

MANX TRADITIONAL FURNITURE

A catalogue of the furniture collections of Manx National Heritage by B. D. Cotton. 300pp including 25 colour plates and many black and white illustrations. Published by the Manx Museum and National Trust, Isle of Man, 1993. £24.95. ISBN 0 901106 348.

A DISCOURSE ON BOXES OF THE 16TH, 17TH AND 18TH CENTURIES

by Anthony J. Conybeare. 160pp, hardback, 1992, published by ROSCA, Worcestershire, £14.50. ISBN 0 9517678 IX

EDWARD BARNESLEY AND HIS WORKSHOP, ARTS AND CRAFTS IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

by Annette Carruthers, 208 pp, hardback, 1992, published by White Cockade, £17.95 ISBN 1 873 48700 2.

AMERICAN ROCOCO, 1750-1775: ELEGANCE IN ORNAMENT

by Morrison H Heckscher, Leslie Greene Bowman, 288pp, 250 illus (Metropolitan Museum of Art, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1992) \$60. ISBN 0 8109 6412 0

Since it is not unusual to find pieces of American furniture cleaned of their original finish and repolished, it was refreshing to find a carved mahogany sidetable with a marvellous patinated surface on the dust jacket of **American Rococo, 1750-1775** and I approached reading this book with pleasure. It is beautifully produced and contains 250 illustrations, 82 of which are in colour. The book was written to accompany the exhibition **American Rococo, 1750-1775: Elegance in Ornament**, held in 1992 at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York and at the Los Angeles County Museum. However it is far more than a catalogue to an exhibition: it provides a most comprehensive treatment of the subject and many articles which, for varying reasons, were unable to be included in the exhibition itself, are discussed and illustrated.

In the preface the authors, Morrison H Heckscher, curator of American decorative arts at the Metropolitan Museum, and Leslie Greene Bowman, curator of decorative arts at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, acknowledge a debt of inspiration to the exhibition and catalogue; **Rococo. Art and Design in Hogarth's England**, held at the Victoria and Albert Museum in 1984. Their exhibition and this book were conceived to answer the question - 'Did the rococo style exist in colonial America'?

We are warned at the outset that the book is not a survey of decorative arts in America in the second half of the 18th century and the authors establish certain criteria: the definition of rococo is limited to the ornamental aspect of the 18th century style, and objects to be included will have been made in America. Thus they exclude paintings of the period, as showing little rococo ornamentation, as



Fig. 5. Extract from the Manx furniture collection catalogue. 'A 19th century painted Windsor chair. Made in ash and oak'

well as the work of regional schools which were not influenced by the rococo style as, for example, Newport, Rhode Island, where the baroque block and shell designs for furniture remained fashionable. The two main vehicles for rococo decoration were silver and furniture and the book concentrates on these; Leslie Greene Brown having written the silver entries and Morrison H Heckscher the furniture. He is well qualified to have undertaken this task, earlier work having included a study of the influence of Chippendale's **Director in America**; a catalogue of the engraved ornament of Lock, a carver and Copland, a silver engraver, whose published designs of the late 1730s and 1740s influenced the development of the rococo style in England; and publishing the scrapbook of a Huguenot carver and gilder in London in the second half of the 18th century, Gideon Saint, which included French engravings of designs from the Regency period by Boulle and Berain, as well as later English designs by Lock, Copland and Thomas Johnson. Architecture, firearms, engravings (bookplates, trade cards, maps and clock dials) are also discussed, as well as the products of three fledgling industries of the period - iron, glass and porcelain. The latter two industries as a result of the worsening relations between England and the American colonies before the eventual outbreak of war in 1773. Imported goods from England were increasingly boycotted in the 1760s and many cities signed non importation agreements. When ordinary trading relations were resumed, these industries succumbed to the competition from cheaper imported goods.

The authors recognise that "only in and around the major cities were the necessary ingredients in place to

cultivate the development of an American rococo style: design, patrons, artisans and materials". Colonial patrons were not aristocrats but wealthy merchants and the authors have found that comparison with the same level of English society suggests little time lag between a style becoming popular in London and in the colonial cities. The main centres to adopt the rococo style were all seaports, which supported rich merchants in the increasingly prosperous colonies, and which were linked as closely to London as to one another. They were Boston, New York and Philadelphia in the north, Charleston and Williamsburg in the south. These main centres for the production of furniture in the rococo style are examined individually: their economic situation outlined and the main patrons and craftsmen, their work and available documentation described. Furniture is discussed under various headings which include frames, both picture and mirror, case furniture, chairs and tables.

