

A Book Review

A Welcome Addition to the Canon

by Lita Solis-Cohen

With few exceptions, such as Nina Fletcher Little's *Little by Little: Six Decades of Collecting American Decorative Arts* (1984) and Leslie Anne Miller's *Start with a House, Finish with a Collection* (2014), most private collections are not published until they appear as hardcover auction catalogs for landmark sales with short biographies of the owners, who are often deceased. *American Classical Furniture 1810-40: Regional Identities in the Schrimsher Collection* includes highlights from one of the finest and largest private collections of American Classical furniture in private hands. It is a book of essays and a catalog of only part of the collection that presents a veritable course in connoisseurship of an often underappreciated era of American furniture history.

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Relatively young collectors (in their 60s), Randy and Kelly Schrimsher began collecting American Classical furniture seriously in the mid-1980s and are still adding to their collection, which they hope one day will find its way to a museum. In preparation they have established a family foundation, and they commissioned the leading scholars in this field to document the regional styles of Classical American furniture with essays that incorporate the latest research in the catalog descriptions, complete with provenance. Clark Pearce covers Boston; Peter M. Kenny, New York; Alexandra Alevizatos Kirtley, Philadelphia; Gregory R. Weidman, Baltimore; and Matthew A. Thurlow, Washington, D.C. In "Form, Motif, and Ornament in Classical Furniture," Wendy A. Cooper and conservator Christine Thomson team up to cover regional differences; and Kimberly E. Schrimsher (Randy and Kelly's daughter, who grew up with the collection but whose Ph.D. is in Italian Baroque painting) with Wendy Cooper introduces the discovery of the ancient world in the 18th century in Herculaneum and Pompeii that inspired the design or pattern books that architects, cabinetmakers, upholsterers, and their customers consulted. Kimberly Schrimsher was overall editor for the project.

The Schrimsher collection comprises hundreds of pieces of furniture by some of the most celebrated cabinetmakers from the key centers of Classical furniture production in the United States: Duncan Phyfe, Charles-Honoré Lannuier, Isaac Vose, Thomas Seymour, John and Hugh Finlay, Anthony Quervelle, and Joseph Barry among others.

In the foreword, Matthew A. Thurlow, executive director of the Decorative Arts Trust, tells how Randy and Kelly Schrimsher, acquired their knowledge and developed their eye while traveling the world in pursuit of the best examples of early 19th-century American furniture suitable for their 1825 house in Huntsville, Alabama. And when that house was

full they bought another period house in Charleston, South Carolina, where they spend part of the year living in the adjacent carriage house because they have installed their finest Philadelphia, New York, and Baltimore furniture along with complementary lighting, porcelain, sculpture, paintings, and prints in the historic house in order to share it with the public. The Boston furniture remains in Huntsville, Alabama. Both houses can be visited by appointment by contacting the Schrimsher Foundation.

American Classical furniture is the robust, archaeologically correct style that came into fashion in the United States about 1810. Period documents describe it as Grecian or modern, and in the 1830s it became the streamlined Grecian Plain style. By mid-century it was displaced by the Gothic, Rococo, and Renaissance revivals.

In the foreword, Matthew Thurlow tells how an advertisement in *The Magazine Antiques* for a symposium in Camden, South Carolina, organized by the Decorative Arts Trust (DAT) started Randy Schrimsher on the road to collecting. Wendell Garrett, Jonathan Fairbanks, Joe Kindig, Harold Sack, Frank Horton, and Dean Failey were the speakers who infected him with the collecting disease at that conference. The following year Randy brought his girlfriend, Kelly, to the DAT symposium in Houston. They later married, bought an 1825 house, and acquired their first Classical furniture from F. J. Carey III on a trip to Pennsylvania. After that they bought from every dealer and auctioneer that offered Classical American furniture.

Their visit to Wendy Cooper's 1993 exhibition *Classical Taste in America, 1800-1840* at the Baltimore Museum of Art introduced them to the full range of the Classical interior: lighting, carpets, window treatments, and porcelain. Much of their knowledge was gained at DAT symposia and DAT study trips abroad. That is why the proceeds of the book will go to the Decorative Arts Trust Publishing Grants program. Randy Schrimsher served as president of the Decorative Arts Trust's board of governors from 2011 through 2016.

