

**ART AND INDUSTRY IN EARLY AMERICA: RHODE ISLAND FURNITURE, 1650–1830**

*Groundbreaking Survey of Rhode Island Furniture from the Colonial and Early Federal Periods*

August 19, 2016–January 8, 2017



Christopher Townsend, cabinetmaker, and Samuel Casey, silversmith, *Desk and Bookcase*, Newport, 1745–50. Mahogany (primary); sabicu(?) and mahogany (secondary); silver hardware. Private collection [RIF242]. Photo: Christopher Gardner

August 11, 2016, New Haven, Conn.—The Yale University Art Gallery is delighted to present the most comprehensive survey to date of colonial and early Federal-period furniture made in Rhode Island, including elaborately carved chairs, high chests, bureau tables, and clocks. The exhibition brings together more than 130 exceptional objects from museums, historical societies, and private collections across the country, highlighting major aesthetic innovations developed throughout the region. In addition to iconic, stylish pieces from important centers of production like Providence and Newport, the exhibition showcases simpler examples made in smaller towns—such as East Greenwich and Westerly—and for export. The exhibition also addresses the surprisingly broad reach of Rhode Island’s furniture production, from the boom of the export trade starting about 1740 and its steady growth throughout the 18th century to the gradual decline of the handcraft tradition in the 19th century. Showcasing over 100

pieces of furniture alongside paintings, silver, and other objects from the period, the exhibition is a tribute to the art and the industry of early American craftsmen.

**Exhibition Overview**

The dynamic and active cabinetmaking trade of colonial and Federal-period Rhode Island has intrigued scholars of American decorative arts for more than a century. Despite this considerable interest, however, there has not been a major survey on the subject since 1965. *Art and Industry in Early America: Rhode Island Furniture, 1650–1830* is the most complete survey of Rhode Island furniture ever assembled, including not only acknowledged masterpieces but also objects from areas that heretofore have received little scholarly attention. Drawing on more than a decade of research for the Rhode Island Furniture Archive ([rifa.art.yale.edu](http://rifa.art.yale.edu)), the exhibition has yielded exciting new discoveries, such as the identity of the maker of the Gallery’s magnificent desk and bookcase, now attributed to Daniel Spencer.

The Colony of Rhode Island was settled in 1636, after the Massachusetts Bay and Plymouth Colonies and at about the same time as the Connecticut Colony. An atmosphere of tolerance made Rhode Island a destination for Baptists, Quakers, Jews, and other religious sects that were treated

with hostility in Massachusetts. Since the colony was smaller than its neighbors, there was less 17th-century furniture made there, and even less of it survives. Following a chronological path, the exhibition begins with a few examples of early joined furniture from the Swansea, Massachusetts (now Warren, Rhode Island), area that feature geometric floral ornament specific to the region.



Edmund Townsend, *Bureau Table*, Newport, 1764. Blond mahogany (primary); yellow poplar (secondary). Private collection [RIF685]. Photo: Thomas R. DuBrock

Though previous scholars have identified some tables, stools, and banister-back chairs as having been made in Rhode Island between 1700 and 1740, case furniture—such as high chests and desks—and other types of chairs from this period have not been well understood. Thanks to the in-depth analysis of stylistic details, construction, and materials undertaken for the Rhode Island Furniture Archive, some veneered case pieces have been reattributed to the colony, thereby deepening the understanding of the early 18th-century furniture trade. High chests of drawers as well as desks with burl-veneered facades and vertical bands of inlay are on display alongside chairs whose legs feature the distinctive Rhode Island compressed ball turnings.

The period from 1740 to 1780 saw the golden age of furniture making in Rhode Island, centered in Newport and Providence. In Newport, the brothers Job and Christopher Townsend, their descendants, and their apprentices led the industry, a status made evident by objects such as the elaborate desk and bookcase by Christopher Townsend (1745–50), a highlight of the exhibition. During this period, Rhode Island furniture makers began carving shells, a classic element of Baroque design, out of dense mahogany with a voluptuousness and fluidity rarely matched. In marrying the shell motif to the block-front form, they created some of the great masterpieces of American furniture, such as the bureau table (1764) in the exhibition by Job Townsend's son, Edmund. This section of the installation brings together a few examples of Providence and Bristol, Rhode Island, furniture ornamented with compass-star inlay and light and dark stringing—decorative motifs usually associated with Massachusetts—as well as furniture by newly discovered makers from some of Rhode Island's smaller towns, including a curly maple high chest of drawers attributed to Amos Stafford, Jr., and most likely crafted in Coventry.

