



ALL PHOTOS BY GAVIN ASHWORTH, COURTESY OF PEM, EXCEPT AS NOTED

“Lost Lives and Vanishing Worlds”

The Peabody Essex Museum hosts the Boston Furniture Symposium

BY STEVE LATTA

On Friday, November 14, 2003, Dan Monroe, the Executive Director of the Peabody Essex Museum, launched the Boston Furniture Symposium, starting some 200 attendees on a short but thorough view of “lost lives and vanishing worlds,” as he so aptly expressed it. Over the next three days, 16 speakers presented new research and insights on the production and use of furniture in Boston during the Federal Period, roughly 1780-1810. The presentations covered a wide range of topics, but what they all shared was an exploration of the material culture of our country as it took its first steps independent from England. From my vantage point as a

furnituremaker whose work is stylistically linked to that period, I found the discussions fascinating. The symposium, combined with the spectacular exhibition *Luxury and Innovation: Furniture Masterworks by John and Thomas Seymour*, made for a memorable and awe-inspiring weekend.

THE SPEAKERS

The subject matter was quite diverse, including talks on upholsterers, gilders, carvers, turners, furniture and looking glass makers, architects, merchants, and traders. Space does not allow me to cover all of them, but I would like to mention

one maker besides the Seymours.

Michael Podmaniczky, Senior Furniture Conservator at Winterthur Museum, gave a lively presentation on the history of Samuel Gragg, a Boston chairmaker best known for his innovative “elastic” chairs. Born in Peterborough, New Hampshire in 1772, Gragg began as a builder of “common” chairs such as Windsors that were made in bulk and widely distributed to the general populace. In 1808, Gragg moved into the Seymour’s Furniture Warehouse and, at that time, advertised having for sale “fancy” and “bamboo” chairs, indicating a substantial jump in his skill level. After



LEFT TO RIGHT—

“Dressing Chest with Mirror” (1808-10); Thomas Seymour; mahogany, bird’s-eye maple, satinwood, ebony, brass, glass, ivory; 73” x 45” x 25”; gift of Miriam Shaw and Francis Shaw Jr.

“Bed with Painted and Gilded Cornice” (1808-14); Thomas Seymour; mahogany, birch, pine, gilding; 108½” x 80½” x 61½”; Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, John Stewart Kennedy Fund.

“Commode Chest” (1809); Thomas Seymour; mahogany, birch, rosewood, bird’s-eye maple, pine, brass; 41½” x 50” x 24½”; M. and M. Karolik Collection at Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

“Fully Elastic Side Chair” (c. 1808); Samuel Gragg; painted white oak, ash, hickory; 34½” x 18½” x 25½”; Courtesy of Winterthur Museum, Delaware.

moving to Boston, Gragg undoubtedly had familiarized himself with the boat-building techniques for bending wooden components, although these processes would not have been foreign to him, for as Podmaniczky pointed out, many farm implements such as scythes or plows had curved components that would have been shaped at home. His association with mas-



ter craftsmen such as John and Thomas Seymour, Thomas Hope, and George Smith exposed him to the fashionable neo-classical styles. But Gragg was an innovator who had a unique ability to fuse elements from various experiences together; his approach was so revolutionary that the United States Government awarded him a patent in 1808—the first patent ever given for a piece of furniture.

Podmaniczky emphasized that Gragg’s elastic chair was a totally unique interpretation of the popular klismos chair of Greek antiquity. Gragg shaped the crest rail of his chair, as well as the sweep of both the front and rear legs, to reflect the overall feel of the earlier form. Keeping with the fashion of “fancy” chairs imported from England, peacock feather designs rolled down the wider central slat of the back. On several examples of Gragg’s chairs, the front legs taper and terminate with a goat-hoof form, a motif common on many klismos chairs.

