

WHAT'S AMERICAN ABOUT EARLY NEW ENGLAND FURNITURE? PETER EATON

as told to John Fiske

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The house that Peter Eaton and his wife, Joan Brownstein, designed and built is strikingly modern. It defies expectations, for Peter is a leading dealer in early American furniture, and Joan specializes in American folk portraiture. I sank deeply into the leather couch beside Peter. We were surrounded by antiques from the couple's personal collection, which is where Peter wanted to begin our conversation.

"Look around," he said. "We collect Roman glass, Sung period pottery, early English and Chinese furniture, and European metalware." The absence of American furniture in the room was striking. "I'm especially interested in the cross-cultural movements of forms and influences," he continued, "in following forms from China to Europe to England to America. We don't collect the New England furniture that I deal in because I don't want to compete with my clients, and you see we don't keep any American folk portraits for the same reason."

ANTECEDENTS AND BEYOND

"Our collecting interests are much broader than what we deal in, and I've come to realize how few genuinely antiquarian collectors there are, collectors who really love old stuff, regardless of where it came from. There are very few who collect cross-culturally, who are willing to mix American, English, Continental - whatever. I think most collectors are too restricted in their horizons - look at those sixteenth-century Chinese cupboards, for example. You can see in them the prototype of this Hudson River Valley Kas over here. Now, the Kas is great in itself, but it's so much more interesting when you can see its antecedents 200 years earlier on the other side of the globe. All antiques are cross-cultural, and I think it's unfortunate that more collections aren't."

I asked Peter to elaborate on that a little.

"Being able to see the antecedents within the objects you are collecting gives you a much broader view," he said, "it helps you see beyond the object itself. But I think it does more than that. When you see the antecedent within the form, you can see where the maker went beyond the antecedent, you can see what he did for which there was no precedent, something that was his and his alone."

"That's what has always interested me about early New England furniture, those signs where the maker did what he had to do in order to solve a problem or to please a local client. I don't know why I developed this strong interest in 'high country' or 'vernacular' furniture, whatever we like to call it, but I did. It's the furniture made outside of the urban centers between about 1680 and 1750 or so - the styles that we call Pilgrim Century, William and Mary, Queen Anne.

"People in the cities wanted furniture that was as close as possible to what was desirable in England or Holland, and they wanted it as soon as possible after the fashion came in. For me, the much more interesting forms were made away from these urban centers, upcountry, that's where you find forms made by people who may have seen an urban example or two, or may have gotten some training in an urban shop, but who were now faced with different materials, different and fewer tools and a different clientele.

"Up the Connecticut River, up the Merrimac, or the Piscataqua, the people there may have yearned to have the wealth and prestige of people in the cities, but they had neither; they had to live and work locally with what was available, and that's when real American forms develop. That's why I find high country furniture so interesting, and why I think it's most American. Look at the Dunlaps, for example, just 30 miles upriver from Portsmouth, producing furniture that went way beyond any prototype. Sure, you can see the English or the North Shore antecedent somewhere inside high country furniture, but the craftsman wasn't quite sure of it, so he produced something that was one-off, or off-beat, maybe at the limit of what he was capable of producing."

"Exceeding the antecedent," I said trying to sum it up. Peter looked at me quizzically. "Well, if you want to put it like that..."



Figure 1: Tea table, birch legs with sycamore top and frame, Coventry area, Connecticut, c. 1740.



Figure 2: Dressing table, cherry, pine secondary, Connecticut, 1750-60.

"The communities where these craftsmen were working may have been inland and rural, but they were communities with taste, and that's important," Peter continued. "The cabinetmaker put that taste into wood, he didn't just nail three boards onto a pair of trestles to make a table. High country furniture shows taste, often a very distinctively local taste, whereas primitive furniture is more functional. When high country furniture is a success, it's really very nice indeed, and even when it isn't, it's always intriguing, at the very least.

"How do I judge when it's successful? Well, like it or not, beauty is not in the eye of the beholder. When I give talks to historical societies or whomever and I say that, it upsets people, but it's true; taste may be personal, but beauty is not. Taste varies; you can say 'I like it,' or 'I don't like it,' but you can't say it's beautiful when it isn't. There are aesthetic proportions, considerations of line and balance and form that are in the object itself, absolutely independent of who's looking at it.

