

YALE
UNIVERSITY
ART
GALLERY

GUIDES
TO
THE
COLLECTION

american
colonial
furniture



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CHAIR WALL

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AMERICAN COLONIAL FURNITURE GALLERIES

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AMERICAN PAINTINGS,
SCULPTURE,
AND DECORATIVE ARTS >

< TO TRUMBULL GALLERY

THIRD FLOOR >

BRANFORD ROOMS
ca. 1765

BRANFORD ROOMS
ca. 1765

INTRODUCTION

Welcome to the American Colonial Furniture Galleries at the Yale University Art Gallery. The majority of this collection was given to Yale in 1930 by Francis P. Garvan, B.A. 1897, in honor of his wife Mabel Brady Garvan. Since that time, the museum has expanded and diversified its holdings of furniture and other decorative arts made or used in America from the colonial period to the present.

This short guide presents a general introduction to the works on view. Each section of the guide, numbered 1 through 6, corresponds to a grouping of objects located within separate bays in the galleries. You may use the map to follow the exhibition sequentially or simply enter at any point along the way. A glossary of terms specific to decorative arts can be found on the last page of this guide.

DENNIS A. CARR

Due to occasional rotation of objects, some of the works described here may not be on view

- 1** LATE RENAISSANCE STYLE
- 2** REFINEMENT
- 3** NATURALISM AND EXOTICISM
- 4** PALLADIANISM
- 5** THE FLOURISHING OF ORNAMENT
- 6** CULTURAL DIVERSITY



1 LATE RENAISSANCE STYLE

During the course of the seventeenth century, colonial American furniture makers created a wide range of products that appealed to European notions of fashion and taste with which their customers were familiar. Many of these craftsmen were European immigrants or second-generation artisans adapting Old World furniture-making techniques to New World conditions. One of the most extraordinary examples of furniture to survive from this period is a chest of drawers with doors (figure 1) made in Boston about 1650–70. Most likely constructed by a London-trained master craftsman, the chest combines exotic woods from Central and South America and a variety of classical motifs. The range of materials and stylistic sophistication indicate the extent of mercantile trade achieved in Boston at an early date.

The style of seventeenth-century American furniture derives from Renaissance designs and can be considered part of the broader revival of classical architectural forms that first appeared in Italy in the fifteenth century and gradually spread to other areas of Europe and, later, to North America. A cupboard (figure 2) made between 1675 and 1690, attributed to Peter Blin, a joiner who worked in Wethersfield, Connecticut, has features of this late Renaissance style: a rectilinear facade with plain geometric panels, numerous applied classical ornaments, and flat relief carving. The stylized and abstracted images of sunflowers and thistles in the three lower panels are characteristic of furniture attributed to Blin and his shop.



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< JOINERY VS. TURNING

European-trained furniture makers of the seventeenth century typically worked in two modes: joinery and turning. The differences between these crafts are exemplified in two chairs: a joined, white oak Wainscot chair from Connecticut (figure 3) and a turned side chair from New Jersey (figure 4). The Wainscot chair, now the official chair of the President of Yale College, was probably made by a joiner in the Branford area. Its back is fashioned with mortise-and-tenon joints secured with wooden pegs. In contrast to the architectural denseness of joinery, the elements of chairs made by a turner using a lathe tend to be lighter and more visually expressive. Lathe turning allowed basic components of seating furniture, such as legs, stretchers, rails, and spindles, to be produced with greater rapidity and precision; standard shapes were easily repeated. The diminutive side chair with turnings typical of Northern European chair-making shows the cultural influence of the Dutch who settled areas in and around New York.



