

RECENT PUBLICATIONS

"Carved decoration on Early English Woodwork" by Penny Rumble, 40 pp inc. 60 black and white plates, 1993. Published by Turner Press, Wolverhampton. Printed and bound by Cambridge University Press. £7.50 inclusive of p & p.

Available from Penny Rumble, The Old School, Chittering, Cambridge (0223 861831) ISBN: 0 9520939 0 1

"Irish Country Furniture 1700-1950"

by Claudia Kinmonth, 256 pp, 220 black and white illustrations and 100 colour plates, 1993

Published by Yale University Press, 23 Pond St. London £29.95 ISBN 0 300 05574 9

"John Channon and Brass Inlaid Furniture 1730-60"

Edited by Christopher Gilbert & Tessa Murdoch, 208 pp, 184 black & white illustrations + 22 colour plates, 1993

Published by Yale University Press, London £30.00 ISBN 0 300 058128

A CULTURAL ANALYSIS OF FURNITURE MAKING IN PETERSBURG, VIRGINIA, 1760 - 1820 by Jonathan Prown, 1992, MESDA (Box 10310) Salem Station, Winston-Salem, N. Carolina 27108

Jon Prown's master's thesis has been published by the **Museum of Early Southern Decorative Arts** and comprises the whole of their May 1992 volume. As the title suggests, it is a study of the growth and demise of furniture making in Petersburg, Virginia, a small town not far from the the North Carolina border. Petersburg is one of Chesapeake's 'fall line' towns, formally established in 1748 at the highest navigable point of the Appomattox River, where waterfalls and rapids form a natural obstacle to further progress upstream. In common with other fall line towns, Petersburg began life as a trading centre, a point where tobacco from the Virginia and North Carolina hinterland was collected and stored for onward shipment to England. From the start, commercial and cultural ties ensured strong bonds with England and Scotland which are evident in the adoption of what Jon Prown calls the 'neat and plain' style of British cabinet making. Once established, Petersburg prospered in a small way as a commercial centre, and quickly developed a number of indigenous industries, including furniture making. By the time of the Revolution, three furniture makers were recorded as working in the town. Petersburg emerged from the war against the British relatively unscathed, and even benefited from the destruction visited on larger commercial rivals such as Norfolk and Williamsburg.

Between 1780 and 1800 at least ten more furniture makers set up shop, but in 1815 Petersburg's growth was checked by a disastrous fire. In the rebuilding that followed, the trade shops which had until now supplied many of the needs of Petersburg and its environs were replaced by new 'retail' based businesses, many of which imported goods from the more developed cities of the north. Petersburg's furniture makers were unable to compete with the sophisticated wares of large northern manufacturers and after 1820, declares the author, "Petersburg's role as a regional furniture making centre was effectively over".

This is a thesis which might well be taken as a model for similar studies. The author discusses geography and topography, economic and social life, links with neighbouring towns and with overseas markets. Within a few pages we have a profile of the town and its inhabitants which enables its furniture trade to be seen in its all important context. In the ensuing account of the history of the furniture makers, the author does not lose sight of apparently extraneous factors ('flood, fire and disease'), so that we know not only what sort of furniture was made in Petersburg, but also what sort of place it was. It is this dimension which we miss in so much conventional British furniture analysis where style and structure are all, and context is largely ignored. The furniture itself is studied by both stylistic and structural analogy, together with analysis of primary and secondary timbers. Stylistically, as we shall see, Petersburg furniture was little different from that of its neighbouring towns, but constructural details enable the author to attribute a corpus of pieces to individual Petersburg makers. Among the more unusual aspects of furniture making to emerge are accounts of black furniture makers, and of the makers of 'riding chairs', which were racy looking, carriage mounted Windsors.

A study such as this raises many intriguing points about methodology in furniture research, and about the relationship of furniture history to other history disciplines. However, space is limited, so let us instead consider something pertinent to the broad aims of the RFS, which is the idea of regionality, and in particular, of what is meant by a *regional* style. The Petersburg style is described as 'neat and plain', deriving largely from British tradition, but avoiding 'more ornate British rococo designs'. This style is not peculiar to Petersburg, but is 'similar to the furniture of other nearby cities'.

These nearby Virginia towns have more than their furniture in common. Petersburg, Richmond, Fredericksburg, Norfolk and Williamsburg were founded on the tobacco trade, and connected by geography, language, culture, and - above all - commerce, to each other and to the 'tobacco lords' of England and Scotland. Their geographical, commercial and, one suspects, social conditions were very similar.

However, in terms of their furniture production there was a definite hierarchy of furniture producing towns in Virginia, depending on their size and their level of economic and political development. Norfolk was the principal entrepot from which tobacco was shipped to Britain and through which British manufacturers, including quality furniture, were imported. At the same time both Norfolk and Williamsburg became established furniture making centres, from which furniture was exported throughout southeastern Virginia and northern Carolina. Smaller towns like Petersburg (white population something over 1500 in 1790) could sustain only a modest level of manufacturing, and certainly did not possess the size of prosperous client base necessary to maintain a first class cabinet shop. Local makers supplied well made, workman-like pieces for middle class homes, the 'neat and plain' style which the author identifies, but high class furniture was imported, either from Britain via Norfolk, or later on, from the more developed cities of the North.

What emerges therefore is not so much a style as a *class* of furniture, whose common characteristics are determined by economic circumstances rather than regional idiosyncrasy. At all stages of its development, the furniture trade in Petersburg was shaped by economic realities, and cultural expression, in terms of a Petersburg 'style', was constrained by this fact.

The implications of this extend beyond the study of any one town, tradition or region. It suggests that 'regionality' is an expression of more than geographical circumstance; as a cultural phenomenon it relates closely to social class and economic status. Therefore, regionality is not an absolute but a relative condition, and one which may change over time. It is a product of many factors; geography, natural resources, language, commerce, society, wealth, materials and workshop practices, to name a few. As these things change, so will expressions of regional culture, including furniture making. We should consider also that regionality may be manifested differently at different levels of society, so that there may be not one but several concurrent 'regional' styles. Furniture made in Petersburg was not the only furniture available; the top echelon of furniture owned by Petersburg citizens was not indigenous but imported, and belonged (in the early 19th century) to the 'regional' style of the north eastern United States.

In such circumstances 'regionality' becomes a notion both layered and faceted, and expressed according to how the various factors of which it is a product combine. Jon Prown's study, in identifying and describing the often subtle relationships between Petersburg, its neighbours and its long distance connections, gives us a paradigm for the situation of many small towns on both sides of the Atlantic. Independent but not self sufficient, fixed by geographical circumstances and commercial necessity between its rural hinterland and its larger urban competitors, Petersburg is part of a larger whole. Its development and decline are reflected in the fortunes of its material culture, of which furniture making is an integral part.