Southern Perspective

A Sampling from the Museum of Early Southern Decorative Arts

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Old Salem Inc.
Museum of Early Southern Decorative Arts
Winston-Salem, North Carolina

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Foreword

I am pleased to have an opportunity to write this foreword to the catalog celebrating the fortieth anniversary of the founding of the Museum of Early Southern Decorative Arts (MESDA). When Frank Horton established this museum in 1965, he had a compelling vision to collect and research the neglected decorative arts of the early South. Now that his original idea has reached middle age, it is appropriate that we celebrate and reflect on all that has been accomplished.

The forty objects selected for inclusion in this catalog provide a glimpse of the MESDA collection. Not only do these objects reflect the importance of the decorative arts in the South, they are also evidence of how far we have come in understanding the unique society and cultures that produced them. This broader understanding of southern society and culture is certainly one of MESDA's most important contributions. It is also what links MESDA within Old Salem.

From the beginning, Frank Horton had a clear vision of how MESDA and the historic village of Salem would complement one another. The fortieth anniversary of MESDA presents an opportunity to remind us how these two components of Old Salem provide a unique picture of the American South.

Today, the American South is seen as one place, bound by a common history and culture. This one South, however, is a product of the Civil War and its aftermath. The late-nineteenth century saw the rise of the legend of the "lost cause," which united southerners and encouraged them to recognize and celebrate the social and cultural traditions that separated them from the rest of America. If we can speak of the South as one place today, it would have been impossible to do so 200 years ago. In fact, there is scant evidence that southerners in the eighteenth or early-nineteenth centuries recognized that their region possessed any particular unifying characteristics.

It is the story of this complex, multi-racial, multi-ethnic, agrarian, even industrial, South of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that Old Salem can help people understand. The furniture, paintings, silver, ceramics, metals, and other objects in the MESDA collection are the tangible reminders left by this complex, evolving southern culture. These objects enable us to understand the movement of peoples from coastal plain to backcountry and from north to south. They can help us see the impact and commingling of Germans, Anglos, Scots-Irish, and Africans, who together created today's unique southern culture. These objects are also evidence of the advancement of technology and manufacturing, which had a profound impact on American life.

The history of the Moravian town of Salem is an important example of this evolving southern culture. The early Moravian settlers brought a unique social experiment to the South. The evolution of this social experiment from a communal, closed society to an open, individual society mirrors the increasing homogenization of southern culture.

Today we prefer to envision Old Salem as one entity with several components: MESDA, the historic town of Salem, the Toy Museum, and the Children's Museum. These are all integral parts of one experience, an experience that enables our visitors to better understand the history of the American South through the objects, buildings, and stories of the people who called it home.

Paul C. Reber, PhD
President
Old Salem Inc.

Introduction

As I look at the forty wonderful objects presented in this book, I wish we could show the entire collection of the Museum of Early Southern Decorative Arts (MESDA), because each piece in the collection is a delight in its own way. But for his anniversary catalog, we decided to select forty objects to celebrate the forty years since MESDA opened its doors in 1965. We think that these forty examples provide a splendid sampling from MESDA's collection.

Some of the pieces that we have selected for this book are so well known and loved that they can be considered "icons" of southern decorative arts. Some of the objects captivated the first visitors to the museum when it opened and some are recent acquisitions.

About the time that the idea for MESDA was germinating, the following justification for the study of decorative arts appeared in print:

> *Documents unfortunately do not provide a complete index to human intellectual processes and attitudes. To arrive at even a general impression of an historical era, one must study not only what was written, but what was sat upon, eaten from, ridden on, and lived in and with (from Carroll Lindsay, "Museums and Research in History and Technology," in* Curator *[Vol. 3, 1962]).*

Now, forty years after MESDA's establishment, we can look back with a broader and more educated perspective to see the enduring truth in those words. From this vantage point, we can also recognize the significant contributions that MESDA has made to the field of American decorative arts through its systematic and dedicated study of southern objects and documents.

Every museum is a unique collection, and the Museum of Early Southern Decorative Arts is an outstanding example of the success and strength that comes to an institution with a clearly articulated focus. MESDA opened to the public in January 1965, and its founders, Frank L. Horton and his mother, Theo L. Taliaferro, were committed to presenting an often-overlooked southern perspective—principally, a view of the early American South. Of primary interest to them were the states of Maryland, Virginia, the Carolinas, Georgia, Kentucky, and Tennessee, and the time period of the seventeenth century through 1820. From these concise parameters came MESDA's focus.

When MESDA opened there were few pieces in the museum that could be attributed to specific artists or artisans. Now, because of MESDA's groundbreaking research program, which reached its zenith in the late 1970s and early 1980s and actively continues today, many of the pieces on exhibit are either signed or can be attributed to known makers.

Frank Horton trained the first classes of MESDA guides himself, and he clearly explained to them the significance of the museum's name:

> *MUSEUM—not a house museum, though our displays are largely placed in room settings...*
>
> *AN ART MUSEUM—arranged to show articles in an interesting manner, but according to types or periods-the visitor conducted by tours...*
>
> *OF EARLY—1640-1820—Jacobean thru [sic] the neo-Classic periods (Federal)...*
>
> *SOUTHERN—Maryland, Virginia, the Carolinas, Georgia, and in the later periods, Kentucky and Tennessee...*
>
> *DECORATIVE ARTS—those things of our daily lives—architecture—furniture—silver—pewter—ironware—textiles—the graphic arts (this last category perhaps approaching "fine arts").*

The collection, which also came to include ceramics, glass, books, and other metalwares, incorporated architectural elements as complete rooms—rooms saved from early southern homes—to help establish the museum's tone, provide an ambience, and complement the objects exhibited in them.

