

## J. Prown: Furniture-making in Petersburg, Virginia - A Model for Research

"Just remember Jon, you are a contextualist".

Reassured by this designation at a previous hearing, our American Secretary, Jonathan Prown, presented his idea to what he hoped would be a more sympathetic gathering.

He started with the deficiencies of "traditional aesthetic connoisseurship" within the decorative arts, which judges "all forms on how closely they compare to the highest and most elaborate examples, on how closely they emulate urban standards of beauty, proportion, and workmanship". He contrasted this with the method of studying furniture in context, based on the belief that "both maker and owner are not only inseparable from, but indeed reflective of their cultural setting". The furniture we find in a given place is a result of the local craftsmen's abilities and influences, and of the requirements and tastes of their customers. It may have little, or nothing at all, to do with what was deemed fashionable in metropolitan centres.

Jonathan's research was based on over two hundred pieces which could be attributed to Petersburg, a small Virginian town, between 1760 and 1820. Before American Independence, the region identified strongly with Britain, and this was reflected in its furniture. Ideas were transmitted by immigrant craftsmen; by the importation of furniture in exchange for tobacco and wheat; and by the

use of British design books. Although this was in a sense "fashionable" furniture, it was the more restrained styles which were favoured, the "neat and plain fashion". After Independence, the nearby international port of Norfolk declined and contact with Britain was disrupted. But Petersburg itself thrived as the centre of the inland rural area, and its cabinet-makers continued to produce relatively plain but exceptionally well-made furniture. There was little attempt to copy contemporary American urban styles, and a certain amount of development of existing forms took place.

Jonathan showed some typical chairs, clearly British in character and apparently uncommon in America, which had their own idiosyncratic features. He showed some local constructional details of the type which are only discovered when such in-depth studies are undertaken, such as dovetailing on the crest rail of smoking chairs. There were also the sort of insights into social history which elude us if we concentrate on the "higher" examples of a period, such as the discovery of a workshop owned by two "free blacks".

But eventually the industrialisation of furniture-making in the North and improvements in transportation made the local products uncompetitive. The workshop owners became furniture retailers, or moved farther afield. The final blow came in 1815 with a great fire in the commercial centre - a curiously common occurrence whenever a trade is in decline!

Provincial furniture of the kind illustrated by Jonathan - ranging from Pembroke tables to sophisticated bureau bookcases - can be difficult to analyse sympathetically. It can easily be disregarded, seen as a late manifestation of fashionable urban styles. With the exceptions of Windsor chairs made in the later part of the period, the pieces shown were hardly vernacular. They were owned by the wealthy, sometimes very wealthy, plantation owners and merchants. These people could have afforded the more elaborate styles favoured in the cities of both Europe and America, but showed a positive preference for pieces which were simpler and of more honest workmanship; and this was something which could be supplied by local craftsmen. "Culture" does not work in a linear direction, each group slavishly and predictably copying the one above. What is sought-after in one place is not necessarily required elsewhere, and this cannot be understood by the traditional method of concentrating on the preferences of one particular social class.

There can obviously be no regional studies without a recognition of social context, and Jonathan ended by expressing the need for more "similar site-specific studies". It is to be hoped that this will ultimately lead to a wider acceptance of an alternative theoretical framework in furniture history.

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