# *sella curulis*

ANCIENT DESIGN
IN AMERICAN FEDERAL FURNITURE

DAVID L. BARQUIST
ETHAN W. LASSER

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*Contents*

## *Acknowledgments*

Knowledge of ancient Greece and Rome was a cornerstone of American education from the beginnings of European settlement. Three centuries ago, the Yale College curriculum required students to be examined in Greek and Latin and to demonstrate a familiarity with ancient history and philosophy. The present exhibition takes a closer look at one manifestation of this fascination with antiquity: seating furniture that followed the design of the Roman *sella curulis*. As the following essay explains, in the early years of the nineteenth century such chairs held a special appeal for the wealthy citizens of the new American nation.

Ethan W. Lasser, a graduate student in the History of Art at Yale and Henry S. McNeil Graduate Research Assistant at the Art Gallery, undertook this exhibition as an independent study with David L. Barquist, Acting Curator of American Decorative Arts. Such collaborations between students and curators are central to the Art Gallery's mission to serve as a meeting place for objects and ideas. Ethan has done an exemplary job of researching the topic and writing the essay and wall labels. Thanks are due to David for his organization and oversight of this project. Patricia E. Kane, Friends of American Arts Curator of American Decorative Arts, reviewed the catalogue and provided many helpful suggestions along the way. We also thank our colleague Edward S. Cooke, Jr., who serves as Chair of the History of Art Department as well as Charles F. Montgomery Professor of American Decorative Arts, for his enthusiastic support and the commitment of departmental funds in support of Ethan's research and travel expenses. The Matrix Gallery in the American arts galleries is dedicated to the realization of these collaborations. The Friends of American Arts at Yale and an endowment created with a challenge grant from the National Endowment for the Arts covered the costs of this exhibition. We are deeply grateful to the Friends of American Arts for their continuing support of exhibitions and projects in American art. A symposium organized in conjunction with this exhibition has been made possible by The Martin A. Ryerson Lectureship Fund.

In spite of its small scale, this exhibition draws on objects from several Yale collections and the expertise of many Yale staff. Three coins come from the Numismatic Collection, now part of the Art Gallery and under the care of Curator of Coins and Medals William E. Metcalf, Jr., who helped locate appropriate coins and offered his expertise on the ancient world. An outstanding Renaissance drawing is from the Department of Prints, Drawings, and Photographs, and Curator Suzanne Boorsch, Assistant Curator Elisabeth Hodermarsky, and Florence B. Selden Curatorial Fellow John A. Marciari were enthusiastic in sharing both the drawing for the exhibition and information for the catalogue. Three important British design books have been generously lent across Chapel Street by the Yale Center for British Art, and we wish to thank Director Amy Meyers, Curator of Rare Books and Archives Elisabeth Fairman, Chief Conservator Theresa Fairbanks-Harris, and Registrar Timothy Goodhue and their staffs for their unhesitating participation.

We have enriched this showing of treasures from inside Yale with a few important loans. We are deeply grateful to Linda Kaufman for lending a rare chair and settee from the extraordinary collection she has assembled with her late husband, George, and for their long-term support and enthusiasm for the Art Gallery, its collections, and its programs. Another significant chair was lent by The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, and we thank Peter M. Kenny, Curator of American Decorative Arts and Administrator of the American Wing, for his enthusiastic participation.

Many other colleagues assisted with the research and organization for this project. We are deeply grateful to Carswell Rush Berlin, Betty Cloud, Beatrice B. Garvan, Joe Hannan, and Philip D. Zimmerman; Charles Lyle and Yvonne Beldotti, Boscobel Restoration, Garrison-on-Hudson, New York; Gail Serfaty, Diplomatic Reception Rooms, U.S. Department of State, Washington, D.C.; Deborah Dependahl Waters, Museum of the City of New York; Andrew Holter, Sotheby's; Suzanne Savery and Elise Wright, Valentine Museum of History, Richmond, Virginia; William G. Allman, The White House, Washington, D.C.; and Wendy A. Cooper, H. F. du Pont Winterthur Museum, Delaware.

Even modest exhibitions require the professional assistance of many of our colleagues at the Art Gallery. We particularly wish to thank Louisa Cunningham and Charlene Senical in the Business Office; John ffrench, Janet Zullo, Alex Contreras, and Susan Cole in Digitization; Clarkson Crolius, Susan Kiss, Richard Miller, and David Norris in Installations; Lesley Tucker and Jennifer Sher in Graphic Design; Associate Registrar L. Lynne Addison, Associate Curator of Academic Initiatives Ellen Alvord, Deputy Director of Programs and External Affairs Anna Hammond, Programs Coordinator Elizabeth Harnett, Events Coordinator Laurie Laliberte, Director of Public Information Marie Weltzien, and Museum Store Manager Howard el-Yasin. Katherine Chabla, Museum Assistant in the Mabel B. Garvan Furniture Study, provided stalwart support for every aspect of this exhibition. Nancy Yates, Janet Miller, Jeanne Davis, Sonia von Gutfeld, Virginie Marier, and Lynn Winningham in the American Arts department readily offered their able assistance.

The Art Gallery is pleased to be able to provide this focused examination of one form of American seating furniture from the early years of the new nation. The diverse objects in this exhibition reveal how one design idea can continue to fascinate designers, craftsmen, patrons, and the public for more than two thousand years.

Jock Reynolds
The Henry J. Heinz II Director
Yale University Art Gallery

ETHAN W. LASSER

# *From the Roman Forum to New York Mansions: Revivals of the Curule Base*

In the early years of the nineteenth century, Americans became fascinated with the cultures of ancient Greece and Rome. Across the cities of the young nation, both the history and the material vestiges of the classical world were studied and collected with curiosity and enthusiasm. In the arts, the American penchant for ancient civilization was manifest in a new Classical Revival style. This artistic turn to the past relied on European design books that compiled the architecture, ceramics, furniture, and painting of Greece and Rome for its source material and inspiration. These design books began to be published in the mid-eighteenth century, when English and French artists and scholars advocated a taste for the antique and brought the forms and aesthetics of the classical world into wide currency in Europe and, later, the United States.

The early-nineteenth-century seating furniture in the present exhibition offers a case study in this transfer of ancient styles from the Old World to the New. The overlapping, S-curved legs or curule bases common to all of these objects derive from the European revival of the *sella curulis*, a folding stool with identically shaped legs that hails from sixth-century-B.C. Rome.[1] The early-nineteenth-century curule base's clear connection to this classical prototype distinguishes it as one of the most accurate reproductions of an ancient design among all of the American furniture produced in the Classical Revival style. Yet, the passage of the curule base from ancient Rome to the style centers of eighteenth-century Europe and then to the United States was by no means direct. The S-curved legs of the *sella curulis* had endured and evolved through some twenty-four centuries of furniture history—from roughly 500 B.C. to 1740—before their ancient associations resurfaced in London, Paris, Salem, and New York.

Past interpretations of early-nineteenth-century American decorative arts have considered curule-based seating furniture within the larger context of the Classical Revival. Charles Cornelius first published the New York version of the form in his 1922 study *Furniture Masterpieces of Duncan Phyfe*. Cornelius described the curule base as an example of the

"Empire influence" at work in the United States around 1800. The term "curule" was actually not used to describe the New York furniture until 1939, when Nancy McClelland's *Duncan Phyfe and the English Regency* compared the form to ancient objects from Pompeii used by Europeans like the "Adam brothers, Sheraton, and the French ébénistes" as models for their designs. The connection McClelland made between the American curule base and the period's European furniture was further developed in Charles Montgomery's 1966 text *American Furniture: The Federal Period.* Montgomery added the French furniture designer Pierre de la Mésangère, the English furniture designers George Smith and Thomas Hope, and the *Supplement to the London Chair-Makers' and Carvers' Book of Prices for Workmanship* to McClelland's list of European sources for the American design. In her 1993 catalogue for the *Classical Taste in America* exhibition at the Baltimore Museum of Art, Wendy Cooper noted that the Englishman Charles Heathcote Tatham published an ancient *sella curulis* in his *Etchings of Ancient Ornamental Architecture* of 1799 (fig. 1, cat. 5). This text was an important source of classical forms for the European furniture designers of the early-nineteenth century.[2]

While enormously valuable to the study of furniture, these larger-scale surveys of the Classical Revival have not focused specifically on the curule base. As such, the history of the form is composed of only a small constellation of European design sources, which do not fully represent its passage from sixth-century-B.C. Rome to the early-nineteenth-century United States. The following essay will attempt to chart this long history by focusing on curule-based seating furniture exclusively. In part one, a variety of extant objects and published sources, including furniture-design books and records of ancient monuments, will be examined to understand the course of the curule base's progression from the ruins of ancient Rome into the minds of the cabinetmakers and consumers of Europe and America. This history of the form's revival will lay the foundation for the second part of the essay, which will consider the curule-based seating furniture produced in New York within its larger historical context and assess the meaning of the taste for the form in the early-nineteenth-century United States.

PART I

## *Objects, Artifacts and Furniture-Design Books: Tracking the Revival of the Curule Base*

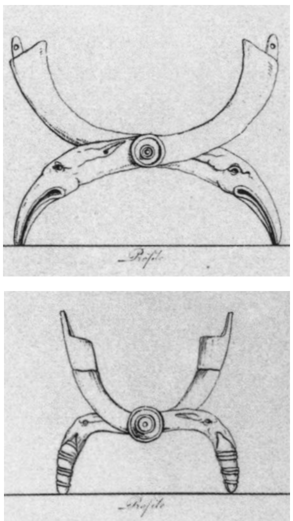


**Fig. 1**
Charles Heathcote Tatham (1772–1842). "Antique Seats executed in Bronze from the Collection in the Museum at Portici," (details) 1799, from *Etchings Representing the Best Examples of Grecian and Roman Ornament*, London, 1826. Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection

In order to fully understand the history of the curule base's revival, one must begin by considering the form and function of the *sella curulis* in ancient Rome. The two stools illustrated in Tatham's 1799 *Etchings of Ancient Ornamental Architecture* are the earliest extant examples of the form (fig. 1, cat. 5).[3] These objects were owned in Herculaneum in the first century A.D. and subsequently unearthed in the excavations of the ancient city that followed from its discovery in 1738. As Tatham's illustration suggests, each side of the stools is composed of two overlapping S-curved legs that meet the floor in a pair of animal-inspired feet, whose form mimics an elephant's head in one case and a griffin's head in the other. These legs are made of bronze and are hinged together by a long pin that extends back from the large, circular disc placed over the point where they intersect.[4] This construction allows each pair of legs to fold together and makes the object portable.

