

## PUBLISHED DESIGNS AND REGIONAL CABINET-MAKERS

The revelation in 'Regional Furniture 2001' that the artisan painting of a furniture draughtsman, first published in colour in 1996, is in fact a portrait of the celebrated popular designer, George Smith, raises some important issues for anyone researching the middle-class cabinet trade. It is interesting that it was first thought that the open volume of designs might have been Ackermann, and that the detailing of the furniture and curtains might be identifiable, especially because now, five years later, not only the curtains and furniture but the book of designs have been identified from the 1826 edition of Smith's 'Designs for Household Furniture'.

John Evan Bedford has made an exciting discovery. The sad fact, however, is that such discoveries are made unnecessarily difficult for most of us because with the exception of the most famous names (Chippendale, Hepplewhite, Sheraton, Hope) re-printed copies of historic designs are either unavailable, except in specialist libraries, out of print, or prohibitively expensive collectors items.

The whole subject hots up when we get to the Regency period, when the sheer proliferation of designs, mostly using the same motifs in endlessly varied ways, provided cabinet-makers with a ready-made 'vernacular' from which they could 'mix and match' without the necessity of drawing their own variations. For example, who would have needed to design an original fan acroterion when George Smith, in 1808, provided more than 25 examples on his various designs to copy direct? I know this because I obtained a copy of the Praeger edition of Smith via the Library Service, and was able to retain it long enough to serve my purpose. The 1826 edition was unavailable.

Current research on the distinguished Welsh cabinet maker David Morley of Carmarthen (1760 - 1832) is revealing him as a consistent user and creative adaptor of such designs, from a bow-fronted chest-of-drawers of c.1785 taken from Hepplewhite to a strikingly unusual cornice from a Smith wardrobe of 1808 (used on library book-cases), a pair of Gothic side-chairs from the same book, and two designs from Nicholson (1826), a sideboard back used on one of his own workshop patterns, and a chair back, used for a public contract paid for in 1830.

The fact that I have been able to identify these sources is a matter of pure good fortune, having retained Smith 1808 and bought the published facsimile of Nicholson's 'The Practical Cabinet-Maker' (E.P.Publishing Ltd., 1973, with an introduction by Christopher Gilbert) in 1975. I wonder if Morley used Smith in 1826 too, or Whitaker, or Brown... Reference to these works in libraries, such as the V&A, is of only partial use, because unless one has a literally photographic memory it is virtually impossible to compare the fine details of the drawings with actual examples when found. One needs to have the pictures at one's elbow, comparing them with the numerous 'snap' photos which most of us take as a means of identifying things which may later merit serious attention.

The only way to fill this gap is for the old pattern books to

be re-printed in an accessible format and price. This should not really be so difficult, because there are no editorial requirements, and modern technology has made it possible for small firms to produce paper-back editions at reasonable prices. One might look to libraries, museums and generous private owners to loan texts for reproduction. Copyrights may be a problem to overcome. A society such as ours must have such resources and expertise among its members, and to sponsor such a project would be of immeasurable service to researchers.

The list of books is potentially a long one, although some works could surely be combined for convenience and economy. The designers listed in the *'Pictorial Dictionary of British 19th Century Furniture Design'* (Antique Collector's Club, 1984–1989) could be a start. Doubtless members will be able to come up with many titles, and hopefully with responses to the whole idea.

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