Over the last forty years the southern perspective of the decorative arts has dramatically changed and developed. In large part this is due to MESDA's innovative research program, which has become a model for other museums. Our understanding of the early South and the objects in

MESDA's collection, within the broader context of Southern cultures, has expanded well beyond the imagination of the museum's founders. The collection has evolved and grown as objects and funds have become available and as the knowledge about what is "southern" has been defined.

The museum has expanded from its original fifteen rooms and four galleries to the current twenty-four rooms and seven galleries, and the collection numbers about 3,000 objects. Through the research program, 76,000 craftsmen have been identified working in 126 trades, and 30,000 objects in public and private collections are recorded in the photo files. The library, another essential component, contains over 20,000 books and a number of significant manuscript collections.

While the process of choosing forty objects to represent MESDA's first forty years was very difficult, it was also gratifying. It gave us the opportunity to examine critically and to evaluate carefully the collection through different eyes and from a fresh point in time. All Old Salem staff members had the opportunity to make their suggestions and justify their choices. Eventually, the hard final decisions fell to the curatorial, education, and publication staff members.

Together, we tried not only to select pieces that represented the three areas of MESDA's South—the Lowcountry, the Backcountry, and the Chesapeake—but also to create a balance in terms of medium, type, and form. Although there are very many pieces that we wish could have been included, we hope that the selections found on the following pages are enticements that ably reflect the range, depth, and quality of MESDA's collection. In the end, while we tried to be objective, these are all personal choices. Above all else, we hope that the forty pieces presented here communicate the essence of the Museum of Early Southern Decorative Arts and exemplify the visions and interests of four people who were vital in the assembly of MESDA's collection: Frank L. Horton, Theo L. Taliaferro, John F. Bivins Jr., and Bradford L. Rauschenberg.

The essays in this book were intended to be concise but informative explanations of the individual pieces, and they were written by myself and my esteemed colleagues: Gary Albert, Director of Publications; Johanna Brown, Director of Collections and Curator; Sally Gant, MESDA's Director of Education and Special Programs; Sandra Hegstrom, MESDA Interpreter and Painting Specialist; Abigail Linville, Collections Manager; June Lucas, MESDA's Education Associate/Coordinator of Special Events; and Blake Stevenson, Old Salem's Coordinator of the Vogler Gunsmith and Silversmith Shops. I sincerely thank each of them for their efforts and their unique perspectives. I also want to extend a special word of thanks to our excellent editor, Gary Albert, who masterfully guided this process from object selection to publication. The superior photography of Wes Stewart, Staff Photographer, reinforces everything that was written and conveys the beauty, excellence, and variety of MESDA's collection. Jennifer Bower, Manager of Photographic Resources, also deserves thanks for deftly coordinating the photographic efforts.

Our outstanding collection and research resources are parallel endeavors that provide a continuum at MESDA that strengthen our purpose. Consequently, the growing knowledge about MESDA's South deepens and broadens. The search to try and define the art, cultural characteristics, and people of this South helps our staff, the students and researchers that we serve, and our visitors to understand it better. The German art historian Carl Schnaase wrote in 1843 "...the most subtle and most characteristic features of a people's soul can only be recognized in its artistic creations... ." After forty years and through the alliance of objects, architecture, and documents, MESDA continues to reveal the soul and explore the changing perspectives and perceptions about the early South.

Paula W. Locklair
Vice President, MESDA
and the Horton Center Museums

The Chesapeake

Elegant Impressive Stately

Desk and Bookcase by John Shaw

While some of the articles advertised below by Annapolis cabinetmaker John Shaw, such as looking glasses and passage lamps, were imported, Shaw is known to have made and sold a variety of furniture forms mentioned in the ad during the several decades that his shop was in operation. One of at least four known similar desks and bookcases from the John Shaw shop, this impressive example was probably one of the most expensive types of furniture Shaw produced and sold.

John Shaw was born in Glasgow, Scotland, in 1745 and was working in Annapolis as a cabinetmaker by 1770. By 1772 he was in partnership with Archibald Chisholm. According to advertisements, the Shaw and Chisholm firm not only sold furniture made by the two cabinetmakers, but also sold imported goods. In 1773, Joshua Collins, a musical instrument maker, advertised that he was working at the Shaw and Chisholm shop. Shaw and Chisholm advertised later that year as cabinetmakers and chairmakers. The partnership dissolved in November 1776 but was resumed briefly in 1783 when a fire destroyed much of the contents of Shaw's shop, including his tools, and forced him to seek the help of his former associate.

Detail of desk interior.

The subscriber has ready made, and for SALE, at his house, near the sadt-house [sic], the following articles of household furniture, viz.

MAHOGANY desks, desk and book-case, bureaus, wardrobes, secretaries, side boards, dining, breakfast, and card tables, drawing room and easy chairs, sofas, bedsteads, of different kinds, basin stands, knife cases, liquor do. Passage lamps, and dressing glasses, a good eight day clock, with a handsome case, and sundry other articles for house-keeping, which will be disposed of on very moderate terms for cash, or the usual credit.

JOHN SHAW

Annapolis, October 10, 1803

In 1777, Shaw married Elizabeth Wellstead Pratt. The couple had five sons and two daughters. Their youngest son, George, was also a cabinetmaker (but died just a few months after John Shaw). After the death of his first wife in 1793, Shaw married Margaret Steuart in 1798 and had one additional daughter. He died in Annapolis in 1829.

