabesques, and parts carved in similar style to the legs. The strap work often strayed beyond the limits of the splat and even invaded the whole back: from this Chippendale also evolved the beautiful ribbon-back style of chair. Astute tradesman as well as artist and an adept at accommodating his designs to the purses of his clients, he struck the happy idea of using straight legs instead of expensive cabriole, reserving all the costly work for the back: these straight legs were square to outward appearance, decorated by fluting or beading and chamfered on the inside to give an appearance of lightness. Though first introduced for cheapness Chippendale worked greatly on the idea and produced beautifully decorative square legs both straight and tapered, ornamented by fretwork and carving, and used them for cabinets, tables, etc. as well as chairs. The finest designs in this period were made for chairs, book-cases, writing, card and occasional tables, and tall (Grandfather) clocks. Most of those for china-cabinets were in over-ornate French or Chinese taste, in sympathy with the mania for collecting Oriental and French china which had an enormous vogue for years. The tall glazed book-cases show Chippendale's great capabilities to the utmost and exquisite work is found in their cornices and incised friezes, also in the ornamental divisions of glass-doors, and in the original ideas in carving and fret introduced into their classic broken pediments. In plan they were rectangular, straight or serpentine fronted in the smaller examples, with wings slightly shallower added in the larger. These remarks apply also to wardrobes which were similar in design, though plain cornices, without pediments, were more generally used than decorated ones. Chippendale published an elaborate book of drawings in 1754 prefaced by a dissertation on the Five orders, and called "The Gentleman's and Cabinet Maker's Director" containing 160 copper plates, modestly described by the author as "calculated to improve and refine the present taste and suited to the fancy and circumstances of *all*

persons in *all* degrees of life". This comprehensive estimate of the scope of the book was perfectly justified by results, for the book was an immediate and immense success and became the inspiration of Cabinet Makers throughout the whole of Great Britain and Ireland, producing in the latter country a distinct variety of his style known as Irish Chippendale. The drawings in the book give no idea of the beauty of the works they represent and great taste and selective ability is needed in reproducing from them. That Chippendale was made conscious of this is shown by a note in his preface "Upon the whole I have here given no Design, but what may be executed with advantage by the hands of a skilful workman, though some of the Profession have been diligent enough to represent them (especially those after the Gothic and Chinese manner) as so many specious drawings, impossible to be worked off by any Mechanic whatsoever, I will not scruple to attribute this to Malice, Ignorance and Inability, and I am confident I can convince all Noblemen, Gentlemen or others *(sic)* who will honour me with their Commands, that every Design in the Book can be improved, both as to Beauty and Enrichment, in the Execution of them."

Though mahogany was the wood generally used by Chippendale, some of his designs were executed in rose-wood, and he also employed white wood japanned or painted and partly gilt. For mounts and handles he used brass and silver richly moulded and chased, and for metalwork generally he produced quantities of designs, some, as those for fenders, of great refinement, others, candelabra and flower-stands for instances, quite ridiculous in their redundancy of meaningless curves. The designs of Robert Adam influenced Chippendale's later work, the influence being all for good. Chippendale carried out in his workshop many of Adam's designs, and suggestions doubtless coming from both sides, it is impossible to say definitely that the resulting pieces are the work of one or the other. Adam designed the furniture for two of the finest English mansions of the period, Osterley Park for Lord Jersey and Harewood for the Earl of Harewood, the work being executed by Chippendale. Though totally different in style to anything he had hitherto executed, he yet produced perfect results in the elaborate inlaid work employed. Adam developed a style of inlay, embodying classic heads, broken columns, rude vases and trophies inlaid very boldly on ovals, surrounded by laurel leaves or bandings of coloured woods; refining the detail by his knowledge acquired first hand in Italy into delicate arabesques and scrolls springing from fanned paterae or vases on backgrounds of wood-mosaic, harewood or satinwood. The woods employed were bright in colour, and time has dealt kindly with them, making the objects they were used upon very desirable as acquisitians.

Adam's style was based on a study of late Roman decoration, such as the work at the Palace of Diocletian at Spalato, of which he published a folio book of drawings. With keen perception derived from training and travel, Adam saw the possibility of adapting the style to English homes, and fortunately possessed the power to improve in the process, evolving the daintiest style of decoration that has ever existed. He was appointed architect to the King in 1762 and his work influenced architecture, decoration and furniture for the next half century. The work of Sheraton and Hepplewhite is but a modification of motives introduced by him.

Dining-rooms during the 18th century were furnished with table, chairs, and side-board table only; some time after 1750 the side-board was flanked by pedestal cupboards which were slightly later joined to the table, forming the piece of furniture known as a pedestal side-board. In both these forms the pedestals were often surmounted by urns fitted for hot water or as knife-boxes.

