November 17th, 2013

The Cabinetmaker & the Carver: Boston Furniture from Private Collections

by Jeanne Schinto

Boston Scottish Rite Masonic Museum
Lunch Talk
12:00 p.m.

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Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston, Massachusetts

Photos courtesy Massachusetts Historical Society

The Cabinetmaker & the Carver, on view at the Massachusetts Historical Society (MHS) through January 27, 2014, inaugurates a new venture for this august Boston institution. Although the MHS has been vastly a haven for scholars but not very welcoming to the general public, "MHS president Dennis A. Fiori said on the exhibition's October 4 opening day. "Although we did small exhibitions and had a wonderful visual collection, we just hadn't brought it out. For about three years ago I warmed up the rooms and said, 'We're going to do exhibitions,' and this is the most extensive one we've ever done."

The MHS is an independent research library founded in 1791 as the first historical society in the United States. I don't habitually associate it with furniture. The repository for the personal papers of, among others, John Adams, John Quincy Adams, and Thomas Jefferson, it's a place I must have looked at manuscript letters on microfilm, heard lectures by biographers of early patriots, and seen small, cased exhibitions of little, flat things, such as Civil War photographs. Fiori's vision for the MHS's future is a welcome development.

The exhibition is part of the ongoing "Four Centuries of Massachusetts Furniture" extravaganza—a collaboration of 11 New England institutions. For more information, see the Web site (www.fourcenturies.org), as well as a previous story in *ACAD Daily* (10.16.13), the latest in a series of articles I've written about this one. What makes *The Cabinetmaker & the Carver* special is that most of the nearly 50 examples in the exhibition were lent by private collectors. As a result, this is a rare, perhaps unique, opportunity to see them.

The pieces date from the 1670's through the 1890's and represent historical associations as varied as Increase Mather and Paul Revere to Abraham Lincoln—some of some supplementary items from the MHS collection—is a 1675-1700 turned "great" chair believed to have been handed down by Mather to his grandson Mather Byles, or else by his uncle Cotton Mather. The latter is the cradle in which Gardner, the art collector and Boston grande dame, rocked her infant son, John Lowell "Jackie" Gardner III, who died in 1863, before his second birthday. A fine example of Rococo Revival style, it now belongs to Mr. and Mrs. Francis L. Coolidge.

Admitting any of these pieces individually is not the point, however. The exhibition's primary purpose is to provide a capsule form a look at the trajectory of cabinetmaking in Boston, where a substantial furniture trade began in the mid-17th century. Its aim is also to help exhibition-goers, especially generalists, accept and understand furniture as legitimate historical documents, comparable to letters or documents, just as full of cultural information, and as capable of varying interpretations of meaning.

"Boston's furniture, like many of its citizens, speaks with a Boston accent," writes the exhibition's guest curator and its catalog's author, Gerald W.R. Ward, a senior curator at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, which is just a few blocks away from the MHS. He goes on to say that Boston furniture has many metaphorical accents represented here, for the furniture's often-immigrant makers were influenced by numerous places around the globe. A magnificent 1710-20 japanned high chest from an anonymous private collection is a good case in point. A circa 1820 Classical klismos side chair, inspired by the ancient Greeks but carried by English-born Thomas Whightman, is another. A third is a masterpiece of the international Arts and Crafts movement, an 1885-95 sideboard designed by Henry Davenport and Company and love by Stephen Dodge and James Skehen. A fourth is a secretaire à abattant (fall-front desk) from the 1819-25 period in the style of the French empire as interpreted by Isaac Vose and Son. Fifth, just think of "Spanish" feet.

One can get a good sense from this exhibition about what Boston furniture looks like, how forms and styles through the centuries. The phrase "Boston chair" from the collection of Norman and Mary Grossing was once a common type. Thomas Fitch, the cradle to sell, used them for 25 shillings each in 1720-23. Made of maple with leather upholstery and a rectangular back, the chair has a back that is "crook'd" as was called in its time. Meant to provide the sitter with "a modicum of comfort," the form "foreshadowed a growing emphasis on good ergonomics that would come to typify 18th-century furniture," Ward observes.

