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AMERICAN DECORATIVE ARTS/HOUSEHOLD FURNISHINGS

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Winterthur Museum

IN A RECENT HISTORIOGRAPHIC ESSAY, THOMAS SCHLERETH RECORDED AND analyzed a century of changing patterns of method and purpose in the diverse pursuits that constitute what he calls American material culture studies. This article has the more limited task of describing a single strand in that web, the study of the decorative arts. I have not attempted to compile a thorough history of decorative arts studies. My emphasis here is instead on literature from about 1970 to the present, a period during which decorative arts study broadened its own methods and purposes and in the process, I think, became more accessible to students of American culture. This essay has four unequal parts. The first offers a brief background account of earlier developments in the field. The second identifies what I see as four major orientations currently operative. The third part discusses at greater length some dominant genres of study and the fourth offers a few tentative suggestions for future directions.

THE EMERGENCE OF MODERN DECORATIVE ARTS STUDY

The roots of today’s decorative arts study can be traced to mid-nineteenth-century Europe and Britain and an intersection of emerging interests in cultural history, folklore, anthropology, archaeology, design reform, and convictions about museums as agencies for public education. In America, antiquarians had sporadically gathered up colonial relics since the early years of the century, but interest in old American furnishings coalesced in the last three decades of the nineteenth century, when collecting “antiques” became a prominent pastime for a small circle of generally affluent and

1Thomas J. Schlereth, Material Culture Studies in America (Nashville: American Association for State and Local History, 1982).
influential easterners. Affected by the Victorian cult of domesticity, design and other reform movements, notions of environmental determinism, patriotism, nationalism, sometimes nativism, and a variety of other sentiments, they furnished their homes with the handicrafts of preindustrial America. Their major products, in addition to collections, were publications and exhibitions. The first major book, still consulted today, was Irving Lyon's *Colonial Furniture of New England* (1891), soon followed by Edwin Atlee Barber's *Pottery and Porcelain of the United States* (1893). In the last year of the nineteenth century, R.T.H. Halsey published *Pictures of Early New York on Dark Blue Staffordshire Pottery*, a weighty volume printed on handmade paper, illustrated in photogravure, and issued in a limited edition of 298 copies for the small group attracted to what was then an arcane study.

Activity in the first decade continued at about the same pace, resulting in Esther Singleton's *Furniture of Our Forefathers* (1900–1901), Luke Vincent Lockwood's *Colonial Furniture in America* (1901), and also in the 1909 Hudson-Fulton Exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, usually considered the earliest major institutional celebration of American decorative arts. The next decade was equally productive, and saw the publication of E. Alfred Jones's *Old Silver of American Churches* (1913), Frederick William Hunter's *Stiegel Glass* (1914), Ada Walker Camehl's *The Blue-China Book* (1916), and Francis Hill Bigelow’s *Historic Silver of The Colonies and Its Makers* (1917). Yet the crucial decade was the 1920s. A calendar of even a few of the major accomplishments of those years is impressive: 1921, Ethel Stanwood Bolton and Eva Johnson Coe, *American Samplers*; 1922, Homer Eaton Keyes finds *Antiques* magazine; 1924, J. B. Kerfoot publishes *American Pewter* and the Metropolitan Museum of Art opens its influential American Wing; 1926, Stephen van Rensselaer, *Early American Bottles and Flasks* and the beginning of Colonial Williamsburg; 1927, Rhea Mansfield Knittle, *Early American Glass* and J. Seymour Lindsay, *Iron and Brass Implements of the English and American Home*; 1928, Wallace Nutting’s *Furniture Treasury* and Albert H. Sonn's *Early American Wrought Iron*. In 1929 the Girl Scouts Loan Exhibition took place in New York and Henry Ford's Greenfield Village was dedicated. The following year the Winterthur Museum was incorporated and Francis P. Garvan began to give his extensive

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collection to Yale University. 4 By 1930 the major institutions involved with American decorative arts had been established and the basic factual outlines of most early decorative arts had been charted in a series of generally well-researched and well-written books, some of them still useful today. Subsequent publications of the next forty years were usually content to refine or fill in these outlines and to continue on much the same course. The major events between 1930 and the wave of new scholarship in the late 1970s were the establishment in 1952 of the Winterthur Program in Early American Culture, which took much of its shape under the energetic leadership of Charles F. Montgomery, and the 1974 founding of the field’s first professional organization, the Decorative Arts Society.

CURRENT ORIENTATIONS IN DECORATIVE ARTS STUDY

At present the study of decorative arts or historic household furnishings can be roughly divided into four overlapping orientations: collecting, art, history and theory. This order indicates the relative prominence of each orientation. Publications for collectors still dominate the field, with those stressing aesthetic evaluation close behind; in fact the two are often inseparable. Studies that deal with history in any broadly conceptualized way are much less common and statements of theory are rarer still. Chances are therefore good that scholars from other disciplines who dip into this field for the first time will encounter works written for collectors; for some classes of objects they will find nothing else.

In his essay on living history, Jay Anderson put comments on its popular, noninstitutional manifestations near the end. 5 Placing the decorative arts


equivalent, collecting, anywhere but at the beginning of this discussion, however, would seriously misrepresent its central importance to the field. Collecting is neither an afterthought nor a byproduct of studies that focus on objects, but a prerequisite. Students of vernacular architecture or grave-stones find their collections more or less intact on the landscape, but those who study portable goods generally rely on more artificial assemblages.

