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The Art of Woodcarving in America: A Symposium

by Jeanne Schinto

Peabody Essex Museum, Salem, Massachusetts

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"The idea of what a carver can do is sometimes a very hard thing to come to grips with," keynote speaker Alan T. Miller told his audience at the Peabody Essex Museum's symposium "The Art of Woodcarving in America." It was held November 3 and 4, 2007, to complement the museum's not-to-be-missed exhibition *Samuel McIntire, Carving an American Style*. "What does carving mean? What does it tell us?"

The art of carving can be equated to "the quality of dancing in space," Miller said. Noting that carving adds rhythm to a line, he gave as examples gadrooning, egg-and-dart sequences, and the punched grounds prevalent in McIntire's relief carving for crest rails. "It also can add line to line that isn't in the structure per se," he added. "If you have an appliqué, the lines can go wherever you want them to go." Finally, carving can bring content or reference to form by making "a classical allusion or a romantic allusion or a naturalistic one." Think of the urn, acanthus leaf, cornucopia, and sheaf of wheat.

Considering its ability to provide literal meaning, carving can be seen as particularly significant during our nation's Federal period. The eagle, figure of Lady Liberty, and profile of George Washington weren't just embellishments at a time when we needed to disseminate our newly chosen patriotic symbols. At least for some people, they were the whole point.

The audience for the weekend-long series of slide talks and other events was composed of nearly 200 participants, including some of the most important Americana collectors in the country. They were joined by prominent dealers, auctioneers, scholars, conservators, and top graduate students who were given scholarships to attend by Ronald Bourgeault of Northeast Auctions.

Dean Lahikainen, the museum's Carolyn and Peter Lynch Curator of American Decorative Art and curator of *Samuel McIntire, Carving an American Style*, shared the podium with Miller and eight other experts who presented new research and recapitulations. A few of them also offered brief glimpses of their academic sleuthing processes.

"My favorite word quickly became 'quagmire,'" Lahikainen said in describing his years-long quest to "confirm and dispute" McIntire attributions. "I did not answer all the questions. You do the best you can, then pray you're not proven wrong. If you have any documents, mail them to me. Just don't show them to me today."

Linda Bantel, whose William Rush catalogue raisonné for the Museum of the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts in Philadelphia was completed 25 years ago, spoke about her own scholarly travails. Unlike McIntire, Rush left no cache of documents, Bantel said. Instead, exhibition records have been used to document his life and work, examples of which are rare and often have been stripped and repainted. To complicate matters further, the independent curator said, Rush had seven carvers in his workshop, including his son, John.

No shop records exist for Duncan Phyfe, said Peter Kenny, the Ruth Bigelow Wriston Curator of American Decorative Arts at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City, whose forthcoming Phyfe exhibition is a joint effort with Michael K. Brown of the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston. It's not even clear how big his business was. Kenny, who focused on Phyfe's carving for this symposium (his and Brown's exhibition, scheduled to open in 2009, is about the entire oeuvre of Phyfe), said only one carver has definitively been connected to the shop, the New Jersey-born Alexander Slote (also spelled Slott), "a fascinating character" we'll be hearing more about as the team's scholarship progresses.

Kenny read to the audience some of what Thomas Sheraton said about the art of carving in *Cabinet-maker and Upholsterer's Drawing-Book*, published in four parts from 1791 through 1793. "In the style of finishing," Sheraton wrote, "it's best to study nature whether animate or inanimate, by which will be observed that all niggling and chopping... must be avoided except in a few particular parts, that outline is the principal feature of all good carving, and on all occasions every other thing must...be sacrificed to its preservation...."

The outlines of ship's figureheads were certainly critical to their success, since they were designed to be seen from a distance, even when they were docked. Unfortunately, as Ralph Sessions of New York City's Spanierman Gallery pointed out in his talk, their survival rates are extremely low. Virtually all of McIntire's actual ship carvings have disappeared, Lahikainen wrote in the book he published to coincide with the opening of the exhibit. It's the same situation for so many of the other ship carvers active during New England's golden age of sail.

Sessions, author of *The Shipcarvers' Art: Figureheads and Cigar-Store Indians in Nineteenth-Century America*, differs with those who believe that the art of shipcarving declined after about 1830. "In fact, shipbuilding entered its last great period around 1840 with the development of ocean clippers," he said. For the sleek vessels that dominated the China trade for a generation, speed was a primary consideration. As a result, most types of decorations, including weighty stern carvings popular in the 18th century, were eliminated or greatly reduced, and figureheads became the focus of carvers' creativity. The shift resulted in some of the finest figureheads ever produced, said Sessions, who noted that several masterpieces are displayed in the Peabody Essex's East India Marine Hall, where the symposium-goers had lunch that day and dinner that evening.

Sessions's slide talk traced shipcarvers' art from figureheads to cigar-store Indians and other commercial shop figures of the mid-Victorian period, by which time they had become "an essential part of many shopkeepers' operations." Then he highlighted another important aspect of figure carving that he has been working on lately—architectural and commemorative sculpture, which includes "interior and exterior architecture figures, garden sculpture, and figures for parades and civic ceremonies."

This is a "much neglected" but "very important" category, Sessions said. "In fact, carved wooden figures represent the first and certainly the most widespread form of public sculpture in this country until close to the end of the nineteenth century." He named Simeon Skillin Sr.'s bust of William Pitt, carved for a pillar of liberty erected in 1767 by the town of Dedham, Massachusetts, to celebrate the repeal of the Stamp Act, as "the earliest recorded public monument created by a native-born sculptor."

