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Rochester Institute of Technology

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of
The College of Fine and Applied Arts
in Candidacy for the Degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

The Academic Tradition of Storage Furniture: 1100-1800

By

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December 1980

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Special Commendation for a job well done!

RHJ

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THE ACADEMIC TRADITION OF STORAGE FURNITURE: 1100-1800

By John Seamster

A MASTERS THESIS FOR
ROCHESTER INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

1980

127709

INTRODUCTION

Introduction

This thesis was started five years ago as one of the requirements for a masters degree in furniture design from Rochester Institute of Technology. It was undertaken in the belief that an understanding of the evolution of furniture design will help the contemporary designer to design for today's needs.

The entire history of furniture is too broad a topic for one thesis. This thesis is limited to the storage furniture of Western civilization. Storage furniture, as opposed to tables, beds and chairs, was selected because it provides an opportunity to trace the evolution of a wide variety of interrelated functional elements. The thesis begins with the Middle Ages because little is known about furniture used before that time. The development of storage furniture since the Middle Ages may be divided into two periods. The first coincides with the development of the academic tradition, and the second the development of modern industrial society. This thesis is limited to the first period spanning from 1100 to 1800.

This thesis subdivides the development of the academic tradition into five chronological and geographic sections in order to illustrate some interesting thematic distinctions. The first section covers the primitive storage furniture of the early Middle Ages, and is followed by a section on the more refined furniture of the late Middle Ages. The academic tradition is introduced in the Renaissance section and is taken to its aristocratic ideal in the French section. In the final section, the academic tradition is adapted by the English to their own more pragmatic bourgeois society.

Introduction

Each of these sections opens with a short outline of the relevant social and architectural features of the era. These outlines provide the thematic context for the furniture designs discussed and illustrated in the section. The specific furniture designs discussed were selected because they demonstrate the evolution of storage furniture functions in response to changing needs. The designs selected are not all-inclusive, but are representative of the important storage forms of the academic tradition.

This thesis employs a unique footnoting system. Each reference footnote has two numbers inside of brackets. The first number identifies the number of the book as it is listed in the Bibliography at the back of the thesis. The second number identifies the page. For example (#9,p272) would refer to page two hundred and seventy-two of the ninth book listed in the Bibliography. This method of footnoting was selected because it allows for modular flexibility. One can add and subtract references from the text without having to change the numerical sequence of the remaining references.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank the members of my thesis committee, Robert Golden, Robert Kerr, and Ronald Padgham, and in particular Craig McArt and Jim Hennessey for their continued guidance and patience. I would also like to thank friends and family who gave advice and moral support, in particular Nick Unkovic whose editorial comments were always blunt yet appropriate to the situation at hand.

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EARLY MEDIEVAL STORAGE FURNITURE

Early medieval introduction

The fall of the Roman empire left Continental Europe in a state of political anarchy. There was no central authority to maintain order, and the few towns which the Romans had founded were in a state of decay. The resultant extreme insecurity was reflected in the layout and furnishings of the early medieval manor. The manor's predecessor, the Roman villa, had depended on Roman law and the Roman legion for its protection, and was unfortified. By comparison, the design of the manor testified to the expectation of attack (#25, p5). The manor's primary function was to serve as a protective enclosure where the community could gather. The early manor consisted of a rectangular building with thick masonry walls surrounding a single large room. When the nobles and peasants were not out in the countryside, their lives were centered around this room. This room was known as the "great hall", and in many regions it served as social room, eating room, bedroom, kitchen, courthouse, workshop, and even stable (#19, p19). The early medieval manor was not marked by a rigid separation of the various social classes. Though each person had his own rank and function, the community co-existed under a relatively communal arrangement in which the space and facilities of the manor were shared by its inhabitants (#11, p13).

The great hall could serve a large variety of functions because of its essentially neutral character. The interior of the hall was an unencumbered space whose few furnishings lined the walls, leaving the center of the room clear for assembly around the open-hearth fire. When it was time to eat, simple saw-horse trestles were set up with large planks across them to provide an eating surface. These rough tables were placed in front of the chests and benches which

