

# BOOK REVIEWS

## RECENT PUBLICATIONS

**AMERICAN ROCOCO 1750 - 1775** by Heckscher, Morrison H. and Bowman, Leslie G. 304pp  
Catalogue of an exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art 1992. £40 (to be reviewed in next newsletter)

### THE BONHAMS DIRECTORY 1993

The directory provides a guide to professional restorers of a wide range of collectable artifacts.  
£10.99 (to be reviewed in next newsletter)

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### ENGLISH COUNTRY FURNITURE.

**The National and Regional Vernacular 1500-1900.**  
by David Knell.  
£35.00 Barrie and Jenkins 1992.

This is an ambitious book by any standard. As Christopher Gilbert's recent work has shown, the subject of vernacular furniture is one whose horizons are ever widening. David Knell's book demonstrates that its difficulties, as a consequence, are also increasing. The author is modest, even diffident in his introductory remarks. His purpose is to present a 'reasonably balanced, comprehensive picture of everyday furniture through the ages.' Considering the task implicit in these qualified words he has not done a bad job, and it would be difficult to find another book which covers as much ground as this in such a concise and easily readable fashion. The subject is treated chronologically, with the bulk being divided into four chapters covering furniture from the medieval period to the beginning of the twentieth century. As the author acknowledges, it is always difficult to know whether a chronological or a thematic arrangement is best; the former has the merit of accessibility and ease of comprehension. Preceding these chapters are sections on construction and timber, and the book ends with a general but problematical discussion entitled 'The Heritage'. All sections are extensively illustrated, with a welcome chunk of colour photographs as a centrepiece.

The book is strong on detail, particularly in the text accompanying the photographs, where factors such as condition, colour, finish and originality are given ample treatment. This is the sort of information which many general readers will appreciate, although whether it is worth a hefty £35 is for them to decide. It may be argued that the book lacks originality both in its approach and its material, but this was never its purpose. Indeed, the author is generous with his credits to 'travellers other than myself'. What he has sought to do is gather and collate a wide spectrum of present knowledge, and to deliver it in such a way to 'accord ordinary furniture the attention it deserves.'

For the general reader there are a number of caveats. Most furniture books address to some degree the subject of timber, and this book is no exception. But to describe elder, for instance, as 'White. No visible grain pattern.', is like describing water as 'wettish'. It leaves us none the

wiser in distinguishing elder from horse chestnut or water from wine. To a specialist such generalities are irritating; to a beginner they must be completely mystifying. Another topic which may confuse the novice is the reputedly 'Chinese' origin of many common 18th century furniture forms. There is a valid thesis here, but there are also counter theses. One questions whether in a general book such contentious issues should be advanced as established fact. More serious, however, is the lack of consideration afforded to the relation between vernacular furniture and its context. There are references throughout the text to changes in manners, usage, terminology and house design, and there is the odd illustration of a contemporary interior. These are greatly outnumbered, however, by photographs from the inside of dealer's premises. A section entitled 'Domestic Context' attempts to redress the balance, but it is too short and simplistic to be of real value. This is indicative of a fundamental problem of approach.

The difficulty is apparent in the title of the book. Three adjectives - country, regional and vernacular - are used, and none of them, as the author acknowledges in his preface, are satisfactory. Initially, he sets out his parameters with care, observing that 'country' is now regarded as inappropriate, 'common' is authentic but archaic, and 'vernacular' and 'regional' are suitable but by no means synonymous. One sympathises with his predicament but it is disappointing to see the word 'country' given pride of place on the title page.

One suspects that commercial considerations decided the issue, and the resulting title is a compromise which will satisfy neither the Campaign for Plain English nor the serious furniture scholar. It is also disappointing that after such careful debate a coherent and consistent approach does not emerge from it.

The book is laced with pertinent but random observations. The example of a 'country' oak bureau bearing the label of the London firm of Coxted and Woster is a useful one, highlighting the clumsy and misleading nature of a 'London' vs 'country' approach. Similarly, the comment that a 17th century joined oak armchair has more in common with other sorts of joined furniture than it does with a 19th century Windsor states an important truth. The last section of the book, 'The Heritage', attempts to draw these and other insights together. Here there are further astute comments; such as that much vernacular furniture is distinguished not by its individualism but by a repetitive conformity deriving from long tradition. And, that such furniture was often highly fashionable, not by London standards, but by the standards of its local context. It is characteristic of the book as a whole that the sense of these remarks is rarely applied to the main text, nor are they taken to their logical conclusions. The implication which arises from the two observations just mentioned needs stating plainly; that 'fashion' in much vernacular furniture will never be understood so long as it is considered solely in relation to metropolitan styles.



The treatment of 'regionality' is the one which will interest RFS members most closely, and this is discussed in 'The Heritage'. Again, the logic of the author's intelligent and often perceptive remarks is not carried through. Most of the photo captions include some sort of regional attribution, but what actually do these attributions mean? Many are exceedingly vague - 'The North' - and where more specific, as in a dresser captioned 'Penzance, Cornwall', they are no more meaningful. The reason they are not meaningful is that a caption cannot by itself produce understanding; it doesn't explain the Cornishness which makes this dresser Cornish, nor does it distinguish it from the Welshness of a Welsh Dresser. If the recent work of this society and its members has taught us anything, it is that regional furniture is inseparable from its context and, indeed, meaningless without it. Valid regional 'signatures' emerge from a large and varied body of evidence including furniture, vernacular architecture, local industry, commerce, raw materials and social organisation. These are all considerations fundamental to our study, but ones which this book fails to take seriously. And this is despite the author's recognition that 'the study of furniture history is ...but a part of the broader spectrum of social history.' In the author's defence, it should be noted that he never claims to be writing anything other than a general work; a full treatment of regionality is not within the scope of the book. Indeed, such a treatment has never yet been attempted in any British furniture study.

Ultimately, the problem derives from a conflict of interest. On the one hand is the attempt to produce a work of repute, consistent with the advances in knowledge and understanding made in furniture studies in the last few years. On the other is the need to produce a book which is marketable. This book has its roots firmly in the marketplace. One only needs to look at the photographic credits to see that they are heavily dependent on trade sources. There is nothing inherently wrong with that - most of us have connections at some level or other with the trade - but let us not confuse what is commercial with what is of historical value. Most of the furniture depicted in the book has already found its market, and is therefore several stages along a process of selection which has removed objects from their original context and bestowed upon them a set of extraneous aesthetic/commercial values. Members of the RFS should take warning that regionality has already become a marketable commodity.