

PERIOD FURNITURE-WHAT PERIOD? Part 2

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With the cessation of hostilities between the new America and England at the Treaty of Ghent in 1814 the late phase of the Neoclassical style shifted from Robert Adams interpretation to a classical Greco-Roman revival. The French style was the first to evolve to the **Empire** furniture style. In the early 1800's Napoleon made himself emperor and commissioned architects; Francois Fontaine (1762-1853) and Charles Percier (1764-1838) to redecorate with the imperial grandeur of the Roman empire. "There was nothing comfortable or inviting about the French Empire style. Its geometry was sharp and severe, and its decoration was stiff and imperial."¹



Henry Holland (1746-1806) introduced the **Empire** style to England, there known as **English Regency**, after time spent studying in France and the continent. Thomas Hope (1769-1831) followed with the publication of his measured drawings in "*Household Furniture and Interior Decoration*" (1807). In America the Greco-Roman revival grew as the country's population and wealth increased after the Treaty of Ghent. The demand for the new style was tied to a spiritual connection to France, for their help during the war, and ancient Greece as being the first democracy. However, American Cabinetmakers only used the aspects of the new style that appealed to their customer base.

1 Greene, *American Furniture of the 18th Century*, pg 102

Duncan Phyfe created his own neoclassical style, inspired by Sheraton, but more graceful, with carved ornamentation of waterleaf and reeded legs. At its height Phyfe's shop employed over 350 Journeymen, and Apprentices shipping all styles of furniture worldwide. A second key Cabinet-Maker to develop the American **Empire** style was Charles-Honoré Lannuier, who immigrated from France to New York and was successful in producing French designs for the new world market. However, the formality of the style prevented it from being popular across all levels of the new American society.²



As America grew and to meet the increasing demand for products, shops such as Duncan Phyfe's became factories to produce lower cost goods being sold through "warerooms", retailers buying for resale; and middlemen buying for far away customers and export. The great change from craftsmen shops to manufacturing was underway. The beginning of the Industrial Revolution provided many technological improvements, and also saw the development of management/labor strife that continues to this day. Three period innovations

2 Ibid., pg 108

that contributed to improvement in manufacturing and cost were the steam powered circular veneer saw, making veneer slices to consistent .100"; the steam powered Lathe sped turning for mass production, and the French Polish finish, replacing a very time consuming four coat varnish finish.

By the mid-19th century French furniture design surpassed English designs and became the dominate style force. While the previous styles enjoyed 20 to 30 years of popularity, the **Victorian**, separated by the initial **Gothic and Rococo** periods and the later **Renaissance** period, spanned the second half of the century. The name coincides with the reign of Queen Victoria from 1837 to 1901. It was during this period that major cultural shifts were occurring. Prior to the Industrial Revolution the primary basis for wealth centered around a man's land holdings and agriculture, and architecture education and furniture design was an important part of that. With the Industrial Revolution and expanding educational opportunities for women; the woman of the house became the dominate force over furnishing style of the household.

The **Victorian Gothic** style popular in Europe was not appreciated in America. We just did not have Medieval Castles standing on the hills over our cities. However, the **Rococo** revival in America began with the 1853 New York Exhibition, and for the next 20 years was the most fashionable furniture in the upper class homes. Another cultural shift was occurring at the same time. Parlor furniture that previously was lined up against the walls was brought into the center of the room and placed around a *Center Table*³.

The **Victorian Rococo** style revived the heavy use of carvings specially ordered by the wealthy, or was mass produced with plaster moldings for the factory furniture. All furniture was very sculpted with arched center pediments and thick wooden parts made from the darkest mahogany and rosewoods from the East Indies, Africa, and South America. The style fit well into the Italianate/Victorian building architecture taking

place at the time. Lastly it is of note that the northern wealthy merchants and factory owners profited greatly from the American Civil War, and continued spending on status symbols.