In today's world, portable folding chairs are the stuff of backyard decks and beach picnics, whereas in ancient Rome, the *sella curulis* was an important and highly symbolic political object. The Romans believed they had taken over the form from the Etruscan ruling classes and took advantage of this historical precedent to define the *sella curulis* as a "seat of honor," whose use was restricted to the magistrates who presided over the Republic. These men, appropriately named the *magistratus curules*, deployed the *sella curulis* in public ceremonies at venues like the Roman Forum, where their exclusive connection to the form earned them an authority befitting their station in the ruling hierarchy of Rome.[5] In 44 B.C., for example, Julius Caesar commemorated his appointment to the dictatorship of Rome with a golden *sella curulis* whose design and material "bestowed on Caesar . . . honors too great for mortal man," as one observer from the period would later note.[6]

The hierarchical connotation of the *sella curulis* was further developed through images of the form on coins, gems, monuments, reliefs, and wall

**Fig. 2**
Attributed to the Paoletti Brothers. Impression of an ancient intaglio, Rome, c. 1800–11. Plaster with paper mount. Boston Athenaeum; Gift of Samuel Elam, Newport, and the Hon. Richard Sullivan, Boston, 1811

paintings paying tribute to the various *magistratus curules*. These objects not only brought the *sella curulis* and its users into widespread currency across the Roman Republic, but also presented the design of the form to eighteenth-century Europeans and Americans who collected ancient coins and gems (fig. 2). Despite their presence in the United States, these artifacts probably had little direct influence on the design of the curule-based seating furniture produced in Salem and New York. Instead, the revival of the form was in large part determined by its *survival* in the furniture vocabulary of the Western world.

The distinctive, overlapping S-curves of the curule base did not disappear after the fifth-century-A.D. fall of Rome. The form began to lose its association with the ancient past at the outset of the Middle Ages, when the design of the curule base changed. The seventh-century Throne of Dagobert offers an early example of the new, declassicized version of the curule base.[7] Most likely produced in France for Dagobert I, who ruled the Frankish Kingdom from 622 to 638, the Dagobert Throne is an armchair with four vertical legs that extend down to the floor from each corner. Within these legs, the curule base remains intact, although the form has been shifted from the sides of the object to its front and back. This modified vestige of the ancient design allows the throne to fold together on a side-to-side axis versus the front-to-back axis upon which the *sella curulis* had folded together. Given this alteration, as well as the lack of classical ornament on the throne, it is possible that the artisan who built the object employed the curule base as a structural solution, rather than as an allusion to the grand civilization of the past. However, as the throne for the ruler of the Frankish Kingdom, the authoritative political stature of the *sella curulis* was retained at the same time the correct design of the ancient form was lost.

In the late-thirteenth century, the Catholic Church appropriated the modified design of the *sella curulis* that developed around the time of the Dagobert Throne. The Latin word *faldistorium* was coined by the late-thirteenth-century French scholar and bishop Guillame Durand to describe this form, which "designated the spiritual jurisdiction connected with the pontifical authority."[8] As Durand's language suggests, the curule base retained its age-old hierarchical significance under the Christian establishment, despite its new religious affiliation. In its design, the curule base was returned to the stool in the late-thirteenth century after having been deployed on armchairs like the Dagobert Throne.[9] The placement of the curule base on the front and back of the *faldistorium*, as well as the crosses that were carved into many of these stools as ornament, suggest, however, that the object's reference to the design of the classical prototype was formal rather than symbolic. By the thirteenth century, the ancient associations of the curule base had faded away, even as the design of the *sella curulis* survived with only slight modification.

But these ancient associations were soon recovered. During the Renaissance, Italian archaeologists unearthed extensive Roman artifacts, including small-scale circulating objects like gems and coins decorated with representations of the *sella curulis*.[10] The spirit of intellectual curiosity toward the classical past that dominated the Renaissance mind brought these representations into popular currency. Images of the curule base surface in the scenes from antiquity painted by mid-sixteenth-century Italian masters like Michelangelo, Raphael, and Giulio Romano.[11] In Giulio Romano's 1530–34 drawing *Gaius Marcius Coriolanus Discovered among the Volscians*, for example, a curule-based armchair is pictured at the center of the composition as the seat of Coriolanus, an early-fifth-century-B.C. Roman general (cat. 4). Though the position of the curule base in this image on the front and back of an armchair makes Romano's rendition of the form closer to the design of the Dagobert Throne than to that of the ancient Roman stool, its setting amid the plumed helmets and leather sandals of Volscian soldiers and its prominence in an illustration of a well-known ancient character clearly attest to the revived classical associations of the curule base that followed from the Renaissance archaeological finds.

During the period of this drawing, Renaissance furniture makers and designers were inspired by the *sella curulis*. In an armchair produced in

Venice in 1550, for example, the curule base was aligned with the front and back in keeping with the thirteenth-century design, but the cross iconography of the *faldistorium* was replaced by classical gadrooning.[12] In the context of the curule base's appearance in images of antiquity, the Renaissance revival of the form seems to have consciously reconnected it to its ancient associations. This speculation is confirmed by the work of late-sixteenth-century furniture designers, who adhered more closely to the design of the *sella curulis*. Two design books from this period, *Differents pourtraicts de menusiere*, compiled by Hans Vredeman de Vries of Flanders in 1580, and *Architectura: Lehr und Kunstbuch Allerhant Portalen*, compiled by Johann Ebelmann of Strasbourg in 1599, illustrate chairs with the curule base on the sides, in keeping with the accurate classical design.[13]

After the sixteenth century, the taste for the *sella curulis* in Europe waned, as the Baroque and Rococo placed less emphasis on the classicism that was central to the Renaissance mind. By the eighteenth century, however, a renewed surge of interest in the ancient world began to sweep through Europe. The advent of the Grand Tour for English travelers in the eighteenth century, as well as the discovery of Herculaneum in 1738 and Pompeii ten years later, laid the foundation for a second classical revival. In this revival, the ancient associations of the curule base were largely recovered through published sources. Initially, the form was illustrated in European texts compiling the classical artifacts unearthed at Herculaneum and Pompeii. It appeared in the very first publication of the excavations at Herculaneum, the 1738 *Picturae antiquae*, which showed an image of a *sella curulis* on a newly discovered wall painting, and continued to appear in later records of the archaeological finds.[14] In 1762, the Italian architect and engraver Giovanni Battista Piranesi's *Le antichità di Albano* illustrated a Roman monument on which a curule-based stool is sculpted in relief. The Accademia Ercolanese, an institution devoted to researching the excavations at Herculaneum, published an illustration of a fresco from the city with an image of the form in *Le antichità di Ercolano* of 1757. Soon after the images in these texts were published, the *sella curulis* was illustrated in studies detailing private collections of ancient artifacts. In 1764, the eminent German art historian Johann Winckelmann illustrated a gem from the Stosch Collection with a figure seated on a *sella curulis*,

**Fig. 3**
Title page detail from Johann Joachim Winckelmann (1717–1768), *Geschichte der Kunst des Alterthums*, vol. I, Dresden, 1764. Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University

in the frontispiece to his text *Geschichte der Kunst des Alterthums* (fig. 3); two years later, the French antiquarian Baron d'Hancarville, in his compilation of the noted English collector Sir William Hamilton's Greek vases and other artifacts, *Antiquités étrusque, grecques et romaines* pictured a relief decorated with a curule-based stool.[15] These publications brought the Roman sources of the curule base to the attention of a wide European audience, although the lack of specific focus on the *sella curulis* in their written explanations suggests scholars had only limited interest in the form in the mid-eighteenth century.

But the *sella curulis* soon emerged as an object of interest in its own right. By the late 1760s, the form began to be illustrated independently. The French scholar Comte de Caylus devoted a single plate to the curule-based stool with distinctive elephant-head feet unearthed at Herculaneum in his 1767 text, *Recueil d'antiquités*. Caylus even captioned this image with a short description that correctly noted the *sella curulis*'s original use "dans la Forum."[16] Caylus's publication of the Herculaneum stool seems to have been a significant and immediate force behind the second revival of the curule base's Roman source. Several classically styled objects that were loosely based on the stools he illustrated surfaced in late-eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century France. In 1777, for example, the Parisian designer Jean-Démosthène Dugourc designed a side chair with the curule base on the sides in keeping with the ancient design, and then produced an armchair with the curule base on the front and back.[17] The bold, classically inspired, acanthus-leaf design on the backsplat of the latter object reinforced the classical associations of the form, despite the placement of the curule base on the front and back of the chair. This medieval variation figured into other French examples of the form as well, including a stool built by P. Marcion around 1800 that otherwise preserved the form of the stool Caylus depicted.[18] After the turn of the nineteenth century, images of the curule base began to be published in French furniture-design books. In 1802, two published sources, *Collection de meubles et objets de goût* by Pierre de la Mésangère and *Recueil de décorations intérieurs* by Charles Percier and Pierre-François-Léonard Fontaine, illustrated stools that feature the curule base on the sides.[19] Though these designs adhere to the form of the ancient *sella curulis*, the variation in the position of the curule base among the extant objects by Dugourc and Marcion suggests an eclectic approach to the French revival of the ancient form.

The revival of the *sella curulis* in late-eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century France is not surprising. In this period, the country was saturated in *le goût grec*, a taste for the ancient world that had developed in reaction to the extravagancies of the Rococo in the 1730s. This taste was further promoted during the reign of Napoleon, who was fond of using classically styled objects to legitimatize his own imperial authority. The *sella curulis* was prominent among these objects and figures in both the boosterish imagery of Napoleon's empire and the furniture commissioned for his palaces. In 1803, for example, a medal commemorating the first awarding of the Légion d'Honneur recognizing service to the state showed Napoleon seated on a curule-based stool designed in the ancient manner.[20] Later, in 1805, Napoleon commissioned a similar object from the Parisian furniture maker Jacob Desmalter. The S-curved legs on this stool were decorated to look like sabers, which were then the primary weapon of the leaders in the French military.[21] This iconography suggests Napoleon was attracted to the

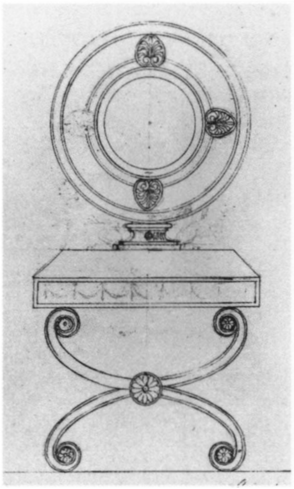


**Fig. 4**
Robert Adam (1728–1792). Design for a hall chair for Sir Abraham Hume (detail), London, 1778. Pen and ink. By courtesy of the Trustees of Sir John Soane's Museum, London

status connotations of the ancient form. The emperor may have learned about these connotations, as well as the curule base's ancient function as an emblem of political authority, in Livy's *History of Ancient Rome*, which frequently mentions the *sella curulis* (see cats. 1–3). In a general sense, Napoleon's references to the ancient curule base show that not only the form but also the function of the *sella curulis* was restored in the early-nineteenth century.