Collecting has usually preceded scholarship and continues to do so today. Typically, someone has started to collect it, whatever it may be, long before scholars grow interested in it. The enduring and even growing vitality of the collecting orientation can be seen in the lasting appeal of *The Magazine Antiques* as an outlet for certain types of research and in the popularity of a number of regional antiques tabloids started in the last two decades, including *Maine Antiques Digest, Ohio Antique Review*, *The Newtown Bee*, and the *New York-Pennsylvania Collector*.6

People collect a remarkable range of objects, but collectors' publications show an equally remarkable lack of variation. Whether they take the form of cheaply published guides to pressed glass or lavishly published catalogues of rare Colonial silver issued by major museums, their goal seems to be much the same: to present facts about the objects. Particularly important are date, place of origin, maker, ownership, form, style, and material. Supplementary data about related objects may make it possible to establish larger categories or sequences. Frequently the research behind these studies is impressive, but by and large collector-oriented publications are not what I would call history. Their relationship to broad historical inquiry is much the same as that of other antiquarian studies; at their best they offer valuable compilations of data for others to interpret. Having collectors and collector-oriented institutions generate studies is in some ways a beneficial division of labor that may save historians a good deal of effort, but it also means that much is assembled in response to what are essentially hobbyists' interests and needs. I do not mean to condemn recreational decorative arts studies, for they are important parts of many lives and continually revitalize this field. It is enough, perhaps, to note that hobbyists do not usually ask the same questions as historians or philosophers.

The close links between the collecting and art orientations are neatly summarized in the title of a current popular journal, *Art & Antiques*. Although aesthetic judgments often go hand in hand with collecting, I am identifying art as a separate orientation to dramatize the impact of another major force that continues to shape decorative arts scholarship: the disci-

6*The Magazine Antiques*, now over sixty years old, has been guided by three editors: Homer Eaton Keyes (1922–1938), Alice Winchester (1938–1972), and Wendell Garrett (1972–).
pline of art history. Because so many publications dealing with historic furnishings can be described as art historical, it is worth asking, to paraphrase Svetlana Alpers, is art history really history? This is not just a matter of idle musing or cute semantics; history and art history often seem to move in opposite directions. Put in oversimplified terms, historians typically use art to study the past while art historians use the past to study art. Deeper understanding and experience of objects are goals that art museum curators take seriously. To Wendy Cooper, the curatorial mandate is "to perceive quality in materials, fabrication, and execution of design." For Henry Hawley the aesthetic experience is paramount "in determining what is to be collected and how objects are to be presented to the public." He argues that the curator's job "is to provide works of art and to facilitate the release of emotional energy from a given work of visual art to the person viewing it." Historical considerations are decidedly secondary here, if relevant at all. Those who make these kinds of aesthetic judgments may or may not see them as timeless or universal, but to critics they are presentist, ethnocentric, and antithetical to historical inquiry. Today no reflective scholars would claim to write balanced history using only objects that thrill them. Students of American culture should recognize that the art orientation is largely normative and ahistorical. They should also realize that the very expression, "decorative arts," is a product of the art orientation and is both pejorative and misleading, pejorative because it subordinates a group of objects to the "real" arts of painting, sculpture, and architecture, and misleading because it indicates that their primary function is decorative.

Both the collecting and art orientations have been analyzed by Michael Ettema in a recent critical essay in Winterthur Portfolio. Ettema argues that most decorative arts scholarship is unreflective and that today's "curators and museum educators unconsciously perpetuate the traditions of the collections and antiquarians...by assuming that knowledge of old things constitutes knowledge of history." As Ettema sees it, collecting and art orientations work together "to recreate the past in an image designed for

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8 Svetlana Alpers, "Is Art History?" Daedalus, 106 (Summer 1977), 1-13.


10 Henry Hawley, in "Forum," WP, 17 (1982), 262-64.
emotional gratification. The effect is to project ourselves on the past rather than to learn from it.”11

Neither the collecting nor the art orientation should be confused with current material culture study. Both patterns of behavior antedate this study and both have continued to remain largely apart from it although, if Jules Prown is correct, some people “have felt suspicious of, even threatened by, material culture.”12 They may have some cause to be, for material culture studies have brought more sophisticated ideas about historical process, relativity derived from popular culture and folklore studies, and anthropological definitions of culture, all of which run head on into the assumptions of the art orientation. As Ettema notes, material culture historians’ major differences are not the objects they study but their goals and priorities, their modes of inquiry into human actions of the past.

Transformations in the study of historic household furnishings have been much like those in American Studies in general. The drama Gene Wise outlined in his 1979 essay has close parallels here, for decorative arts scholars began to redefine themselves as students of material culture shortly after those in American Studies began to reject the myth-symbol orientation of their field.13 The actual number of people involved in the new orientations to anthropologically or sociologically informed history and theory is small, but they have had a disproportionate impact within the field and even attracted attention outside, achievements reflecting both new receptivity without and new directions within. Specific comments on the new studies of history and theory might be more appropriate in the following discussion of genres, where departures from conventional efforts stand out in a sharper relief.