The **Victorian Renaissance** revival reintroduced angular shapes with segmented surfaces evolved in three phases. The first drawing from 16th century French designs with Baroque decorations; the second from Louis XVI style of the 18th century; and last, Neo-Classical elements of the Empire designs.⁴ The style never reached the height of popularity or craftsmanship of previous styles in America. The Industrial Revolution had by now fully enveloped furniture making reducing costs to appeal to a growing middle class. By the middle of the 19th century, steam driven line shaft machinery replaced a great amount of hand work, except final carvings and finishing, in furniture production. The design and concept of this equipment would be easily recognizable today.

3 Fitzgerald, *Four Centuries of American Furniture*, pg 216

4 Ibid., pg229-230



Before moving into the style periods of the industrialized period beginning in the 20th century, we have to step back again and reflect on what has been written above. What we study in the museum pieces today was made for the wealthiest families. In 18th century America, 3% of the population lived in Boston, New York, Philadelphia, and Charleston, SC. This distribution of our early population did not change much through the 19th century. Rural America was an agrarian society with a lot less money to spend. It was perhaps the snobbery of the city elite that termed the rural population as 'country bumpkins' and labeled **Country** and **Furniture of the Folk** as crude and poorly designed.⁵

However, most **Country** furniture designs came from the printed works circulating in the cities nearest to them. The German heritage of Lancaster, PA., created a blended style of German Baroque and rural English style. Connecticut style was a blend of New York, Boston, and Newport, RI. There were cabinet-makers in the country areas that produced pieces that are prized today, Samuel Dunlap and Samuel Gragg the most notable from New Hampshire. Perhaps **Country** furniture has been discounted because of the use of local domestic woods such as Cherry, Maple, Walnut,

Poplar, and Pine, instead of the imported and expensive Mahoganies and Rosewoods. Period furniture purists could discuss this endlessly.

Although most country cabinet-makers worked as isolated craftsmen, two groups created distinctive styles that prospered through the late 18th, and 19th centuries; the **Pennsylvania Germans**, and the **United Society of Believers in the First and Second Appearing of Christ**.⁶

The **Pennsylvania Germans** brought with them 16th century traditions that were blended and Anglicized in the colonies. We only have furniture pieces to study made after mid-18th century. The prized piece of the style was the painted *schrank* (chest). Powdered pigments first mixed with oils, then milk paints were used. By mid-19th century painted furniture fell out of favor with the increased wealth of the area, and decorations took the form of veneers and inlays.



5 Ibid., pg 135

6 Fitzgerald, *Four Centuries of American Furniture*, pg 195



Mother Ann, raised in the slums of Manchester England turned to the English Quakers, James and Jane Wardley in 1758 for salvation. While imprisoned for disturbing the peace she claimed to, receive a vision that Christ's spirit returned to earth through her, and later in 1774 she was called to the New World. So began the '**Believers**' known in America as **The Shakers**. With the increase of religious revivals in late 18th century America, the poor and orphaned flocked to the sect. By the 1790's eleven Shaker communities existed with New Lebanon, NY as the central ministry in charge of all aspects of their life and work. Shaker community furniture's popularity spanned most of the 19th century, the last village production fading during the Industrial Revolution.



Shaker style has lasted to this day, initially, from 1800 to about 1875 by Shakers themselves to countless craftsmen and companies producing the style. From the beginning the attention to quality craftsmanship and design flowed down from the Central Ministry. Uniformity and simplicity were their hallmarks with their members admonished to make things to last forever. With the belief that beauty rests on utility, pieces made in the Queen Anne and Federal styles were rejected. Before Louis Sullivan declared "Form ever follows function", the Shakers lived it.



Our local Shaker communities continue today in Canterbury, NH, and Hancock, MA. Both offer a living history of a time and enterprise in American history worth visiting and remembering. As far as a Period style with a popularity spanning two centuries, the **Shaker** Style has lived up to its founders teachings to make things that last forever.