In Britain, the revived *sella curulis* surfaced a year after Dugourc designed his chairs, in 1778, when the English furniture designer and architect Robert Adam sketched an acanthus-leaf-decorated side chair with the curule base on the front and back (fig. 4) in a design for Sir Abraham Hume, whose Hill Street home in London he decorated.[22] Later, in 1800, Thomas Hope, the gentleman turned proponent of the Neoclassical style, commissioned a curule-based stool with the legs on the front and back for his home on Duchess Street.[23] During this period, the form also surfaced on the outskirts of London. The chairmaker William Webb of Newington illustrated a Windsor chair with a curule base on his trade card from 1795 (fig. 5).[24]

As in France, these British objects coexisted with a number of published sources that featured examples of the curule base. Interestingly, the form seems to have first surfaced in eighteenth-century England in a volume that had nothing to do with furniture design. In 1793, the artist John Flaxman illustrated Alexander Pope's translation of Homer's *The Iliad* and pictured several curule-based stools (fig. 6).[25] The form of these objects, which feature the S-curved legs on the front and back, was not rendered in keeping with the ancient prototype. However, the stools are occupied by deities, who sit as their subordinates stand around them, and thus adhere to the authoritative function of the *sella curulis*. It was not until 1799, when Tatham published the Herculaneum stool with the curule base on the sides, that English cabinetmakers and designers were offered a more accurate image of the form.

Not long after Tatham's image was published, the curule base appeared in a number of English furniture-design books. In 1803, the English designer Thomas Sheraton illustrated three chairs with the curule base on the front and back in *The Cabinet Dictionary*. Thomas Hope pictured five interiors decorated with similarly designed curule-base chairs and stools in his 1807


**Fig. 5**
Trade card for William Webb (active 1779–1811), Newington, London, c. 1795. Etching. The British Museum, London, Banks Collection

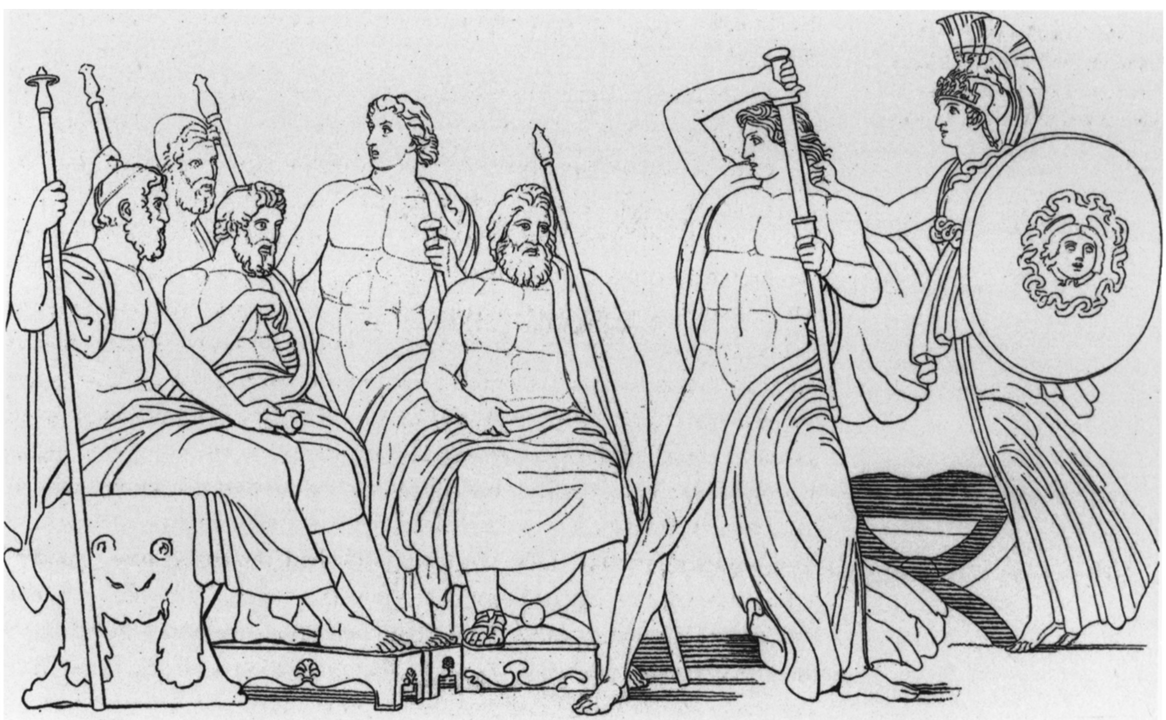


**Fig. 6**
John Flaxman (1755–1826). "Minerva Repressing the Fury of Achilles," 1793, from Homer, *The Iliad*, translated by Alexander Pope, London, 1805. Art and Architecture Collection, Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Division of Art, Prints and Photographs, The New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations

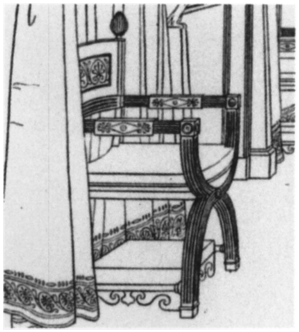


**Fig. 7**
Edmund Aiken (1780–1820) and George Dawe (1781–1829), after Thomas Hope (1768–1831). Plate 7 (detail) from *Household Furniture and Interior Decoration*, London, 1807. Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection

*Household Furniture and Interior Decoration* (fig. 7, cat. 6). In 1808, George Smith illustrated two curule-base stools in *Designs for Household Furniture* that are based almost exactly on the ancient stools Tatham illustrates (cat. 7). A year after Smith's publication, Rudolph Ackermann published a curule-base chair with the S-curved legs in the front in the first volume of his journal, *Repository of the Arts*, a chronicle of the period's high fashions.[26] The variation between the positions of the curule base in these sources suggests that, like the French, the English revival of the curule base was not restricted to the accurate design of the *sella curulis*.

In the same years the English furniture-design books were published, the curule base also began to surface in price books printed to codify and facilitate construction in the cabinetmaker's shop. An illustration of the form in the 1808 edition of the *Supplement to the London Chair-Makers' and Carvers' Book of Prices for Workmanship* shows that very little time elapsed between its illustration in the design books and actual manufacture (fig. 9).[27] After the close of the first decade of the nineteenth century, the curule base was published almost exclusively in these price books.[28] The absence of the form in later nineteenth-century furniture-design books suggests it may have been less fashionable after 1810.

The English furniture-design books published in the early-nineteenth century were key conduits for the transmission of the revived curule base to America. Several of the New York objects in the present exhibition relate specifically to images in these texts. The base of the lyre-back side chair with the S-curved legs in front and the saber legs in back (cat. 8), for example, resembles one of Sheraton's 1803 designs.[29] The form of the Salem stool (cat. 12) also matches examples published in Hope.[30] However, the settees (cats. 10–11) do not appear in any of the early-nineteenth-century sources and are likely to be American innovations. Charles Montgomery claimed the same distinction for chairs with the curule bases on the sides (cat. 9).[31] Although this last design roughly matches that of the side chair designed by Dugourc in 1777, it is unlikely New York cabinetmakers were aware of this French antecedent. The position of the legs on the sides of this New York chair, which follows the ancient Roman prototype more closely than any of the chairs that were published in France and England, is particularly notable. This position suggests the curule base entered into fashion in America not only through design books, but also through the records of ancient artifacts, like Tatham's *Etchings* and Caylus's *Recueil d'antiquités*, that accurately illustrated the classical form.

PART II

## *An Aristocrat in America and a Ruler in Ancient Rome: Towards an Understanding of the Taste for the Curule Base in the Early-Nineteenth-Century United States*

The long and complicated course of the curule base's revival and survival through some twenty-four centuries of furniture history lays the foundation for the second issue this essay will consider: the meaning of the taste for the curule base in the early-nineteenth-century United States. Several of the extant American curule-based objects have descended through the generations of wealthy families. These histories offer the contemporary scholar a sense of the type of individuals who were likely to have owned curule-based seating furniture in New York. Two of these figures—Thomas Cornell Pearsall (1768–1820), a wealthy Manhattan merchant who is believed to have owned one of the side chairs in the present exhibition (cat. 9.), and David Lydig (1764–1840), the owner of two flour mills in Orange County, New York, and president of New York City's prestigious Merchant's Bank, whose family is recorded as the owner of a similar object sold at auction—will provide case studies for this concluding section.[32] We will consider the taste for the curule base within its larger historical context and see that though there is both a political and a social answer to the question of what encouraged the American attraction to the *sella curulis*, the second explanation is more convincing than the first.

As the Constitution was written and the thirteen colonies were joined together under the auspices of a Federal authority in the late-eighteenth century, the political history of the Roman Empire was intensively consulted and discussed. The Founding Fathers compared the new United States to the strength of the Roman Republic, and looked to the classical past for models of solid leadership, wide-reaching patriotism, and a successful and profitable imperial network.[33] This political identification with the ancient world continued into the early years of the nineteenth century, when the taste for the *sella curulis* was at its height. In 1803, for example, the architect Benjamin Henry Latrobe took control of the construction of a new Capitol building in Washington, D.C., whose domed and vaulted center, colonnaded façade, and Corinthian capitals explicitly connected the

American government to the iconography of classical Rome and celebrated ancient buildings like the Pantheon. This connection is made clear in Thomas Jefferson's writing, which describes the newly completed Capitol as "a work . . . [that] will be a desirable and honorable monument of our infant republic, and will bear favorable comparison with the remains of the same kind of the ancient republics of Greece and Rome."[34]

The parallel Jefferson generally draws in this passage between the "infant republic" of the United States and the "ancient republics of Greece and Rome" could be understood to constitute the motivating force behind the taste for the curule base in early-nineteenth-century America. Like the architecture of the classical past, this line of reasoning would contend, the furniture of Rome was attractive because it embodied the hallowed values of the ancient political system with which the new nation sought to identify itself. As an object first deployed in the political environment of the Roman Forum, the *sella curulis* would, of course, have been a particularly fitting symbol of this identification, evoking, in its S-curved lines, visions of the toga-clad magistrates whom the American legislators viewed as ideal and inspiring leaders.