2

REFINEMENT

Changes in the courtly styles of England and the burgeoning international mercantile system caused a dramatic transformation in furniture making by the end of the seventeenth century. An English caned side chair (figure 5) from about 1700, owned by the Reverend James Pierpont in New Haven, provides an example of this new style being imported into the American colonies. Easy to transport because of its thin turnings and caned upholstery, this type of moderately priced English chair, itself based on Dutch antecedents, became popular with affluent American colonists. Such chairs, recorded in Boston inventories as early as the late 1680s, represent the Baroque style of furnishings associated with the court of William of Orange and Mary Stuart of England (1688–1702). Furniture made in this style featured attenuated forms, the use of curvaceous c-scrolls and

volute, and particularly the fanciful play of positive and negative space in sculptural forms. The Pierpont chair has extensive, finely turned elements and a double c-scroll crest rail whose outline is repeated in the front stretcher rail. Note how the chair's forms are echoed in the profile of the front skirt of the high chest of drawers (figure 6). This shape frames an area of theatrical space amidst the tall, ornately turned legs of the high chest.

During this period, cabinetmakers found ways to work with thinner boards and dovetail joints. This change in joinery techniques allowed for the expressive lightness of the Baroque style. Furniture was made more affordable through the use of less expensive materials in the construction of the basic form, which was then covered by a thin veneer of more rare and costly woods.



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Richly figured native woods like burl walnut and maple became popular as veneers and gave objects, such as the high chest of drawers, the showy surface gloss of aristocratic furniture.

The high-style domestic objects of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries responded to the desires of a more refined age, an age in which codified rules of civility, genteel manners, decorating, and entertaining took on even greater significance in everyday life. The introduction of new furniture forms, including slant-front desks, drop-leaf tables, and matching high chests and dressing tables (figure 7), signaled the popularization of new modes of writing, storing and displaying fine goods, and dining in the colonies.



5

CHAIR WALL

The chairs in this display represent a wide range of mid-market seating furniture produced in America during the eighteenth century. The New England banister-back armchair (figure 8) is a fine example of rural chairmaking. It has a fan-carved crest rail and parts made of readily available native woods—maple and ash—painted black. Another example is an ingenious writing-arm Windsor chair branded with the name of the Lisbon, Connecticut, chairmaker Ebenezer Tracy (figure 9). Windsor chairs were a ubiquitous form of utilitarian furniture for both domestic and institutional use, cheaper to construct because their turned spindles and legs could be mass-produced. They demonstrate a mastery of turning, carving, and bending of various types of wood.





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Even in a diminutive Windsor high chair (figure 10) intended for a baby or small child, the chairmaker achieved a remarkable thinness of materials and artistic design. Its delicate spindles and arms, carved crest rail, and boldly flaring legs rival those of the finest Windsor chairs attributed to Pennsylvania prior to the Revolution.

Stools were another inexpensive and widely used form of seating furniture in seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century America. They are often listed in period inventories as “joint stools.” The baluster-and-ring turnings on the legs of this stool (figure 11) relate to similar turnings of a staircase from a contemporary house in Newport, Rhode Island, indicating that craftsmen who made the turned elements of furniture probably also applied these skills to house carpentry.



3

NATURALISM AND EXOTICISM

By the second decade of the eighteenth century, the late Baroque style that had been popular in England since the late seventeenth century gradually made its way to the American colonies. Furniture of this period, sometimes referred to as “Queen Anne,” was inherently sculptural, rejecting the rectilinear forms of earlier styles. This new style began to break away from the confines of architectural space, pushing outward in all directions through the prevalent use of the s-curve. In his 1753 design treatise *The Analysis of Beauty*, the English artist William Hogarth codified the s-curve as his perfect “line of beauty” (figure 12).

Take as one example a Philadelphia side chair from about 1730 (figure 13). The gentle curve of the chair’s back conforms more sympathetically to the human spine than earlier seating furniture. Its front legs bulge outward in a graceful, almost

muscular way, as though poised to spring from their resting position and walk away. The basic form of the chair is inherently anthropomorphic: it has a back and shoulders, legs, knees, feet, and sometimes arms. Seating furniture long had this association, but in the early eighteenth century these parts began to assume much more overtly the forms of anatomy after which they are named (figure 14).