In the last quarter of the 19th century social upheaval in Europe and economic, political crisis in America put furniture fashion on hold until the early years of the 20th century. The Industrial Revolution made European philosophers question its effect on the dignity of work and craftsmanship. The American economic recession and depression from 1873 to 1897, following the repayment of debts of our Civil War and political corruption of the Grant administration from 1868 to 1876 eventually affected Europe as well. It was during this time period that William Morris (1834-1896) following the teachings of John Ruskin (1819-1900)

began the **Arts and Crafts Movement**. Against this backdrop the furniture of William Morris, Charles Eastlake (1836-1906) and revivals of Colonial, Gothic, or Rustic styles received little acceptance in America.



Contrary to many writings and beliefs that Arts and Crafts was a style, *it was and is a movement of philosophy on how and why we should; and do work*. Within the **Arts and Crafts Movement** were individuals who created styles, and today there are new designers and craftsman that are reviving those styles. The **Arts and Crafts Movement** in America started with the **Craftsman** style of Gustav Stickley; the **Prairie** school of Frank Lloyd Wright; and the **Mission** style of the Stickley brothers and Roycroft's. They made an impact on American Furniture fashion and there revivals in the late 20th century.

“The terms Mission, Craftsman, and Arts and Crafts are often mistakenly used interchangeably. In fact, they have quite distinct meanings. Arts and Crafts is the umbrella term that applies generally to all crafts – from tiles and textiles to ceramics, furniture and illuminated manuscripts, produced under the influence of anti-industrialist ideas for social reform. The ideas were first articulated by John Ruskin and

William Morris. The term Arts and Craft was coined after the Arts and Crafts Exhibition of 1888 in London. The movement which emphasized hand craftsmanship, honest design, and local materials began in England, then spread to continental Europe and America.”⁷

Visiting the English shops of Morris, Voysey, Ashbee and others, plus French Samuel Bing's *Art Nouveau* shop, all leaders of the European Arts and Crafts Movement; Gustav Stickley picked up the medieval concepts and tenets of the Movement for his work in America. The labels **Mission** and **Craftsman** can both be attributed to the designs of Stickley. While he rejected the term Mission in favor of Craftsman; the name of his publication, he used Mission for the public's new interest in western California culture to promote his furniture.



Stickley's **Craftsman** style was a formulation of Shaker simplicity, Wright's angularity, with influences of 17th century rectilinear shapes; through tenons and mortised frames and center panels, exposed dovetails, and quartersawn white oak. From his metal shop he produced hand wrought copper, brass, and iron hardware. The style, except for the brief period of Harvey Ellis during 1903-1904, was of solid massiveness with no decoration. Harvey Ellis, briefly brought many of the design elements of the English designers with thinner and lighter pieces and curved aprons and

7 Rodel, Kevin P & Bineen, Johathan; *Arts and Crafts Furniture: From Classic to Contemporary* (Newtown, CT. : The Taunton Press, 2003), pg.9

bowed stiles, veneers and lamination. Ellis died in 1904, and Stickley's **Craftsman** style quickly reverted back to his original precepts.

“Mission refers generally to rectilinear American furniture of the Arts and Crafts Movement. The term was apparently coined with reference to the simple, solid furniture of some Spanish missions in California.”

Craftsman is the trade name Stickley chose for his line of Arts and Crafts furniture. Although much American manufactured furniture was made in imitation of Stickley's Craftsman line, none but Stickley's is properly called Craftsman furniture”⁸

Frank Lloyd Wright and the **Prairie** style started in Chicago after the fire in 1871. He was one of several architects of the time who espoused a major tenet of the English Arts and Crafts Movement that architects had control over exterior and interior design. Wright rejected the Movement's premise that only hand craftsmanship was essential to good design. Good designs made with the use of time saving machines and attention to detail made for good end products.

The **Prairie** school architects drew design concepts from the Japanese pavilion at the 1893 World Exhibition in Chicago. Adopting the use of horizontal and cantilevered lines blended with the vast prairies of the Midwest. Table and chest tops reflected the roof overhang on their houses, tall slat backed dining chairs created a sense of enclosure in open floor plans, or served as screens to divide a space were to compliment the house design. Wright used built-in furniture pieces to insure his designs of a unified exterior and interior did not get changed by his clients. Arrogance does not last well when someone else is paying for it. Wright's houses were ahead of their time modern, with open floor plans, spaces for intimate conversations, vast cantilevered roofs over veranda's and grand entrances, and window walls to bring the outdoors inside. Much of his furniture was uncomfortable.