LUXURY AND INNOVATION

The symposium was scheduled to fall within the dates of the exhibition *Luxury and Innovation: Furniture Masterworks of John and Thomas Seymour*, which ran from November 17, 2003 through February 16,

2004. Robert Mussey, owner of Robert Mussey Associates, a well-established firm specializing in furniture conservation and restoration, was the guest curator for the exhibition, and he assembled an impressive body of 72 pieces that reflected the brilliance of two of Federal America’s most talented artisans. The furniture was absolutely stunning—rich and sophisticated.

Putting the exhibition into a historical context, Mussey spoke on the influx of immigrant craftsmen such as John and Thomas Seymour into the Boston area during the Federal period. In 1793, John Seymour, 56, having struggled to earn a decent living for nine years in Maine, relocated his family to Boston with the hope of building a clientele among the town’s elite. His young son and apprentice, Thomas, was already proving his worth as a cabinetmaker, and together they made furniture fashioned in the classical style promoted by Sheraton, Hepplewhite, and the architects Robert and James Adam.

Boston proved to be a hard market to break into, despite the fact that their work often pushed the artistic envelope in both style and technical competency. The cost of such brilliant work, however, was beyond the reach of most people, and the



CLOCKWISE FROM FAR LEFT—

“Side Chair” (1808-12); Thomas Seymour; mahogany, maple, birch, upholstery; 33 $\frac{1}{2}$ ” x 20” x 21”; collection of Mrs. Melanie Gill.

“Fancy Painted Chair” (1785-93); John Seymour Jr.; birch, woven split cane, paint; 35” x 19” x 15”; museum purchase.

“Secretary and Bookcase with Pediment Clock” (1808-12); Thomas Seymour, James Doull (clock); mahogany, satinwood, misc. woods, brass, mirror; 90” x 46” x 22”; Gore Place Society, Massachusetts.

“Tambour Secretary with Pediment” (1793-98); John and Thomas Seymour; mahogany, pine, walnut, brass; 54” x 38” x 19”; private collection.

PHOTO BY JEFFREY DYKES, COURTESY OF PEM



PHOTO BY DAVID BOHL, COURTESY OF PEM

his death in August of 1818, he had been a resident at the Boston almshouse for three years. Conflict with England, this time in the form of The War of 1812, continued to wreak havoc on Thomas’s affairs, driving him further into debt; tired of the pressures of self-employment, he abandoned his business in 1817 and took a position as foreman in another shop. He retired from cabinetmaking seven years later and, as Mussey relates, “spent the next 23 years in relative obscurity, dying at the age of 77 in Lunenburg, Massachusetts.”

Despite this oft-told tale of the struggling artist, the legacy that the Seymours left behind is truly one of the finest stories of American furnitremaking, and it is aptly represented in the magnificence of the exhibit. The show included several example of a ladies’ dressing table with mirror, a form that Mussey feels was originated by Thomas. The example pictured (page 52) contains the typical arrangement of a mirror and three small drawers resting on top of a lower case most often consisting of three drawers. The piece, made for one of his wealthiest and consistent clients, Elizabeth Derby West, is a prime example of the level of craftsmanship attained by Seymour in consort with fellow artisans. His favorite and most consistent carver, Thomas Wightman, executed the garlands and acanthus leaves adorning the legs as well as the leafage and scroll carving along the lower rail. In-depth research led Mussey to speculate that another master craftsman, Nathan Monroe, gilded the mirror and supporting brackets.

Ladies’ worktables or sewing stands

Seymours were listed as “poor” in the tax records of 1800.

With the financial backing of partners, Thomas, who took charge of the family business at the age of 33, opened the Boston Furniture Warehouse in 1804, bringing under one roof a collection of craftsman from multiple disciplines to provide one-stop shopping for the blossoming population of wealthy Bostonians. During this time, he established some of his most solid relationships with long-term clients such as Elizabeth Derby West, and with fellow craftsmen including English-trained carver Thomas Wightman and ornamental painter

John Penniman. Both types of associations proved most advantageous to Seymour, who took the quality of his furniture to new heights by building on the combination of a client willing to pay for the finest work with artisans competent in their abilities to produce it.

