

THE REGENCY PERIOD 1800-1830

The Regency has been defined as *“The period 1811-1820 during which the Prince of Wales (later George IV) acted as regent during his fathers periods of insanity”* (Collins 1979 p 1286). As you can see from the this definition, strictly speaking the Regency lasted from 1811-1820 , but as with any stylistic period the styles and fashions of the Regency were not confined to the decade which gave them their name . The influence of the Prince made itself felt long before he took temporary control from his father in 1811, and certainly did not disappear when he became king in 1820 (Price 1978).

No style is more aptly named than Regency, for unlike most styles that bear the name of a current ruler, Regency has at its heart the tastes of the Prince Regent himself . The Prince became Regent in 1811 Price (1978 p 109) states *“... he was well on the way to becoming a public embarrassment to the Royal household. He was not yet fifty but he was grossly obese , he dressed in garish uniforms , often of his own design, he allegedly sacked housemaids if he caught them looking at his immense belly and wept at the feet of the disinterested beauties he diligently pursued ”*.

But this was the man who sponsored the building of Regent Street and Cumberland Terrace and loved the novels of Jane Austen. He was also a good friend of the then famous explorer Scott. A true playboy of his day he spent money like water on building, statuary, carpets, paintings, he was an early collector of Dutch masters , porcelain and furniture. In three years he is reported to have spent £160,000 on furniture alone, in those days a staggering sum. He added to the royal collections not only the cream of what was made in his own lifetime but much that had been dispersed at an earlier date, including objects from the great primary collection of Charles I (Price 1978).

The Prince presided over the rebuilding of much of central London, with possibly his most impressive achievement being Carlton House given to the Prince of Wales when he came of age in 1783. With the help of the 3 architects Henry Holland (1745-1806), James Wyatt (1746-1813) and John Nash (1752-1835), he transformed a relatively modest two-storied house into a veritable palace worthy of comparison to European royal retreats. Regency high style at its most sumptuous was embodied here.

At Carlton House, Holland used French craftsmen to create magnificent staterooms shimmering with ornate gilding and mirror-glass. They made a fittingly grand setting for the Princes dazzling collection of opulent pre-Revolutionary French furniture. The furniture that Holland himself designed or commissioned had restrained classical lines but its decoration was lavish. Until it was found unsafe and demolished in 1827, Carlton House was a showpiece of Regency high society's taste. When it was thrown open for public viewing for three days in 1811, so many people crowded in to see it that visitors collapsed in the crush (Price 1978).

The decoration and furnishings of Carlton House were said at the time to be the Princes most impressive achievement, but some commentators thought Brighton Pavilion reflected the Princes personality more accurately. The project was a collaboration between the Prince and Henry Holland, it was a lavish oriental fantasy with onion-shaped domes and Moorish arches, pierced stone facades and tall arched windows. Sydney Smith rather unkindly remarked that it was "... *as if St Paul's had gone to the sea-side and pupped*" (Price 1978 p 110).

Brighton House (eventually to be renamed Brighton Pavilion), was partially rebuilt between 1815 and 1822 when the Prince became interested by the taste for Chinoiserie, then fashionable again. He commissioned designs for a new building in the Oriental style. Several eminent architects submitted drawings but the final result was the work of John Nash. The Prince was ecstatic with the results and was to furnish and decorate his pride and joy in exuberant style. He had the walls decorated with mandarins and fluted yellow draperies to resemble Chinese tents, the ceilings hung with canopies of tassels and bells and Oriental treasures of all kinds. A large proportion of the furniture was made in England in the Chinese manner and carved and painted to simulate bamboo. Ironically the workmen had virtually no experience of real bamboo, and so these pieces are often excessively adorned with painted knots.

Among the designers of furniture for the then named Royal Pavilion were George Smith (1756-1826) and Thomas Hope (1769-1831). Much of it was actually manufactured by the important London firm of cabinetmakers Bailey and Saunders. The Prince was said to have been very pleased with the quality of their side tables made of rosewood and

satinwood, supported by Chinese dragons and for use in the Banqueting Room,
“...which cost him the 'princely' sum of £430 each “ (Price 1978 p 110)

A painting of the Prince of Wales' Pavilion by *S. H. Grimm*, depicts the transformation by Henry Holland of the 'respectable farmhouse' into the Marine Pavilion in 1787. The original farmhouse was incorporated into the left-hand wing of the new structure (Brighton and Hove council 2008 p 5).