The Stickley brothers, Lee (1869-1957) and John George (1871-1921), started making **Mission** style furniture in 1901. Their designs were based on Gustav's early pieces. The L. & J.G. Stickley company maintained the attention to quality standards of the Arts and Crafts Movement. The backs of casework and cabinets remained vertical chamfered boards, rectangular wooden pulls, and case stiles pinned to the top of cases for structural reinforcement.⁹ The brothers are also credited with the method for post glue-ups of thin stock for quartersawn figure on four sides.



8 Rodell & Bineen, *Arts and Crafts Furniture: From Classic to Contemporary*, pg.9

9 Cathers, David M., *Furniture of the American Arts and Crafts Movement* (Philmont, NY: Turn of the Century Editions, 1996), pg 79



The Stickley brothers ceased production of the Mission style line in 1923; by 1926 their designs were based upon colonial revivals. After Lee's death in 1957 the company was sold to Alfred Audi, and in 1989 the A.J. Audi Company reintroduced **Mission** style furniture, contributing to a rebirth of the Arts and Crafts Movement.

The current Greene and Greene revival is part of the renewal of the Arts and Crafts Movement. Charles and Henry Greene, architects from the MIT class of 1893 moved to California and designed the low bungalow houses with overhanging roof and rough hewn shingles. Their furniture design was closer to Art Nouveau combining the oriental cloud forms, rounded edges and corners. The original design popularity was brief and ended by 1915.



The history of furniture styles in the 20th century has been a contest of new design and return to revivals of past styles. Americans became increasingly conservative just prior to World War I, and began a rejection of the Arts and Crafts Movements styles for revivals of everything from Jacobean through Victorian-Renaissance. Factory production made possible choices of every style and every designer at a reasonable cost. However, manufacturers were quick to take liberties with the details of style for mass production, and sales and marketing types were quick with new labels, such as "French Provincial" to conjure something new. The most popular of the **Pre WWI** and **Pre WWII Modern** styles periods were called Colonial and Early American styles, but were adaptations of Queen Anne and Federal styles in mass production techniques.

Prior to WWI 70% of Americans lived in the rural countryside, by 1920 the country was divided 50% rural and 50% city. This shift occurred with the growth of factory workers and better opportunities than farming. Americans needed apartment houses and simpler, smaller, more flexible furniture and we built to satisfy these needs. One key development following the work of Louis Pasteur on microbes and disease was the introduction of tubular and angle brass and steel used initially for bed frames, one of the first of machine age materials to be used in furniture.



The Paris Exhibition of 1925, labeled; “*Exposition Internationale des Arts Decoratifs et Industriels Modernes*” brought the introduction of **Art Deco** to building architecture and furniture design. There were three schools within Art Deco; the French style continued the traditional methods of hand craftsmanship and materials, the German style promoted the use of machines and machine age materials, and the Swedish style blending the French and German. The Swedish style became the **Scandinavian Modern** style in America. Unlike Europeans shaken by their experience with WWI, Americans were not ready to reject the past and accept modernism. It took the 1929 Stock Market Crash, Great Depression, and calamity of WWII to do that.

While the German Bauhaus school promoted and used manmade materials of steel, aluminum, plastics and glass, **Scandinavian Modern** was between the severe lines of Art Deco aesthetic and traditional revivals. Interestingly, Kaare Klint, the founder of the Swedish and Danish Arts and Crafts Movement of the 1930's, was greatly influenced by 19th century Shaker design.¹⁰ As the world descended into WWII, 1930's American designers created variations on the Scandinavian designs, most notably *Streamlining*, that encompassed automobile, airplane, trains, ocean liners, and furniture; labeled *Waterfall*.