Shaw was apparently an ardent patriot. During the Revolution, he was appointed the Armorer of the State of Maryland, a post he continued to hold until 1819. Much of Shaw's work was commissioned by the Maryland government, including furniture for the State House, the Chancery Office, the Land Office, and the Orphans' Court. He was also heavily involved in overseeing the construction of state buildings in Annapolis, including the Statehouse.

Numerous pieces of furniture bear the label of John Shaw, many of which were made for use in public buildings. These examples tell the story of a versatile craftsman who developed a style all his own, from his earliest Marlboro legged tables, such as the one owned by MESDA that could possibly have been made during Shaw's first partnership with Chisholm, to the successful combination of neoclassical elements with rococo details as seen on this desk and bookcase. For example, though the swelled bracket feet are an adaptation of foot designs in the third edition of Thomas Chippendale's *The Gentleman and Cabinetmaker's Director*, a design book published in 1762, the inlaid stars on the pierced pediment, the three patera across the cornice frieze, the eagle enclosed in an arch on the prospect door, and the stringing on all of the drawers are neoclassical details popular from the 1790s to the 1820s. The delicate fretwork of the pediment adds a lightness to the overall appearance of the desk and bookcase. It is almost identical to the fretwork seen on at least three other desks and bookcases from the shop, indicating that it was probably cut using a template perhaps by one of the several journeyman cabinetmakers who worked in the shop during the years it was in operation.

—Johanna Brown

Pembroke table by John Shaw or the shop of John Shaw and Archibald Chisholm; Annapolis, MD; ca. 1780. Mahogany with tulip poplar and yellow pine; HOA 28 1/4"; WOA closed 20"; WOA open 38 1/4"; DOA 29". MESDA Purchase Fund. MESDA acc. 4376.

Desk and bookcase by John Shaw; Annapolis, MD; 1790-1800. Mahogany with poplar and yellow pine; HOA 98"; WOA 46 11/16"; DOA 24 1/2". MESDA Purchase Fund. MESDA acc. 4391.

Extraordinary Artistic Sensitive

Embroidery by Elizabeth Boush

Unlike the curriculum of modern education, girls in America who attended school in the eighteenth century usually learned needlework along with other subjects, such as writing and arithmetic. Their first embroideries were samplers, and if they continued instruction and gained expertise, the pieces they made became more intricate and could ultimately result in complex embroidered pictures, which demonstrated the mastery of a variety of stitches and an understanding of the artistic use of colored silk threads to achieve painterly effects.

While the names of hundreds of teachers have been recorded in MESDA's research files, few needlework examples survive that can be attributed to specific teachers with certainty. An exception is this embroidery by sixteen-year-old Elizabeth Boush. Her skillfully embroidered picture is the earliest known American example to name the teacher. The embroidered inscription along the bottom edge is "Elizth Boush Workd this Peice at E. Gardners 1768 9." Without this, both the student and the teacher would remain in oblivion along with the vast numbers of anonymous needleworkers.

Elizabeth Boush (born circa 1753–died before 1810), from Norfolk, Virginia, was the only daughter of Samuel Boush III and his wife Alice Mason Boush. In 1769, the year that she completed her extraordinary embroidered achievement, she also sat for a portrait by artist John Durand, who recorded for posterity this lovely member of the esteemed Boush family. She married Champion Travis of Jamestown Island in 1772, and after his Revolutionary War military service they settled in Williamsburg, Virginia. They had seven children.

As a young lady, Elizabeth attended the school operated by Elizabeth Gardner, who advertised in 1766 that she was opening a boarding school in Norfolk where she would teach, "Embroidery, tent work, nuns do. queenstitch, Irish do. and all kinds of shading; also point, Dresden lace work, catgut, &c. Shell work, wa[x] work, and artificial flowers." Not only was Elizabeth Gardner a good teacher, but Elizabeth Boush was clearly an exceptional student.

Among the resources available to and employed by Elizabeth Gardner was probably either the important design source, the *Thesaurus Sacrarum Historiarum Veteris Testamenti*, published by Gerard de Jode in Antwerp in 1585, or patterns inspired by this work. An illustration in the thesaurus of the "Sacrifice of Isaac" seems to have been the inspiration for Elizabeth Boush's sensitive version of this Old Testament story.

Elizabeth Gardner married an English merchant and soap-boiler, Freer Armston, on 25 November 1769, and afterward she advertised her Norfolk boarding school under the name of "E. ARMSTON (or perhaps better known by the Name of GARDNER)." Freer, a loyalist, and his wife seemed to have prospered in Norfolk until December 1775 when, along with other Tories, they were driven from their home with their fourteen-month-old daughter. They found refuge with Lord Dunmore and the British fleet, and remained with them until they landed in Bermuda in July 1776. Because of difficult times there, they eventually left and sailed for England, arriving in August 1777.

It is not known if Elizabeth resumed a school in England. But her legacy endures in the work of one very talented student, Elizabeth Boush. Among the embroidered pictures in MESDA's collection, this piece is the most remarkable example of a schoolgirl's artistry and the teacher's facility to impart her expertise to her pupil.

—Paula Locklair

The Sacrifice of Isaac*, embroidery by Elizabeth Boush; Norfolk, VA; 1768-69. Silk tent stitch on silk ground of 38 to 40 threads per inch; HOA 19 1/2"; WOA 11 1/2".* Gift of Mrs. James H. Stone (Constance L.). MESDA acc. 2847.

