

THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

WILLIAM AND MARY 1689-1702

Up until the late 1680's English furniture design had been in a state of some stagnation, prevailing styles having not changed much for 14 or 15 years due to political and economic unrest during the reign of Charles II.

When William III, son of William, Prince of Orange, married Mary, daughter of Charles I, and the couple came to the throne in 1689 all that was about to change.

With this Dutch King came Dutch craftsmen and a strong but inevitable Dutch influence.

The fixing of thin slices of wood to a carcass for decorative effect was known as early as the second quarter of the 17C, but it became extremely popular under this Dutch influence in the early 1690's.

Bly J (1971)

Veneers from this period are almost an eighth and not less than a sixteenth of an inch thick.

"Now known as veneer, it was originally called "faneer" because the slices of wood were cut across the grain of the wood showing the fan of the timber."

Bly J (1971)

Walnut was being imported from France and Spain to meet an ever-increasing demand for this native timber. Mouldings and cornices were generous in their proportion and almost always cross grained.

Oyster shell cut Laburnum veneer was briefly popular, often the oysters would be divided by boxwood lines or strings.

Parquetry also became popular, as did marquetry, another direct influence of the Dutch tradition.

This marquetry could be divided into two main types;

"Floral" was the (earliest type), containing acanthus leaf scrolls, vines, flowers and occasionally birds parrots and eagles.

Timbers used were Walnut, Kingwood, Rosewood, Sandalwood, Orange and Lemon, Box, Holly, Acacia and Sycamore, sand shading and dyeing were commonplace.

The second being “Arabesque” or “Seaweed” marquetry, recognizable as extremely fine symmetrical scrollwork using only 2 woods, Box or holly for the pattern and Walnut for the background.

This craft reached a considered perfection around 1702 and became extremely popular on the very best pieces of the period.

Bly J (1971)

Quarter veneering was introduced, as was cross banding although this was soon superceded by herringbone banding, very much an English walnut period peculiarity.

Earlier fashion had been to apply mouldings to the drawer fronts, this was now being replaced with these decorative veneer effects and the mouldings were moved to the carcass dividers separating the drawers. This took the form of Cross-grained D moulding closely followed by DD moulding.

Pine began to be used instead of oak as a carcass wood to meet the increasing demands of the middle classes.

Probably the most influential development of this period was the use of the metal screw in furniture construction, this had changed forever the tradition of furniture making by the 1720's.

Bly J (1971)

This was very much an evolutionary period, with many new forms of furniture evolving around the needs of the middle and upper classes.

Eating fantastic quantities of fine food, and drinking tremendous quantities of alcohol were very much a middle class pastime. The large dining tables of the period were built to accommodate such feasts.

Forms such as the “Dumb waiter” appeared to help with the practicalities of this ritual gluttony.

Price B (1978)

Tea drinking had become firmly established as a national tradition by the beginning of the eighteenth century and was very fashionable by now in the best houses. Bly J (1971)

This resulted in one very popular new form, the *Kati*, a small decorated chest for storing ones tea. These evolved to contain two or three canisters for the home blending of different types of teas.

The name evolved to become Caddy, a term we are all familiar with today. Bly J (1971)

Again under this influence Tea tables were almost ubiquitous in wealthier English homes to further enhance this new English ceremony.

Dressing or toilet tables were becoming increasingly popular, having evolved from the side table by the addition of extra deep drawers to store the cosmetics, (often potentially fatal preparations made from white lead and mercury) Bly J (1971).

New and evolving designs and an expanding clientele meant that this was the beginning of a flourishing and exciting period for the English furniture industry.

QUEEN ANNE 1702-1714

Fully upholstered armchairs were becoming increasingly popular.

This was a time of great improvement in comfort and elegance with the backs of chairs being shaped to fit the body of the sitter for the first time. Bly J (1971).

The curved leg was introduced around the turn of the eighteenth century during the first quarter of the eighteenth century the curved leg was simpler, often terminating with a simple pad foot, with the square foot being the earlier form. Bly J (1971).

