

PERCY MACQUOID, *GARRYA ELLIPTICA* &
DAVID DOUGLAS by Professor Jim Green.

Among the hundreds of illustrations of furniture in the four volumes of Macquoid there is a single photograph of a plant. The name is misprinted, with a single 'l' as *Garrya elliptica*. Long, graceful catkins are a prominent feature of this shrub. Macquoid regards these catkins as the model for the decoration on the back of a walnut chair dated to 1686. This attribution is unconvincing when photographs of the chair and plant are compared, even allowing for some fairly extreme stylizing. Macquoid goes on to say that in the late 18th century this ornament became a most prominent feature of decoration. Among other examples he notes a table designed by Adam and made by Chippendale in 1768

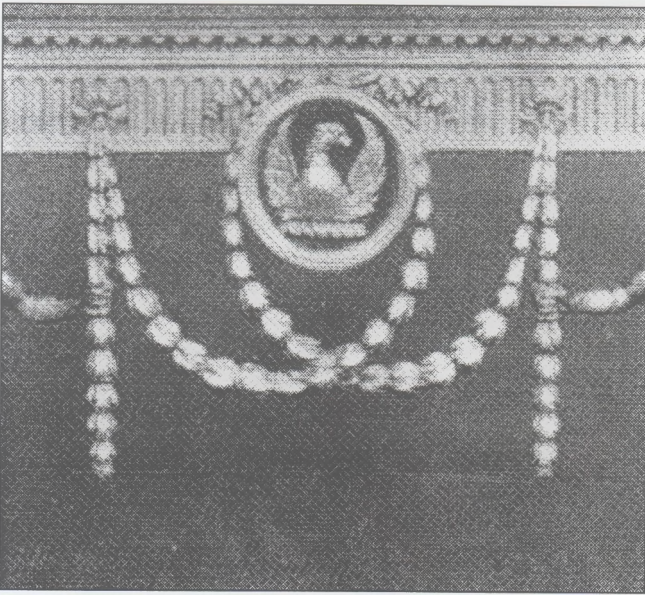


Fig. 7 Swags on a table designed by Adam, made by Chippendale (circa 1768)

(fig. 7). Furniture of the late 18th century does indeed bear decoration which at first sight appears to be based on *Garrya elliptica*. But there is a problem. David Douglas was an extraordinary man. He wandered alone over large areas of North America, collecting plants and sending them back to the Royal Horticultural Society. One of the 600 or so species he collected came from California, and he named it *Garrya elliptica* in honour of Nicholas Garry, of the Hudson Bay Company who had helped him with his travels. The natural range of this plant is confined to the southwestern part of North America. The problem in relation to Macquoid's idea is that Douglas first went to North America in 1825. There seems to be some doubt about the precise date that *Garrya elliptica* was introduced into European gardens, but it was probably between 1829 and 1834. This implies that the decorative work resembling the catkins of *Garrya* on European furniture before the 19th century must have been based on some other model, or models.



Fig. 8 Detail from door panel at Osterley showing use of stylised lilies

It is well known that the Adam brothers had a great interest in classical antiquities. They modified and applied various classical forms in their decorations. Some of their designs can be derived from ancient Egyptian sources. Among the treasures from the tomb of Tutankhamen there are catkin-like decorations on such diverse objects as unguent jars and chair backs. One possible model for this decoration is a willow (*Salix subserrata*) which was, and still is, common along the Nile. Other possibilities include the flowers of the Tamarisk trees. But I believe that most of the Adam-style decorations are derived from other sources. Stylised water lilies, often confused with Lotus flowers, are common in ancient Egyptian decoration and have passed into Greek and Roman culture. As they become more stylised they begin to resemble ordinary lilies. This form is often used in decorative panels by Robert Adam for instance. On a door of the Etruscan room at Osterley (circa 1776) there is a design (fig. 8) based on stylised lilies, arranged end to end, forming an elegant oval. This is not the only floral chain design used at the end of the 18th century. Some of the swags designed for furniture are clearly not derived from lilies, but whatever their sources may be, they are not likely to be based on *Garrya elliptica*.