

The Windsor Style In America, Volume II

by Charles Santore

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There are several distinct styles among American Windsors, and the chairs made in any one style display an enormous variety of detail. The casual observer might assume that as many variations were played on the Windsor theme as there were chairmakers. But study reveals that the American styles evolved from historical antecedents, most often English, and that certain forms are characteristic of a particular region and period.

This is the subject of Charles Santore's illuminating work, THE WINDSOR STYLE IN AMERICA, Volume II. The two books comprise the most authoritative work to date on American Windsors. The scope and detail, presentation and documentation here eclipse earlier studies.

Mr. Santore's authority has more than one source. His passion for the form echoes that of Wallace Nutting, whose work AMERICAN WINDSORS was first published in 1917.

Charles Santore too gets wonderfully carried away contemplating the history of the Windsor style. Early in Volume I, he draws a detailed parallel between American modifications of English Windsors, and the politics of the

18th century. The argument turns on the spindle backs of American chairs, compared to the central splat common to English Windsors; on the American, use of turned legs exclusively never the English cabriole leg, which led to a dramatic splay in the typical American undercarriage; and on the frontal design of English chairs, as against American styles that look evenly balanced from all sides. Mr. Santore takes these changes as manifestation of American independence.

Both books begin with Mr. Santore's softly detailed evocative line drawings of Windsor chair features, ensembles of turning and carving. This section is followed in both volumes by several pages of colour plates titled 'A Study Of Windsor Surfaces', which bring to life the paint history evident in most old chairs. Over time they were typically painted more than once, and later layers are likely to loosen and chip away, revealing layers underneath. The result is often dramatic, a vision of the centuries slipping by, a combination of deep colour and surface wear that comes only with long use. The chairs in the colour plates are all photographed against carefully chosen shades of seamless background paper. The effect is quiet, nearly reverent, and certainly beautiful.

The departures of Volume II are apparent in the text and layout of the main body of the book. In Volume I, the text runs in a continuum from one example to the next, and comparative discussions of two or three chairs at once are frequent. The prose carries Santore's enthusiasm with an easy grace, and the images come quickly with his lively, visual language.

In Volume II, the less poetic text occurs as captions to the photographs, which are more consistently large and clear. There are brief introductory remarks at the beginning of each style section. It's more clearly defined, less discursive format: here Santore is getting down to cases, after making his broad statement on history and style in Volume I.

The freshest detailed piece of stylistic history in the two volumes is Mr. Santore's new theory of the origins of the continuous arm-chair. The 'mystery' of this particular form is that it 'appears to have no English Windsor prototype in the 18th century'. Like a true detective, he carefully unearths both a motive and the means that enabled New York City chair-makers to produce this innovative style. Santore the artist looks at the bergere, a formal French chair popular around New York late in the 18th century, when the New York continuous arm first appeared. He sees that the downward rounded sweep of a bergere's upholstered back, extended to form arms ending in small handholds, follows quite precisely the line of the typical continuous arm. Santore the historian searches out a link between the world of formal furniture and Windsor chairmaking, providing strong (if not conclusive) evidence to support his theory that the bergere is the true continuous arm antecedent.

Also of interest in Mr. Santore's second volume is his revised opinion of the merits of rod-back chairs. The development of the rod-back style corresponds roughly with the coming of the industrial age, when mechanical efficiency swept aside an earlier aesthetic. The rod-

back is a thrifty style, and the chairs can be made cheaply in great numbers, which always makes aesthetes uneasy, but it's really an aesthetically neutral fact. As Santore himself says, 'Different times pose different problems that result in new design solutions and expressions'.

Rich as Volume I was, Charles Santore shows us, in Volume II of THE WINDSOR SYTLE IN AMERICA, that the subject is still deep and wide. It's one he treats with substantial passion, discipline and talent.

Peter Murkett