"Collectors must have a sense of good form, or beauty, but the way beauty is put into form changes: good form in Pilgrim furniture is different from good form in Queen Anne. There's a change from a massive, grounded, rooted beauty, to a lighter, more airy beauty; the change from joiners to cabinetmakers. Some furniture historians argue that the insecure and agricultural life of the earlier communities made them seek beauty in forms that were massive and appeared rooted in the ground. Joined furniture certainly gave its owners substance and status, but I don't think we have to go digging into the psychology of the need for roots! Though certainly the changes from Pilgrim to Queen Anne do reflect the changes in rural New England societies and in their economic prosperity, and possibly therefore in their sense of security."

EXAMPLES FROM PAST INVENTORY

Peter paused for a moment.

"Let's get on to the real objects," he said, spreading out photographs of some of the pieces he had sold over the years. They covered up the motoring magazines that were neatly arranged on the large, modern coffee table in front of us - Peter is quite a gearhead on the side.

"Take this country tea table," he began, passing Figure 1 to me. "It's birch with a sycamore top, and was made in the Coventry, Connecticut, area. You can see in it almost everything I've been saying. While the skirt is known on two other tables, the leg with that beginning of a cabriole knee and pure William and Mary turnings is a one-off. It's all one piece, turned on a lathe and then hand shaped. Then the tapering trumpet section is fluted!"

His voice sounded almost incredulous.

"There's nothing else like it," Peter said, "but it worked; it actually worked. When I owned it, people either loved it, or they walked right away from it. The guy who made it could clearly have done anything, anything he wanted, but his customer must have had some William and Mary furniture, a dressing table or whatever, and he wanted

something to fit in, but wanted something that was au courant as well. He wanted the combination so he put them in the same piece! Only high country American furniture can give us something like this. It could occur nowhere else."

Peter fished around in the pile of pictures.

"This is the only one of these I've ever seen," he said, handing me Figure 2. "This dressing table has a case-width of only 24 inches, and look at that huge overhang. It's cherry, all wooden pin construction, with great Connecticut talons on the ball-and-claw feet, but it had to be a special order. It was made for a client who wanted this, and nothing else; he probably had just the spot he wanted to put it in. It was a counterpoint to something, it had to be; that's what it is - a counterpoint. The heavy molding under the top is pure Connecticut, the legs with their tiny ankles and well-curved knees are pure Connecticut, so is the skirt, but the relationship of the top to the case is absolutely unique, and it's beautiful, whether it's your taste or not, it's beautiful."

"So is this," Peter showed me the candlestand in Figure 3. "You could easily overlook this. It doesn't have the mass that many people think is necessary for something to be important. Now, this would not have been popular in any urban center, but that's as beautiful an object as you'll find anywhere in American furniture. Absolutely gorgeous. See the chamfered underside of the top, and how the maker