In spite of the long hours and risks taken, financial security always eluded the father and son team. Jefferson’s 1807 trade embargo with England had a significant negative impact on the Seymours’ business. At the age of 70, John retired from the trade that had sustained him for so many years, but retirement proved difficult—at

CLOCKWISE FROM NEAR RIGHT—

“Card Table” (1817); James Barker, Thomas Seymour; mahogany, maple, rosewood, ash, brass; 29 $\frac{1}{2}$ ” x 35 $\frac{1}{2}$ ” x 18 $\frac{1}{2}$ ”; museum purchase.

“Worktable” (1810-17); Thomas Seymour; mahogany, ash, cherry, pine, brass; 30” x 25 $\frac{1}{2}$ ” x 14 $\frac{1}{2}$ ”; private collection.

“Cylinder Secretary” (1798-1808); John and Thomas Seymour; mahogany, rosewood, satinwood, misc. woods, brass; 44” x 35” x 21 $\frac{1}{2}$ ”; private collection.

“Worktable” (1805-10); John and Thomas Seymour; mahogany, satinwood, oak, pine, brass, leather; 30” x 22” x 17 $\frac{1}{2}$ ”; private collection.

are another of the Seymours’ “signature” forms, and described by Mussey as being “more expensive per square inch than any other piece of Boston furniture.” The example pictured to the right dates to the first decade of the 19th-century and displays all of the frills associated with the form including turned legs reeded in both the upper and lower sections and enhanced by turret corners on the top, interior drawer compartments with lids covered in red Moroccan leather with gilt tool edging, and a fabric bag (since lost) made of the finest materials to hold the lady’s handwork. Made of mahogany with burl and curly satinwood veneers, Seymour followed the English convention of arranging the diagonal flow of the pronounced curls across the drawer fronts in a contrary manner.

Tall clocks boasted of a family’s wealth, often being the most expensive piece of furniture in a household and prominently displayed in an entrance hall or major public room. While conducting his research, Mussey found the initials “J S” written on the inside of a tall clock that is part of the White House permanent collection. Being the only example bearing a direct link to the Boston craftsman, the piece has become, in Mussey’s words, the “Rosetta Stone” for studying others clocks because of the consistency practiced by Seymour in his manufacture of cases.

This clock (page 56) was made in an identical manner to the piece in the White House. The Seymours made many cases for prominent artisans in the Boston area, and most often for the prestigious Willard family of clockmakers. The clock pictured



PHOTO BY STUART FELD, COURTESY OF PEM



TWO PHOTOS BY DAVID BOHL, COURTESY OF PEM

here has a dial signed “Aaron Willard Boston” and is a remarkable demonstration of design and technical competency. The exceptional veneer work is executed in such a manner as to accentuate the height of the clock, which stands just a few inches shy of nine feet. Ornamental bandings frame and define the richness of the mahogany crotches that make up the major panels of the case. Extremely ornate cast brass capitals on the lower and bonnet columns, combined with other brass highlights including the ball-and-steeple finials, nicely contrast with the rich color of the case. The manufacture of the cove moldings below the bonnet and above base was unique in that they were made out of solid stock with a vertical grain orientation to remain sympathetic to the other case components. I found the clock remarkable, and smiled when I read the catalog entry which described the clock as “restrained.”

It was a pleasure to see “in the flesh” one of the most famous and well-known Seymour pieces, the commode chest (page 53) made for Elizabeth Derby West in 1809. Amazingly, the sales receipt survives in Seymour’s own hand citing not only the original purchase price of \$80 but the fact that Thomas Wightman was contracted to do the carving and John Penniman for the elegant shell-and-seaweed painting on the top. Because of the many complex structural problems that arise in this well-known English form, Mussey considers it one of Thomas Seymour’s most ambitious projects. As was often the case with pieces commissioned by West, the work was intended to boldly flaunt the family’s wealth and, certainly in this example, the effort was more than merely successful.