The scallop shell motif was highly fashionable appearing on the friezes, front rails and capping the knees of curved legs on all types of furniture.

The curved leg had begun its development into what we now call the “Cabriole” leg, from the French dancing term, meaning “to bound or leap”, this term was used to describe legs terminating in an animals foot, such as a hoof or a claw.

Bly J (1971).

GEORGE I AND GEORGE II (1714-1727 1727-1760)

George I came to the throne in 1714, during a relative period of mellowing of design between 1710 and 1720.

It has been said that was; “*As if our cabinet makers needed a break to settle down and prepare themselves for the expansive times ahead.*

The Palladian, Rococo, Gothic revival, and second Chinoiserie styles were to lift some from craftsmen status to high society, making them extremely wealthy in the process” Bly J (1971)

“*The great age of English Furniture had begun*”

Styles from 1720 –1800 are generally referred to by the name of the style or the designer, such as rococo rather than George II, to Hepplewhite or Adam rather than George III.

Bly J (1971).

This is because George I and later George II had little personal interest or effect on prevailing furniture fashion.

Couple this with the ever-growing affluence and influence of the middle classes, and the inevitable independence this brought to their taste, and we can see why this is the case.

In these first few years of the eighteenth century there were 3 main categories of furniture in production;

1/ The finest pieces, made by the best craftsmen for royalty and the aristocracy, often introducing new styles.

2/ Furniture made in London or other large cities or towns, for the squire and merchant class.

3/ Country, Cottage and Vernacular furniture made by the local joiner or village carpenter for the poorer classes.

It was the second category, mainly because of the sheer volume in which it was produced, Furniture made in London or other large conurbations, that laid the foundations for the rapidly expanding furniture industry that was to develop as the century progressed. Bly J (1971)

Most of what we recognize today as Antique furniture derives from this section of the market.

By now construction techniques were almost perfected, some of the best pieces matching the quality of those supplied to the French court. Bly J (1971).

Mahogany was being imported for the first time and by 1730 was being used to construct most of the more important pieces. Bly J (1971) As with walnut's introduction in the mid 17th century it was used mainly in the solid at first.

Walnut furniture continued to be produced alongside the new mahogany but by 1735-40 leading designers were reviving Rococo and the newly discovered close-grained Mahogany, that carved crisply, lent itself excellently.

This mainstream could be seen to fall loosely into 2 camps;

1/ Palladian, the most mass produced, inspired by Italian architecture and the Grand tour.

2/ Baroque, which when applied to furniture translated to fanciful idealistic asymmetrical designs, often of questionable proportions, using scrolls eagles masks spread-wings torso's and fantastic shells as their motifs.

Referred to by some pundits as "*Magnificence without elegance*".

William Kent was inspired to design some awesome examples around 1730.

This developed into Rococo, from the French *rocaille* meaning rockwork.

As a style it was really a simplification of the baroque style often using rocks garlands festoons and flora as its decorative motifs.

It remained popular in England until the 1760's and was of course the backbone of Chippendales "*Gentleman and cabinetmakers director*".

In fact to quote Bernard Price's "The story of English furniture"; "*It was Chippendale who anglicized it!*" Price B (1978)

In 1747 Horace Walpole transformed his house at Strawberry hill into what was to become the most admired Gothic villa in the world. His work had a great influence on many leading makers and designers, such as Chippendale. Price B (1978)

By the early 1750's a Gothic revival had truly begun and there was also an increasing taste for the Chinoiserie style.