A strong French influence is never far away from English Regency furniture design, and its greatest impact occurred in those early years of the nineteenth century. This was a time when Napoleon was at the height of his power, and is said to have identified strongly with the Caesars and the opulence and potency of the Roman Empire. This bold French style came to be known as “French Empire Style” and this in turn affected English furniture.

The style of regency furniture still owed much to the designs of George Hepplewhite (died 1786) and Thomas Sheraton (1751-1806). There were also a number of contemporary designers who were to play an important part in its future development. One of the most notable was Thomas Hope who as previously mentioned worked on the Brighton Pavillion . He was born in Holland into a wealthy middle-class family, he moved to England in 1795 where he poured his energies and his considerable fortune into the study of architecture and into the designing and furnishing of his various large houses. Hope was a collector, antiquarian and designer who travelled widely in Greece. He copied the furnishings depicted on Greek vases and decorated them first with typical classical motifs such as lion's masks, Ionic scrolls and acanthus leaves. Hope brought a scholar's adaptation of Greek and Egyptian ornament into English furniture design (Price 1978). Hope first introduced his ideas in his *Household Furniture and Interior Decoration* published in 1807, the designs were badly received by contemporary critics, who thought the furniture ugly and impractical (Bly 1971).

Hope became interested in the French Empire style as he found this style quite compatible with his taste for the antique. Hope had strong links with France through his friendship with Charles Percier, one of the architects Napoleon employed building

monuments in Paris. He was said to have been inspired with a sense of mission to revolutionize English art forms. It was a mission that achieved some success and his *Household Furniture and Interior Decoration* helped to stimulate more interest in classical and ancient tastes, in spite of its poor reception from some critics.

Hope found much difficulty in finding craftsmen to carry out his ideas and finally sought the help of continental artisans to complete his work. The furniture he designed for his house, Deepdene in Surrey, was amazingly not dispersed until July 1917 when it was liquidated, this fueled a greater interest in Hopes designs but unfortunately all too late to save the collection.

The various influences at work during the Regency affected cabinetmakers and designers in different ways. George Smith an Egyptologist in his early career, was understandably an enthusiast for the new Egyptian style. Smith published his *“Collection of Designs for Household Furniture and Interior Decoration”* in 1808, four years later he published a further volume, *“Collection of Ornamental Design After the Manner of the Antique”*. For his material he drew liberally on French and Classical sources in tandem with the designs of Sheraton and Hope. He was delighted by Egyptian ornament and found it a novelty he could not resist using to the full.

Smith was a cabinet maker of considerable insight, and a successful business man and went on to produce a further major volume in 1828 which he proudly called *“The Cabinet Makers and Upholsterers Guide”*. It was in this important volume in which he noted how his earlier designs for household furniture had now been made obsolete in the face of recent stylistic developments (Price 1978). George Smith’s pleasure in Egyptian decoration (Bly 1971), his somewhat self indulgent use of such motifs as the sphinx, griffin, lion, leopard and his taste for palm leaves placed next to acanthus leaves all helped to give uniqueness to his furniture and to stamp it unmistakably as a product of the Regency period (Price 1978).

The designers of the late eighteenth century had interpreted their classical models with some freedom, this new breed of Regency designers copied them much more literally and boldly. Thomas Hope and George Smith’s furniture, while it holds great fascination for the antiquarian, conveys the distinct impression that it has stepped aside from the

main-stream tradition in the development of English furniture design, the overall effect is strongly classical and quite unique.

It has to be borne in mind that the Prince's was not the only influence to be felt in the early years of that century, Chinoiserie and Gothic were very much in fashion. The previously mentioned trendsetters and architects James Wyatt, and John Nash were busy designing castellated mansions and gothic ornamental cottages. In fact all over England style conscious landowners were commissioning carefully constructed ruins and follies to adorn their country estates (Price 1978).