While compelling, this political analysis of the American attraction to the curule base is complicated by the biographies of Lydig and Pearsall. Neither were particularly politically active men. They are not known to have run for office or to have participated in any governing organizations, and it does not seem as if their families sided fervently with either the British or the Americans during the War of Independence and the military conflicts that followed the Revolution. Lydig was even remembered by his descendants for his "disinclination . . . to take part in public affairs."[35] The fact that the owners of curule-based furniture in early-nineteenth-century New York are not likely to have had a significant political role suggests there was more to the American taste for the ancient form than simply its ideological evocations.

In his book *The Refinement of America*, the historian Richard Bushman offers a social theory that can be applied to provide a second, more convincing answer to the question of why Pearsall and Lydig were attracted to the *sella curulis*. Bushman argues that members of the wealthy, upper tier of society in the United States immersed themselves in English models of superior culture and aristocratic refinement—what he terms "gentility"—in order to insure a level of class authority commensurate with their wealth. In following British taste, these Americans were able to distinguish themselves as a refined, cosmopolitan group, who were separated from the ordinary citizens. This differentiation conveyed a certain element of authority. For the exclusive culture the wealthy Americans embraced derived from Europe's ruling classes and thus earned the upper tier in the United States something of the power of a traditional aristocracy. This transfer of social authority occurred even as the civic ideology of the United States discredited the notion of a ruling elite, which ran in clear opposition to the democratic ideals of the young nation.[36]

Pearsall and Lydig would have desired the element of class authority Bushman locates in the American penchant for English culture. While each man was distinguished by his personally accumulated wealth, as well as the inheritance he had received from his parents, the fortunes Pearsall and Lydig amassed were not alone sufficient to establish them as members of a superior class. Each had achieved monetary success in a city where rapid growth and a connection to ever expanding markets made wealth accessible to a broader cross section of the socio-economic hierarchy. As the historian George Lankevich writes of early-nineteenth-century New York, "Opportunity beckoned to everyone . . . the vigor of city business derived from the middle classes, and they, in turn, were constantly aware of entrepreneurial pressure from below. . . . New York offered the possibility of upward mobility."[37] In this socially fluid environment, it took more than wealth to achieve a position of class dominance.

The determination Pearsall and Lydig possessed to elevate themselves to a position above the upwardly mobile classes that Lankevich describes is evident in the early years of the nineteenth century, when each moved away from the bustling crowds and noisy streets of lower Manhattan to more exclusive locales. First, around 1800, Pearsall built Belmont, an estate far from downtown, on the East River of Manhattan.[38] The very name of this home, which may have derived from Theodore Tone's 1790 novel *Belmont Castle*, a chronicle of the Anglo-Irish aristocracy, gave Pearsall the aura of the ruling classes in the United Kingdom and thus inscribed his move with a clear social ambition. For Lydig, who settled in a mansion at 225 Broadway in 1819, the connections between moving uptown and a desire for authority were even more explicit.[39] The very rhetoric around Broadway in these years bestowed a certain aristocratic air on the street's residents. Not only was Lydig in "the center of the fashionable world," as one observer from the late-eighteenth century wrote, but he was literally above the masses, "in an *elevated* [my emphasis] situation [with] its position on the River." Like the other wealthy merchants who moved to Broadway in these years, Lydig's new position allowed him to expect a certain deference from the lower classes.[40]

Pearsall's and Lydig's taste for curule-based furniture in the early years of the nineteenth century can be understood in terms of the social agenda that fueled their escape from Lower Manhattan. The S-curved legs of the ancient form referenced the furniture-design books and records of ancient monuments published for the libraries of European gentlemen. By matching the tastes of these men, the New York patrons may have hoped to gain something of this aristocratic identity. Indeed, Pearsall's purchase of his curule-based furniture coincided with his travel abroad, when he encountered the fashionable European circles of the Willinks family in Holland. Similarly, Lydig was recognized for his "old fashioned aristocratic notions." Shortly after he took ownership of his curule-based chair, he was initiated as a leading member of "The Club," an exclusive circle of New York's thirty most prominent and cultivated residents that met weekly for dinner and conversation.[41] Just like the move each man made uptown, Pearsall's and Lydig's curule-based furniture attests to an ambition for social differentiation. In turn, one can understand the attraction the two men had for the ancient design as yet another product of this drive toward differentiation and the element of class authority Bushman sees as its result.

Certainly, the ancient stature of the *sella curulis* as a stool for the magistrates who ruled the Roman Empire made it a particularly apt symbol for an expression of class authority. And this connection was probably not lost on the men like Pearsall and Lydig who owned curule-based seating furniture in early-nineteenth-century New York. Many of the classical texts popular among American readers in the early-nineteenth century featured images or references to the curule base that refer to its powerful status in ancient Rome. Flaxman's illustrations for the Pope translation of *The Iliad*, for example, had a particular prominence in America around 1800, and the educated class was also familiar with Livy's *History of Ancient Rome*, a key text in the curriculum of American colleges.[42] These references were almost certainly known in early-nineteenth-century New York, which had more philological societies than any other city in the United States and led the country in the drive to establish public museums to collect classical artifacts.[43] One can speculate, then, that the curule-based seating furniture produced in early-nineteenth-century New York lent its owners both the stature of British gentlemen and also something of the prestige of the rulers of the ancient world. Ultimately, both the form and the hierarchical function of the curule base had survived for some twenty-four centuries—from the Roman Forum to the mansions of early-nineteenth-century New York.

## ENDNOTES

1 Ole Wanscher, *Sella Curulis* (Copenhagen: Rosenkilde and Bagger, 1980), 121.

2 Charles Cornelius, *Furniture Masterpieces of Duncan Phyfe* (1922; reprint New York: Dover Publications, 1970), pl. 8; Nancy McClelland, *Duncan Phyfe and the English Regency* (New York: William Scott, 1939), 141; Charles Montgomery, *American Furniture: The Federal Period* (New York: Viking Press, 1966), 124; and Wendy Cooper, *Classical Taste in America: 1800–1840* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1993), 117–20. For a survey of the European design roots of American classical revival furniture—including the curule base—see Carswell Rush Berlin, " 'Solid and Permanent Grandeur': The Design Roots of American Classical Furniture," *Catalogue of the International Fine Art and Antique Dealers Show* (New York, 2002), 17–26.

3 Charles Heathcote Tatham, *Etchings of Ancient Ornamental Architecture* (London, 1799), pl. 74.

4 Wanscher, 139, 321.

5 Ibid., 121.

6 Quoted in Wanscher, 132. The hierarchical connotation of the folding stool actually had an earlier precedent, dating back to ancient Greece. However, the Greek version of the form typically had straight, versus S-curved legs.

7 John Morley, *The History of Furniture: Twenty-Five Centuries of Style and Design in the Western Tradition* (New York: Little Brown and Company, 1999), 55. Some scholars have argued that the back of the Dagobert Throne is a later addition.

8 Quoted in Wanscher, 198.

9 Miniatures and illuminated manuscripts from the period attest to this shift. See Wanscher, 229–31.

10 Ian Wardropper and Lynn Springer Roberts, *European Decorative Arts* (Chicago: The Art Institute of Chicago, 1991), 19; and Morley, 88.

11 Morley, 105.

12 This object is illustrated in Morley, 106.

13 The Flemish source is illustrated in Helena Hayward, ed., *World Furniture* (1965; reprint New Jersey: Chartwell Books, 1977); the German source is illustrated in Simon Jervis, *Printed Furniture Designs before 1650* (London: The Furniture History Society, 1974), 37.

14 Giovanni Belloro, *Picturae antiquae cryptarum Romanarum et sepulcri Nasonum* (Rome, 1738), 201.

15 Giovanni Battista Piranesi, *Le antichità di Albano* (Rome, 1762), pl. 3; the Accademia Ercolanese illustration is in Francisca Fernandez, *El real museo de Portici* (Valladolid: Universidad de Valladolid, 1988), 97; Baron d'Hancarville, *Antiquités étrusques, grecques et romaines* (Naples, 1766-67), 3: pl. 3.

16 Anne-Claude Philippe, Comte de Caylus, *Recueil d'antiquités* (Paris, 1752-67), 3: pl. 39. The stool that Caylus illustrates appears to be the same object Tatham published in 1799. The imagery and explanation of the *sella curulis* in Caylus's text further suggests that between the publication of the earlier records of ancient artifacts and the compilation of *Recueil d'antiquités,* the extant stools were excavated at Herculaneum. Unfortunately, the precise date of this find is not known.

17 The side chair is illustrated in *French Cabinetmakers of the Eighteenth Century* (Paris: Hachette, 1963), 181, pl. 16. A similar object appears in an early-nineteenth-century gouache by Jean-Baptiste Mallet (170, pl. 9). The armchair is illustrated in Morley, 204.

18 This object is illustrated in Serge Grandjean, *Empire Furniture: 1800–1825* (New York: Taplinger Publishing, 1966), pl. 31. Its similarity to the stool illustrated in Tatham is evident in the large discs that cover the area where the S-curved legs intersect.

19 Pierre de la Mésangère, *Collection de meubles et objets de goût,* (Paris: Au Bureau de Journal des dames, 1802), 1: pl. 13. For other examples of the curule base in this text—which are in large part based on the surviving design with the curule base on the front and back—see 1: pls. 20, 88, 97, 174; 2: pls. 201, 220, 230, 259, 264, 336; 3: pls. 436, 515, 539; 4: pls. 617, 644, 649, 661, 682. Charles Percier and Pierre-François-Léonard Fontaine, *Recueil de décorations intérieurs* (Paris: Gidot l'ainé, 1812), pl. 39.

20 This object is illustrated in Wanscher, 273.

21 This object is illustrated in Grandjean, pl. 7.

22 Eileen Harris, *The Furniture of Robert Adam* (London: Alec Tiranti, 1963), 95.

23 This object is illustrated in David Watkin, *Thomas Hope and the Neo-Classical Idea* (London: John Murray, 1968), pl. 95.

24 Thomas Crispin, *The English Windsor Chair* (London: Alan Sutton, 1991), 14. The hybridity of this object, which combines a traditional back with a curule base suggests that the form was understood outside of London as a fashionable design but not as a reference to the ancient world.