In 1754 Chippendale published the now famous "*Gentleman and cabinetmakers director*", that brought together these styles with 160 line engravings, it was highly popular and another edition was published in 1755, and a third revised edition in 1762. Bly J (1971)

The introduction written by Chippendale himself gives some idea of the document;

He describes it as ; "*Being a Large Collection of the most elegant and Useful Designs of Household Furniture in the Gothic Chinese and Modern Taste: including a great Variety of BookCases for Libraries or Private Rooms. Commodes, Library and Writing-Tables, Buroes, Break- fast- Tables, Dressing and China- Tables, China-Cases, Hanging Shelves, Tea Chests, Trays, Fire Screens, Chairs, Settees, Sopha's, Beds, Presses and Cloaths-Chests, Pier-Glass Sconces, Slab-Frames, Brackets, Candle-Stands, Clock-Cases, Frets, and other Ornaments. To which is prefixed, a Short Explanation of the Five Orders of Architecture, and Rules of Perspective; with Proper Directions for executing the most difficult Pieces, The Mouldings being exhibited at large, and the Dimensions of each Design Specified; The Whole comprehended in One Hundred and Sixty Copper- Plates, neatly engraved, Calculated to improve and refine the present Taste, and suited to the Fancy and Circumstances of Persons in all Degrees of Life.... . Price B (1978)*

THE AGE OF CLASSICISM

At the same time as Chippendale was promoting the lavish and exuberant Rococo, gothic and Chinoiserie styles there was among some designers a feeling that a simpler more classical style was the way forward.

Robert Adam was deeply influenced by the classical taste when he studied architecture and antique designs in Rome in the mid 1750's.

"*Adam believed that the interior design and furnishings of a room should add up to a harmonious whole*". Price B (1978)

This influence was to travel back with him to England where it was adopted by enthusiastic artisans who craved relief from the overpowering rococo and gothic styles.

The classical taste necessitated simplicity of form and outline, lightness and elegance, with much attention paid to the perceived negative space.

The movement started off with Adam's adaptation of this ancient style and as the century passed, and the revival gained impetus, the adoption of the style became more and more accurate. Bly J (1971)

Decoration was more often than not in the form of fine veneers, Satinwood was very much in fashion having only become available to cabinetmakers since the early 1760's, Tulip-wood was also becoming a popular timber.

Price B (1978)

1777 saw the patenting of a brass stamping process that made all kinds of brass handles and escutcheons available to the designer and maker. . Price B (1978)

Fine stringing and cross-banding abounded, as did husks, urns festoons, anthemions and stylized honeysuckle. Marquetry of the finest quality was often used and rams head masks appeared as handles. Bly J (1971)

George Hepplewhite;

Adam worked on the finest commissions for the finest houses and most of his work was out of the reach of the middle class pocket.

It was Hepplewhite's widow who, after his death in 1786, was responsible for bringing this movement to the wider attention of middle England by publishing his "*Cabinet Maker and Upholsterers' Guide*" (1788). Bly J (1971)

A second edition was published in 1789 and a third in 1794.

The "*Cabinet Maker and Upholsterers' Guide*" was a less formal and somewhat simplified version of Adams designs, he was responsible also for the promotion of the shield and the heart as suitable shapes for chair backs. Bly J (1971)

Thomas Sheraton continued the previous traditions of Adam and Hepplewhite and published his “*Cabinet-maker and Upholsterers Drawing book*” in 1791-1994 (3 parts).

His furniture is thought by some commentators to be the zenith of elegance in English furniture, fine and delicate proportion coupled with decoration that was sometimes exuberant, but always restrained and under control. Bly J (1971)

Sheraton was a journeyman cabinet-maker but little evidence exists of Sheraton actually making any of his own designs into furniture. Bly J (1971).

His strength lay in his competent designs, and pieces from the “*Cabinet-maker and Upholsterers Drawing book*” were often made accurately to the published drawings. Bly J (1971)

This was the peak of the age of the designer, advances in the printing industry and the postal system meant that a designer such as Sheraton could, and did affect the prevailing fashion of furniture in all four corners of the country.

The age of the designer was coming to an end, The eighteenth century was drawing to a close and the Prince Regent, riding on a wave of nationalism generated by the war with France would once again affect the direction of furniture design from within the royal household.