The city's own version of the blockfront style, popular in Boston from 1740's until the end of the 18th century, is well represented here. A 1750-60 blockfront bureau dressing table, made in Boston possibly for William Parker of Portsmouth, New Hampshire, is "not quite Rococo" or "exquisite," yet "may have been one of the furnishings that contributed to Parker's somewhat grandiose style of life, which one colleague noted were 'rather beyond what is merely decent and necessary.'" An even more grandiose Boston furniture invention of the mid-18th century is the monumental desk-and-bookcase form, which Ward describes as "perhaps the modern composer," whose numerous small drawers, pigeonholes, and other compartments provided "a new kind of sophistication and organization that was unheard of just a generation or two earlier."

A third form peculiar to Boston and to the Essex County environs of the late 18th century is the tambour shape. Desk-and-bookcases with tambour doors. The one in this exhibition is a privately owned chest of drawers attributed to Thomas Needham Sr., who worked in both Boston and Salem, Massachusetts. I, for one, would like to read a good psychological explanation of why the big-bottomed form developed in this region. It was not popular elsewhere in the colonies, and for good reason, some would say.

Being a clockmaker's wife, I've seen quite a number of Simon Willard tall clocks, so I wasn't motivated to inspect closely the one in this survey. The more interesting timepiece to me was a highly unusual form—a lyre "banjo clock," that sits on a short tripod of hanging on a wall. From a private collection, it was made by Aaron and Dyar during the brief (1822-27) life of that firm. John Aaron and George W. Dyar were the principals. Their shop was in the Haymarket section of Boston, which is also where Simon Willard of Aaron Willard had a strong connection to the Roxbury/Dorchester/Boston neighborhood where the Willards had their shops and where so many businesses subsidiary to clockmaking were located. John Rimo Penniman, who painted ornamental reverse glasses for the Willards, was there for a time. The reverse-glass painting on the throat of the Aaron and Dyar clock was executed by Charles Hubbard, who had been trained by Penniman.

Some of the furniture in the exhibition was made for the office rather than the home. A privately owned 1755-85 slant-front desk is of the kind used by Boston merchants, ministers, and others in need of a place to write and store ledgers and important papers. I guess you could call it a laptop, as compared to the desk-and-bookcase combo. It is a great one. Its feet are not only claw and ball but also are embellished with carved flames. Two

The exhibition's full-color illustrated catalog, written by guest curator Gerald W. R. Ward, can be bought on line or at the MHS. The 64-page softcover costs $50, plus shipping or handling.

Joined cupboard with drawers, attributed to the Harvard College Joiners, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1670–90, oak, maple, cedar, pine. Private collection.

Sofa, Isaac Vose and Son, with upholstery by Otis Packard and carving by Thomas Wightman, Boston, 1823, mahogany, sugar maple, cherry, with original under-upholstery and modern show covers. The Colonial Society of Massachusetts; gift of the grandchildren of Francis Parkman. Photograph by David Bohl; courtesy of Robert D. Mussey Jr. and Clark Pearce—whose ongoing research project is about Vose, the leading furniture company in Boston in the 1820's.

Cradle, Boston, circa 1863, mahogany with rosewood graining. Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Francis L. Coolidge.

Desk, probably carved by John Welch, Boston, 1755–85, mahogany, white pine. Private collection.

Side chair, Edward Hixon, Boston, 1817, walnut, MHS collection.

Wheatley family card table, Boston, 1760–70, mahogany, pine, MHS collection. Photograph by David Bohl.

Card table, attributed to Thomas Seymour, with carving attributed to Thomas Wightman, Boston, 1815–20, mahogany, with mahogany and bird's-eye maple veneers, ash, chestnut. Private collection.

Desk-and-bookcase, carving attributed to John Welch, Boston, 1750–55, mahogany, eastern white pine, ash. Private collection.

Library table, probably Boston, circa 1860, walnut, L. Knife & Son corporate collection. Note: The busts are likenesses of George Washington, Ben Franklin, William Shakespeare, and Daniel Webster.

Bureau dressing table, Boston, 1730–40, mahogany, white pine. Private collection.

Japanned high chest of drawers, Boston, 1710–20, maple, pine. Private collection.

Turned great chair, Boston or Charlestown, Massachusetts, 1675–1700, maple, ash. MHS collection.

Cabinet and bookcase, possibly designed by Henry Hobson Richardson and his assistants at Gambrill & Richardson, Boston, 1880, oak. MHS collection. Photograph by David Bohl.

Cane side chair, Boston, 1690–1705, beech. MHS collection.