Architectural Hospitable Enlightening

Sideboard Table attributed to William Buckland and William Bernard Sears

Sideboard tables or sideboards were among the most important furniture in the eighteenth-century dining room. As successor to the earlier court cupboard and precursor to the sideboard of the late-eighteenth century to which was added a series of drawers and cabinets, the sideboard of the mid-eighteenth century was described by Samuel Johnson in his *Dictionary* (1755) as "the side table on which conveniencies are placed for those that eat at the other table." By "conveniencies" Johnson was referring to beverages or to extra dishes of food, or "removes." Often equipped with a marble top that would be impervious to the wide range of wines, ales, and punches on hand, they were often called "slabs" or slab tables.

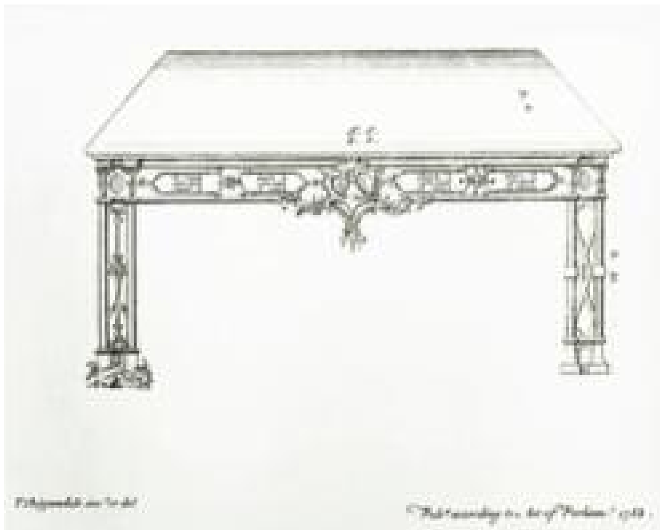


Plate 38 from the 1754 edition of Chippendale's Director*, which clearly inspired the makers of MESDA's sideboard table.*

Made in the 1760s for Mount Airy, the imposing Richmond County, Virginia, home of John and Rebecca Tayloe, this sideboard table stands out as a rare example of American architect-designed furniture.

The custom of commissioning architects to plan furnishings to complement their architectural surroundings was an accepted practice among the British aristocracy. In America, however, where few builders claimed the title of architect or achieved the level of expertise and knowledge to support that title, architect-designed furniture was a rarity.

It is no wonder that the Virginia Tidewater provided the environment in which a major exception to this fact occurred. The world of the prosperous Virginia landed gentry closely resembled that of their English counterparts. Great plantation houses and the possessions within and around them were extensions of their owners' lives and metaphors for the cultural society they sought to build. When the Tayloes sought to hire a skilled joiner to finish the interiors of Mount Airy in a style that the house deserved, they were simply following habits of taste and custom that would have been quite accepted in England. It just so happens that a person with just the right training and aspirations was available at the right place and the right time.

William Buckland had come to Virginia in 1755 under an agreement of indenture to oversee the installation of the interiors of Gunston Hall, the home of prominent Fairfax County planter George Mason. At the end of that project, Mason endorsed Buckland as "a complete Master of the Carpenter's & Joiners Business both in Theory & Practice." Within two years of completing Gunston Hall, Buckland and William Bernard Sears, the accomplished carver who had worked with him there, had moved into Richmond County and begun work on Mount Airy. Unfortunately, only a few fragments of Buckland and Sears's work at Mount Airy survive due to a fire that consumed most of the interior in 1844. Only when this sideboard table came under scrutiny did the long-lost interiors of Mount Airy begin to rematerialize.

The eighteenth century was a heyday for published pattern books, offering instructions and designs for cabinetmakers, architects, and their patrons. Several of these volumes were owned by William Buckland and provided inspiration for this table's design. The central pendant cartouche and "cut through" legs are based upon a table in Thomas Chippendale's *Gentleman and Cabinetmaker's Director* (Plate 38; 1754, 1755). Other elements, including the robust egg-and-dart ovolo molding under the top and the intersecting guilloche fret of the frame, were derived from architectural pattern books that were still in Buckland's possession at his death in 1774. These latter motifs match woodwork at Gunston Hall, and it was this discovery that suggested the probable relationship between this table and the room in which it stood.

The dining room at Mount Airy, as at many Virginia houses, was a center of the hospitality that characterized Chesapeake society in the eighteenth century. In 1774, visitor Philip Vickers Fithian provided a glimpse of the house and its dining room: "Here is an elegant Seat!— . . . finished curiously, & ornamented with various paintings, & rich Pictures. . . —In the Dining-Room, besides many other fine Pieces, are twenty four of the most celebrated among the English Race-Horses, Drawn masterly, & set in elegant gilt Frames."

This sideboard table remained at Mount Airy from the time it was made until coming to MESDA—a silent yet eloquent witness to the time, place, and people of the eighteenth-century Chesapeake.

—Sally Gant

Sideboard table attributed to William Buckland and William Bernard Sears, carver; Richmond County, VA; 1761-71. Walnut and marble; HOA 34 3/16"; WOA 44 7/8"; DOA 28". MESDA Purchase Fund. MESDA acc. 3425.