GENRES OF STUDY

The majority of decorative arts literature is intended as reference material. Museum collection and exhibition catalogues and indexes of marks, patterns, manufacturers, and artisans all serve as critical collecting and curatorial tools and are still produced today. In the category of expository writing, the survey is the major genre. Typically decorative arts surveys are organized to illustrate objects related by style, origin, date, material, or some other factor that facilitates assembly of artifactual classes or sequences. Just as typically,

surveys take the form of catalogues of museum exhibitions, for most decorative arts study resides in museums of art or history, where the exhibition and catalogue are the dominant forms of scholarly activity. Small classes and short sequences are more practical and manageable than their opposites; few successful large-scale studies exist. No single survey offers an adequate comprehensive view of American decorative arts or household furnishings, although Edgar Mayhew and Minor Myers, Jr.'s *Documentary History of American Interiors* (1980) is probably the best of the type.14 Less understandable, few reliable volumes even survey the furnishings of the Colonial period. The best is probably Wendy Cooper's frankly celebratory volume, *In Praise of America: American Decorative Arts, 1650–1830* (1980). Cooper gestures toward what she calls a "‘total culture’ approach," but her book is otherwise a conventional product of the art and collecting orientations. Yale University Art Gallery's earlier Bicentennial exhibition, *American Art: 1750–1800, Towards Independence* (1976), examined a more restricted period but generated a subtler and more diversified volume. Brief essays by J. H. Plumb, Neil Harris, Jules Prown, Frank Sommer, and Charles Montgomery

on various aspects of cultural and stylistic transfer and change preceeded discussions of nine categories of objects ranging from paintings and prints to furniture, silver and gold, ceramics, glass, and textiles.\footnote{Wendy A. Cooper, In Praise of America: American Decorative Arts, 1650–1830/ Fifty Years of Discovery Since the 1929 Girl Scouts Loan Exhibition (New York: Knopf, 1980); Charles F. Montgomery and Patricia E. Kane, eds., American Art: 1750–1800, Towards Independence (Boston: New York Graphic Society for Yale Univ. Art Gallery and The Victoria and Albert Museum, 1976).}

The major survey of the nineteenth century is still 19th-Century America: Furniture and Other Decorative Arts, the catalogue of the Metropolitan Museum of Art's landmark 1970 exhibition.\footnote{Metropolitan Museum of Art, 19th-Century America: Furniture and Other Decorative Arts (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1970).} Although devoted almost entirely to costly objects, this exhibition and its accompanying publication were critical as official endorsements of post-1840 design by one of America's leading institutional arbiters of taste, and represented formal acceptance of Victorian objects into the pantheon of art. While sporadic examinations of nineteenth-century furnishings had appeared before, Victorian design was still considered of dubious merit in 1970, and even today some individuals and institutions continue to act as though no noteworthy furnishings had been produced since 1840. Nonetheless Victoriana has subsequently become very popular. Articles appear regularly in Nineteenth Century, the magazine of the Victorian Society in America, founded in 1969, and in Art & Antiques, The Magazine Antiques, and a number of other art and collecting journals.

Stylistic and cultural movements of the last century have been the subjects of several useful surveys. For Classical America, 1815–1845 (1963), Berry Tracy and William Gerdts assembled over two hundred objects to show how the international neoclassical taste, known as Empire in this country, was interpreted in high culture American furniture, silver, lamps, clocks, wallpapers, and other furnishings, as well as in painting and sculpture. Houston's Museum of Fine Arts examined the Gothic taste in American furnishings. Princeton University's Art Museum sponsored what remains the most extensive exhibition of the Arts and Crafts Movement in America. The catalogue, a collaborative effort of nine authors, provided an extensive overview of the movement and its products. Papers from a related symposium later published in the Record of the Art Museum (1975), may be more useful, however, particularly the short but suggestive pieces by Robert
Winter and Carl Schorske on the movement's ideological and social dimensions.17

One of the most recent cultural movements examined was the American Renaissance, the subject of an ambitious project originated by the Brooklyn Museum. While the term conjures up something different to literary historians, to the originators of the Brooklyn exhibition it meant an episode of self-conscious historicism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries shaped by nationalism, the genteel tradition of ideal beauty, and cosmopolitan eclecticism, all supported by vast industrial fortunes. Biltmore and the palaces at Newport are manifestations of this American Renaissance. Essays by Richard Guy Wilson, Dianne Pilgrim, and Richard Murray examined the cultural roots and phases of this American Renaissance and traced its expressions in architecture, landscape design and city planning, painting and sculpture, and domestic luxury industries like tapestry and stained glass. *The American Renaissance* (1979) was innovative in providing an interpretive synthesis of these phenomena, but remained within the art museum tradition in its emphasis on elite culture.18

A more prevalent type of survey deals with the products of a particular region or group of people, or both. By far the best regional study is *New England Begins: The Seventeenth Century* (1982).19 A mammoth and impressive achievement, this three-volume catalogue constitutes the most thorough and intellectually sophisticated examination of the material culture of seventeenth-century New England produced so far. Part of its impact derives from its size and part from the meticulous documentation of the objects; an amazing number still survey from the period. Yet the greatest cause for the catalogue's immense value is the mix of expertise and approaches contributed by authors and consultants who brought to the project training in history, art history, geography, folklore, and American Studies. Although generated by a department of decorative arts in a major art museum, *New England Begins* is the quintessential interdisciplinary American Studies


product, reaching far beyond conventional art museum concerns to provide deep immersion into the artifactual and mental worlds of seventeenth-century New England.