Thomas Wightman demonstrated the full range of his talents as a carver on this Seymour bed (page 52) dating back to 1808-



"Tall Clock" (1808-15); Thomas Seymour, Aaron Willard (dial); mahogany, pine, cherry, brass, glass; 105 1/2" x 20" x 10 1/2"; private collection.

"Sofa" (1795-1804); John and Thomas Seymour; mahogany, curly maple, curly satinwood, upholstery; 34 1/2" x 52" x 26"; collection of Mrs. Melanie Gill.

The staff of the Peabody Essex Museum went to great lengths regarding the educational aspects of this event. On each day of the symposium, workshops were offered on such topics as "Seymour Connoisseurship" or "Veneering and Inlay," that allowed participants to gain further understanding of the subject matter in small group settings that encouraged interaction with the presenters.

Additionally, the PEM, working with master craftsman Phillip Lowe, founder of the Furniture Institute of Massachusetts, produced a series of short videos covering the topics of inlay, veneer, dovetailing, and hand-planing. The segments, ranging in length from 2-6 minutes, feature Lowe, in his typically straightforward and practical manner, demystifying many of the techniques associated with the Seymours. These video segments are presented with a great deal of succinct background information as well as a significant sampling of the exhibition on-line at www.pem.org. Webmaster Jim Forest and John Grimes, Deputy Director for Strategic Initiatives, whom I was told was the intellectual force behind the site, should both be commended for their efforts.

It is always a pleasure being witness to an event that brings together a wide assortment of people, amateurs and professionals alike, who are impassioned by a common theme. The Boston Furniture Symposium was just such an event, with a setting that provided for a wide range of discussions, demonstrations, and lectures, all complemented by *Luxury and Innovation*, one of the most stunning furniture exhibitions I have ever had the good fortune to see. I was told by Greg Liakos, the Public Relations Manager for the Peabody Essex Museum, that the institution will play host to similar gatherings in the future. Based on the success of this event, I look forward to the schedule.

Steve Latta specializes in furniture inspired by the Federal period, and teaches furnituremaking at Thaddeus Stevens College in Lancaster, Pennsylvania.

1814, which Mussey described as "perhaps the greatest American bed of any period." A partial list of the design motifs include tassels and swags, beads and florets, heavy reeding, and Gothic arches that repeat at various points along the length of the posts. Although no receipt ties the carving directly to Wightman, Mussey's extensive research revealed that Wightman was the only English-trained carver with the necessary skills for the undertaking of such a bold endeavor living in the Boston area at the time. The cornice, which may be original to the bed, is lavishly decorated with ornamental painting and gilding that, in many cases, echoes the themes of the posts.

Mussey included several tambour secretaries in the exhibition, including the elegant "Cylinder Secretary" (page 55), stating that the Seymours made more of these than any other form with the possible exception of card tables. The facing board of the pediment, adorned with an imported pictorial oval highlighting a

classical urn, is hinged and folds down when unlocked. The tambour panels are decorated with inlaid swags of husks precisely executed in sets across each door. A lunette pattern, characteristic of the Seymours, runs along the front edge of the writing flap and is balanced by a curly maple crossbanding running along the bottom of the case. To accent the banding, Seymour sand-scorched the veneers to enhance the play of light upon the work. Pilasters made of alternating light and dark veneers frame drawer fronts featuring book-matched mahogany crotches edged with curly satinwood crossbanding and an inset cockbead. Complete with carved lower brackets and a turned vessel on the top, this piece displays the wealth of technical expertise and design capabilities that Thomas Seymour brought to his work.

Robert Mussey's new book, *The Furniture Masterworks of John & Thomas Seymour*, published by the Peabody Essex Museum, is the culmination of ten years research for Mussey both here and abroad, and reflects the passion he brought to the project. The work provides a detailed history of the Seymours and their times and, at more than 450 pages, presents the most extensive catalog of their work to date. The photographs are excellent; the background information enlightening. It will no doubt become a standard member in any collection of American decorative art resources.

EDUCATION AND MORE