A 1732 bill from a Boston upholsterer for a set of chairs with “horsebone feet and banist[er] backs” gives contemporary names to the design ideas behind this style of seating furniture. Today we would understand the “horsebone” foot to be a cabriole leg. “Banister back” refers to the outline of the back support, or splat. The shape looks like the turned column of an architectural balustrade. Both the cabriole leg and the banister back can be

shoulder

stile

splat

slip seat

knee

cabriole leg

stretcher

pad foot

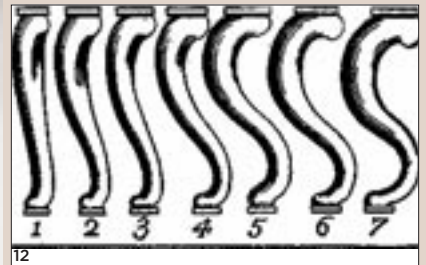
14



13



15



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seen in the back of a Boston side chair from 1730–60 (figure 14). Viewed another way, this splat could appear as the profile of a tall ceramic vase atop a pedestal.

Many scholars have also noted the striking visual similarity between furniture of the Baroque period and Chinese furniture from earlier centuries. Although specific examples of direct copying are difficult to come by, western trade with China began during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, and the popularity of Chinese goods had a dramatic impact on both European and colonial American designs and culture. Expensive, imported Chinese teas could be purchased in New England by 1690, and

by the 1730s and 1740s the price of this commodity was falling steadily, making it much more widely available throughout the colonies. The dramatic surge in the popularity of tea drinking brought small groups of people together around new forms of furniture designed specifically for this custom, such as tea tables (figure 15), china tables, and stands to hold urns for dispensing hot water.



4

PALLADIANISM

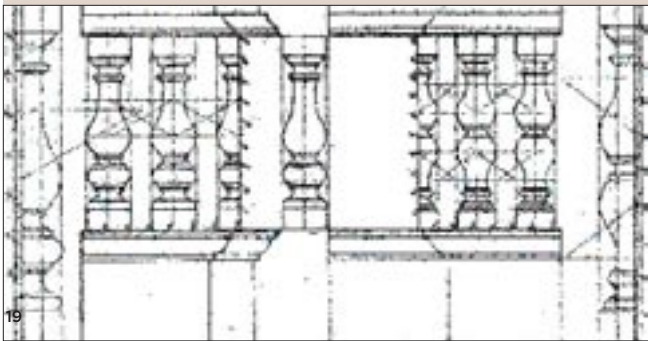
During the first few decades of the eighteenth century, architects and designers in England reacting against the prevailing Baroque style sought to return to the classicism of the Renaissance. This reinvigoration of interest in classicism began with the publishing of architectural design books, many of which were based closely on Renaissance design sources thought to contain more correct models of classical form and proportion. Among them was William Salmon's *Palladio Londinensis* published in London in 1734, a revision and translation of Andrea Palladio's Renaissance treatise, *Four Books of Architecture* (1570). Furniture inspired by Palladian architectural designs became popular in the American colonies in the second half of the eighteenth century. For example, the pediment of a cherry high chest of drawers, with a prominent pinecone finial, made after

the American Revolution in Preston, Connecticut (figure 16), was based on a pattern for a doorway in *Palladio Londinensis*, (figure 17), and suggests how a particular motif or idea remained fashionable in America long after first being introduced in England. The turned baluster pedestal of a mahogany tilt-top tea table from Newport, Rhode Island (1750–70) (figure 18), closely resembles the balustrade in Newport's Touro Synagogue (1763), which in turn is derived from a plate in James Gibbs's architectural design book, *Rules for Drawing* (1732) (figure 19).

Other objects in this section, while not descended as clearly from direct architectural sources, nonetheless contain elements of the classical style, including fluted columns, ogee bracket feet, and stylized niches (see figure 20).



18



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^ DESK AND BOOKCASE

With a scrolled pediment capped by urn finials, fluted quarter columns, and pronounced blocking, the desk-and-bookcase (figure 20) made in Newport, Rhode Island, displays the grand architectural character typical of late eighteenth-century American furniture design. One of the distinctive features of Rhode Island cabinet-making is that the blocking on the facade, a Baroque architectural conceit that first appeared in case furniture from Boston, is surmounted by exquisitely carved shell motifs that follow the same alternating convex and concave pattern.