Throughout the interwar period America delved into a search for a lasting furniture style. Many designers produced Studio, avant-garde designs that were lauded by their critics and wealthy, but never became popular. Prior to America's entry

10 Fitzgerald, *Four Centuries of American Furniture*, pg 316

into WWII, furniture sales of historical reproductions and the functional, inexpensive modern designs were equal to one another.

The best quote that sums up the American experience of the first half of the 20th century and WWII comes from George Nelson, influential post war designer of Modernism; “*the past had to be swept away and the world changed, somehow, into a better place.*”¹¹

Before WWII, England, France, Belgium, and Germany led the world with the latest designs and styles. With most of the European continent in ruins, and America's new found role as leader of the western world, we took over. As our military personnel returned, and families grew, an exodus from the confines of cities started for the suburbs. With this trend, modernism advocated the simplification of the home and furniture. The **Mid Century Modern** style became sculpted biomorphic forms; such as Isamu Noguchi's delta wing shape glass top coffee table; contemporary forms of the hand-crafted pieces of teak and traditional woods; and the first generation of the **Studio** Craftsmen.¹²



Studio furniture in 1950's and 1960's was influenced by Scandinavian design, Shaker style and Windsor chairs. The designers are a list of well-known names; Wharton Esherick, George Nakashima, Sam Maloof, Arthur Espenet Carpenter, Jere Osgood, and Tage Frid. Their original works

11 George Nelson, “Introduction: The Design Process at Herman Miller,” *Design Quarterly* 98/99(1975), p.8

12 Fitzgerald, *Four Centuries of American Furniture*, pg 324-328

furnished the new mansions of the wealthiest and fashion conscience elite. Leading furniture manufacturing companies were quick to the mass market with copies and lookalikes.



One of the innovations of the war technology was bent plywood lamination. Charles and Ray Eames working for the US Navy developed the method and after the war realized the possibilities in furniture. Their molded plywood seat and back, fastened to a chrome plated metal wire frame was easily produced, light and easy to move.¹³ These are as popular today as they were in 1950.



During the last quarter of the 20th century, Modernism morphed into a Minimalist trend of less is more. With no sense of scale or proportion the mantle of geometric form and technology, metallic surfaces, plastics and modular furniture styles developed. Artists created furniture as art, using Pop Art and Op Art influences. The closest thing to any new style grew from Italian architects following the writings and presentations of Robert Venturi and Charles Jencks, American architects who attacked the concepts of Modernism's unbending geometric forms. The **Memphis** style, named after

13 Ibid., pg 334-335

Bob Dylan's "*Stuck Inside of Mobile and Memphis Blues Again*", Memphis also being the home of Elvis Presley, and the cradle of civilization in ancient Egypt.¹⁴ I included the above as part of the research done on the topic, but still having a hard time getting a grasp of the reasons given.



Using the dictum of form over function, The **American Memphis** style prospered with the elite and those who sought high fashion. The style did bring back the elements of ornamentation and ancient classical forms, but never achieved popularity outside the tenets of modern art.

This review of American furniture styles is possible because of all the work done in the past 20 years by so many historians, researchers, and writers who have revived the study of how and why we make things. The national and regional resurgence of craftspeople, schools, and guild groups is a part of this. So what period style is your forte? There are many to choose from. If you want to do an authentic 18th century piece, then turn off the electric power, light your candles, and sharpen your hand tools, because that's how they did it in the 18th century. In the meantime I will use my new found skills of hand tools and 21st century power tools to make furniture and accessories from traditional materials and designs in the most

14 Fitzgerald, *Four Centuries of American Furniture*, p352

efficient manner possible that fit my home and clients want.

I have no doubt that someone's favorite designer, craftsman, architect, or author has been overlooked in this article. My intention was to cover the highlights and most influential styles and people of the times and how we've arrived at this time and place in our furniture styles. Over the spring and summer as I read, researched, and wrote this there are some craftsman that I will go back to for an in depth review of their designs. As part of the camaraderie in the woodworking shop I am looking forward to the next "Period" furniture project!