Most regional studies attempt less. The Philadelphia Museum of Art’s Bicentennial exhibition surveyed three centuries of that city’s artistic creativity. While the catalogue was not a major interpretive work, it comprehensively recorded and discussed, in entries written by thirty-seven contributors, over five hundred objects made in Philadelphia or by Philadelphians. More limited in time and range of objects, Long Island is My Nation: The Decorative Arts and Craftsmen, 1640–1830 (1976) was a documentary and descriptive account of household objects, particularly furniture and silver, known to have been used on Long Island before 1830.20

Studies of the furnishings of specific groups have tended to emphasize white ethnics or religious communities in rural settings. The Pennsylvania Germans and the Shakers, for example, have probably attracted more attention than any other groups, but recent scholarship has widened the range of peoples examined.21 Charles van Ravenswaay’s Arts and Architecture of German Settlements in Missouri (1977) is an extensive treatment of the artifactual remains of German immigrants who settled along the lower Missouri River Valley in the early nineteenth century. The section on furnishings discusses and illustrates hundreds of household objects, nearly half of them furniture. Van Ravenswaay also includes musical instruments, wood carving, baskets, firearms, objects in tin and copper, textiles, pottery, and a variety of other materials and forms. While more descriptive than interpretive, the book is written with sensitivity and affection and provides a remarkably large body of data from a specific people and place.

Another recent volume, Moravian Decorative Arts in North Carolina (1981), examines a community distinguished by extraordinary documentation. John Bivens and Paula Welshimer’s study is both a catalog of the collections of Old Salem, Inc., and an attempt to assess the place of artisans and their products in a religiously ordered community. While recording furniture, pottery, textiles, metalwork, prints, paintings, and other objects produced


within the settlement between 1775 and 1840, the authors analyze the ways Moravians met their material needs within a distinctive framework of religious, economic, and governmental structures.²²

Nonwhite Americans have not fared particularly well. Native Americans are usually studied in isolation and are rarely integrated with whites in decorative arts studies, although some institutions have made attempts to do so.²³ The furnishings of black Americans have also been largely ignored, with one outstanding exception, John Vlach's *Afro-American Tradition in Decorative Arts* (1976). Vlach's study examined nine media in which black artisans produced a distinctive material culture: basketry, musical instruments, wood carving, quilting, pottery, boat building, blacksmithing, building, and grave decoration. While only some of these could be called furnishings, Vlach showed how all exhibited links to African antecedents through iconography, technology, spatial organization, or conceptualization. In the process, Vlach, a folklorist trained at Indiana, brought deep grounding in anthropological theory to a major art museum production, showing how "the traditions and customs which inform the decorative arts are not necessarily the same as those expressed in the fine arts," and contradicting melting-pot assumptions that black Americans lost all vestiges of their own material culture. Vlach's vision of black culture as a living, dynamic, and often subtle fusion of African and European ingredients enriched the decorative arts field's superficial understanding of tradition and reinforced the views of other current scholars of ethnicity who reject static models of culture and tradition.²⁴

Publications like Vlach's, organized around people, are exceptions in this field. Most object studies are organized around objects, classified either by material (silver, pewter, glass) or function (furniture, lighting, floor coverings), categories defined in part by conventions of manufacturing but even more by habits of collecting. Here again books for hobbyists predominate, but


²⁴John Michael Vlach, *The Afro-American Tradition in Decorative Arts* (Cleveland: Cleveland Museum of Art, 1976). See also McDaniel, *Hearth and Home and William Ferris, ed., Afro-American Folk Arts and Crafts* (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1983). Bringing anthropological orientations into an art museum is not without ironic racist overtones. Nonwhite peoples are still considered appropriate subjects for anthropology, particularly by those who view anthropology as the study of culturally inferior societies. Thus Vlach's innovation may in part have been supported by enduring cultural prejudices.
many areas, such as ceramics, glass, and silver, are also examined in works with broader utility. For example, Barbara McLean Ward and Gerald Ward's *Silver in American Life* (1979) is an innovative, wide-ranging exploration accessible to readers with varied interests. This attractive exhibition catalogue examines six themes in American silver: its qualities as a metal, its role as currency, the work processes of the traditional silversmith, the industrialization of silver manufacture in the nineteenth century, some of silver's social meanings, and changing styles in silver objects, particularly household furnishings. The catalogue component reinforces the text and includes objects ranging from silver ore, ingots, coins, silversmiths' tools, a fireman's trumpet, trophies, and jewelry to a thorough survey of silver objects for the home. *Silver in American Life* maintains a solid foothold in material, but builds bridges to other concerns and other scholars. As the Wards noted in their introduction, the goal was "to examine silver in all its multi-faceted nature, in as broad a humanistic context as possible."25

Occasionally a single book defines and dominates a field. An example is Catherine Lynn's *Wallpaper in America* (1980), one of the major works of American design history. Writing in an area with very little prior literature,

Lynn charted in rich detail over two centuries of changes in wallpaper style, production, and use. While she originally viewed the topic in rather narrow terms, Lynn took the topic past design, technology, and business into cultural and social history, providing insights into concepts of the home, consumerism, women's roles, and changing aesthetic, moral, religious, and patriotic values in this country.26