5 THE FLOURISHING OF ORNAMENT

Furniture made in the American colonies from the middle to the last quarter of the eighteenth century retains the familiar curvaceous and architectural forms of previous furniture styles but overlays them with abundant ornamentation. This furniture has elements of the French Rococo style characterized by lush naturalistic designs, asymmetrical decoration, and sometimes eroticized imagery. This style is often called “Chippendale” in reference to the English designer Thomas Chippendale who published several versions of a highly influential book *The Gentleman and Cabinetmaker’s Director* beginning in 1754. This book served as a guide for both gentleman patrons and cabinetmakers who sought to stay current with ever-changing trends in style. Such English pattern books circulated in the American colonies. The splat and back of a side chair (figure 21) made in

Philadelphia between 1760 and 1780 demonstrates how an American craftsman subtly reinterpreted plate X of Chippendale’s book (figure 22).

To consider only the influence of Thomas Chippendale, however, would miss a wide range of other important regional differences in furniture designs in colonial America. A five-legged card table made in New York (figure 23) has a distinctive curvaceous form, heavy gadrooning around the lower edge of the skirt and crisply rendered knee carving. In another regional peculiarity, the unusual fifth leg of this card table swings out to support the hinged top when open. The table’s five cabriole legs terminate in large claw-and-ball feet, an exotic design that has unknown stylistic origins but may suggest extended talons clutching a pearl.

PHILADELPHIA HIGH CHEST >

The applied naturalistic ornamentation on the Philadelphia high chest suggests the work of a specialized carver. The most skilled carvers often worked for different cabinetmaking shops within the same city. The unidentified carver of the high chest is known simply as the "Garvan carver," named after the collector Francis P. Garvan, who gave the high chest to Yale in 1930.



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Other objects, such as the ornate high chest of drawers (figure 24), demonstrate the boldly three-dimensional carving that is a feature of high-style furniture made in America just prior to the Revolution. While much of the carved ornamentation is integral to its walnut case, such as the carving along the skirt and knees and the shell in the lower drawer, the carving on the face of the pediment was fashioned separately and then applied. These abundant naturalistic elements taken from a repertoire of classical designs, including acanthus leaves, vines and scallop shells, were popular motifs of the Rococo style.



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6

CULTURAL DIVERSITY

Significant pockets of non-British immigrant communities, the largest of which contained settlers of German, Dutch, and French heritage, contributed to the richness and complexity of furniture-making traditions in colonial North America. German immigrants settled predominantly in New York and Pennsylvania on sprawling agricultural lands in a number of tightly woven, religion-centered communities that preserved many of the folk traditions of the Old World. Popular in these rural counties were painted chests, a common storage form in Germany, which served often as dowries or wedding gifts. A group of these chests believed to have been made in the Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, area are distinguished by their lively, polychrome decoration of flowers and vases set within an arcade of applied arches and fluted pilasters. Written in chalk underneath the lid of one of these chests (figure 25) is the name of Caspar Hildebrand,

possibly the original owner, and on the front are painted the initials “C • B • H • B” and the date “1776.”

The massive New York kast (figure 26), with its wide projecting cornice, oversized ball feet, and intricate moldings, has features typical of Northern European cabinetmaking. The kast shares similar construction details with other kasten attributed to western Long Island, then known as Kings County. Family history states, however, that the owners of this kast were not of Dutch extraction, but rather were members of a prominent English Quaker family from neighboring Queens County. In that area of central Long Island, which was populated largely by English yeoman farmers and their families, the cultural influence of the original Dutch settlements in New York City remained present throughout the eighteenth century. Surviving objects like this kast speak to the mixing of different European cultures.



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▲ DOMESTIC STORAGE FURNITURE

During an era when built-in closets were rare in colonial American houses, a Dutch-style kast—with its combination of three shelves and one hanging drawer locked behind two paneled doors, as well as a long, visible drawer beneath—would have served as a secure place to store expensive linens and other precious objects, such as silver and ceramics. For household storage, German settlers preferred a similar form called a shrank, which had both shelves for folded items and pegs for hanging clothing, while the French named such furniture armoires. The English more often used large cupboards and later chests of drawers.



