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Editorial

We often lament the loss of British regional traditions in everything from dialect to dress to food, architecture or furniture, but sometimes those traditions are not lost but simply need to be rediscovered. Aidan Harrison's rediscovery began with the purchase of a small Scottish chair at auction, whose unusual proportions and carved decoration aroused his curiosity. His exploration of the chair and its history reveals an apparently unique Scottish tradition of chair-making which has its roots in the Scottish custom of women retaining their maiden identity after marriage. Aidan's work also adds to evidence for the existence of an important furniture-making centre in Aberdeen in the late sixteenth century. Hitherto this had hinged on the survival of formal or ceremonial chairs such as those at Trinity Hall, Aberdeen, but it can now be given a more domestic, albeit aristocratic, aspect.

Further proof that Scottish identity was strongly manifested at an aristocratic as well as a vernacular level is given in Charles Wemyss's article, which discusses the political and economic context which gave rise to a distinctive Scottish style of late baroque architecture. Its most remarkable feature was its split personality — 'ancient without and modern within'.

He argues that the peculiar circumstances of late seventeenth century Scotland led members of the Scottish political elite to adopt a Janus-like stance, looking both to England and to Scotland, in the design of their houses. He concludes that this instigated the rise of a new generation of Scottish furniture-makers who went on to make Edinburgh one of the most important British furniture-making centres in the eighteenth century.

Philip Zimmerman's article highlights a debate which has not, as yet, disturbed furniture scholars on this side of the Atlantic, but which has spawned vigourous disagreement in North America. It concerns pieces of colonial-period furniture in American collections which to all outward appearances are British, but which employ one or more North American secondary woods in their construction. Some American scholars maintain that their very appearance argues against their being American, and that the presence of American secondary woods is explained by the export of American timber to Great Britain. Others, Zimmerman included, suggest that this is inherently unlikely, if only because the trade statistics show that the quantities of American wood exported to Britain before 1800 were very small in proportion to the wood supplied from Scandinavia and the rest of Europe. At its heart the debate is not about the transatlantic trade in wood, but about what makes eighteenth-century American furniture 'American'.

John Boram's article continues his work on late eighteenth-century light or 'fancy chairs', highlighting once again the potential and actual links between fashionable and vernacular chair-making. Moreover, the sheer quantity of evidence, both in documentation and in surviving chairs, suggests that light chairs played a far more important role in late Georgian houses than has hitherto been recognised. This is partly a consequence of their poor survival rate relative to more robust mahogany and other chairs, but it is also, one suspects, due to the false perception that such chairs were for

bedrooms, or nurseries, or cottages, and therefore beneath serious notice. As John's work shows, this was certainly not the case.

Chris Pickvance gives us the first detailed study of two important sixteenth–century chests. Quite why these have so far escaped serious attention from furniture scholars is unclear, but that deficiency is now made good. The value of Chris's article lies not just in the analysis of the chests themselves, but in the way that they can be used to draw out themes of construction and decoration which illuminate important changes, both artistic and technical, in English woodworking in the first half of the sixteenth century.

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