AMERICAN FURNITURE: A CASE STUDY IN TRADITIONAL AND EXPERIMENTAL RESEARCH

The largest and most active area of decorative arts scholarship is furniture study. Furniture has been the subject of nearly all of the most imaginative studies in American decorative arts as well as some of the narrowest. The literature of early or preindustrial furniture in particular is dominated by the mutually reinforcing concerns of connoisseurship and regionalism. Connoisseurship serves to separate authentic from false, good (expensive) from bad (cheap), and to determine an object's origins, first by region, then, if possible, by maker. Regionalism is the study of regional variations in different types of furnishings. Its major concerns are to identify and explain these differences.27 Two of the most significant statements about regionalism in early furniture appear in the work of Charles Montgomery and John Kirk.28 Montgomery's essay in the Yale Bicentennial exhibition catalogue argued that regional characteristics were shaped by the interaction of craft specialization and organization with local taste. Kirk's American Chairs: Queen Anne and Chippendale (1972) is largely descriptive and evaluative, analyzing distinctive construction and design elements in chairs from six eighteenth-century "style centers," then offering tentative conclusions about regional aesthetics and parallels in linguistic regionalism. The most extensive, systematic, and hyperbolic study of regional characteristics is The Work of Many Hands: Card Tables in Federal America, 1790–1820 (1982). Staff of the Yale University Art Gallery cooperated with Benjamin Hewitt on an extensive project to establish objectively verifiable data about the regional characteristics of one furniture form. In an outstanding example of what Michael Ettema calls "scientific antiquarianism," Hewitt used a computer to track 176 characteristics drawn from four hundred card tables. The results, predictably enough, were more data. Gerald Ward's essay on card playing will probably hold

27Cooper, In Praise of America, 156–209.
more interest to historians. Ward sought to explain not only how card tables were used but why card games were so popular in the early nineteenth century. As part of his answer he offered a functional and symbolic analysis of the once common game of Ten.29

The two most important early books in the field of furniture history are in a sense regional studies, but Irving Lyon’s Colonial Furniture of New England (1891) and William Hornor’s Blue Book—Philadelphia Furniture (1935) are also much more. Lyon’s book was the first major study of American colonial furniture; nearly a century later it remains valuable and suggestive. Lyon’s contribution was twofold. First, he established chronologies and determined period terminology and use. Second, his research identified and drew upon most of the major categories of documents still mined today, including wills, diaries, inventories, newspapers, receipts, and bills. Lyon also visited Britain and Europe in search of precedents and parallels to help him establish what might be called the basic facts of American furniture history. When Lyon began, nearly all was uncertainty. When he was done, he had drawn the general contours that still shape furniture study.

Hornor’s Blue Book is a far more expansive account of furniture produced in Philadelphia. Like Lyon, Hornor examined a vast range and number of documents including at least five thousand manuscripts, several hundred account books, and scores of printed volumes, newspapers, and other classes of documents, many of which were in private hands. What differentiates Hornor from Lyon was not only region and time—Lyon examined the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, Hornor the eighteenth—but emphasis as well. Lyon concentrated almost exclusively on furniture, but Hornor was interested in the entire social fabric of artisan and patron, producer and purchaser. A reverence for old families was part of Hornor’s motivation, but it did not distort his vision and does not seriously mar the book’s utility today; the Blue Book is still the richest compendium of data about Philadelphia eighteenth-century furniture.30 The only more recent study that might be classed with Lyon and Hornor’s is Charles F. Montgomery’s American Furniture: The Federal Period.31 Consisting of a short historical essay and a monumental catalogue of part of the Winterthur Museum

collections, it constitutes the most encyclopedic and respected study of American Federal period furniture yet published.

New England furniture has been studied more than that of any other region. Perhaps because the process of modernization struck New England before other parts of the country and because the region was the center of America's intellectual and cultural life, collecting began early and a great many objects were preserved. Yet New England also seems to hold some mythic power in furniture studies, and unverbalized sentiments seem to endow its objects with added significance. It may be that the region's uncontestable artifactual richness and its abundant and accessible documentation hold great attraction for furniture scholars. Despite over a century of attention, however, attribution remains a continuing issue. Patricia Kane's *Furniture of New Haven Colony* (1973) summarized the colony's history up to the 1660s, but its major thrust was the use of style and motif to isolate four distinctive groups within the surviving body of furniture. *New London County Furniture* (1974) was an even more vigorous exercise in identification and attribution. In their attempts to link furniture to names, Minor Myers, Jr., and Edgar Mayhew developed an extensive checklist of makers with outlines of their careers. They examined forty-six case pieces, dealing both with surface detail and more subtle matters of construction, and identifying eighteen types of drawer-front and twenty-six types of drawer-back construction. This information, enhanced by minute examination of joints and even the angles of dovetails, enabled them to link objects to documented craftsmen. *Boston Furniture of the Eighteenth Century* (1974) was less an exercise in connoisseurship than a series of essays by eight authors on characteristic objects and their contexts. Brock Jobe's discussion of the Boston furniture industry between 1720 and 1740 drew on surviving account books to explore the structure and dynamics of the trade. Other essays dealt with particular forms or motifs and one examined the career of a representative cabinet-maker.

Identification and attribution are the objectives of studies of furniture of most other regions, whether those be Maryland, North Carolina, or Texas.