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At the extreme northern and southern ends of the American colonies, from eastern Canada to the lower Mississippi Valley and the city of New Orleans, French immigrant culture flourished. The French mastery of the decorative arts, long noted for its elegant craftsmanship and distinctive style, appears in examples of surviving furniture, such as the ornate armchair (figure 27) from Canada. In this chair, the delicate baluster-shaped and tapered arm supports are inset from the front legs. A diminutive child's chair (figure 28) from Louisiana has turned legs that taper at the bottom and splat designs and finials of a French style, but made on a smaller scale.

The Spanish Empire in North America vied for control of the lower Mississippi Valley with the French and dominated in the far West. In New Mexico, a tradition of making chests, or *cajas*, decorated with heraldic designs extended along the overland trade route stretching from the Spanish colonial capital in Mexico City. A pine chest (figure 29), with applied moldings and imagery of lions, rosettes, birds, and pomegranates carved in low relief, demonstrates the strong cultural, economic, and political influence of New Spain along its northern border.

LIST OF FIGURES

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Chest of Drawers with Doors
Boston, Massachusetts, 1650–70
White oak, red oak, chestnut, eastern white pine, soft maple, probably American black walnut, cedar, probably maple or cherry, beech, cedrela, snakewood, rosewood, lignum vitae
48 7/8 x 45 3/8 x 23 5/8 in.
Mabel Brady Garvan Collection
1930.2109
- Figure 2**
Possibly Peter Blin (d. 1725)
Cupboard
Wethersfield, Connecticut, 1675–90
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1930.2291
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30 11/16 x 13 x 13 3/8 in.
Library transfer
1969.52.2
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Mabel Brady Garvan Collection
1930.2197
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Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, 1700–30
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Mabel Brady Garvan Collection
1930.2056
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1955.33.3
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Gift of C. Sanford Bull, B.A. 1893
1949.245
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Detail of Plate from William Hogarth's *The Analysis of Beauty*, London, 1753.
Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University
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Side Chair
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, ca. 1730
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Lent by St. John's Episcopal Church, Stamford, Connecticut
ILE1933.117a
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Probably Boston, Massachusetts, 1730–60
American black walnut, soft maple
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Mabel Brady Garvan Collection
1930.2626e
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Tea Table
New York or Albany, New York, 1750–75
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Mabel Brady Garvan Collection
1930.2489
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Preston, Connecticut, 1770–90
Black cherry, birch, soft maple, chestnut, yellow-poplar, eastern white pine, oak
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Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University
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1940.320
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Mabel Brady Garvan Collection
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Louisiana, 1775–1825
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Mabel Brady Garvan Collection, by exchange
2000.90.1
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Chest
Rio Abajo area, New Mexico, 1775–1825
Pine (probably Ponderosa pine), iron
18 1/2 x 52 x 18 in.
Mabel Brady Garvan Collection, by exchange
2000.83.1

GLOSSARY OF TERMS

Acanthus leaf

Conventionalized representation of the scalloped, serrated leaves of the acanthus plant used in the decoration of Corinthian and Composite capitals and adapted as a classical decorative motif in furniture (see also gadrooning).

Baluster

Any one of the columnar elements set in a row that supports an upper railing, such as on a staircase (see figs. 4, 8, 18).

Blocking

An alternating convex and concave facade on case furniture, introduced into Boston during the 1730s and subsequently used on furniture made in other areas of New England (see fig. 20).

Cabriole leg

Rounded leg in the shape of a s-curve or cyma curve, introduced about 1700 in Europe, which takes its name from the French word for a dance step (see figs. 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 18, 21, 23, 24).

Caned chair

Chairs with backs and seats upholstered with woven strips of cane, a plant fiber exported from the West Indies (see fig. 5).

Card table

Table, typically with a folding top, used for playing card games (see fig. 23).

Chest of drawers

Type of case furniture with drawers for storing folded textiles and other domestic goods (see also high chest of drawers).