Engaging Determined Vibrant

Portrait by Charles Bird King

Charles Bird King (born 1785–died 1862) was the son of Captain Zebulon King and Deborah Bird, who lived in Newport, Rhode Island. At the age of four, King's father was murdered in Marietta, Ohio. He was cultivating land given to him by the government for his military service when he was attacked by raiding Indians. King's memories of his father were sketchy at best; however, the disturbing events of his father's death followed him forever.

Ironically, despite the tragic death of his father, King is celebrated for his portraits of North American Indians from the Great Plains tribes, depicted in their traditional attire. In this three-quarter-length portrait of the Indian boy Mistipee, King's representation of costume is accurate; however, the boy's features and pose are questionable and reflect a Caucasian inspiration rather than a North American Indian.

Henry St. George Tucker *by Charles Bird King; Washington, DC; ca. 1816-20. Oil on canvas; HOA 28"; WOA 24".* Mr. and Mrs. R. Philip Hanes Jr. Purchase Fund. MESDA acc. 966.1.

Mistipee's parents had chosen to raise their son in the manner of their white neighbors, and had originally named him Benjamin. Gradually, the name of Benjamin transformed into Mister Ben, Mistiben, and ultimately to "Mistipee." In 1825, Mistipee visited Washington, DC, with his father, Yoholo-Mico. Inscribed on the back of the stretcher is "Mistipe, Yoholo-Mico's son, Creek Indian, C.B. King, Washington, 1825."

Engaged in the arts at an early age, it is possible King received training from his grandfather, Nathaniel Bird, a merchant and painter. He also received artistic guidance from Samuel King, who taught Washington Allston, a fellow painter and classmate. Fortunately for C.B. King, Rhode Island had supported an array of artists: John Smibert, Robert Feke, Joseph Blackburn, John Singleton Copley, Gilbert Stuart, and Edward Greene Malbone. Each artist that King studied or encountered influenced his artistic actions. Between 1800 and 1805 he was apprenticed to Edward Savage, a well-known portraitist, miniaturist, and engraver in New York City. Funded by an inheritance received from his father, King was able to travel to London in 1806, and like many artists of the day, he studied under Benjamin West at the Royal Academy. His experience in London exposed him to the Grand Manner, which is a form of history painting, "in which subjects of great significance are treated in a manner or style that elevates them above the realm of the commonplace," according to *The Harper Collins Dictionary of Art Terms and Techniques* by Ralph Mayer. King was familiar with the premise that great art must be more than just pleasant to look at, but should also communicate an enlightened theory to the viewer.

King was not only influenced by his fellow artists, but by his religious background. Raised as a Moravian, throughout his life he clung to the teachings of his faith—service to God and each other, harmony, industriousness, civility, and in all things, love. Thomas Sully, his roommate in London, stated, "As a man, he is one of the purest in morals and principle. Steady in friendship, and tenderly affectionate…without professing to belong to any particular set of Christians, he is the best practical Christian I ever was acquainted with."

In 1812, King returned from London and resided in Philadelphia for a short time. Working as an itinerant artist, King traveled to Richmond, VA, Baltimore, MD, and Washington, DC, where he settled permanently in 1819. His decision to stay in Washington was due to a large number of requests for paintings by socialites and dignitaries, such as Congressman Henry St. George Tucker of Virginia, whose portrait by King is also in the MESDA collection. Although King completed hundreds of genre paintings and portraits throughout his lifetime, he is remembered most for his portraits of the delegation of Indian chiefs from the Great Plains tribes, commissioned by the Department of War in 1822. He continued to receive commissions to paint Indian portraits until 1842, having completed approximately 143 paintings.

The scope of King's contributions to art in the nineteenth century extended beyond that of portraits, to encompass still lifes, landscapes, and genre paintings. His focus was broad and reflected his association with fellow artists. King's talent was as versatile as it was competent, creating a painter of originality that reflected a respect for the traditional.

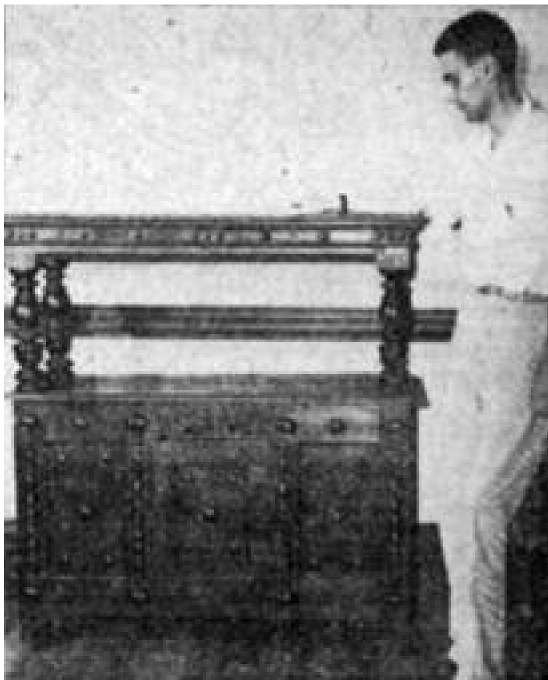
—Abigail Linville

Mistipee, Yoholo-Mico's Son *by Charles Bird King; Washington, DC; 1825. Oil on canvas; HOA 17 1/2"; WOA 14 1/4".* Gift of Mr. and Mrs. James W. Douglas. MESDA acc. 3542.