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Wallace Gusler's *Furniture of Williamsburg and Eastern Virginia* (1979) also had a revisionist purpose, however. Gusler analyzed documents, archaeological evidence, and construction, woods, and other aspects of surviving objects both to document a body of related high-style furniture made in eighteenth-century Williamsburg and to lay to rest the notion that Virginians imported from England all furniture of better quality. Although some shop attributions may be tenuous, this study represents a significant step in the ongoing reevaluation of the material culture of the South. One very recent publication, *Eastern Shore, Virginia: Raised Panel Furniture, 1730–1830* (1982), shows that the interest in southern decorative arts continues to grow. This particular publication is clearly preliminary and neither its methodology nor its conclusions are completely developed, but it is noteworthy for demonstrating how long-ignored areas sometimes turn out to be rich in artifacts of considerable historic and cultural interest. The mere presentation of over one hundred case pieces of distinctive panel construction requires furniture historians to redraw their mental maps of furniture in preindustrial America.35

In matters of attribution, method would seem to be a critical consideration, but furniture historians have not often addressed the topic directly. Thomas Schlereth reprinted important essays by Charles Montgomery and E. McClung Fleming in his anthology.36 Montgomery's essay was appealing when it first appeared in 1961, but his approach today seems far too subjective. Fleming's more subtle essay raised critical methodological questions and showed how most of them might be answered in the case of a seventeenth-century cupboard. Among the few notable subsequent methodological offerings are two articles by Phillip Zimmerman. In the first, "A Methodological Study in the Identification of Some Important Philadelphia Chippendale Furniture" (1979), Zimmerman articulated a system to examine both intrinsic data, like construction and workmanship, and extrinsic data, like histories of ownership and interpretation of style. The uses of extrinsic data are fairly obvious; Zimmerman's contribution lay in explicating ways to exploit intrinsic data. In a second article, "Workmanship as Evidence: A Model for Object Study" (1981), Zimmerman amplified his earlier arguments to show how close attention to workmanship could augment understanding of the ways objects were conceived and produced. Drawing from David Pye the idea of the workmanship of certainty and from Benno Forman the notion of workmanship of habit, Zimmerman formulated an examination procedure for objects,


in this specific case, Philadelphia chairs in the Chippendale manner. Meticulous and systematic attention to clues of workmanship of certainty and habit helped him not only assign seemingly unrelated chairs to the same shops, but to posit more general conclusions about the processes of chairmaking in eighteenth-century Philadelphia. Crucial to Zimmerman's analysis was his understanding of eighteenth-century chairs as products of a commercial system and not just works of art.37

The work of three other young scholars of early furniture, Robert F. Trent, Robert St. George, and Edward S. Cooke, Jr., acknowledges the need for firm documentation, but decisively breaks through the limits of identification and attribution to claim new intellectual territory. Like Zimmerman, these three are graduates of the Winterthur Program in Early American Culture and studied with the late Benno Forman. All three made major statements in catalogues of exhibitions at New England historical societies. With their work furniture history becomes American Studies.

Robert F. Trent's *Hearts and Crowns* (1977) was a turning point in American furniture study. When it appeared it was the most conceptually aggressive and probing decorative arts exhibition catalogue yet produced. *Hearts and Crowns* was pivotal in expanding and diversifying furniture studies, for it established the validity of studying vernacular furniture while emphatically rejecting three cherished and largely unexamined assumptions of American decorative arts scholarship: that "London, via Boston and New York, was the style center for the northern English colonies; masterpieces are the proper object of research; and folk art is a degenerated or at least garbled version of high style forms." Trent traced one specific form of vernacular furniture, the so-called heart and crown chair of the Connecticut coast, from its probable introduction by immigrant British artisans to its eventual obsolescence. In recording the life of a single form of relatively cheap chair over more than a century, Trent outlined the ways makers transformed or adjusted their basic design in response to "challenges" of new design ideas. The basic chair form and the shops producing it both remained viable until finally run out of business by mass-produced fancy chairs in the early nineteenth century. Even more important than Trent's history of the form was his imaginative synthesis of ideas drawn from Henri Focillon, George Kubler, and Henry Glassie to generate a system to evaluate objects in terms of the culture that produced them rather than in terms of presentist, high-art analysis or the often condescending concept of folk art. Fired by the example of Glassie and

others, Trent brought new visions and values to furniture study and in so doing dramatically raised the intellectual level of the latter.38

The work of Robert St. George brings to American furniture history considerable folkloric and anthropological sophistication. St. George's study of “Style and Structure in the Joinery of Dedham and Medfield, Massachusetts, 1635–1685” (1979) drew on the writings of a diverse group, including Kenneth Lockridge, David Grayson Allen, George Kubler, Benno Forman, Patricia Kane, Henry Glassie, Claude Lévi-Strauss, and others, in an ambitious attempt to reconstruct one aspect of “the cumulative reality of New England in the seventeenth century.” St. George moved from minute examination of two carved oak panels from the original 1655 pulpit of the first meeting house in Dedham through an analysis of what he termed “artifactual dialect” in over a dozen surviving objects to speculate on those objects' roles in their culture. He attempted to show how “emphasis on maintaining standards of workmanlike and artificial competence by the joiner's trade” indicated “a need to assert and perpetuate one artifactual language—one order—that was acceptable to the immediate community.” In examining specific ways of Dedham and Medfield joiners imprinting their “own old England on the New England void,” St. George hoped to demonstrate how scholars might “pierce deep into the subjective reality” of another age. In his analysis, the Dedham and Medfield artifacts were “the psychology reality of the seventeenth-century New England yeoman embodied in physical form.”39

