

Letter from America

Dear Friends in the Regional Furniture Society,
Greetings from America!

This 'Letter from America' is the first of a series meant to keep you apprised of the state of regional furniture scholarship in the United States. In this letter I intend to give you an overview of some of the major trends in American regional furniture scholarship. In my next letter I plan to introduce some of the many web-based resources available from American institutions that might prove useful to your own work across the pond.

One of the most important trends in American furniture scholarship has been our focus on the influence of immigrant craft traditions. It is a simple fact that all of our American craftsmen came from somewhere and that the flavor of our regional furniture is a direct result of the ethnic and religious origins of our craftsmen. Within one-hundred miles of where I live in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, there were Quaker, Scotch-Irish Presbyterian, and German-speaking reformed, Lutheran, and Moravian communities. There were also free and enslaved African-American craftsmen. Not only did



Chest of Drawers, Attributed to Joseph Wells, 1796, Alamance County, North Carolina. Walnut with tulip poplar and sulfur inlay. MESDA Collection (Acc. 5568) <http://mesda.org/item/collections/chest-of-drawers/20629/>

these groups bring traditions with them when they crossed the Atlantic, but they also carried those traditions with them as they migrated inland over succeeding generations. In the most recent issue of the *MESDA Journal* (www.MESDAJournal.org) Robert Leath and Nick Powers follow families of Quaker cabinetmakers from New England and Pennsylvania as they move south into the Shenandoah Valley and the piedmont region of North Carolina. In the 2015 edition of the journal *American Furniture* edited by Luke Beckerdite and published by the Chipstone Foundation, Lisa Minardi weaves similar stories about the German-speaking protestant communities of Pennsylvania. However, just as important as these cultural enclaves are the stories of what happens over time as these communities come together and interact with one another. In the 2016 edition of *American Furniture* June Lucas writes about the Cane Creek community of Alamance County, North Carolina. In her article Lucas illustrates a chest of drawers in the MESDA collection that with its arched top drawers and dentil moulding – is typical of furniture made by Quaker cabinetmakers in Southeastern Pennsylvania and the piedmont region of North Carolina. However, this particular chest of drawers is inlaid using molten sulfur, a technique associated with German-speaking craftsmen. Here the chest's maker, Joseph Wells, a Quaker, has created a hybrid form for his German Lutheran client.

To a large extent our focus on micro-regionalism is driven by our ability to easily access large quantities of historical data. Databases like Ancestry.com and FamilySearch.com have made it simple to flesh out the communities of makers and owners around an object. By weaving together formal analysis, traditional



Sugar Chest, 1850–1900, Probably Indiana, possibly Kentucky. Cordier Auctions & Appraisals

connoisseurship, and historical documents, we are often able to answer important questions about craftsmen, consumers, and communities. The confluence of fieldwork, documentary research, and sound scholarship can be seen in publications like Patricia E. Kane's 2016 *Art and Industry in Early America: Rhode Island Furniture, 1650–1830*. (The database on which this book is based can be accessed at: <http://rifa.art.yale.edu>)

Museums, collectors, and scholars in America are also increasingly drawn to objects that may have once fallen outside the canon of traditional furniture studies because they were deemed 'too plain', 'too common', or from regions derided as 'not interesting'. In recent years scholars Jeffrey S. Evans and Kurt Russ have produced exhibits and catalogs with the Museum of the Shenandoah Valley in Winchester, Virginia, on both vernacular chair traditions and punched-tin decorated food safes! There is also now active scholarship in long-overlooked places like the American Midwest.

To be sure, some of this interest is driven by the market. While the market for mid-grade 'brown furniture' has been soft in America for much of the past decade, rare, superb – and sometimes superbly weird – objects that cross the line into 'folk art' have been strong. A Kentucky desk and bookcase made in 1796 sold for just shy of \$500,000. An unusual paint-decorated sugar chest from the Midwest sold for \$263,250 at a small regional auction in Pennsylvania. And a punched-tin decorated food safe sold at an auction in the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia for \$102,000.

New objects are regularly coming to light. Both the Museum of Early Southern Decorative Arts (<http://www.MESDA.org>) and The Classical Institute of



Corner cupboard, Attributed to Jacob Clodfelter, c. 1795, Davidson Co., North Carolina, walnut with walnut and yellow pine. MESDA Collection, Gift of Mr and Mrs James W. Douglas (Acc. 3576) <http://mesda.org/item/collections/corner-cupboard/1838>



Corner cupboard drawer, showing the single board which forms the three-sided back.

the South at the Historic New Orleans Collections (<http://www.classicalinstituteofthesouth.org>) have active field documentation programs. Other institutions have done similar work in places as diverse as Rhode Island (<http://rifa.art.yale.edu>), Wisconsin (<http://content.wisconsinhistory.org/cdm/landingpage/collection/wda>), Texas (<http://texasartisans.mfah.org>), and Massachusetts (<http://www.fourcenturies.org>). (More on these databases in my next letter!)

Finally, there is a growing movement to create bridges between the curatorial and craftsman communities in America. New publications like the magazine *Mortise and Tenon* focus on a kind of collaborative 'experimental archaeology' between these two groups. Let me give you an example: In issue four of *Mortise and Tenon* author Jim McConnell explored the construction of corner cupboard drawers by a group of cabinetmakers who worked in Davidson County, North Carolina, between 1770 and 1858. The drawers have six sides. Rather than cut dovetails or mitre and nail each facet, this group of cabinetmakers kerfed and bent a single board to form the drawer back. Though this seems like a logical solution, we are not aware of any other cabinetmakers who used this technique. Jim's work gives new insights about how and why these cabinetmakers did this, and perhaps also why others chose not to. Another important example of the value of a craftsman-conservator's perspective in curatorial work is Leroy Graves's 2015 *Early Seating Upholstery: Reading the Evidence from Colonial Williamsburg*.

In short, the state of regional furniture scholarship in the United States is strong, and I look forward to sharing the 'state of the field' with you in future letters from America.

All the best,

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