December 13th, 2007

Samuel McIntire: Carving an American Style

by Jeanne Schinto

Peabody Essex Museum, Salem, Massachusetts

by Jeanne Schinto

When Samuel McIntire died in 1811, he owned over 300 carving tools, more than three times the number in a typical carver's shop of the period. He needed the surplus for his multiple styles and the wide variety of carving challenges he faced, so Dean T. Lahikainen told a lunchtime crowd of media previewers a few days before the official opening of his curatorial masterwork, *Samuel McIntire: Carving an American Style*, at the Peabody Essex Museum (PEM) on October 13.

McIntire needed that many tools because he worked in such a range of scales, producing clusters of delicate grapes in mahogany, intended for sofa appliqués, to magisterial eagles sculpted in pine, designed for the tops of public buildings. "Depending on the magnitude of work involved, different sets of tools were required," said Lahikainen, who labored for years on this superb retrospective that, among other things, celebrates the 250th anniversary of McIntire's birth in Salem in 1757.

Genius was also a requirement for all that McIntire accomplished in a relatively short lifetime of 54 years. (He died of pneumonia, contracted after rescuing a child from drowning.) A self-taught architect, he designed more than 50 buildings in his hometown, many of them former residences of Salem's wealthiest merchants that even today give Salem its unique character—stateliness, solidity, softened by stylish details. His fencepost carvings alone, Lahikainen remarked, gave an elegance to neighborhoods that was unrivaled in New England—this at a time when Salem was one of the busiest ports and perhaps the most dynamic marine community in the country.

The mansion of America's first millionaire, Elias Hasket "King" Derby (1739-1799), was McIntire's most significant architectural commission, completed in the year of Derby's death. For this undertaking, McIntire also carved more than 1000 interior and exterior ornaments—capitals for columns and pilasters, urns, roses, and hundreds of feet of decorative moldings. It's an astounding number, detailed on a surviving receipt.

The Derby mansion on Salem's Essex Street, considered one of the finest homes in the country, did not itself survive for long. In existence only 16 years, it was torn down to make way for a new town hall. The loss occurred before the age of photography could record it, but Lahikainen was able to re-create the sense of it—in "an abstraction," as he called it-for the exhibit. He worked with a full range of its original architectural drawings, many of them on view, along with architectural fragments from the house.

McIntire carved furniture for the Derbys as well. Three sets of carved mahogany chairs with a Derby family history have been the subject of many previous scholars' interest, a reflection of their importance, Lahikainen pointed out. Now here is a rare opportunity to see displayed for comparison one from each set, owned by the Winterthur Museum, the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art, respectively.

These and 206 other objects, in all 154 of them carved by McIntire or by his only son, Samuel Field McIntire (1780-1819), are arranged in five galleries, along with related documents, prints, paintings, and other decorative arts, which are meant to provide a broad context for understanding McIntire, his work, and his time. Lahikainen was able to borrow all the important pieces that PEM did not already own. There are, as well, some delightfully quirky ones, including a camera obscura, designed and carved by McIntire, and a full-size (72" tall) mannequin of a Chinese merchant, Yamqua, for which McIntire carved the hands and head.

Entire exhibits could have been created around any number of McIntire specialties. Instead, the focus here isn't a particular kind of project or object, it's the carvings themselves. Lahikainen is the first curator to have used them as the gathering point. It was a brilliant choice, because it allowed him to bring together the best examples of McIntire's entire oeuvre. The choice was also a daring one, because the carving attributions have been among the most controversial in the annals of American decorative arts.

The trouble is that Samuel Field McIntire carried on after his father's death, carving many of the same motifs, and McIntire's nephew, Joseph McIntire Jr., perpetuated the same carving traditions into the 1850's. Undocumented works by carvers Daniel Clarke, Nathaniel Safford, and Joseph True also make it difficult for those trying to make attributions for Salem pieces that have survived from the late Federal era.

One faulty attribution story in particular is related in colorful detail in the book (reviewed in this issue) that Lahikainen wrote to coincide with the opening of the exhibit. It recaps the public debate between Fiske Kimball and Mabel Munson Swan in the 1930's.

Kimball was an architect, university professor, and early McIntire scholar, who later became director of the Pennsylvania Museum of Art. Swan was a little-known independent scholar who wrote for *The Magazine Antiques*, but it was she who proved that some of Kimball's McIntire attributions were wrong, most notably his attribution on the carving on the famous Derby chest-on-chest that now resides at Yale University Art Gallery. Swan's conclusion on that chest stands: the cabinetmaker was Stephen Badlam, and the figures on the pediment were carved by Simeon Skillin Jr. and his older brother John.

Kimball was embarrassed, and his reputation suffered. His book, *Mr. Samuel McIntire, Carver: The Architect of Salem*, finally issued by his reluctant publisher in 1940, "remains the most authoritative source and gives the best overview of McIntire's extraordinary architectural career," Lahikainen notes in his own book. "But not a single piece of furniture was included."

It should be noted that the millionaire's wife, Elizabeth Crowninshield Derby, was the actual patron of McIntire. "King" Derby's major role was bankroller. The patronage continued courtesy of the couple's daughter, Elizabeth Derby West, whose country estate, Oak Hill, in South Danvers, now Peabody, Massachusetts, was another architectural tour de force of its time. It was built in 1800-01, probably with McIntire's involvement in its design. (The statement isn't definitive, because no documentation survives.) For the next 13 years, McIntire and then his son produced interior details, ornaments, and furniture for Madame Derby—as she liked to be known after her divorce.