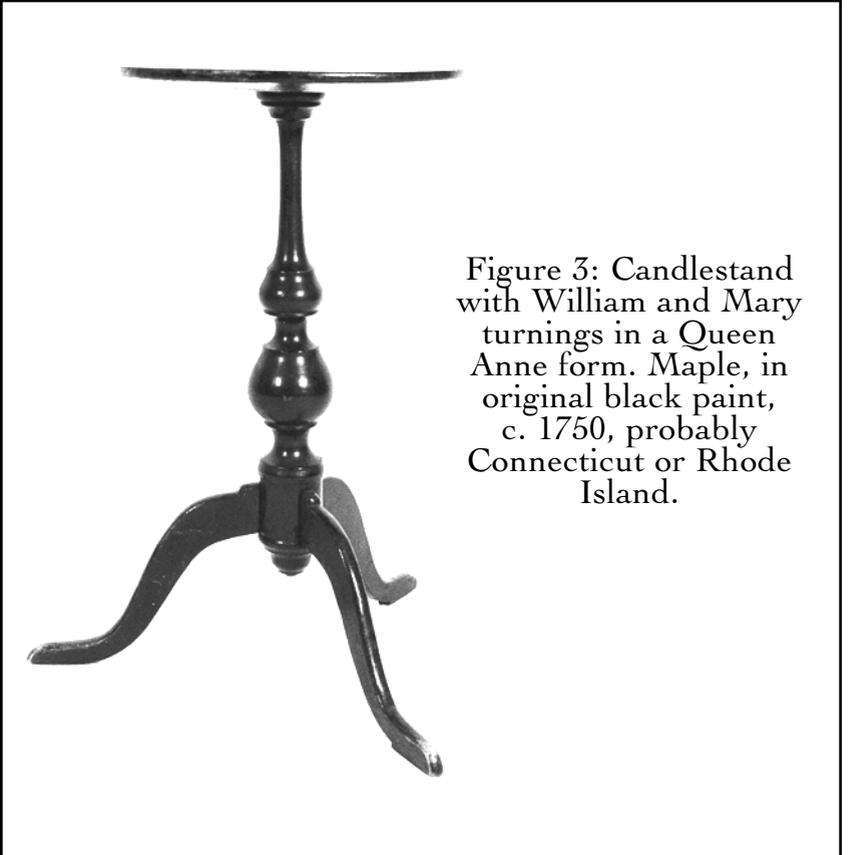


Figure 3: Candlestand with William and Mary turnings in a Queen Anne form. Maple, in original black paint, c. 1750, probably Connecticut or Rhode Island.



Figure 4. Figure 4: South-central New Hampshire Queen Anne desk, maple, c.1785, with massive blocks for the feet.

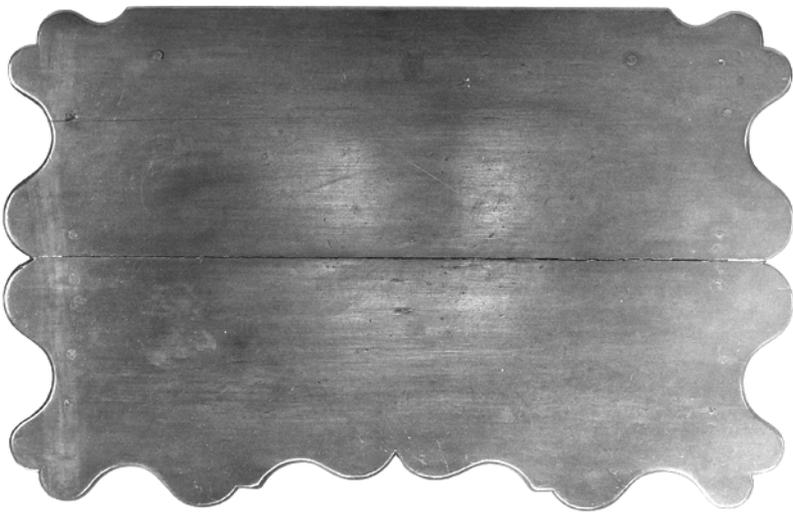


Figure 5.
Figure 5: Dressing table with boldly scalloped top, cherry, Connecticut River Valley, c. 1775.



has set the pillar right into it without a cleat so as not to spoil the line, and the little step in the knee. See how well the William and Mary turnings go into the Queen Anne form? Just a beautiful, beautiful object. That guy wasn't just a cabinetmaker, he was an artist, he had an eye."

Peter found that photograph hard to put down, but after a moment he did, and shuffled through the others.

"Here," he said, pulling out Figure 4. "Almost a generic Queen Anne desk, right? If it had been in walnut it could have been Salem, though the central drop looks more upcountry. This is a New Hampshire variant, perhaps by someone who had trained in Massachusetts. Then you flip it. See those massive blocks for the feet underneath, and see how that little decoration hanging below the skirt is carved right out of the block itself? This is not something they'd have done on the North Shore. The maker must have looked at Queen Anne cabriole legs and seen a structural weakness in them. 'Well, darn it,' he said, 'we can fix that.' And he did. Those are the strongest cabriole legs you'll ever see! Pure New Hampshire."

