

## THEODORE R CROM 'AN EIGHTEENTH CENTURY ENGLISH BRASS HARDWARE CATALOGUE'

A reproduction of an anonymous catalogue of brass hardware for furniture, dating from about 1770, consisting of 125 plates. Introduction by Ted Crom, 12 pages; 11 b/w illustrations; short bibliography; index to the contents of the catalogue; 9" x 12" hard cover; 1994. ISBN 0-9604888-5-5 Available from the author at Route 2, Box 212, Hawthorne, Florida 32640, U.S.A. \$95.00 plus \$5.00 overseas postage.

For the past thirty years or so American authors and publishers have led the way in collecting and reproducing 18th and 19th century trade catalogues and other industrial ephemera. This kind of material, rarely surviving and therefore difficult to find, is of immense value to students of industrial and cultural history, and to others interested in design and technological development. United States libraries and universities have also shown the way by collecting and preserving such samples of (to quote Siegfried Giedion) 'anonymous history', which have so much to tell us of the artifacts and ideas of our recent ancestors, and which have so often been destroyed once their primary purpose has been served.

The present book is a complete reproduction of an 18th century catalogue for the brass trades of Birmingham. Dr Crom, a research enthusiast who has already achieved a high reputation for his work on the history of horological tools and catalogues of other domestic trades, is the author and publisher. This catalogue, with its etched and engraved plates, illustrates the wide range of brass items such as drawer handles, curtain hooks, locks, bolts, hinges, desk quadrants, latches, capitals, bases, clock balls and spires, ornamental devices, escutcheon plates, lock plates and many other objects which were indispensable to clock case and furniture makers during the last quarter of the 18th century and well into the 19th. Altogether there are some 840 numbered items shown, with about 75 extra on the last ten pages of the book. The original copy of the catalogue, from which this reproduction has been made, is in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, and there are, apparently, at least five copies of it known in American collections. As none of the copies have names of either the producers of the brass products illustrated or the publishers of the books, Ted Crom has chosen to call it the 'JANET' catalogue, so named after Janet Bryne, librarian at the MMA who clearly helped him in his research and to whom the book is dedicated, with thanks to all librarians for their help.

There are three particular ways in which a book of this sort is extremely valuable; (1) it provides evidence of the way in which the brass accessory trades of Birmingham and other Midland Towns such as Wolverhampton supplied brass fittings to furniture makers during the 18th century; (2) it illustrates the astonishingly wide variety of styles of ornament and other details which were used within the stylistic idiom

of Rococo and Neo-Classical; (3) a less important purpose is that this material helps to identify and date furniture on which such accessories appear, though this should perhaps be treated with caution since items such as drawer handles, lock plates, hinges and so forth could be (and often were) replaced at a later date.

Ted Crom's introductory essay deals only with the structure of the brass trade in late 18th century Birmingham, and has little to say about the aesthetic and art historical aspects of the book. His essay, however, is a very well written and thought provoking study of how, why, when and where such catalogues were produced. For example he shows how catalogues to the trade first began to appear about 1760; he illustrates the point that many were first produced as separate sheets and only later bound into volumes; he quotes from the accounts of Gillows of Lancaster, showing how items were ordered by catalogue numbers from Thomas Shaw of Birmingham; he examines the question of why all the brass trade catalogues known (many of which are in the Victoria & Albert Museum, but not this one) are anonymous, though he does not, perhaps, come to a firm conclusion about this. This reviewer believes that these pattern books were produced by wholesalers and retailers and not by the actual small workshop makers of the brassware. By remaining strictly anonymous these retailers protected their financial interests by not divulging the actual sources of the goods - a trading procedure well established in, for example, the ceramic industry well into the 19th century. It was only men of the calibre of Matthew Boulton who set up his Soho manufactory in the 1760s who could afford to advertise on an international basis, like his great contemporary Josiah Wedgwood; little 'back street' workshops remained anonymous and had to depend on the entrepreneurial skills of provincial distributors.

Dr Crom's essay is full of well-researched and detailed evidence as to how the catalogue and numbering system developed, and how this was of value to the furniture trade. There is a stylistic oddity, however, which he does not fully explain which concerns the last ten plates of the catalogue. These plates are drawn with a delicacy and subtlety which makes them stand out as being quite different from the other 115 plates, and it seems likely that they were acquired from another publication altogether. This is an unresolved enigma, but suffice it to say that the objects shown (watch stands, highly ornamental drawer handles, candle sconces, fully blown Rococo girandoles and even a portrait miniature of the famous John Wilkes (of radical, reformer and republican fame) are illustrated in a style more reminiscent of the sophisticated pattern books of Thomas Chippendale, Matthias Lock or Thomas Johnson. There are no screws, hinges, casters, nails, pull rings or lock bolts in this part, though these practical necessities abound in the majority of the other plates.

Altogether this is an excellent publication for which Ted Crom should be congratulated for his enterprise,



enthusiasm and research. It is a worthwhile prospective purchase for the lover of Georgian furniture and clocks. The richness, variety and vitality of the etched drawings of these necessary adjuncts to furniture is astonishing and adds an important ingredient to our understanding of how Georgian craftsmen worked.

*Professor Alan Smith*