Morrison Heckscher outlines three main routes by which the rococo style spread to America: the use of printed sources, copying of imported articles, and design ideas brought by immigrant craftsmen. These are exactly the same routes by which design ideas would have been transferred in Britain - many of the points raised in the book are relevant to the study of provincial furniture anywhere. His careful study of the printed sources for the rococo in America is very informative: the known availability of pattern books in workshops and libraries is recorded and instances of designs taken directly from pattern books are noted, as on the 'Pompadour' highboy from Philadelphia, where the carving on the bottom drawer has been taken directly from a plate in Thomas Johnson's *New Book of Ornaments of 1762*. (If the copy of Chippendale's *Director* in the 1778 library inventory of Hay's successor Edmund Dickinson in Williamsburg was brought over by Benjamin Bucktrout when he arrived from London in the 1760s, as is suggested, it seems surprising that Bucktrout did not take it with him when he set up his own workshop in 1770). The explosion in the publication of architectural texts and pattern books after 1730 enabled the very rapid spread of new ideas to the possibly somewhat overwhelmed provincial tradesman.

The importance of the role of imported furniture as models is discussed, although, without precise documentation, this is difficult to do in other than general terms. There appear to be few examples, as detailed as the advertisement of 1772 by Richard Magrath, a cabinetmaker in Charleston, for carved chairs of the newest fashion, splat backs, with hollow slats and commode fronts, of the same pattern as those imported by Peter Manigault, Esq. More furniture is said to have been sent from London to New York than to the other ports being discussed: a figure of £2415 is given for the value of these exports in 1772. This may reflect the especially close ties that existed between New York and London: it was the colonial seat of British administration and had been the port responsible for provisioning the British troops during the French and Indian War (1754-63). The first furniture yet recorded in America from Chippendale's workshop was sent to New York, as part of the household furnishings of Lady Susan Fox Strangways when she set up house there following her marriage to William O'Brien in 1764. (It is unfortunate that there is no bill relating to this payment of £247 and therefore no way of knowing which Chippendale articles

were the first to arrive in America). One English article discussed as being used as a model in New York is a frame from the Beckman collection, which another frame in the same collection, known to have been made by a New York carver, Stephen Dwight, closely resembles. Morrison Heckscher suggests that the absence of circular punch marks on the textured background of the ovolo mouldings on Stephen Dwight's frame may have been due to lack of the requisite tool. It is also possible that this may have been a personal design choice on the part of the carver - one imagines it would have been relatively straightforward to bore out the centre of a nail and file it into a circular punch, should this have been required.

Differing economic circumstances in the colonial cities affected the immigration of craftsmen, at its height in 1760s. This is reflected in the varying 'take up' rate of the rococo style in these centres, and can be paralleled in the history of other styles in other provincial centres. The fullest expression of the rococo took place in Philadelphia, which was enjoying an economic boom during the second half of the 18th century. The presence of young wealthy patrons and an expanding economy allowed the encouragement of immigrant craftsmen: one of the two major cabinet makers in the city, Randolph, was native born, but the other, Thomas Affleck, and the four main carvers and gilders - Bernard and Jugiez, Courtenay and Reynolds - had all arrived from London in the 1760s. One of these, Hercules Courtenay, must have arrived in Philadelphia steeped in the rococo, having served his apprenticeship with Thomas Johnson, one of the leading promoters of rococo carving in London. This contrasts sharply with the situation in Boston which, by the second half of the century was entering a period of declining fortunes and where the already established cabinet makers were unwilling to admit newcomers with the further competition this would involve. In consequence the Boston furniture of this period contains fewer examples of the rococo style.

The discussion of the one-piece silvered clock dials, which are described as a 'native alternative' is somewhat confusing as it is not made clear that these dials are in the mainstream of clock dial development. The spandrels of some English one piece silvered dials of the 1770s are decorated with rather attenuated raffle leaves, similar to those engraved on the dial of the musical clock by David Burnap, catalogue number 44. (For example see B. Loomes, *Grandfather Clocks and their Cases*, 1985, plate 241, p198). However, by the 1780s engraved decoration on English dials had become neo-classical in feeling: the designs are symmetrical and often incorporate ovals, garlands, paterae and urns. The dial of the clock by David Burnap is dated to the 1790s and is described as a 'late flowering of rococo ornament in rural America'.

This book, which proves beyond doubt that the rococo style did exist in colonial America, illustrates some beautiful pieces of furniture, such as the Cadwalader sidetable from Philadelphia, and makes one regret being unable to attend the exhibition itself. The informative text must make it required reading for any serious student of American furniture.

Michael Legg