"This came out of the Connecticut River Valley, couldn't be anywhere else." Peter showed me the dressing table in Figure 5 with its dramatically scalloped top. "Now these things don't have a precedent, but again, the maker could have done whatever he wanted; he was a skilled craftsman, but this was what was stylish in that area at that time, only a short period of time, say 1765 to 1790, and only in the Valley. Nobody on the North Shore, or in Boston, would have had that in their house. That's what's so intriguing: why there, why then?"



Figure 6: Tulip and Sunflower chest, Weathersfield, Connecticut, c. 1700.



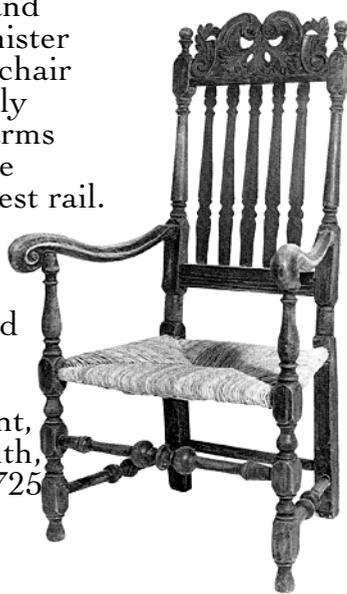
Figure 7: Hadley chest, Deerfield, MA area, c. 1700. Oak and pine. Found in an attic in Indiana full of quilts. Original red-brown paint under an old crackled shellac surface.

"Hadley chests and sunflower chests," he continued, picking up Figures 6 and 7, "They're very distinctive local forms, and they developed so early, say 1690 to 1710 or so. Okay, the carving may have English antecedents, and there's some Dutch in the applied bosses and split spindles, but the sunflower and tulip chests are uniquely Hartford, and there's nothing remotely like a Hadley chest anywhere else in New England. Now, you can get into a sociological issue, and good luck to you, but why were these two forms only made in the Hartford area and up the Connecticut River Valley? As incredibly well developed and beautiful as these things are, they had a really limited geographic appeal. Why weren't they popular in Boston? Why weren't they popular in Providence, or New York, or Philadelphia? It was only a small group of people who wanted things like this, and there was an even smaller group who wanted the Hadley-Hatfield chests and boxes. The one in Figure 6 is Weathersfield, and you go up river for 30 miles and you get the one in Figure 7. We'll never know just how or why 30 miles made that sort of difference, but it did. The carving's not quite as sophisticated, maybe, but it's still a gorgeous thing."



Figure 8:
William and
Mary banister
back armchair
with boldly
scrolled arms
and foliate
carved crest rail.

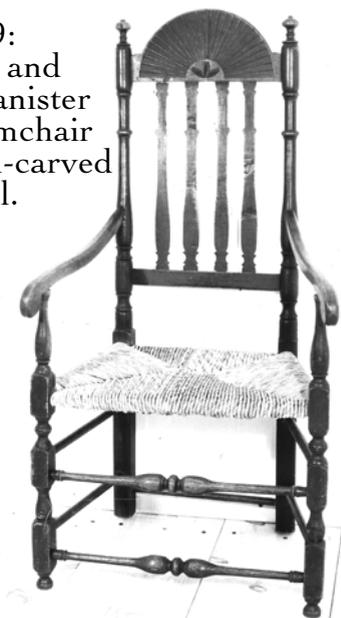
Maple and
ash in
original
black paint,
Portsmouth,
NH, c. 1725



“Now let's look at these chairs (Figures 8 and 9.) There's a generic style to them, William and Mary, that has English antecedents, though the combination of banisters and rush seats is much more of an American variant, but what's amazing about them is their crest rails. This one (Figure 8), is the best, it's the best of Portsmouth chairs. It's as though the maker said, 'Okay, I can make you a good chair, but on the crest, I'm going to show you what I can really do!' That wonderful leafage carving is the same as on an altar table in one of the Portsmouth churches. The maker of Figure 9 clearly saw the popularity of carved fans on drawers, and saw no reason why he shouldn't put one on a crest rail. At the center of the fan, where the drawer would have had its pull, he solved the problem of the empty space by carving his own, unique three-petal flower.”