The Brothers Adam used a new patent "Compo" for the ornamental work and panel mouldings in wall decoration, a perfect substitute for carved wood, very rigid when dry. It could be used with perfect safety where wood could not, as in swags and very prominent ornament light in character; for swags it was fixed on to bent wires. With this material Adam decorated the dining rooms of his houses, dividing the walls into panels with ornamental work within and without, and in places framing pictures with it. Niches filled with statues were a feature also. The ornaments of ceilings and walls were picked out in various tints, frequently different shades of green. The chimney pieces were of marble or scagliola, a substitute for marble, with overmantels in "Compo" or carved wood, gilt or painted. Rooms were sometimes divided into compartments by pilasters and the ornaments of these were either gilded or left white on tinted backgrounds, while painted or china medallions

were introduced into the ornament. Drawing room panels were sometimes filled with damask or tapestry, but never those of eating rooms.

That Robert Adam was justly proud of this method of dealing with rooms is shown by a passage from his book "We have introduced a great diversity of ceilings, friezes and decorated pilasters, and have added grace and beauty to the whole by a mixture of grotesque stucco, and painted ornaments, together with the flowing raincea:, with its fanciful figures and winding foliage. If we have any claim to approbation we found it on this alone; that we flatter ourselves we have been able to seize, with some degree of success, the beautiful spirit of antiquity, and to transfuse it with novelty and variety through all our numerous works."

Adam was undoubtedly helped to build his great reputation by the great contemporaries he employed. Pergolesi, Cipriani, Zucchi and Columbani as designers and painters and Angelica Kauffmann a: painter of exquisite decorative figure subjects, contributed quantities of original work that went to his credit. Pergolesi published a book of designs for low relief plaster work for walls, ceilings, architraves, chimney-pieces, furniture etc, extending to seventy large pages of beautiful and delicate designs, the whole forming a storehouse of dainty ornament.

Adam was not successful in designing chairs, for though he introduced several new shapes, they are not perfect in proportion or line and it remained for Sheraton and Hepplewhite to correct their defects and develop a number of beautiful designs from them.

Among the ornaments favoured by the Adams in various ways were festoons, fauns, cupids, goats, eagle-headed grotesques, ribbons and drapery, caryatides, rams heads, lions and eagles claws for feet, griffins, sea-horses, winged sphinx, paterae, Greek and Roman vases and ornaments, wreaths, honeysuckles, medallions with figures of mythological meaning, and especially husks and fans. Their ornament was enclosed in all kinds of geometrical, oval and lozenge shapes.

Hepplewhite, the pioneer of a lighter kind of furniture and altogether daintier treatment of woodwork, worked from about 1760 to 1786; the tradition of his work was carried on after his death by the firm of Hepplewhite & Company for about ten years. Naturally he was much influenced in the early part of his practice by Chippendale and Adam, but the strong admiration he felt for French Louis XV. and Louis XVI. work leavened these influences and led him into the light rythmic style he originated. Pre-eminent as a maker of chairs, settees and light drawing-room pieces, he also produced quantities of beautiful side-boards, book-cases, and bedroom furniture, quite different in style to anything previously made.

The early Hepplewhite chairs had arms and legs gracefully carved and moulded on French lines, the front of seat serpentine in shape, and the backs wheel, shield, oval, heart, and lyre shaped, the most striking chair back of this period being the oval filled with large Prince of Wales feathers, sometimes carved, sometimes painted. Characteristic ornaments of chair backs are bunches of wheat, sheaves of leaves, and delicately carved trails of husks, the latter used on back and legs.

Hepplewhite side-boards are exceptionally graceful pieces of furniture, covering the whole range of contemporary shapes, and his pedestals and urns are famous for the delicate work expended on them. In the later Hepplewhite side-boards great variety of design is found in plan, costly shaping of various kinds going to the making of one piece, and the shaping is sometimes repeated in a gallery placed on the top of the side-board, containing cupboards with doors or roller slides. Many side-boards at this period by Adam, Sheraton, or Hepplewhite have brass galleries at the back supporting a curtain.

Hepplewhite was a past master in the use of both carving and inlay; the latter is best shown in the clever use of bandings and lines on side-boards, commodes, tables etc.; the former in his beautiful bedposts, chairs, and delicate work on the wood divisions of glass doors in cabinets and bookcases.

Original satin-wood pieces by Hepplewhite painted with flower or figure subjects command very high prices, and are certainly very desirable possessions.

The name most prominently associated with this great period of inlaid furniture is that of Thomas Sheraton, a man totally unsuccessful in life, though possessed of undoubted ability in many directions. He published a book on furniture, in which the remarks he makes on past and contemporary exponents of his art are the reverse of kind, forcing the conclusion that his want of commercial success may have been partly due to a jealous and unlovable disposition, seeing only