Emblematic Unique Enduring

Court Cupboard

Court cupboards were frequently recorded in the estate inventories of well-to-do eighteenth-century Virginians. Ranging in value from 10 shillings to 350 pounds of tobacco, they were located in halls, parlors, and bed chambers. The earliest example noted in the MESDA research index is for an "old Court Cubbord" listed in the 1647 Northampton County, Virginia, estate of "Capt. Phillipp Taylor, dec.d." Often accompanied by a cupboard cloth and cushions, and frequently listed with ceramics, pewter or silver, court cupboards were obviously items of importance in the hierarchy of possessions within the seventeenth-century Chesapeake household. In 1668, Accomack County, Virginia, joiner John Rickards agreed to provide Mrs. Anne Boote with a large order of furniture "to bee done by me," which included "five Courth Cupboards, one Courth Cupboard very handsome according to Mrs. Boote her directions."



Frank Horton with the court cupboard photographed for a newspaper article. ©1947 Twin City Sentinel *photo.*

In spite of the numbers indicated in the records, only two southern court cupboards are known to survive today. Of these two, the MESDA example is the more exceptional due to the distinctive placement of a single open shelf above the cabinet rather than below, a format that is unique in recorded American cupboards. This unusual composition may reflect a patron's demand for both style and utility that was carried out by the creative merger of the British open-shelved court cupboard with the French form known as a *buffet bas,* or low cupboard. MESDA's cupboard descended in the family of Thomas Vines of York County, Virginia, in whose 1737 estate inventory it was recorded as an "old cupboard."

Built of frame and panel construction with applied ornamental moldings and turned half spindles and bosses, this cupboard is the mid-seventeenth-century product of an unknown joiner working in southeastern Virginia. Its frame is of white oak, the panels, shelves, and interior of yellow pine, and its turned balusters, half spindles, and bosses are of walnut that has been ebonized with a black stain. It still retains its original dovetail hinges of wrought iron.

When discovered by Petersburg, Virginia, antique dealers Mr. and Mrs. B. L. Brockwell in the 1920s, this Cinderella of cupboards had migrated from its seventeenth-century position of dignity within the house to the back porch where it continued to serve a more humble function of storage for tools and salt pork. Following its purchase by the Brockwells, the cupboard received national attention in the advertising pages of *The Magazine Antiques,* and was proudly featured in Mrs. Brockwell's booth at the first International Antiques Exhibition in New York City in 1929. It remained in the Brockwell collection through the 1930s and early 1940s, and by 1947 was in the possession of young antiquarian Frank L. Horton of Winston-Salem, North Carolina. Horton and his mother, Theo Liipfert Taliaferro had begun to build a major collection of southern antiques. In 1965, that collection became the core of the museum they founded, the Museum of Early Southern Decorative Arts.

Frank L. Horton said of this cupboard, "Just think of the conditions in which people were living when it was made. They were really just trying to survive, and yet here is this thing with perfect proportions. It is exactly as tall as it is wide. It almost brings tears to the eyes to think of the wonderful thing accomplished here."

If any object were to be considered an emblem of the MESDA collection, the court cupboard would make an excellent candidate. As a rare survivor that continues to both puzzle and inspire, it represents the quintessential spirit of MESDA and its mission to discover, preserve, study, and appreciate the decorative arts of the early South.

—Sally Gant

The court cupboard's identification tag used while it was exhibited at the seminal 1952 exhibit "Furniture of the Old South" produced by the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts.

Court cupboard; Southeastern VA; 1660-1680. Oak with yellow pine and walnut; HOA 49 7/8"; WOA 50"; DOA 18 7/8". Gift of Frank L. Horton. MESDA acc. 2024.6.

Diminutive Exceptional Atypical

Dressing Table

On 5 November 1753, the *South Carolina Gazette* published the following notice by the Society for the Regulation of Manners:

> *ORDERED, that after the 10th of this Instant November, no Lady do presume to walk the Streets in a MASK, unless when either the Sun or Wind is in her Face; such as are very ugly or have sore eyes always excepted. By order of the Society, A.B. Secr.*

The desire to adorn oneself for the sake of fashion is an ancient one, whether to accentuate attractive features or to disguise unattractive ones. An eighteenth-century woman of some means might have sat at a table such as this one to apply cosmetics, fix her hair, or put on jewelry in front of a small table-top looking glass. Dressing tables are often pictured in eighteenth-century prints and paintings with cloth covers on which sit various small containers for cosmetics, lotions, and perfumes, toilet equipment such as combs and brushes, and a pin cushion holding the pins necessary to fasten garments. Although the advertisement above seems to indicate that masks were falling out of favor in Charleston by the mid-eighteenth century, women sometimes wore them to protect their faces and the facial appearance they had worked to achieve from dust and the elements of the weather.

Detail of stretcher joint.

Found at the border of North Carolina and Virginia, this remarkable dressing table is a rare survival of an attempt in the Albemarle or lower Chesapeake to emulate high baroque urban examples of the same form. Although in the North, three- and five-drawer dressing tables are common in the first quarter of the eighteenth century, this single-drawer dressing table is more typical of what was found in the South during the same period. The shaped cross stretchers are a sophisticated detail except that the ends are cut round to match the turned legs rather than being cut square, as is commonly seen on tables of a similar form in urban style centers. The wood used to construct the table was pit-sawn, and the drawer is rabbeted and nailed together rather than dovetailed. Both construction characteristics support the early date of the table.

The settlement patterns and socioeconomic situation in southeastern Virginia and northeastern North Carolina were colored by the geography of the region, which encouraged scattered settlement rather than the widespread formation of large towns and cities. Consequently, in order to make a living, cabinetmakers often turned to other income-producing activities such as farming or other trades in addition to the woodworking for which they were trained. Indeed, one B.J. Montgomery, who worked to take the census of manufactures in northeastern North Carolina in 1820, commented that he was having difficulty gathering information on the various rural trades because the tradesmen were "Summer Agricultorists and Winter Mechanicks."