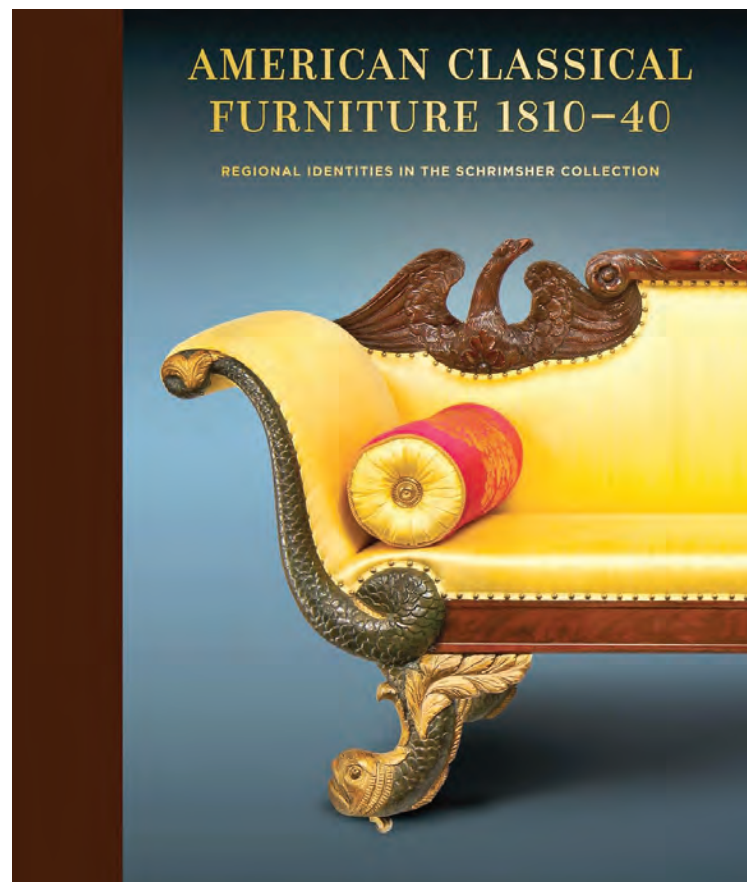
American Classical Furniture 1810-40 defines regional styles all in one book, building on the pioneering monographs on individual craftsmen and individual regional studies. In their introduction, Wendy Cooper and Kimberly Schrimsher tell how excavations that began at Herculaneum in 1738 and Pompeii in 1748 ignited a fever for the Classical past in England and France that then spread to America. Architects, artists, and amateurs flocked to the Continent to experience ancient sites on the Grand Tour.

The Classical forms introduced in England in the 1760s came to America after the Revolution. French and English pattern books were owned by cabinetmakers, upholsterers, architects, and their customers and found in libraries. All of these design sources are listed in the book's extensive bibliography and referred to, and individual plates are pictured in the essays and catalog entries. Even though the same design books were consulted in the four urban centers, regional styles were developed. Boston and Salem's chaste interpretations of the English Regency style appealed to conservative Boston's spartan taste. After the War of 1812 exuberant sculptural furniture was in New York

American Classical Furniture 1810-40: Regional Identities in the Schrimsher Collection

Edited by the Schrimsher Foundation

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with deep ties to French sources. Philadelphia had a vibrant furniture trade powered by craftsmen well versed in international trends. Baltimore, a port city that came into prominence after the Revolution, developed a specialty in painted furniture. In Washington, D.C., the refurnishing of the President's House (now known as the White House) and the Capitol after the British burned them in 1814 brought the Classical style to public spaces. The shipping of Classical furniture from these cities to southern ports is not overlooked.

In their chapter "Form, Motif, and Ornament in Classical Furniture," Christine Thomson, a conservator of painted, lacquered, gilded, and varnished surfaces, and Wendy Cooper discuss the vocabulary of ornament, materials, and regional specialties and point out the challenges to identification. They describe techniques such as gilding (water, oil, freehand, and stencil), painting (graining and vert antique), and the use of metal mounts and inlays, composition ornament, and exotic veneers all to create remarkable effects.

Appendix I pictures French secretaries, pier tables, card tables, sofas and chairs, paw feet, pad and bun feet, lyres, Ionic columns, and ormolu mounts from the four cities. Appendix II pictures labels, inscriptions, and stamps. The extensive bibliography includes major books and articles on the subject. The essays include the latest research, with plenty of footnotes referring to similar examples pictured in the pioneer books and monographs often by these same authors or in articles published in the *Chipstone* journal *American Furniture* or in one of the monographs by Stuart and Elizabeth Feld of Hirschl & Adler. *American Classical Furniture 1810-1840* is a welcome addition to the canon and it comes at a time when there are few new books about American furniture.