25 Homer, *The Iliad*, trans. Alexander Pope (London: Ingram Cooke and Co, 1853), 1: 89; 2: 279.

26 Thomas Sheraton, *The Cabinet Dictionary* (1803; reprint New York: Praeger Publishers, 1970), 1: pl. 31, 2: pl. 47; Thomas Hope, *Household Furniture and Interior Decoration* (London, 1807), pls. 6, 7, 12, 20, 29; George Smith, *Designs for Household Furniture* (London: J. Taylor, 1808), pls. 53, 152; Rudolph Ackermann, *Repository of Arts* 1, no. 4 (January 1809): pl. 3.

27 *Supplement to the London Chair-Makers' and Carvers' Book of Prices for Workmanship* (London: The Committee of Chair- Manufacturers and Journeymen, 1808), pls. 3, 4, 6 (hereafter cited as 1808 *London Supplement*).

28 *London Chairmaker's Book of Prices* (London, 1829), pls. 4, 6, 7.

29 Sheraton, 1: pl. 31. Montgomery also cites the general connection between the curule base on the front and back of the chair and the design for "Grecian cross fronts" in the 1808 *London Supplement* (Montgomery, 124).

30 Hope, pl. 6.

31 Montgomery, 124.

32 Clarence Pearsall, *History and Genealogy of the Pearsall Family in England and America* (San Francisco: H. S. Crocker, 1928), 2: 1125; William Cutter, *Genealogical and Family History of Southern New York* (New York: Lewis Historical Publishers, 1913), 3: 264–66; and *Fine Early American Silver, Jewelry, and Other Heirlooms* (New York: Parke-Bernet Galleries, February 6–8, 1941), lot 569.

33 Linda Kerber, *Federalists in Dissent: Imagery and Ideology in Jeffersonian America* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1970), 1. Many past historians had assumed that Americans were attracted to the politics of the ancient world because the ancients were exemplars of republicanism and democracy. Recent scholars have shown, however, that the writings of early American political leaders rarely make this point (see Richard Bushman, "Public Culture and Popular Taste in Classical America," in Cooper, 16).

34 Wayne Craven, *American Art* (Madison, Wisconsin: Brown and Benchmark, 1994), 122–23; Jefferson is quoted in Bushman, 16.

35 Walter Spooner, *Historic Families of America* (New York: Historic Families Publishing Association, n.d.), 128.

36 Richard Bushman, *The Refinement of America* (New York: Vintage, 1993), 402–06.

37 George Lankevich, *American Metropolis: A History of New York City* (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 66.

38 Cooper, 162.

39 Spooner, 127.

40 Edwin Burrows, *Gotham: A History of the City of New York* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 372.

41 Pearsall, 2: 1125. The prominent New York merchant Philip Hone spoke of Lydig's aristocratic character in a journal entry from May 16, 1840 (cited in Cutter, 3: 266). Lydig's participation in "The Club" is discussed in Spooner, 127.

42 Caroline Winterer, *The Culture of Classicism* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), 15, 35.

43 Burrows, 376. The New York Academy of Arts, for example, was established in 1802 to collect casts of classical sculpture.

# *Catalogue of the Exhibition*

1 Silver denarius of Q. Cassius Longinus
Rome mint, c. 55 B.C.
3.96g, 7:00, 18 mm (5/8 in.)
Yale University Art Gallery, Numismatic Collection Transfer

2 Silver denarius of P. Cornelius P.f.L.n. Lentulus
Rome mint, c. 74 B.C.
4.05g, 9:00, 17.5 mm (9/16 in.)
Yale University Art Gallery, Numismatic Collection Transfer

3 Silver denarius of P. Furius Crassipes
Rome mint, c. 84 B.C.
4.11g, 10:00, 19 mm (3/4 in.)
Yale University Art Gallery, Numismatic Collection Transfer

These three coins are struck with images of the *sella curulis*, one of the principal emblems of political authority in ancient Rome. This folding stool had two hinged, S-shape legs on each end, with a seat frame created by fitting notched side rails onto the fixed front and back rails. A leather or fabric seat was stretched between the fixed rails, and, as seen on cat. 1, a loose cushion could be placed on top. The ancient diesinkers represented these stools without using perspective, making their images more difficult for modern viewers to read.

Writing in the first century B.C., Livy described the *sella curulis* as "the royal curule chair" (*curuli regia sella*) and recounted that it and another primary symbol of power, the *toga praetexta*, or purple-bordered toga, were copied from the Etruscans. During the Republic it was used only by high officials, including consuls, praetors, and curule aediles, the highest rank of minor magistrates. An empty *sella curulis* stood as a reminder of an individual's rank; Livy recounts the story of the victorious dictator Marcus Valerius being awarded a permanent seat at the Circus Maximus "and the *sella curulis* was placed there." The images on the coins served the same purpose, associating the individuals whose names were inscribed with the authority signified by the stool. After the end of the Republic, the *sella curulis* continued to be used by the emperors as a symbol of power. Suetonius records an accident in which Augustus was thrown backwards when the joints of his *sella curulis* came apart.[1]


1


2


3

4 Giulio Pippi, called Giulio Romano
(1492/99–1546)
Mantua, Italy
*Gaius Marcius Coriolanus Discovered among the Volscians*, 1530–34
Pen and brown ink over traces of black chalk or charcoal, 26.8 x 33.5 cm (10 9/16 x 13 3/16 in.)
Yale University Art Gallery, Maitland F. Griggs, B.A. 1896, and Everett V. Meeks, B.A. 1901, Funds

The chair in this scene from Roman history is a not an archaeologically accurate reconstruction of the ancient *sella curulis*, but a piece of Renaissance furniture inspired by the Roman prototype. As discussed in the essay (p. 12), this version transposed the orientation of the curule from the sides to the front and back, transforming the stool into a chair with extensions of the curule supports serving as arms and attachments for the back. Giulio Romano may have featured the curule chair in his drawing because of its associations with antiquity, although by the sixteenth century this form had a long usage in both ecclesiastical and secular contexts. Raphael's portrait of Julius II in the *Mass of Bolsena* of 1512 shows the pope kneeling at a carved and gilded chair of this type.[2]

This drawing is a preparatory study for a fresco of the early 1530s in the Palazzo Tè in Mantua. Different scholars have proposed a variety of identifications for the subject, which presently is believed to be a scene from the life of the ancient Roman general Coriolanus as recounted by Plutarch and Livy. The patrician general, exiled from Rome because of his opposition to the plebians, enters the camp of his former enemies, the Volscians, masked by a heavy cloak. The drawing depicts the moment when he is recognized and uncovered by the Volscian general.[3]

4

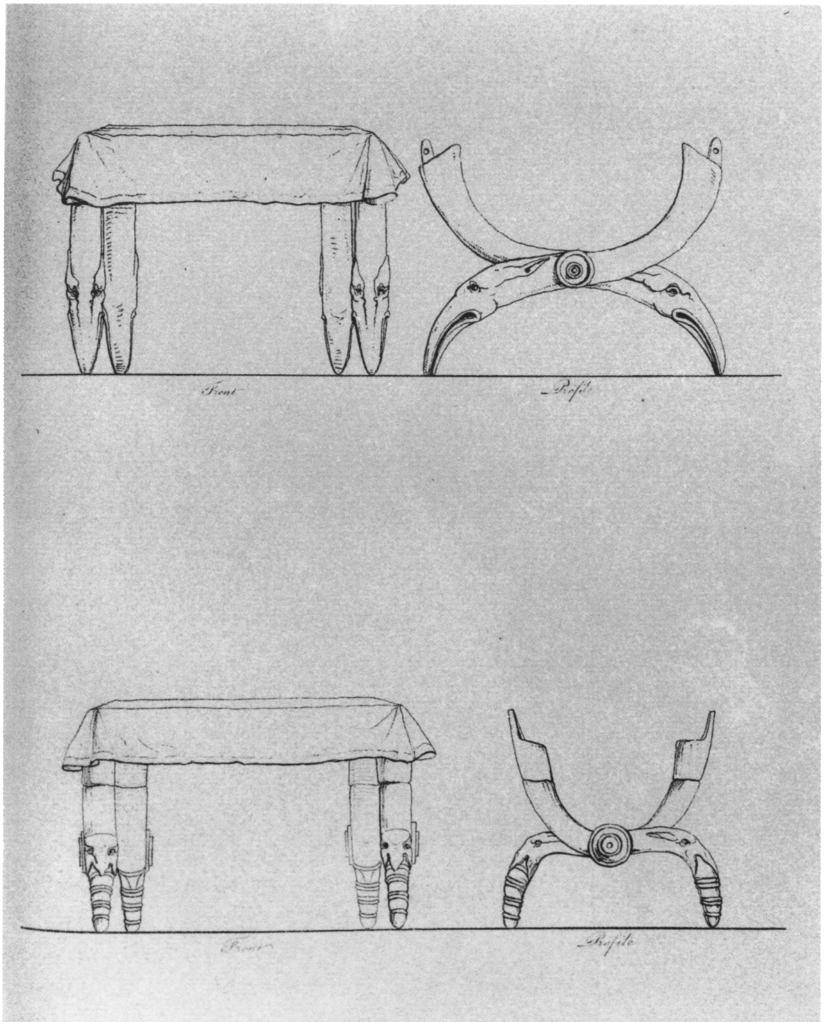
5 Charles Heathcote Tatham (1772–1842)
*Etchings Representing the Best Examples of Grecian and Roman Ornament*
Printed book, 30.5 x 48.9 cm (12 x 19 1/4 in.)
London: Priestley and Weale, 1826
Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection

6 Thomas Hope (1768–1831)
*Household Furniture and Interior Decoration*
Printed book, 30.5 x 49.5 cm (12 x 19 1/2 in.)
London, 1807
Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection

7 George Smith (life dates unknown; active c. 1785–c. 1830)
*A Collection of Designs for Household Furniture and Interior Decoration*
Printed book with hand coloring, 22.2 x 26.9 cm (8 3/4 x 10 5/8 in.)
London: J. Taylor, 1808
Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection

The publications of Tatham, Hope, and Smith were among the most influential on the later Neoclassical style in England, although each was different in intent. An architect working in the office of Henry Holland, London's leading architect during the Regency, Charles Heathcote Tatham was dispatched to Italy in 1794 to draw ancient buildings and sculpture as references for Holland's designs. Five years later, Tatham published his sketches in *Etchings of Ancient Ornamental Architecture*. The book was a great success and was reissued twice in his lifetime, first in 1810 and latterly in 1826 under a different title (cat. 5). Among its illustrations were two bronze curule stools that had been excavated at Herculaneum in the 1750s and were on exhibition at the royal museum in Naples.[4]