—*Johanna Brown*

Dressing table; attributed to southeastern VA or NC (Albemarle region); 1710-30. Walnut with yellow pine; HOA 28"; WOA 31 1/4"; DOA 20 3/4". MESDA Purchase Fund. MESDA acc. 1057.

Emulous Familial Vivacious

Portrait by Charles Peale Polk

Charles Peale Polk (born 1767–died 1822) was the son of Robert Polk and Elizabeth Digby Peale. Polk's mother died around 1773, and in 1775 his father became a sailor, leaving Charles and his sister in the care of their uncle, Charles Willson Peale. Accepted into the Peale family without pause, Polk received an education paid for by his uncle, and with the death of his father in 1777, the Peale family became the official guardians of the Polk children.

Mrs. George Grundy *by Charles Willson Peale; Baltimore, MD; 1789. Oil on canvas; HOA 36"; WOA 27¹/₄".* Gift of Frank L. Horton. MESDA acc. 3973.

In order to truly understand Polk as an artist, it is essential to consider his uncle, Charles Willson Peale (born 1741–died 1827), who is regarded as one of America's most important artists. Peale was an academic and studied under the renowned artist Benjamin West in London. Upon his return from London, he tutored his brothers, his nephew, and his children in drawing and painting. Having an entrepreneurial spirit, Peale established a museum consisting of art and natural history. He also helped to establish the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts.

Where Peale led, his nephew followed. Often emulating works by his uncle, Polk's early paintings incorporated similar characteristics such as arrangement and positioning. The 1791 portrait of Mrs. Robert Riddell and her daughter Agnes by Polk clearly displays his dependence upon his uncle's artistic style. When compared to Peale's painting of Mrs. George Grundy and her daughter Mary, the influences are unmistakable in the shapes, posture, accessories, features, and handling of hair.

Mrs. Robert Riddell (born 1761–died 1806) was born Mary Hawkesworth, daughter of Colonel Hawkesworth, whose miniature portrait can be seen in the pendant she is wearing. In 1790, she married Robert Riddell, a Baltimore merchant. Their daughter, Agnes, was approximately five years old when the portrait was taken.

At the age of sixteen, Polk completed his first portrait and by age eighteen traveled to Baltimore, MD, and Alexandria, VA, where he advertised in *The Virginia Journal and Alexandria Advertiser* on 30 June 1785:

> *The subscriber begs leave to inform the public that having finished his studies under the celebrated Mr. Peale of Philadelphia in Portrait Painting, he is now ready to exert himself to the utmost of his abilities in taking LIKENESSES in oil, and flatters himself he shall please those who may employ him.*

Apparently, Polk was not well received as a portrait painter in Baltimore or Alexandria and returned to Philadelphia to take up the humble career of house, ship, and sign painter. Success, however, followed when Polk moved to Baltimore in 1791, where he faced modest artistic competition. Opening a drawing school for young ladies in 1793 helped to balance his income, but, despite his successes, Polk continually faced financial difficulties. Attempting a career as a merchant, Polk launched a shipping business and opened a dry-goods store in 1795.

Baltimore is probably where he learned the verre églomisé process of applying gold leaf to glass, followed by etching through the gold leaf to create a profile. The verre églomisé process was often used by Baltimore cabinetmakers.

Verre églomisé silhouette of an unknown man by Charles Peale Polk; attributed to Richmond, VA; ca. 1806. Gold leaf on glass with paint; DIA 4⁵/₈". MESDA Purchase Fund. MESDA acc. 4451.

In 1796, Polk left Baltimore for western Maryland and resigned from the mercantile business in order to commence with portrait painting again. Between the years of 1785 and 1801, Polk traveled throughout western Maryland, northern Virginia, Philadelphia, and Baltimore painting portraits. From 1802-19 Polk worked as a clerk for the government in Washington, DC.

Polk's success as a portrait painter was challenging, and he never quite achieved the artistic success like that of his uncle. His later years did bring about artistic development, as Linda Croker Simmons wrote in her catalog of Polk's work, "he seems to have recognized this maturity and independence and was clearly confident of the quality of his painting."

—Abigail Linville

Mrs. Robert Riddell *by Charles Peale Polk; Baltimore, MD; 1791. Oil on canvas; HOA 36 1/2"; WOA 34 1/2"*. Gift of Frank L. Horton. MESDA acc. 3374.

British Puzzling Shapely

Armchair

In the eighteenth century, just as today, chairs were often sold in sets. Today a set often includes two armchairs and several side chairs. In the eighteenth century, a set might include only one armchair. Today, the armchairs that come with a set of chairs are usually reserved for the head of the household or honored guests just as they were in the eighteenth century.

One curious point about MESDA's Edenton armchair is that evidence suggests that this chair and others like it may have been sold in sets of armchairs rather than as a part of sets consisting of both armchairs and side chairs. No corresponding side chairs have been found and numerical markings on the chairs imply that each was from a different set of similar armchairs. This puzzling evidence has influenced furniture scholars to hypothesize that sets of armchairs may have been the fashion in northeastern North Carolina, where this and other nearly identical armchairs have been found. Personal inventories such as that of cabinetmaker and businessman John Sanders's of Perquimans County, North Carolina, who died in 1777, support this suggestion. Sanders's inventory included five armchairs among a variety of other articles including "leather chairs," mahogany dining tables, desks, chests, bedsteads, and a variety of other pieces of furniture. One might argue that the armchairs could have been part of Sanders's shop inventory, but why then are there no corresponding side chairs listed in the inventory?

