

# Adam Bowett, *Early Georgian Furniture, 1714-1740*

Antique Collectors' Club, 2009 (£50)

Writing in the Preface to this splendidly illustrated book, Adam Bowett tells us that he has attempted to 'provide an up-to-date and straightforward account of the stylistic and technical development of fashionable English furniture in the first few decades of the Hanoverian age'. However, the book's title speaks not of Hanoverian furniture, which would imply a linkage to court art, but of 'Early Georgian' furniture, a title redolent of that great fantasist, Percy MacQuoid, whose shadow hangs long over this period in furniture history. Other large shadows, as acknowledged by Bowett, are also visible – namely, those of R.W Symonds and Ralph Edwards. Indeed, the typological organisation of the material in this book goes straight back to Edwards' 1954 *Dictionary of English Furniture*.

The topic brings with it considerable baggage, as Bowett makes clear in his Preface. As he observes on p.8, the principal difficulty in writing about English furniture of this period is, 'How to overcome the accumulation of received wisdom, preconceived ideas and plain nonsense that is the state of popular knowledge of the subject?' As a means for understanding this period in English furniture, Bowett emphasises technical details of construction, and archival and empirical evidence, basing his discussions on pieces he has personally examined. He thus introduces objective, and even scientific, analysis of objects as an antidote to a long history of 'connoisseurship', and in this way he moves scholarship forward, bringing welcome flashes of new insight to this material.

Science, however, is not infallible. Bowett states he has attempted to find documented examples of the first instances of technical developments and innovations. This is a worthy but difficult pursuit, given the random accidents of survival among furniture of this antiquity. We are told that Bowett's dating may be at least 10 to 20 years out from that in older literature, and that examples of furniture in this period have traditionally been dated too early, but these potentially very interesting statements are not developed systematically in the text. On plate 1:16 we have the number '24' and the initials 'BA' in bold red strokes on the inside of a drawer. Bowett suggests that the red pigment exactly matches the red used in the interior of the immaculate black and gold japanned bureau cabinet to which the drawer belongs, illustrated opposite, and concludes these might be the initials of the japanner. However, the calligraphy looks more modern, and might have been added when the cabinet was restored or repainted later, as often happened with japanned furniture.

In Chapter One we have a very interesting look at the

London furniture trade of the 18th century, acknowledging the work of Ambrose Heal, Pat Kirkham, Laurie Lindey, and others. Trade cards and archival documents are much in evidence, shedding light on the training of furniture makers and the organisation of businesses. The interrelationships between individuals, workshops, and trades is complex and interlocking, which – as Bowett states – tends to argue against the connoisseurial approach. The furniture maker as businessman is brought to life, and those who could make the transition to management and run their own firms often became wealthy. Particularly interesting is the discussion of the timber trade, in which Bowett has established himself as an expert, and its relationship to London workshops. Even the siting of these workshops may have been a direct response to the nearby presence of docks and warehouses with timber. The influence of trade with Asia is certainly important during this period, mainly with respect to motifs and decorative techniques such as japanning, although certain shapes derive directly from Asian objects as well. The sources for such designs are not pursued here, but there is a rather disconnected discussion of Chinese and Indian imported furniture at the end of Chapter One.

With Chapter Two, we begin the typological run-through, beginning with case furniture and working through seats in Chapter Four, Tables and Stands in Chapter Five, and Mirrors in Chapter Six. There is much rich detail, particularly of a technical nature, and many nuggets of new information. The book breaks new ground in terms of its clear illustration of a number of aspects of construction, and much care and thought has gone into the selection of the visual materials.

However, there are some interesting incongruities thrown up by discussing furniture according to type – for example, the section on 'Term Stands'. Terms, of course, were stone markers placed outdoors in the landscape of the classical world. Designers like William Kent (who did not make furniture) had seen them in Italy, and understood the classical ornamental vocabularies of their design. The 'fish-scale' pattern actually represented the talons of the eagle of Jupiter, which Kent knew well; the scallop shell and the dolphin were attributes of Venus, and the so-called lion mask and feet signified the panther, sacred to Bacchus. Therefore, once we enter into the world of high design, with programmes of iconography and meaning, then the 'scientific' and constructional approach no longer seems quite so relevant. Palladianism, perhaps, is not really served by this approach.

What this book addresses is that phenomenon long known as 'brown wood' (and it is brown wood brought glowingly to life here) – that is, the well-made, functional, and at the same time fashionable furniture for a

prosperous clientele based mainly in the dynamic mercantile societies of northern Europe and its colonies. This is ultimately vernacular design which ran parallel to a rich vein of high baroque furniture made in Europe which tracked the court styles, dominated by Versailles. Occasionally we rub up against these designs, as with the furniture of James Moore the Elder, but they remain largely outside the scope of this book.

This book is about the furniture made by craftsmen interacting with tradesmen in London during the first half of the 18th century. There is no conclusion, alas, and no final summation of an overarching point of view. We are left with a sequence of very rich morsels of information. I am delighted to have *Early Georgian Furniture* on my shelves, and will dip into it with interest in the years to come, but it is tempting to observe that, in terms of its title, vocabulary and structure, it is a meticulously researched and illustrated update of a paradigm which has nowadays become rather old fashioned. The new material in this book is very welcome, but it would be nice to have a new way of conceptualising this genre of English furniture. Bowett hints strongly that the way forward is to view this material ultimately within the context of business and trade, but I suspect what the old connoisseurs were after was somehow to capture a bit of the magic and appeal of this enduringly popular furniture as well.

**Megan Aldrich**