Thomas Hope was a wealthy designer and collector. His *Household Furniture* of 1807 recorded the interiors and collections of his Duchess Street home, which three years earlier he had remodeled to his own designs. The house was one of the classical showplaces of London, at least for those with access to Hope's elevated social circle—admission required

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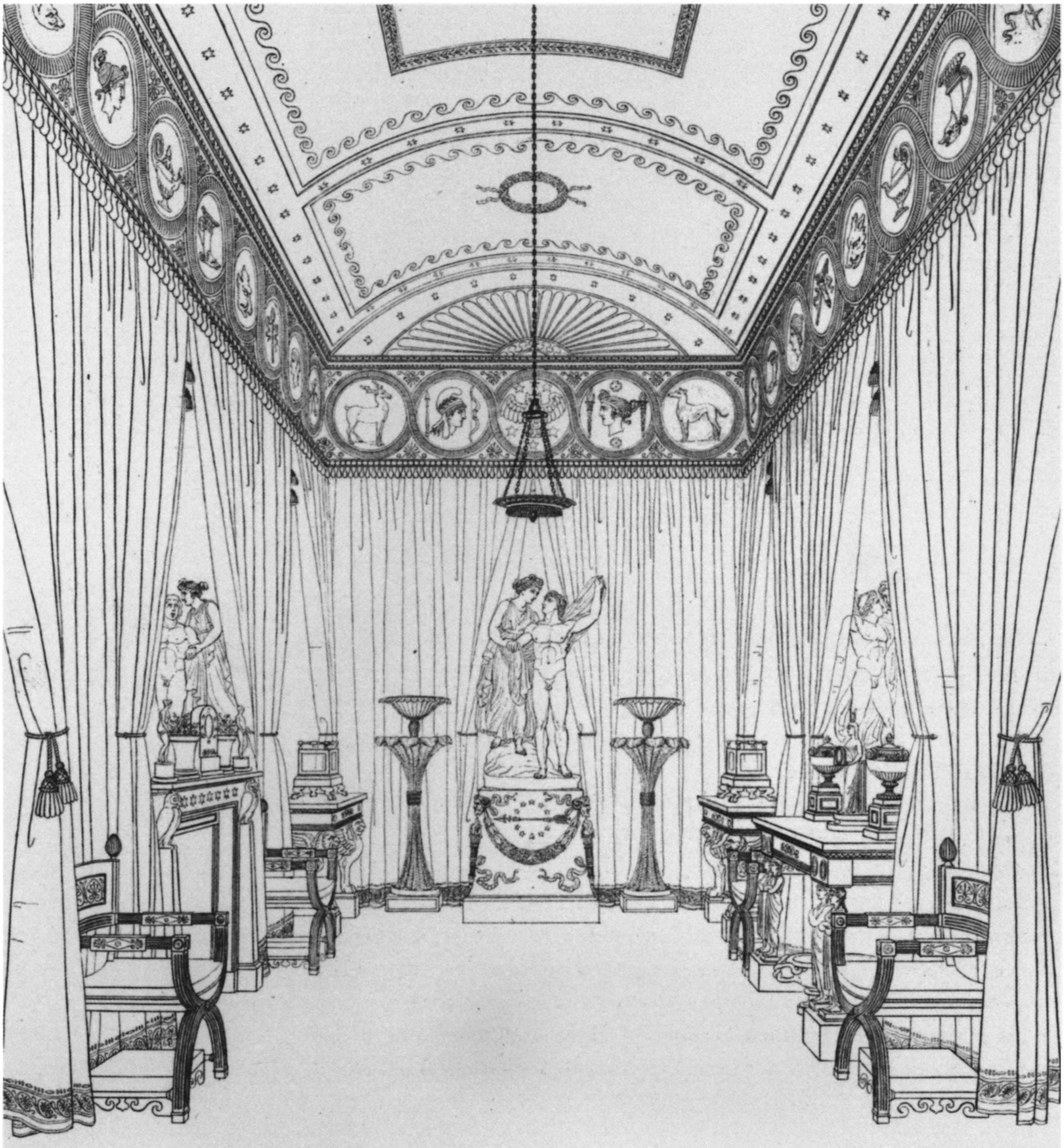

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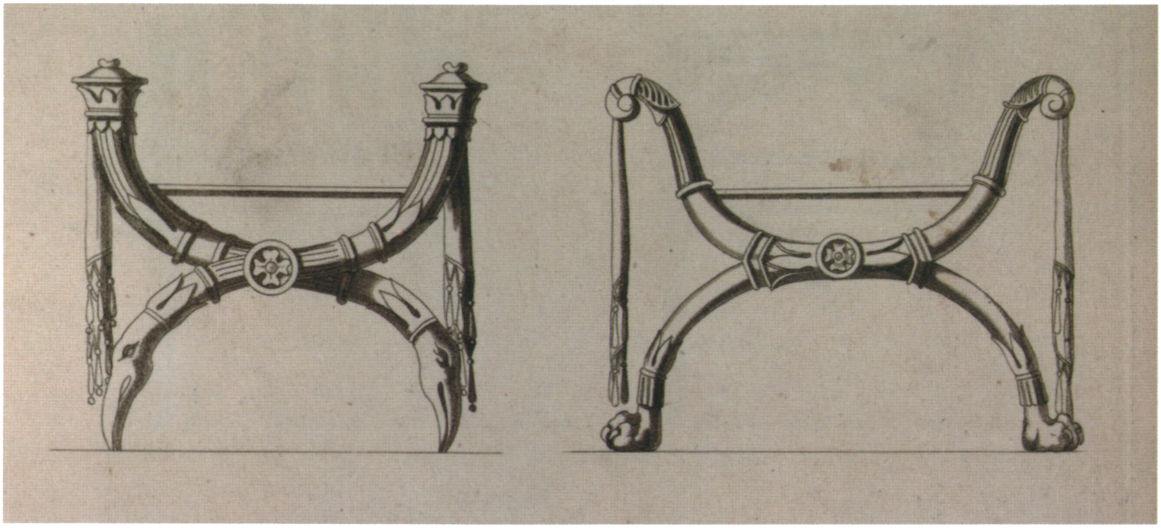

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an "application signed by some persons of known character and taste"—and the publication had an immediate and broad impact on Anglo-American design. Hope designed both chairs and stools "after the manner of the ancient curule chairs," as seen in the room that housed John Flaxman's *Aurora and Cephalus* (cat. 6).[5]

Among those influenced by Hope was George Smith, a London cabinetmaker and upholsterer who claimed the patronage of the Prince of Wales and may have supplied furniture to the Marquess of Bute at Mount Stewart. Smith's *Collection of Designs,* issued in three parts with the publication date of 1808, was the largest publication of furniture designs during the Regency period. In addition to the classical revival style, Smith created work influenced by Egyptian, Gothic, and Chinese sources. Some of his designs were simplified versions of Hope's, although one of his "Drawing Room X Seats" (cat. 7) was based on an ancient stool illustrated by Tatham (cat. 5).[6]

8 Side chair
New York City, c. 1810–20
Mahogany with cane, 81.3 x 50.7 x 50.1 cm (32 1/8 x 20 x 19 3/4 in.)
Collection of Mrs. George M. Kaufman

9 Side chair
New York City, c. 1810–20
Mahogany and cherry with cane, 83.3 x 45.2 x 55.6 cm
(32 13/16 x 17 13/16 x 21 7/8 in.)
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of C. Ruxton Love, 1960

These two chairs belong to an important group of chairs, sofas, and benches with curule bases made in New York City during the 1810s. The chairs fall into two distinct subgroups: those with a single curule on the front (cat. 8), and those with paired curules on the sides (cat. 9). Each of these subgroups exhibits an exceptional degree of unity in design and construction.

Chairs with the single curule on the front followed a pattern that was popular in England during the first decades of the nineteenth century and featured in furniture design and price books (see p. 18). American examples have survived in relatively small numbers, although curule bases appear on the fronts of a few sofas, benches, and stools (cats. 10–12). The chairs include an armchair and pair of side chairs in a private collection, a set of three side chairs at the White House, and a pair of side chairs

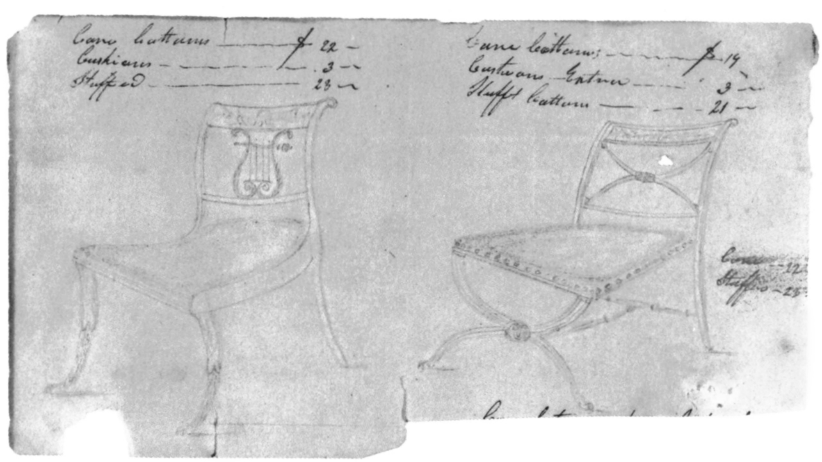

**Fig. 8**
Attributed to Duncan Phyfe (1768–1854). Designs for two chairs, New York, c. 1815–16. Graphite with ink notations. Courtesy The Winterthur Library; Joseph Downs Collection of Manuscripts and Printed Ephemera

8

now divided between the White House and the Museum of the City of New York. With the exception of cat. 8, these chairs share the same design features: veneered crest rails, "ogee bannister" (curved X-shape) backs, continuously reeded stiles, and upholstered seats.[7] The seat frames, uprights, and front faces of the curules are ornamented with four reeds between two fillets. None of these upholstered chairs has a history of ownership.[8]

The chair in the Kaufman collection is distinguished by its lyre splat, cornucopiae carving on its crest rail, rosette carvings at the junctures of the stiles and stay rail, and caned seat. These design features are a combination of the elements that appear on two different chairs in a drawing attributed to Duncan Phyfe (fig. 8). Its carved wood feet are fitted over round tenons at the ends of the legs and probably are replacements for the brass feet found on other curule-base chairs. The lion mask, made of molded composition, is a replacement that imitates the brass lion mask applied to the chair at the Museum of the City of New York.