After the Revolution, Newport struggled to rebuild, having been occupied by the British during the war. Providence, which had not been occupied, came into its own during this period, with expanded trade and manufacturing. Rhode Island became the center of Windsor chairmaking in New England, producing spritely examples of this popular seating form on tall, tapering legs. Originally used as outdoor seating in English gardens, Windsor chairs became popular in the new nation as seating for civic spaces such as town halls and colony houses. Also on view are



*High-Back Windsor Armchair*, Newport, 1765–70. Maple and hickory (microanalysis). Winterthur Museum, Garden, and Library, Del., Bequest of Henry Francis du Pont, inv. no. 1959.1667 [RIF1240]. Photo: Courtesy of Winterthur Museum, Garden, and Library, Del.

examples of early Federal-period Rhode Island furniture, characterized by distinctive pictorial inlay patterns, such as bellflowers and paterae, on tables and case pieces. A card table attributed to James Halyburton and made in Warren, for instance, depicts a beautiful floral pattern along its skirt and upper legs. After 1805, Rhode Island furniture makers, influenced by the designs of English cabinet-maker and designer Thomas Sheraton, moved away from these pictorial inlays, instead using contrasting veneers and turned reeded or fluted legs to ornament their objects.

In the early to mid-19th century, Rhode Island furniture was more directly inspired by that of Boston and New York, whose rising influence would eventually eclipse the craft and business of cabinetmaking in Rhode Island. However, for more than a century, Rhode Island craftsmen produced objects that combined artistry and industry, design and engineering. Their furniture graced the homes of early America, from the grand to the humble, and was shipped to ports both near and far, fueling Rhode Island's commercial economy and the network of Atlantic trade.

To better elucidate the craft and artistry that went into making these varied furniture forms, *Art and Industry in Early America* features several videos that demonstrate how Rhode Island furniture was made. The videos show contemporary craftsmen making a banister-back chair; carving a reproduction of a 17th-century wainscot chair; and demonstrating



Attributed to James Halyburton, *Card Table* (detail), Warren, Rhode Island, 1795-1800. Mahogany, mahogany veneer, and light and dark wood inlay (primary); maple and pine (secondary). Museum of Art, Rhode Island School of Design, Providence, Peter and Daphne Farago Purchase Fund, inv. no. 1986.120 [RIF4259]. Photo: Courtesy Museum of Art, Rhode Island School of Design, Providence, photo Eric Gould

techniques for creating various types of ornamentation and construction, including claw-and-ball feet, shells, and dovetail joints. Interpretive materials reveal secret compartments and makers' marks. A musical tall case clock, created by Thomas Claggett around 1775 and recently restored to working order, melodiously marks the hour.

Programming for the exhibition features a robust series of lectures and gallery talks on topics ranging from Native American life in colonial Rhode Island to religious freedom and slavery in colonial Newport, and from French influence on furniture style to contemporary furniture making in the state. Highlights also include a performance of period music by the Yale Collegium Musicum, a furniture-making demonstration by master cabinetmaker Allan Breed, and the Oswaldo Rodriguez Roque Memorial Lecture and Symposium, on September 15-16, 2016.

"*Art and Industry in Early America* is the culmination of more than a decade of research conducted by the Gallery under the direction of Patricia E. Kane, Friends of American Arts Curator of American Decorative Arts, whose scholarship and dedication to the project have made this exhibition and publication possible," explains Jock Reynolds, the Henry J. Heinz II Director. "This landmark study has shown that there are many new insights into this important school of American furniture making still to be gained through the reexamination of surviving objects and the careful combing of the historical record."

"It is very exciting to see this long-awaited exhibition come together," states Kane. "It's our hope that *Art and Industry* will inspire a newfound appreciation for one of the most important schools of furniture making in early America." Visitors can marvel at the majestic simplicity of some objects, the elegant intricacies of others, and the fine craftsmanship of all.

## **Exhibition Credit**

Exhibition organized by Patricia E. Kane, Friends of American Arts Curator of American Decorative Arts. Made possible by generous support from an anonymous donor; Lulu C. and Anthony W. Wang, B.A. 1965; Jeanie Kilroy Wilson; Jane P. Watkins, M.P.H. 1979, and Helen D. Buchanan; and the Henry Luce Foundation. Additional support provided by Jerald Dillon Fessenden, B.A. 1960; Judith and John Herdeg; Sarah Jeffords Radcliffe; Gayle and Howard Rothman; the National Endowment for the Arts; the Wunsch Americana Foundation; the Friends of American Arts at Yale Exhibition and Publication Funds; and the David and Rosalee McCullough Fund.

## **On View**

August 19, 2016–January 8, 2017

## **Related Programs**

### **Exhibition Tours**

Tuesdays, September 13, October 11, November 8, and December 6, 12:30 pm

### **Lectures**

Friday, September 30, 1:30 pm

“Friendship, Enslavement, and Persistence: Indigenous Relations with the ‘Wautaconâuog-Coatmen’ (Colonists) in Rhode Island, 1636–1776”

Charlotte Carrington-Farmer, Assistant Professor of History, Roger Williams University, Bristol, Rhode Island

Sunday, October 9, 3:00 pm

“American Irony: Religious Freedom and Slavery in Colonial Newport”

Keith Stokes, Vice President of 1696 Heritage Group

Sunday, November 6, 3:00 pm

“‘To Bigotry No Sanction’: Acceptance and Assimilation in the 18th-Century Jewish Communities of Newport and Charleston”

Daniel K. Ackermann, Curator of the Museum of Early Southern Decorative Arts, Winston-Salem, North Carolina

### **Symposium**

Oswaldo Rodriguez Roque Memorial Lecture and Symposium

“Art and Industry in Early America: Rhode Island Furniture, 1650–1830”

Thursday, September 15, 5:30 pm

Keynote Lecture: “Studying American Furniture in the Present”

Philip D. Zimmerman, museum and decorative arts consultant

Friday, September 16, 9:00 am-4:00 pm

Registration is required for the symposium on Friday; for more information, visit [artgallery.yale.edu/furniture-symposium](http://artgallery.yale.edu/furniture-symposium).