St. George continued his explorations into everyday life in seventeenth-century New England in The Wrought Covenant (1979). His introduction to this exhibition catalogue was a richly textured and subtle manifesto calling for a combination of the perspectives of history and anthropology to produce “an historical analysis of expressive behavior.” For St. George an essential prerequisite for analyzing expressive behavior in seventeenth-century New England is understanding the English regional subcultures that provided craftsmen with their systems of conceptualizing and making artifacts, and furnished their communities with corresponding ideas of appropriateness. Equally important is the concept of artificiality, “the capacity to consistently achieve and display a high degree of control over workmanship,” and the craftsman's role of upholding its standards. With these ideas in mind, St. George examined the artifacts “as part of a complex communicative process

between makers and users” and as both “intellectual and behavioral achievements.” Extensive documentary clusters, including objects, a checklist of craftsmen, extracts from inventories, and a bibliography, provide specificity for St. George’s arguments and give The Wrought Covenant lasting value as both reference tool and statement of theory.40

St. George’s recent essay in New England Begins reaches out beyond the study of single classes of artifacts or clusters of craftsmen to encompass a rich historic ethnography of seventeenth-century New England life. His major themes are the ways “the yeoman ordered the space and time in which he thought and worked.” He weaves together an impressive variety of artifactual threads ranging from fields, farmyards, barns, and fences to houses, furnishings, and even clothing, crafting them into a thickly textured interpretive fabric. St. George glides from examinations of details of specific objects to compelling conceptualizations as he traces the changes in “attitudes towards space, time, and the human body” that took place during the seventeenth century.41

Cooke’s major publication is Fiddlebacks and Crooked-backs (1982), a study that set out to explain why furniture of the second half of the eighteenth century and the early years of the nineteenth produced in two western Connecticut towns only eighteen miles apart should be so notably different. Cooke found answers in differences in the towns and in social and economic structures. Newtown was a conservative farming community that supported the farmer-craftsmen. Woodbury was a growing commercial center that drew independent entrepreneurial craftsmen more responsive to design ideas of larger metropolitan areas. Cooke’s methodical examination of documents and objects provides historic illustrations of the now familiar sociological distinction between locals and cosmopolitans.42

Although it was not a concern for Cooke, both Trent and St. George dealt with the transfer of culture from Europe, particularly England. Their well-grounded treatments stand in marked contrast to the unsupported and often chauvinistic assumptions about the Americanness of American furniture bandied about over the years. Most claims for the unique qualities of American furniture before the industrial age reveal more about their authors’ ignorance than any properties of the furniture and fall flat in the face of John T. Kirk’s newest book, American Furniture and the British Tradition to 1830

(1982). Kirk has exhaustively examined the working methods, forms, decorative motifs, and constructional details in British and American furniture before 1830 to show how American furniture was almost entirely an extension and continuation of British design traditions. As for American invention, Kirk has found little of it and his readers may find even less.

Nineteenth-century furniture has received much less attention than that of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, in part because the subject has been respectable for less than a generation. Art-oriented studies have usually been limited to "masterpieces" or to objects like patented furniture that seemed "proto-modern" and appeared to transcend or subvert the lamentable or laughable taste of Victorian America. Still common today are the early modern myths that taste declined in the nineteenth century and that mechanization was largely to blame. Michael Ettema has specifically addressed these prejudices in an article where he argued that historians have overestimated the transformational power of machinery in the nineteenth century and that industrialization had relatively little impact on furniture design. After carefully studying the actual capabilities of nineteenth-century woodworking machinery, Ettema concluded that machinery least affected high-style, trend-setting furniture because expensive ornament could not be replicated inexpensively; where the machine made its impact was on inexpensive furniture. In other words, mechanization made possible proliferation, not elaboration. Like Zimmerman, Ettema has rejected the idea of furniture-making as a "decorative art," preferring to see it as a consumer industry controlled by cultural considerations and what he calls "the economics of design."

Historically-minded students of nineteenth-century furniture have investigated another range of questions than those asked of earlier objects, perhaps because their study originated under different social, cultural, and political conditions, but surely also because documentation and identification are not major issues. The last century's self-conscious record-keeping and its communications revolution have left today's scholars with vast amounts of documentation, much of it in forms rare or unknown in earlier periods. One study, for instance, drew upon the published catalogues of world's fairs to outline patterns of conflict in international high culture. "The Battle of

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the Sideboards” demonstrated how sideboards became vehicles for stylistic and cultural values and symbols of cultural hegemony. A visual analysis of Grand Rapids furniture of the 1870s, on the other hand, relied heavily on photographic images from period trade catalogues rather than on actual furniture. The catalogues constituted a controlled and internally consistent body of data that could not easily be replicated on the same scale with surviving objects and proved entirely adequate for the purpose of examining design conventions. In fact, because they illustrated modes of upholstery now lost, the photographs were superior to extant objects which had been reupholstered and thereby falsified.46

As studies examine topics closer to the present, documentation grows richer and more diversified. Cheryl Robertson has drawn on extensive materials already collected in the Prairie Archives at the Milwaukee Art Museum to write The Domestic Scene (1981), a catalogue monograph on the work of early twentieth-century interior designer George Niedecken. David Hanks’s art-oriented study of Frank Lloyd Wright’s decorative work, and Randall Makinson’s examination of the West Coast design team of Greene and Greene were similarly based on substantial collections of objects and documents.47 The next logical step in this movement toward increased documentation and decreased distance between subject and object is Michael Owen Jones’s brilliant book, The Hand Made Object and Its Maker (1975). This is not history but a behavioral analysis of a contemporary and in some ways traditional rural chair-maker who exhibited archaic and idiosyncratic personal traits but also made extraordinary chairs. In writing this essay in folkloric and artisanal theory useful to almost anyone who studies people who make things, Jones dipped deep into the literature of creativity and craft but also spent a good deal of time observing and talking to the chair-maker himself. Only autobiography takes us closer to the creative process.48