Figure 9:
William and
Mary banister
back armchair
with fan-carved
crest rail.



“I could go on and on,” Peter sighed. “You'll have to stop me. Look at that neat little one-piece blanket chest on frame with a lift top (Figure 10.) It was in its original red paint, and look at the well-carved slipper feet on the front legs and the simple turnings on the back and that beautifully developed skirt. Then, by separating the two drawers at the top, he made the whole piece...” Peter paused for the right word. “ Different,” he said.

That one word may be what sums up Peter's love for high country New England furniture. It's different. That, too, is what's most American about it.

IN SUMMARY

“It was good to go through pictures of things I sold many years ago,” he said, looking up at me. “I'd buy them back in a heartbeat if I could. It's getting so hard to find the really distinctive pieces. There's good stuff out there, there's good high country furniture out there, but the real standouts, they're hard to find. So many of them now are in the major private collections or museums. We just keep looking, and every now and again we find one.”

Peter gathered up his photographs from on top of the motoring magazines, and held them carefully, almost lovingly.

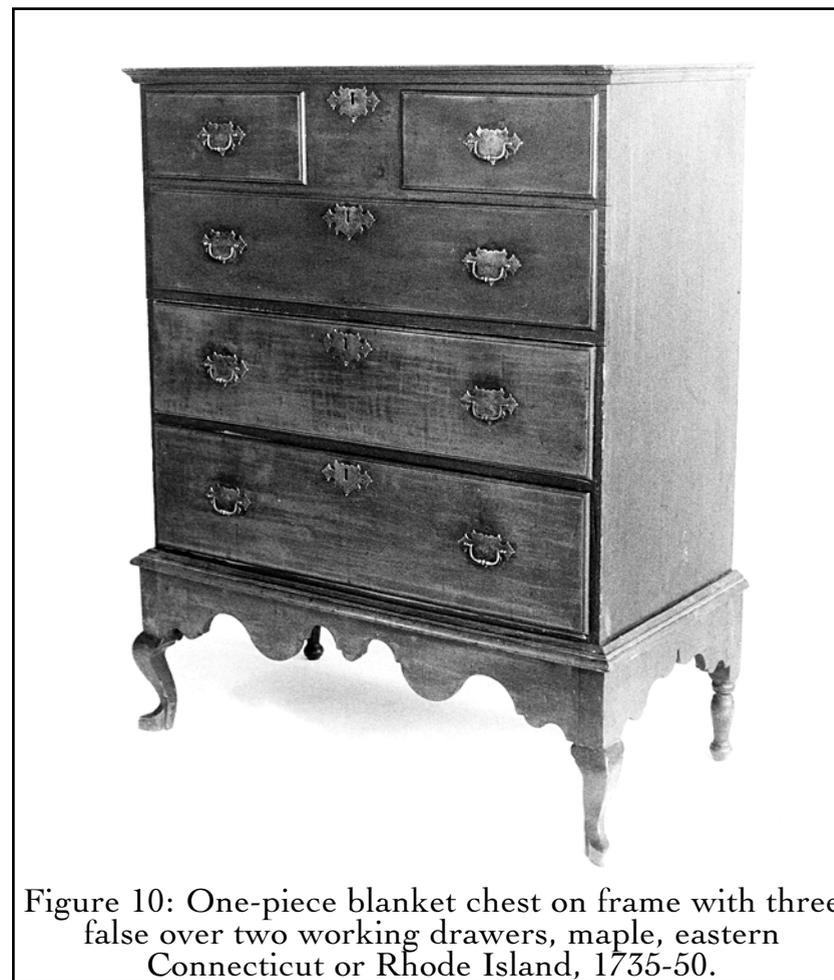


Figure 10: One-piece blanket chest on frame with three false over two working drawers, maple, eastern Connecticut or Rhode Island, 1735-50.

Further Reading

The most important book on this topic is John Kirk: *American Furniture and the British Tradition to 1830*, Alfred Knopf, New York, 1982. Also of interest, but now somewhat dated, is Herbert Cescinski and George Leland Hunter: *English and American Furniture*, Garden City, New York, 1929.