The Kaufman chair is also the only chair of this type with a history of ownership. Dorothea Emily Hamilton (Brown) Glover of Fairfield, Connecticut, loaned it in 1920 to the Philadelphia Museum of Art. She had married Samuel Glover of Philadelphia in 1856. The chair passed at her death in 1922 to Deborah A. Glover and afterwards to the latter's nieces, Mrs. Allen A. Johnson and Deborah Norris Glover of Fairfield, Connecticut. The Browns, Glovers, and Norrises all were wealthy Philadelphia families in the early-nineteenth century, but their precise relationship in terms of the chair's provenance has proved elusive. When the chair was offered for sale in 1977, it was described as descending in "the Mays family of Philadelphia," and their connection to these others remains undetermined.[9]

Chairs with paired curule supports on the sides were not common in England or included the British design or price books, but this form enjoyed great popularity in New York, judging by the quantity that survive (see p. 18). Cat. 9 is one of twelve side chairs that was part of a suite including two armchairs and a sofa. This furniture descended from Thomas Cornell Pearsall (1768–1820) to his great-great-granddaughter, Mrs. Henry Wilmerding Payne. Her heirs sold the set at auction, where it was purchased by the collector C. Ruxton Love, who donated three chairs to the Museum of the City of New York and the remainder to The Metropolitan Museum

9

of Art. In addition to the Pearsall suite, other chairs with curules on the sides include a set of twenty-four side chairs and a sofa that descended in the family of Nathaniel Prime and a set of seven side chairs and a pair of couches sold at auction in 1938 and 1941 with a history of ownership in the Lydig family of New York (see p. 19). Further examples with no recorded provenance include at least three pairs of side chairs, a pair of armchairs, and a set of four side chairs and two armchairs.[10]

Several side chairs in the Pearsall set, including cat. 9, have been stamped with the name "H. DORR," who has been identified as the New York chairmaker Henry Dorr, active from the early 1840s to the early 1860s. It has been proposed that these chairs were made by Dorr to extend the set for a later owner, but these chairs are identical in every dimension and ornamental detail to the chairs without the stamps and appear to be contemporaneous. It is possible that Dorr marked some of the chairs when they were sent to his shop for repair, or he may have sold a subsequent owner additional early-nineteenth-century chairs that originally were not part of the set but identical to them in design.[11]

It would not have been difficult to integrate other chairs from the same period into the set, as chairs with curule supports on the sides are remarkably consistent in construction and details of ornament. The curules are doweled into front-corner blocks of the seat frame and into the stiles of the back. All of the chairs originally had two medial braces that were fitted between the front and back seat rails with sliding dovetails. Crossed laurel branches are carved on the crest rails, laid out with the same template. The same flower with twelve petals around an ovoid center, carved within an octagonal frame, is set into the center of each ogee splat, and the same rosette with eight petals surrounding a circular center within a square frame is carved at the juncture of each stile and the stay rail. The front and side seat rails have six reeds framed by two fillets; the curules are not reeded. The only variations within this group are two different pairs of side chairs with upholstered seats instead of caning and the seven Lydig chairs with cornucopiae carved on their crest rails and no rosettes carved on their stiles.[12]

Consistent details shared by all curule-base chairs suggest that they may have been produced in the same workshop. The same applied carved flowers appear on both front and side curule-base chairs with ogee backs. In every instance, the curule is made from an S-shape element forming the upper left support and the lower right leg, with the opposing support and leg tenoned or doweled into it as separate pieces. This technique is not listed in the 1808 *Supplement to the London Chair-Makers' and Carvers' Book of Prices for Workmanship*, which proposed the alternatives of lapping together the two halves of the curule or tenoning together four separate pieces (fig. 9; see also cats. 10–11). All the chairs have applied brass feet. The dimensions of the stock of the uprights, seat frames, and legs are identical. The minor variations that exist in the carved ornament, even on chairs from the same set, are more suggestive of multiple carvers working within a large workshop than of different centers of production. The stretchers, identical in dimension and overall design but with minor variations in their execution, suggest that different turners may have been subcontracted to produce them to the same shop's specifications.

The drawing of a curule chair (fig. 8) is the only extant document known to the author that suggests an identity for the maker of any American curule-base seating furniture. It survived together with a bill dated January 4, 1816, for a quantity of furniture supplied by Duncan Phyfe of New York to Charles N. Bancker (1777–1869) of Philadelphia. Charles Montgomery speculated that the drawing had accompanied earlier, now-lost correspondence between Phyfe and Bancker. The handwriting on the bill and the drawing are not the same, but the chairs are both characteristic of New York furniture during the first decades of the nineteenth century. Among the many cabinetmakers working in New York during this period, Phyfe would have been best qualified to produce this unusual form in some quantity. By 1810, he had operated his workshop on Partition Street for fifteen years, and it must have attained a significant size by that date. He employed the kind of specialist craftsmen that enabled him to produce a wide range of forms. In 1813, a New York merchant reported that a work table ordered by a friend was nearly complete, adding, "Phyfe wanted it to be made by one of his workmen who best understands this kind of work."[13]

10 Settee
New York City, c. 1810–20
Mahogany with cane, 88.1 x 147 x 61 cm (34 11/16 x 57 7/8 x 24 in.)
Yale University Art Gallery, Mabel Brady Garvan Collection

11 Settee
New York City, c. 1810-20
Mahogany and ash with cane, 87.9 x 147 x 62.9 cm (34 5/8 x 57 7/8 x 24 3/4 in.)
Collection of Mrs. George M. Kaufman

These two settees and an unlocated couch comprise a small group of curule-base seating furniture that is distinct in both design and construction from the majority of examples made in New York (see cats. 8–9). Their striking design features a single curule spanning the width of the frame, which is larger in scale and more dramatic in effect than the paired curule bases found on other New York sofas and couches. The settees also have integral, carved feet that similarly are larger than the applied brass feet found on most curule-base chairs. The settees' curule supports are composed of two long C-shape sections, each with a leg attached to it, that were butted and tenoned or doweled together at the center, a variation on one type of construction suggested in the 1808 London price book (fig. 9). The cross stretcher was tenoned into this joint. Each settee originally had a single medial brace rebated and nailed to the front and back seat rails; the brace on cat. 10 is no longer present.[14]

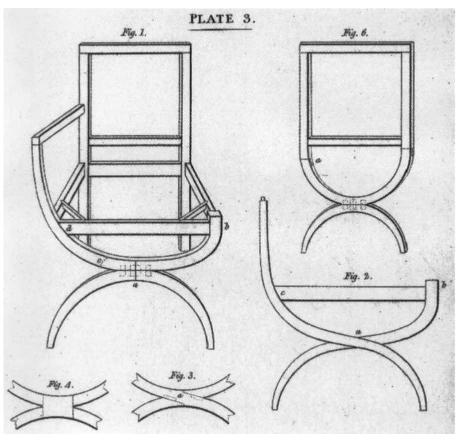


**Fig. 9**
"Chairs with Grecian Cross Fronts," Plate 3 from *Supplement to the London Chair-Makers' and Carvers' Book of Prices for Workmanship*, London, 1808 (detail). Art and Architecture Collection, Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Division of Art, Prints and Photographs, The New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations

Although apparently made as a pair, the settees have separate provenances that extend only to the early-twentieth century. Francis P. Garvan purchased the Yale settee in 1919 from the estate of Mrs. Frank H. Bosworth of New York City, "an amateur of refined taste and discriminating judgment." A photograph of this settee that Luke Vincent Lockwood first published in 1913 clearly shows the medial brace that later was removed. The Kaufman settee was owned by the dealer Charles Woolsey Lyon of Millbrook, New York, and subsequently was acquired by the New York City collector Robert Lee Gill.[15]

10

11

12 Stool (one of a pair)
Probably Salem, Massachusetts, c. 1810–20
Mahogany and ash, 38.7 x 48.9 x 39.5 cm (15 1/4 x 19 1/4 x 15 9/16 in.)
Yale University Art Gallery, Mabel Brady Garvan Collection

Most curule-base furniture made in America during the first quarter of the nineteenth century appears to have originated in New York City. However, a small amount of curule-base furniture was produced in other American centers. Both this stool and its mate, now in the collection of Mrs. Peter Terian, have previously been attributed to New York. Neither has a history of ownership. In 1976, Patricia E. Kane reattributed the Yale stool to Salem, Massachusetts, noting the close similarity of the carved leaves on the lower legs to the leaves carved on the arms of sofas and armchairs made contemporaneously in Salem; she also noted the absence of related carving on any New York furniture. Although no other Salem-made seating furniture of this quality with curule bases has been identified, the stools' ornamental details are nevertheless atypical of documented New York furniture and relate more closely to furniture from eastern Massachusetts. In addition to the leaf carving noted by Kane, the reeded urn turnings on the stools' medial stretchers resemble the urns on a bed from Boston or Salem and seem distinct from similar elements of New York furniture, such as the arm supports on chairs. The square molding on the leg above the carved foot has also been related to Boston chairs that differ from the more fluid junction of these parts on contemporaneous New York chairs.[16]

Thomas Hope illustrated stools of this type (see p. 18), although this stool and its mate are also closely related to French sources. The overall form resembles Parisian stools of the early-nineteenth century, including a stool supplied in about 1805 to Fontainebleau by P. Marcion and a

12

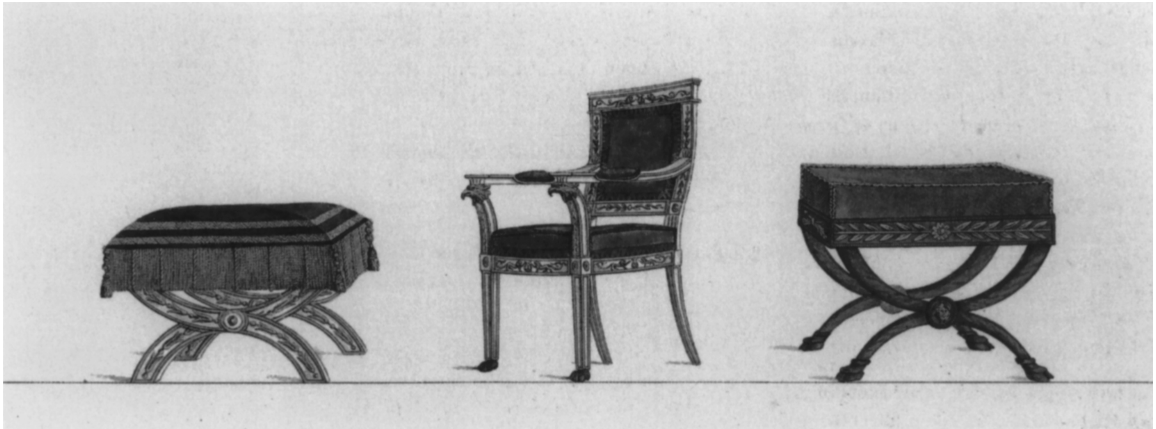

**Fig. 10**
Pierre de la Mésangère (1761–1831). "Tabouret d'Appartement, Fauteuil Riche, Tabouret Ordinaire" (detail), from *Collection des meubles et objets de goût,* Paris, c. 1803. Spencer Collection, New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox, and Tilden Foundations

design published by Pierre de la Mésangère (fig. 10). Inspired by the ancient prototypes, these stools also derived inspiration from Louis XVI *pliants* (folding stools) of the mid-1780s. Stools with similar animal-paw feet, foliate ornament on the fronts of the legs, and large bosses at the junction of the legs were delivered to Marie-Antoinette's *Salon des jeux* at the chateaux of Compiègne and Fontainebleau in 1786 and made by Georges Jacob for her dairy at Rambouillet in 1787. Stools were not among the furniture imported from France by Jefferson, Monroe, and other Francophiles in the later-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries, but the form enjoyed considerable popularity in the United States during the period. George Smith extolled them as "ornamental and extra Seats in elegant Drawing Rooms." Four curule-base stools were part of a large suite of parlor furniture purchased by the New York lawyer Samuel Foot in 1837, purportedly from Duncan Phyfe.[17]