Another current in later furniture study links objects to social history. The Rocking Chair Book (1979), for example, is a fresh and lively survey of that artifact written in unaffected and unpretentious prose.49 It offers not only a general history of the object but comments on the conscious and uncon-

scions meanings of these chairs in three centuries of American life. Other studies have tried to show how household artifacts of Victorian America could be incorporated into discussions of both environments and mentality. One essay, for example, combined sociological orientations drawn from Peter Berger, Erving Goffman, Robert Merton, and Thorstein Veblen with an extensive visual and functional analysis of nineteenth-century hallstands to demonstrate how those objects met culture-specific utilitarian, social, and psychological needs. A later article by Leslie A. Greene, "The Late Victorian Hallstand: A Social History" (1980), traced the subsequent decline of the hallstand as a status-conferring object in the final years of the last century, as attitudes about the hall and its actual shape and function were changed. Her compact discussion deftly wove together issues of social class, style, and presentation of self.50

An investigation of Victorian parlor organs took another tack, examining ways those objects were used as nonverbal tools in broad social strategies. Drawing particularly on the evidence of late nineteenth-century advertising images, this article argued that Victorians valued parlor organs not only for their manifest function of making music but as props to help them engage in and extend conventionalized social roles, to promote social and cultural continuity over time, to insure social bonding, and to enhance their lives by providing occasions for self-actualization.51

Some objects seem to carry more cultural meaning at a given moment than others. For Diane Douglas, the nineteenth-century sewing machine fit this description. In "The Machine in the Parlor: A Dialectical Analysis of the Sewing Machine" (1982), she examined the complex interplay between the sewing machine and nineteenth-century American attitudes and values. She argued that when the sewing machine entered the home it brought into that private, female-dominated, spiritual space part of the outer masculine world of power and industry. Primarily used by women, the sewing machine became a focal point in nineteenth-century debates over women's appropriate role and was preempted for arguments on both sides. Douglas first uses contemporary texts and images to show how the machine figured in debates over social issues, then turns to analysis of the physical form of the sewing machine to argue that patterns of reconciliation of social alternatives were echoed in patterns of reconciliation of design alternatives.52


These examinations of rocking chairs, hall stands, parlor organs, and sewing machines go well beyond object identification, connoisseurship, and the accumulation of facts. Along with the studies of Trent, St. George, Cooke, Ettema, the Wards, Lynn, and a few others, they are part of a process of broadening the definition of appropriate objects for study, introducing new methods of research, exploring more far-ranging cultural issues, and reaching out to speak a common language with scholars in other fields. Decorative arts studies have moved closer to intellectual and academic mainstreams in the late twentieth century. It will be difficult, for example, to speak about everyday life in seventeenth-century New England without some reference to New England Begins. Here and in a half dozen other instances, the once fusty reference shelf catalogue has been transformed into a major vehicle for interpretation and theory.

The utility of household furnishings for historical studies has been clearly established. These artifacts are not relevant to all historical issues but they do illuminate many, particularly those that relate to values and meaning in everyday life. What we need now are not more manifestos claiming objects are relevant, but more people showing how they are. I should make it clear, however, that decorative arts study is still a very small field. Few within it have addressed the same data, let alone the same questions or assumptions. To have written this essay in terms of issues or controversies would have misrepresented the field and created a false sense of interaction. Decorative arts/household artifacts study is still an underpopulated field in need of immigrants and agitators.

Obtaining a critical mass of active scholars would be one step toward creating a field where one person's work overlaps with another's, where concerns are shared and explored by groups and not isolated individuals. More people and more studies can help sharpen the field's focus, identify major issues, and build the body of theory every vital field needs. Like American Studies itself, this field is largely derivative for its theory. What critics see as academic posturings in some scholars' work are efforts to push their minds as far as possible in searches for new ways to think about and understand objects. Much very basic and exciting documentary work also needs to be done. Scores of categories of objects remain to be studied in depth and examined as they move and change over time, space, and social class.

Because objects are as diverse as the people who make and use them and because these times favor academic pluralism, experimental studies drawing on objects will probably go in many different directions. The publications discussed here have already suggested ways furnishings can be used in examinations of technology, business, women's roles, artisans and craftsmen, design values, industrialization, domestic space, patterns of daily life, and a
long list of related subjects. More work in all of these will be welcome. Ambitious writers may try to draw upon objects to trace sweeping historical transformations like modernization or the consumer revolution. Regardless of focus, however, many historically-oriented studies will probably operate under the assumption that objects are documents that, taking into account their own peculiarities, can be mined more or less like other documents to answer specific historical questions.

If it is also possible, however, that objects are specific classes of behavior, experience, and reality that are fully comprehended in neither the past nor the present, then the need for entirely different questions and strategies will emerge. These will bring us back full circle to an investigation of the basic and persisting behaviors that lie unexamined at the root of decorative arts and household furnishing studies. Decorative arts scholars still do not really understand collecting, the behavior that is the eternal parent of this field. They still do not have compelling explanations of why museums appeal to people or why exhibitions attract visitors. Those who study objects still cannot fully explain the undeniable fascination that objects possess and the unreasoned spells they cast. American scholars have not been particularly interested in identifying or understanding the most fundamental relationships between people and objects. Attempts to seek those understandings may completely reshape the field.