Madame Derby's chest-on-chest by an unidentified cabinetmaker, for which McIntire carved ornamentation in 1806-09, was perhaps the culmination of the collaboration between this ideal match of benefactress and artisan. The chest, now owned by the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (MFA), is displayed at this exhibit alongside the Badlam-Skillin chest-on-chest for the first time.

Just how great a carver was McIntire? The twinning of these two pieces makes it clear. The artistry of the Madame Derby piece's central ornament of an allegorical female figure of America is one measure of his virtuosity; the proportioning is another.

"McIntire nailed proportioning," Lahikainen said, speaking broadly of his subject, likening his works to symphonies. "They move from notes into movements into the whole masterpiece."

As is the Derby mansion, Oak Hill is gone, having been dismantled piecemeal starting in the1820's, after it passed down to a Madame Derby descendant. The deconstruction continued into the 1950's, until finally what remained was demolished to make way for one of our mid-20th-century paragons of automobile-influenced architecture, the North Shore Shopping Center. Along the way, the woodwork from Oak Hill's parlor, dining room, and master bedchamber went to MFA, as did other architectural elements, and the plunder was used to create three period rooms, which are currently being restored.

The period room concept is being reconsidered by museums everywhere, and this exhibit's innovations follow that welcome trend. By using fragments of reproduction wallpaper, draperies, and carpet, along with carefully chosen props-a Willard patent timepiece ("banjo" clock), a Cermenati and Monfrino looking glass, paintings by Michele Felice Cornè (circa 1752-1845)-the McIntire world is evoked much more compellingly than it would have been by traditional realism.

"I was also determined to give a sense of the different scales in which McIntire worked," Lahikainen said. And so he did, aided by galleries that soar, measuring 28' at their highpoint.

One of those galleries accommodates a photographic blow-up of Chestnut Street's South Church, an 1804 McIntire commission. The church, with its 150' steeple decorated by 21 McIntire-carved urns, was destroyed by fire in 1903. Here it seems to be uncannily brought to life again.

In another gallery, designers constructed a three-quarter model of a triumphal arch, one of four that McIntire designed and ornamented as part of his largest public works project. Completed in 1805, they were the gates that led to Salem's Washington Square (now Salem Common), newly fenced and rechristened to honor our first president.

Other pieces of that colossal commission on display include a 5' x 10' lunette in painted pine with gilding. The largest surviving relief-carving by McIntire, it is a rendering of the Massachusetts state seal. A Native American is at its center, his sword pointed downward to indicate his peaceful nature. Above him, a disembodied right arm seems ready to strike with its broadsword, illustrating the state motto, "*Ense petit placidam sub libertate quietem*," loosely translated, "By the sword we seek peace, but peace only under liberty."

McIntire was living at a time when the symbols of American patriotism were still being selected, and this exhibit includes a dozen or more examples of McIntire's eagles. One of the first artists to carve it in wood, he was the very first to put it into the now classic pose, in which its powerful talons are grasping a globe and its wings are partially outstretched in the moment just before flight. He also carved eagles in high relief with wings spread wide and talons clutching yet another new symbol of the republic, a shield with stars and stripes, along with the olive branch peace symbol and a bundle of arrows.

As the imagery caught on in the popular imagination, McIntire was commissioned to put eagles on items such as sofas. Today, a McIntire sofa, no matter what the imagery on its crest rail, is among the furniture forms that many Americana collectors most desire. In this exhibit there are several, including two on the "masterpiece-level" (Lahikainen's characterization), one belonging to Winterthur—with an unusual crest rail decorated by McIntire's only freestanding basket of fruit and flowers—and one belonging to MFA. For the crest rail of the MFA sofa from Oak Hill, McIntire carved a spectacular freestanding ornament consisting of a pair of crossed cornucopias tied together with a ribbon.

The motifs McIntire and his clients chose weren't based merely on aesthetic considerations. As this exceptional exhibit takes pains to make clear, those decorative elements relate to other, vital aspects of American life. His depictions of wheat sheaves coincided with a time when American farmers were experimenting with grain crops. They underscore the important role that agriculture played in securing economic prosperity for our new nation. More universally, the ribbed melon and the apple, always present in his basket of fruit and flowers, symbolize Christ and Lucifer, good and evil, heaven and hell, life and death.

William Bentley (1759-1819), the pastor of Salem's East Church and well-known diarist, wrote the day after McIntire's death that this "most ingenious man...had a fine person, a majestic appearance, calm countenance, great self command & amiable temper. He was welcome but never intruded...." On McIntire's tombstone it was written: "He was distinguished for Genius in Architecture, Sculpture, and Musick." As if the decorative arts weren't enough to occupy his beautiful mind, McIntire was also an accomplished musician who played the bass viol, taught singing lessons, and built organs. Appropriately, organ music is the exhibit's soundtrack.

Samuel McIntire: Carving an American Style will be on view at PEM through February 24, 2008. The show will not travel. Those who make the trip to Salem to see the exhibit will also have the opportunity to tour the PEM campus. There are 24 historic properties, including three McIntire-designed houses, two of them open to the public. For more information, contact PEM by phone at (978) 745-9500 or visit its Web site (www.pem.org).