Mark Reinberger, an architectural historian and professor at the University of Georgia in Athens, referred to himself as "the villain at this conference," because his subject was composition ornaments or "compo," for short. A less-expensive alternative to wood carving popular in the early 19th century, it was fashioned out of a mixture of lime and rosin that was made into a paste and forced into a mold, then glued onto doorways, mantelpieces, and the like. It was made in imitation of carved wood appliqués. It could also be steamed, made flexible, and wrapped around curved architectural details.

McIntire was known to have used compo, even on projects, such as the Derby mansion, that did not need to spare expense. There is a receipt for a McIntire mold in the documents Lahikainen used for his research, and compo molds were found in McIntire's shop inventory upon his death in 1811. But the Salem master never embraced the material.

Reinberger named the English-born Robert Wellford of Philadelphia as our country's most successful manufacturer and best spokesperson for compo. In 1801, Wellford paid for a public advertisement that tried to win respect for this more democratic form of repetitive decoration, likening it to the arts of printing and engraving that brought visual arts to the masses. Reinberger, for his part, compared compo to the classical motifs that adorned the factory-made pottery of Josiah Wedgwood.

Jennifer Howe, an independent curator and lecturer, said she had anticipated "shaking things up" by her talk on the extraordinary phenomenon of the Cincinnati art-carved furniture movement, the subject of a book she edited for the Cincinnati Art Museum. Led by three men—Henry Fry, his son William Henry Fry, and Benn Pittman—it mainly involved female followers. Of the approximately 1000 studio students they taught from the 1870's through the mid-1920's, 851 were women. "Let men construct, and women decorate," the elder Fry wrote, although he later amended this idea, saying women should "do anything they wish."

While most of the women carved for purposes of home beautification, Howe said, nine of them became professional wood carvers, who faced "very serious resistance" while working in the manufacturing business. Janet Scudder (1869-1940) was one of them. (She is listed on art-price Web sites, including AskArt.)

About 55 women from the school exhibited in the Women's Pavilion at the Centennial Exhibition in Philadelphia in 1876. Their works included an organ, a piano, bedsteads, doors, writing desks, hanging cabinets, tables, and smaller objects, such as wall pockets and picture frames. The result was national recognition. One critic, writing of women carving in wood, said that "although it seems an unheard of, an impossible, an almost outrageous thing for a lady to do, they took to their tools like ducks to water, utterly engrossed by their newfound sport. For a time there was scarcely a mantel or doorjamb that was safe from the attack of a chisel in the hand of some wife or mother intoxicated by art." But Henry Fry saw "a far deeper significance." It was, he wrote, "the beginning of a new era, defining for them, clearly and truly, the doctrine of women's rights."

Alan Miller's keynote returned to earlier decorative-arts traditions in America with a discussion of bespoke carving by five masters: Henry Hardcastle, the so-called Garvan carver, John Pollard, John Welch, and Martin Jugiez. "Bespoke, in this sense, is like a designer original, not off the rack," Miller said. "Furniture carvers were paid set fees for a given task —a claw foot, a shell, a basket of flowers. He could increase his earnings only by carving faster. A job that depended on satisfying the customer's sense of fashion or modernity presented an opportunity for a carver to show his wares."

Miller spoke frequently of a carver's "vocabulary," that is, a particular lexicon of motifs, styles, and idiosyncratic ways with the tools of his trade. The noted antiques consultant, whose background is in restoration, also talked about quality and how to define it. For him, "good" isn't necessarily "fancy or complicated." It is "clear, powerful, unified, and expressive," and that expressiveness is capable of communicating well beyond its time.

In Miller's opinion, "the Aristotelian idea that one can find out what good taste is by going to people who have good taste and seeing what they like is still good advice." To that end, he took obvious delight in showing "amazing," "astonishing," and "remarkable" examples of his five chosen masters' works, including the recently discovered Philadelphia tea table attributed to the Garvan carver that sold at Christie's on October 3, 2007, for $6,761,000. "I don't always endorse record prices, but I do endorse that one," he said.

The following day many attendees, myself included, had to return to the world of the marketplace. Running concurrently with the symposium were Skinner's Americana auction and the Ellis Antiques Show, both in downtown Boston. We missed a full morning's worth of scholarship. According to the program schedule, Gerald W.R. Ward of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, spoke in detail about two pieces attributed to John Welch, specifically addressing the symbolism of the rare carved masks on the knees of their legs. Andrew Connors, founding senior curator at the National Hispanic Cultural Center in Albuquerque, New Mexico, discussed saint carving in colonial Puerto Rico, a tradition that thrives to this day. Brock Jobe, professor of American decorative arts at Winterthur, gave a preview of his work-in-progress on Federal furniture in southeastern Massachusetts. Glenn Adamson of the Victoria & Albert Museum in London ended the series with an explication of courtly Parisian furniture making, "the wellspring of much American 18th-century furniture design," with McIntire serving as a culminating example.

The final lunch for the group was served in Salem's Hamilton Hall, which has McIntire carving still in situ. Built in 1805 from plans by McIntire and named in honor of Alexander Hamilton, the property at 9 Chestnut Street has hosted heads of state, debutantes, a visit by French hero Marquis de Lafayette—and now this august group of carving devotees.

For more information about the museum, see the Web site (www.pem.org) or call (978) 745-9500.