View from rear.

This chair has a long history of ownership in Hertford, a town in Perquimans County in the northeastern part of North Carolina. Other nearly identical armchairs have similar histories. Variations in the form of the ball and claw feet seen on eighteenth-century furniture often offer furniture historians clues about where a piece was made. The rear talons of the claws on this chair are finished with a sharp "knife" edge, a characteristic not seen on the ball and claw feet of pieces made outside of northeastern North Carolina. Just above the feet, the front legs of this chair and the others like it are oval in cross section rather than round, as is common on chairs with cabriole legs.

The style of the chair is principally British. Some of its characteristics found in England but not widely seen elsewhere in America include the shaping of the arm supports and the rear stiles or vertical members of the seat back, and the carving on the top of the arm supports. Also British in design are the rear cabriole legs of the chair. The eighteenth-century English artist William Hogarth described the S curve used in a cabriole leg as the "line of beauty" seen in things that are living. The lively shaping of the rear stiles and legs of this chair make it as interesting and beautiful to look at from behind as it is to look at from the front. The pattern of the splat (with slight variations) has been seen on examples from both Philadelphia and Ireland. It was fashionable in the eighteenth century to place furniture such as chairs and tables around the outside walls until it was time to use them. When needed, the furniture would have been moved toward the center of the room (and possibly seen from behind). Wherever this chair was placed—against the wall or within the room—it would be a striking sight to behold.

—Johanna Brown

Detail of arm.

Detail of rear talon.

Armchair; Edenton, NC; 1745-65. Mahogany with beech real rail, cypress glue blocks, and beech slip seat. HOA 39 1/4"; WOA 28 7/8"; DOA 23". MESDA Purchase Fund. MESDA acc. 2418.

Orderly Sectional Vivid

Sampler by Ann Gould

Of all the pieces in the MESDA collection, this sampler was made by one of the youngest "artists," ten-year-old Ann Gould. While nothing is yet known about her teacher or the school, there are five other similar samplers with histories from the same area, indicating a common education for the girls. Among those five is one, in MESDA's collection, embroidered by Ann's older sister, Elizabeth, also in 1807, when she was fifteen years old.

> *Her Children arise up and call her blessed Her husband also and he praiseth her*
>
> *—Proverbs 31:28.*

Ann and Elizabeth were the daughters of William and Anna Gould, of Queen Anne's County, Maryland. According to their father's 1817 will, there were four other daughters and two sons in the family.

Sampler by Elizabeth Gould; Eastern Shore of MD; 1807. Silk on linen; HOA 17¾"; WOA 13¼". MESDA Purchase Fund. MESDA acc. 4042.2.

The overall quality of the work indicates that the two samplers in the MESDA collection are not the first pieces of embroidery executed by the sisters, and while each sampler has two uppercase alphabets, the inscriptions use uppercase and lowercase, suggesting that at some earlier time they each had worked a basic marking sampler of their letters. Ann, however, as the younger, did incorporate the numerals one through seven, but Elizabeth omitted numbers. The primary stitches that they used were cross, satin, and chain.

Even though the colors of the silk threads are now somewhat faded, the original color palette was very bright and cheerful, contrasting effectively against the neutral linen ground. Because the reverse has been protected from light, which causes irreversible fading, the true colors can be seen there. For instance, many of the mellow golds of the flowers were once beautiful shades of rose and pink. The lower portion of the brickwork of the building was a rich brick color, contrasting with the blue windows and the gold pediment. The greens, blues, and true golds were brighter and livelier.

The sisters' samplers are orderly and compartmentalized. They are also very similar in layout, the choice of motifs and colors, and the unusual use of the prominent and distinguished building (yet unidentified), which anchors the lower third of each sampler. The dominant center panel, with the alphabets, inscriptions, and the building, is surrounded on three sides by floral motifs, each framed individually—each a small work of art in itself. The girls also used some of the same large stylized flowers, the undulating vine across the top ending in a basket of flowers, the small spotted dog, and bands that divide the parts. Immediately above the building, the space is divided into two almost equal sections. On the left is the important record about the young needleworker and on the right is a Bible verse. The very close similarities indicate that they were working from printed patterns or ones drawn by the teacher. About herself, Ann stitched: "Ann Gould her sampler worked in the 10th yr of her age and in the year of our Lord 1807."

It is not unusual to find poems or Bible verses on samplers. In this case, both of the Gould girls chose verses from the Old Testament book of Proverbs—a book that provided instruction and wisdom for living. Ann's is Proverbs 31:28 (quoted above) and Elizabeth's is Proverbs 31:25: "Strangth[sic] and / Honour are her / clothing and she / Shall rejoice in / Time to come." Both verses refer to the virtues and the rewards of a godly wife, apparently intended as inspirations for aspiring wives and mothers. These samplers remain as testaments to the stitching abilities of the Gould sisters, but in their time they were also beautiful teaching pieces that proved their skill and served to remind them of the blessings and honor that would come with prudent living.

—Paula Locklair

Sampler by Ann Gould; Eastern Shore of MD; 1807. Silk on linen; HOA 17 3/8”; WOA 12 3/4”.
MESDA Purchase Fund. MESDA acc. 4042.1.