## NOTES TO THE CATALOGUE

1 Livy 1.8.3, 1.20.2, 2.31.3; Suetonius *De vita Caesarum* 2.43 ("evenit ut laxatis sellae curulis compagibus caderet supinus"). For further information, see William Smith, ed., *A Dictionary of Greek and Roman Antiquities*, 2nd ed. (Boston: Little, Brown, 1870), 1014–15; Gisela M.A. Richter, *The Furniture of the Greeks, Etruscans, and Romans* (London: Phaidon Press, 1966), 103–4; Thomas F. Mathews, *The Clash of Gods: A Reinterpretation of Early Christian Art* (rev. ed. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 104–6.

2 For further discussion on the history of the curule chair in the twelfth to fifteenth centuries, see Penelope Eames, "Furniture in England, France and the Netherlands from the Twelfth to the Fifteenth Century," *Furniture History* 13 (1977), 182–91. For an illustration of the Raphael fresco in the *Stanza d'Eliodoro* in the Vatican, see S. J. Freedberg, *Painting in Italy 1500-1600* (rev. ed. Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1975), 59.

3 Plutarch, *Coriolanus*; Livy 2.34–2.40. I am grateful to John Marciari for information on this drawing from his entry for a forthcoming catalogue of Old Master drawings in the Art Gallery's collection.

4 Edward Joy, *Pictorial Dictionary of British Nineteenth-Century Furniture Design* (Woodbridge, U.K.: The Antique Collectors' Club, 1977), xiv. For an excellent overview of English and continental European design sources, see Carswell Rush Berlin, "'Solid and Permanent Grandeur': The Design Roots of American Classical Furniture," *Catalogue of the International Fine Art and Antique Dealers Show* (New York, 2002), 17–26.

5 David Watkin, *Thomas Hope 1769–1831 and the Neo-Classical Idea* (London: John Murray, 1968), 93–124; Margaret Jourdain and Ralph Fastnedge, *Regency Furniture 1795–1830*, 2nd rev. ed. (London: Country Life, 1965), 20–1, 23.

6 John Harris, *Regency Furniture Designs from Contemporary Source Books, 1803–1826* (London: Alec Tiranti, 1961), 18–20; Jourdain and Fastnedge, 22–23; Geoffrey Beard and Christopher Gilbert, eds., *Dictionary of English Furniture Makers 1660–1840* (London: Furniture History Society, 1986), 826.

7 The terms "ogee splat" and "ogee bannister" appear in the 1810 and 1817 New York City price books; see Montgomery, 104.

8 These chairs are illustrated in *Important American Furniture, Silver, Prints, Folk Art, and Decorative Arts* (New York: Christie's, January 21, 2000), 149, lots 180–81; Betty C. Monkman, *The White House: Its Historic Furnishings and First Families* (Washington, D.C.: White House Historical Association, 2000), 266, 309; *Fine American Furniture, Silver and Decorative Arts* (New York: Christie's, October 2, 1982), 85, lot 271; Wallace Nutting, *Furniture Treasury* (Framingham, Massachusetts: Old America Company, 1929), 2: no. 2400 (the same chair, with different upholstery, in Charles Over Cornelius, *Furniture Masterpieces of Duncan Phyfe* [New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1922], pl. 8).

9 I am very grateful to Beatrice B. Garvan for this genealogical information and the loan history at the Philadelphia Museum of Art. The Museum returned the chair to Charlotte (Glover) van Kirk of Southport, Connecticut, in 1952 (PMA loan file 108/1932/1a). For the "Mays family" reference, see *Distinguished American and English Antiques, Fine Paintings* (New York: Bernard and S. Dean Levy, 1977), 62. This reference probably is to the May family.

10 The suite belonging to Nathaniel Prime is illustrated in Berry B. Tracy and Mary Black, *Federal Furniture and Decorative Arts at Boscobel* (New York: Boscobel Restorations, 1981), cats. 10–11. Curule-base furniture with the Lydig provenance was

sold in 1938 and 1941 as the property of Frank Knight Sturgis, who had acquired these pieces in 1932 from Lydig descendants (see *The Erskine Hewitt Collection* [New York: Parke-Bernet Galleries, October 18–22, 1938], lots 1170–71; *Fine Early American Silver, Jewelry, and Other Heirlooms* [New York: Parke-Bernet Galleries, February 6–8, 1941], lots 569–70); unfortunately, these objects could not be located for this study. Pairs of undocumented chairs are at Winterthur (Charles F. Montgomery, *American Furn-iture: The Federal Period* [New York: Viking Press, 1966], cat. 72); the Diplomatic Reception Rooms, U.S. Department of State (Clement Conger and Alexandra W. Rollins, eds., *Treasures of State: Fine and Decorative Arts in the Diplomatic Reception Rooms of the U.S. Department of State* [New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1991], cat. 136, nos. 80.81.1–2); and a pair sold at auction in 2002 (*The Contents of the Captain Henry Lay Champlin House: Property from the Collection of Geoffrey Paul* [Portsmouth, N.H.: Northeast Auctions, August 4, 2002], lot 620). The set of two armchairs and four side chairs is owned by the Henry Ford Museum and presently is on long-term loan to the Wickham House of the Valentine History Museum, Richmond, Virginia (illustrated in *Antiques* 71 [June 1957]: 492). A single side chair illustrated in Cornelius, pl. 8, may be from the Pearsall set. The pair of side chairs illustrated in Nancy McClelland, *Duncan Phyfe and the English Regency, 1795–1830* (New York: William R. Scott, 1939), 180, may be the pair now at Winterthur or from the same set. When Winterthur purchased its chairs in 1964, the dealers Ginsburg and Levy described them as "part of a set which has been owned by this firm from time to time but now dispersed. Two chairs from the set are illustrated as Plate 164 in Nancy McClelland" (undated note in Winterthur object file M64.24.1-2). The undocumented armchairs are in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (Edwin J. Hipkiss, *Eighteenth-Century American Arts: The M. and M. Karolik Collection* [Boston: Museum of Fine Arts, 1941], cat. 118).

11 Deborah Dependahl Waters, "Is It Phyfe?," *American Furniture* (1996): 74–75. One of the three Pearsall chairs donated to the Museum of the City of New York, although not the example stamped by Dorr, appears to be extensively altered or of a later date than the remainder of the set (MCNY accession number 59.279.1).

12 The upholstered pairs are at Winterthur and the U.S. Department of State (see n. 8); for the Lydig family furniture, see n. 8.

13 For further discussion of the drawing, see Montgomery, 124–27. The most detailed study of Phyfe's career is Michael Kevin Brown, "Duncan Phyfe" (M.A. thesis, University of Delaware, 1978); the quotation is cited by Brown, 6.

14 The settees are described in Patricia E. Kane, *Three Hundred Years of American Seating Furniture: Chairs and Beds from the Mabel Brady Garvan and Other Collections at Yale University* (Boston: New York Graphic Society, 1976), cat. 230, and J. Michael Flanigan et al., *American Furniture in the Kaufman Collection* (Washington: National Gallery of Art, 1986), cat. 57. The construction of the curule base described in the latter source is incorrect. The couch apparently made in the same shop as the pair of settees, with identical design details, was advertised in *Antiques* 107 (March 1975): 402. For the London price book, see *Supplement to the London Chair-Makers' and Carvers' Book of Prices for Workmanship* (London: The Committee of Chair-Manufacturers and Journeymen, 1808), 23.

15 *Illustrated Catalogue of the Rare and Beautiful Antique Treasures Collected by the Late Mrs. F. H. Bosworth* (New York: American Art Association, November 10–14, 1919), lot 978; Luke Vincent Lockwood, *Colonial Furniture in America,* 2nd ed. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1913), 2: 162; Flanigan, cat. 57.

16 For the stools, see McClelland, 94; Kane, cat. 201; Wendy A. Cooper, *Classical Taste in America 1800–1840* (Baltimore: The Baltimore Museum of Art, 1993), 119–20. The bed is illustrated in Montgomery, cat. 1. I am grateful to Carswell Berlin for the observation on Boston chairs (letter to the author, March 4, 2003, YUAG object file 1930.2008). An example of a Boston side chair is illustrated in Berry B. Tracy et al., *Nineteenth-Century America: Furniture and Other Decorative Arts* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1970), cat. 30.

17 For Marcion, see Serge Grandjean, *Empire Furniture 1800–1825* (London: Faber and Faber, 1966), pl. 31; for the eighteenth-century French prototypes, see Pierre Verlet, *French Royal Furniture* (New York: Clarkson N. Potter, 1963), nos. 35-36; F. J. B. Watson, *The Wrightsman Collection* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1966), 1: cat. 51; *French Cabinet-makers of the Eighteenth Century* (Paris: Librairie Hachette, 1963), 239, fig. 2. An overview of American purchases of French furniture is provided by Francis J. B. Watson, "Jefferson and French Eighteenth-Century Furniture," *Jefferson and the Arts: An Extended View*, William Howard Adams, ed. (Washington: National Gallery of Art, 1976), 273–93. For the popularity of stools, see Cooper, 120; George Smith, *A Collection of Designs for Household Furniture and Interior Decoration* (London: J. Taylor, 1808), 11. For the Foot furniture, see McClelland, 272-73.

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