

SLIDE 2

Desk and Bookcase

Boston, Massachusetts, 1735-1750

Mahogany with red oak

Major Acquisitions Centennial Fund, 1986.414

Great fortunes were evident in eighteenth-century Boston. In 1708, over 70 wharves jutted out into the harbor to send and receive the goods that made this wealth possible. This busy but beautiful seaport was, more than any other in the colonies at the time, a truly elite, proper English town, which prided itself on excellent taste, a high regard for fashion, and a vain cultural superiority. Wealthy merchants and land speculators, eager to demonstrate their advanced positions within the colony, commissioned craftsmen to make elegant pieces of furniture for their impressive homes. More furniture craftsmen lived in Boston in the early 1700s than in any other city in the Colonies.

The more complex the design of a piece of furniture, the more craftsmen required to construct it, and the Art Institute's desk and bookcase display the work of several individuals. Most of these craftsmen were native to Boston; immigrant furniture workers found it almost impossible to break into the furniture industry which was based upon a tight-knit system of apprenticeship. Once a cabinetmaker (also called a joiner) made enough money, he would open a cabinet shop and employ other craftsmen. These would include carvers, junior partners to the joiners, who specialized in

carving figures, foliage, and flowers, and turners who worked with a lathe and gave legs, posts, balusters (small columns), and spindles (thin rods used as upright supports in chair backs) their curved shapes and contours. Also employed were upholsterers and japanners, specializing in using varnishes to imitate the very refined and expensive Japanese lacquer. Sometimes craftspeople would not be employed by a particular shop, but would instead work on their own and charge the shop owner for their labor. Other times, shop owners would simply buy pre-fabricated spindles, balusters, etc. and have their joiner assemble the parts. Whatever the case, the craftsmen's work received little recognition; it was always the shop owner's name that was affiliated with the finished product.

Combination desks and bookcases were considered the most sophisticated piece of furniture that a family could own in eighteenth-century America. A patron's wealth and taste were reflected in both its design and decoration, and it was placed prominently in the home for friends to admire. Desks and bookcases, however, were more than decorative pieces; they served as "centers" for communication (letter writing) and information (storage of important papers) for both business and personal matters. In this sense the desk and bookcase had to be a functioning piece of furniture with shelves, drawers, and cubby holes.

Decoration and function are beautifully balanced in the Art Institute's desk and bookcase. Constructed of rich mahogany, the piece has an elegant simplicity befitting its Queen Anne style. (The Queen Anne period of Colonial American furniture is 1730 - 1760,

post-dating the Queen's actual reign from 1702 - 1714. The colonial Queen Anne style is characterized by curved forms and a lightness influenced by the French Rococo style of the reigns of Louis XIV and XV in the mid-1700s.) Its front or face has a blockfront design in which the panels of wood are delicately curved. This blocking was quite costly to produce, both from a standpoint of wood used and of time invested, and required consummate skill on the part of the cabinetmaker. The desk and bookcase's beauty and value were further enhanced by the mirrors on the case doors. The mirrors are flanked by columns which, together with the pediment that crowns the bookcase, recall classical architecture and give the piece a structural solidity. Combined with these architectural forms are decorative carvings of grapes, leaves, and flowers that attest not only to the fine skill of the anonymous craftsman, but also to the influence of the Rococo period's love of the decorative. The exquisiteness of the decorative features is matched only by the ingenuity of the complicated system of shelves, drawers, and cubbies behind the case doors. It was there that the owner stored documents and managed the business affairs that brought wealth and prominence to eighteenth-century Boston.

QUESTIONS & ACTIVITIES

1. Before informing students about the desk and bookcase, ask them to examine it and speculate as to the variety of craftspeople and skills necessary for its production. After exploring its production and value, have students examine pieces of contemporary furniture in

school and at home and compare materials, production, and value. What has replaced the desk and bookcase in the contemporary home as the most valuable possession? What does this tell us about our lifestyle and times?

2. The desk and bookcase is both decorative and functional. Have students create on paper or as a three-dimensional model a desk for the 1990s that accomodates modern equipment such as a computer, fax machine, and telephone in an effective and attractive design. Students must consider materials, size, and desired appearance.

3. Elements of classical architecture, such as the column and pediment, appear on much American furniture in the eighteenth and early nineteenth century. Have students research the formal and symbolic importance of these elements on furniture of various styles and periods, particularly as they relate to the country's developing identity as a democratic nation.

4. See "Furniture: Form and Function" activity sheet in "Sample Lessons" section.