### **Furniture Study Tours**

“Focus on Rhode Island Furniture”

Fridays, September 2, November 4, December 2, and January 6, 12:30 pm

### **Gallery Talks**

Wednesday, October 5, 12:30 pm

“French Connections in Rhode Island Furniture”

Philippe Halbert, Ph.D. candidate, Department of the History of Art, Yale University

Wednesday, October 26, 12:30 pm

“Details of the Works of Newport’s Cabinetmakers”

Jeffrey Greene, furniture maker and independent researcher

Wednesday, November 30, 12:30 pm

“Contemporary Rhode Island Furniture”

John Stuart Gordon, the Benjamin Attmore Hewitt Associate Curator of American Decorative Arts, Yale University Art Gallery

### **Performance**

Thursday, October 13, 5:30 pm

“New England’s Annoyances: American Music from the Founding of the Colonies to the Federalist Debates”

Yale Collegium Musicum

### **Studio Programs**

Friday, October 7, 12:30 and 2:00 pm

“Shaping Block-Front Furniture”

Allan Breed, master cabinetmaker

Registration required; call 203.432.9525.

All programs are free and open to the public unless otherwise noted. Space is strictly limited for the exhibition tours, gallery talks, furniture study tours, and studio programs. For more detailed programming information, visit [artgallery.yale.edu/calendar](http://artgallery.yale.edu/calendar).

## **Related Publication**

*Art and Industry in Early America: Rhode Island Furniture, 1650–1830*

Patricia E. Kane

With Dennis Carr, Nancy Goynes Evans, Jennifer N. Johnson, and Gary R. Sullivan

The most comprehensive publication available to date on the topic, *Art and Industry in Early America* examines furniture made throughout Rhode Island from the earliest days of the settlement to the late Federal period. This stunning volume features nearly 400 illustrations of beautifully constructed and carved objects—including chairs, high chests, bureau tables, and clocks—that demonstrate the superb workmanship and artistic skill of the state’s furniture makers. Written by distinguished scholars, the book presents new information on the export trade, patronage, artistic collaboration, and small-scale shop traditions that defined early Rhode Island craftsmanship. In addition to iconic, stylish pieces from important centers of production like Newport and Providence and by well-known makers such as John Goddard and Samuel and Joseph Rawson, Jr., the catalogue showcases simpler examples made in smaller towns. More than 100 catalogue entries detail marks and inscriptions, bibliography, and provenance and feature many new photographs, encouraging a deeper understanding of this dynamic school of American furniture making.

508 pages / 9¼ × 12 inches / 392 color illustrations / Available September 2016

## **Rhode Island Furniture Archive**

Conceived in 2002 and launched in 2010, the Rhode Island Furniture Archive ([rifa.art.yale.edu](http://rifa.art.yale.edu)) documents furniture and furniture making in Rhode Island from the time of the first European colonization in 1636 through the early 19th century. Bringing together records of surviving furniture, individuals who owned it, and known furniture makers, this archive aims to provide a complete account of the specific culture, local variations, and artistic practices surrounding the first two centuries of furniture making in Rhode Island. Archive researchers have drawn on existing scholarly resources, secondary literature, and commercial publications to locate surviving examples of Rhode Island furniture and catalogue object details, such as maker, geography, and inscriptions, as well as provenance, construction notes, and bibliography. Select makers’ biographies round out this comprehensive database. Research is ongoing and the database continues to be updated; currently available for searching are more than 1,800 makers and 5,000 examples of beds, case furniture, clocks, looking glasses, seating furniture, and tables.

## **Yale University Art Gallery**

The Yale University Art Gallery, the oldest college art museum in the United States, was founded in 1832 when the patriot-artist John Trumbull gave more than 100 of his paintings to Yale College. Since then its collections have grown to more than 200,000 objects ranging in date from ancient times to the present.

## **General Information**

The Yale University Art Gallery is located at 1111 Chapel Street, New Haven, Connecticut. Museum hours: Tuesday–Friday, 10 am–5 pm; Thursday until 8 pm (September–June); and Saturday–Sunday,

11 am-5 pm. The Gallery is closed Mondays and major holidays. Free and open to the public. For general information, please call 203.432.0600 or visit the website at [artgallery.yale.edu](http://artgallery.yale.edu).

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