Another important Regency personality was of course Nelson (1758-1805). Admiral Nelson's much publicized victories at sea had a powerful effect on English Regency furniture design. His death in the hour of victory at the Battle of Trafalgar in 1805 undoubtedly the catalyst and from then on a Nelson cult touched virtually every aspect of Regency life. His silhouette, or a picture of his ship *Victory*, appeared on objects from medallions and brooches to jugs and plates, snuffboxes and vinaigrettes to wooden butter moulds.

Ebony was used to decorate furniture as a sign of mourning, and some chairs were carved in imitation of Nelson's draped sarcophagus. Seafaring motifs abounded, their best-known use is on Sheraton's 'Nelson chair', or 'Trafalgar Chair', which has decorations of carved dolphins, anchors and rope on the splat. These chairs are still fashionable as dining chairs today, they have a distinctive back rail that is often cable moulded, the back supports continuing in a curve through to the floor and the sabre front legs curving in from the front seat rails. They get their name not only from the fact that they were developed at the time of Trafalgar but also because the firm of Morgan and Saunders, one of the best cabinet-making firms of the period, renamed their premises in honour of Nelson, calling them the Trafalgar Workshops. This fashion for nautical motifs continued to flourish for more than a decade and manifested itself in many forms of furniture (Price 1978).

Staying abreast of high society's fashions was an obsession of the wealthy. They grew rich in a booming wartime economy while Britain fought Napoleon on and off from 1793

to 1815 (Price 1978).

Round tables were in vogue , and continued well into the biedermeier style (Philp 1974), and as it was then fashionable to recline rather than sit upright, chaises longues, ottomans and sofas became increasingly popular. The fashionable sofa of the Regency period was the Grecian couch, often with roll-curved ends, bolster cushions and carved feet. Sofa tables, which had first appeared late in the previous century, now became increasingly popular. Chairs featured the broad cresting rail that became almost ubiquitous.

Another innovation of the Regency was the well known circular convex wall mirror, it usually had quite simple gilded frame, often surmounted by an eagle with spread wings sometimes holding a chain in its beak from which a ball is suspended. The frames on such mirrors were often decorated with applied gilt balls around the inside edge. There are also examples of mirrors which are far more ornate, enriched with acanthus leaves and even fitted with candleholders in the manner of the girandole. Usually hung in the dining room, these mirrors had a practical advantage – the butler could see at a glance how the various courses were progressing (Price 1978).

The dining-room of the regency might also contain serving tables, console tables, plant stands and of course cellarets , but the focal piece of furniture was always the dining table itself. At this time the most fashionable dining tables had rounded or D-ends and were designed to allow for the insertion of extra loose leaves, often stored upright in their own cabinet. The bases were usually in the form of a pedestal or pillar, which often stood on tripod legs. Before about 1800 these legs had a concave profile, later, legs swelled out greatly at the knee and tapered to a tiny ankle, before long the legs were replaced by plinth supports as the William IV period approached (Price 1978).

Regency period brought the classical taste of the late eighteenth century to a close. Satinwoods popularity was in decline (Haywood 1936) and the cabinet makers chose rich dark exotic timbers with boldly striped figuring that would be set off by brass inlays and brass galleries (Price 1978). Fashionable adornments came in the form of brass

lions paw feet , brass castors and lion mask handles .The new look in furniture veered from the spindly ultra delicacy of the later 18th century towards a more robust, opulent style, still Classical in inspiration but exuberant in ornament. Shapes were simple and solid with rather low horizontal lines, broad unbroken surfaces, gentle curves and some discreet reeding and fluting. Fashionable rooms now had their wooden floors carpeted, often wall to wall. Draperies were lavish, with fabric not just festooned across doors above the windows and hanging as curtains crossing over at the centre, but sometimes covering the walls as well. Other wall treatments included wallpaper and painted decorative effects such as marbling, graining and stencilling. Walls, furniture coverings and curtains might have the same pattern, frequently of flowers or of country scenes, sometimes of stripes (evoked by the military mood). Pale colours, with yellows and lime-greens among the most popular, gave rooms a light airy look. A new modernity was well and truly established by the time William IV came to the throne in 1830 and the Regency period came to an end.

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