Claw-and-ball foot

Carved foot in the shape of a bird's or dragon's claw with extended talons clutching a ball or pearl (see figs. 16, 18, 21, 23, 24).

C-scroll

Ornamental scroll that curves in the shape of a "c" (see also s-curve).

Cupboard

Form of case furniture with doors that enclose an area for storage and horizontal shelves for the display of fine goods, such as silver, ceramics, glass, and textiles (see fig. 2).

Dovetail joint

Type of joint made when connecting two pieces of wood in which a series of flaring, projecting flanges at the end of one board fit into corresponding cutouts at the end of the other board.

Dressing table

Low case of drawers on legs, sometimes referred to in the late 19th and 20th centuries as a "lowboy," typically with one long, shallow drawer above two deeper drawers (see fig. 7).

Drop-leaf table

Table with a stationary top and one or two hinged leaves that extend its size when raised.

Ebonized

State of a furniture component made to look like exotic ebony, often by painting or staining the wood black (see figs. 1 and 2).

Finial

Carved or turned decorative element, usually located on a pediment, which projects upward (see fig. 4, 8, 16, 20, 24, 27, 28).

Fluting

Series of evenly spaced, vertical channels cut into a piece of wood, especially on the shaft of a classical column or pilaster (see figs. 20 and 25).

Gadrooning

Ornamental pattern of repeating convex and concave ridges on decorative moldings (see fig. 23).

High chest of drawers

Case furniture popular in the English tradition for storing textiles, sometimes called a "highboy," consisting of a lower case of drawers elevated on tall legs surmounted by another case of drawers and a pediment (see figs. 6, 16, 24).

Kast

Tall, Dutch-style cabinet often fitted with shelves and drawers for storing and displaying textiles, clothing and other decorative objects, such as silver and ceramics (see fig. 26).

Lathe

Machine for shaping a piece of wood, metal, etc., that is rotated between two axes against a stationary cutting tool.

Mortise-and-tenon joint

Joint made with a rectangular, projecting end (tenon) on one piece of wood that fits into a corresponding cutout (mortise) on another piece of wood; often a wooden pin is inserted through the entire joint for added strength (see figs. 1 and 2).

Ogee bracket foot

Foot made of two pieces of wood with profiles in the shape of a double or s-curve (see fig. 20).

Pad foot

Rounded foot set upon a disc, commonly the terminus of a cabriole or turned and tapered leg (see figs. 13, 14, 15).

S-curve

A double or cyma recta curve in the shape of an "s" formed by inverting two c-scrolls, specifically with the convex section over the concave.

Skirt

The lower edge of the front or side board on case furniture and table frames, often shaped, carved or otherwise decorated.

Slant-front desk

Also called a fall-front desk, in which the sloping lid of the upper portion, hinged at the bottom, can be lowered to provide a horizontal writing surface.

Tea table

Table for serving tea, usually with a lipped top either rectangular and supported by four legs or circular and attached to a central pillar with cabriole legs (see figs. 15 and 18).

Veneer

A thin layer of fine or exotic wood affixed to a less-expensive "secondary" wood (see fig. 6).

Volute

Scrolled or spiraled elements of Ionic or Composite capitals used also in furniture design. (see fig. 5)

Wainscot chair

A joined chair with a paneled back and plank seat (see fig. 3).

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P.O. Box 208271
New Haven, Connecticut
06520-8271

GALLERY INFORMATION
Recorded general and
program information
(203) 432-0600
Group and school tours
(203) 432-8479
<http://artgallery.yale.edu>

GALLERY HOURS
Tuesday through Saturday
10:00 am to 5:00 pm
Thursday until 8:00 pm
(September-June)
Sunday 1:00 to 6:00 pm
Closed Mondays and
major holidays

Dennis A. Carr is a Marcia Brady Tucker Graduate Curatorial Assistant at the Yale University Art gallery and a doctoral candidate in the history of art at Yale.

The Yale University encourages student-initiated projects. For more information, please visit <http://artgallery.yale.edu> or contact the Education Department at (203) 432-8459

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