Early medieval introduction

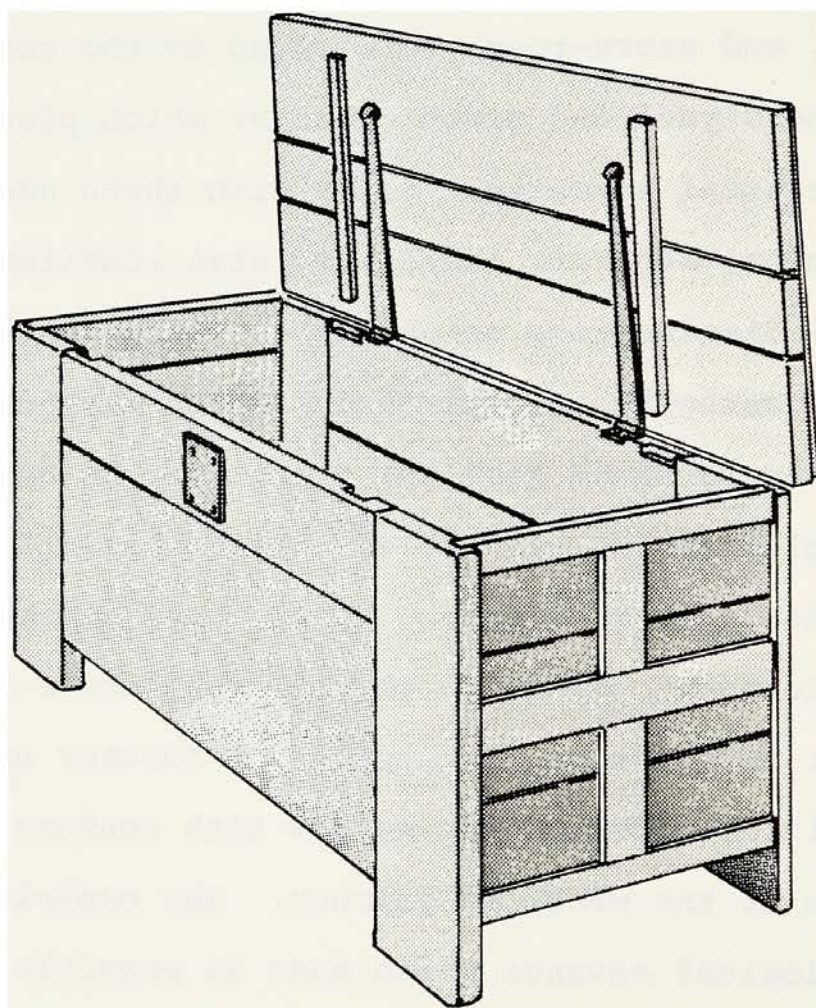
lined the perimeter of the room. This simple transformation converted the great hall into a dining room, and the entire household would sit down to a meal. When it was time to sleep, the trestle tables were cleared away and blankets were laid out on the benches so that the hall became a dormitory.

The great hall's ability to accommodate multiple functions was enhanced by the simple and portable nature of medieval furniture. Medieval furniture derived its simplicity from the fact that during the Middle Ages no class of men had reason or opportunity to spend large sums on furniture construction. The position of the nobility in feudal society demanded that they spend most of their wealth on defensive measures and spread what remained over a number of manorial estates (#19, p22). Medieval furniture derived its portability from the great amount of traveling the nobility was obliged to do in order to keep track of its various estates. The general instability of the countryside left some doubts as to what might happen in the master's absence, and, as a result, the master took most of his valuable possessions with him when he left on an extended journey (#4, p272). Thus, medieval culture created few pieces of monumental household art. The nobility preferred to display what wealth it had in the forms of fine fabrics such as carpets and tapestries, and metals and gems shaped into utilitarian objects (#13, pl63). Furniture was viewed more as an essential tool than as a work of art, and was held in relatively low esteem when compared with the objects which it contained. This perception provided little incentive for woodworkers to develop the level of sophistication found in medieval stone-work, metal-work, and weaving (#19, p43). Furniture construction was the responsibility of the estate carpenter when he was not busy with other jobs such as building war machines and fortifications (#10, pl3). Its design

Early medieval introduction

was the product of the carpenter's empirical concern with utility, and evolved by trial and error without a form-conscious concern for proportion and decoration. The practical decorative details which did develop were not allowed to dictate the form or function of the object, nor was the presence of the furniture allowed to dominate the open space of the room.

As medieval society developed a certain prosperity, pantries, workshops, stables, and store-rooms were added to the core of the great hall in an undesigned and organic manner which placed little emphasis on architectural symmetry. Along with these additions, which served a communal benefit, there were also additions that began to make territorial distinctions between the ruling family and their retainers. In this category was the "dais" which was added to the great hall at the end furthest from the drafts of the entrance. The dais was a raised platform six to twelve inches tall and large enough to support a trestle table and bench. It was used by the lord and his family while taking meals to elevate them above the general squalor of the rest of the room (# 8 , p27). A further and perhaps more important addition occurred during the 11th century as a result of the introduction of the manteled chimney. The manteled chimney was a significant technological advance which made it possible to heat individual rooms and thereby opened the way for the construction of a private chamber, or "solar", for the exclusive use of the lord and his family. For centuries the community had gathered around the warmth of the great hall's open-hearth fire. The introduction of the chimney and its concomitant private chamber brought comfort and refinement to the noble family while widening the social gulf between the lord and his retainer (#25, pl1), a trend which was indicative of future developments in domestic architecture.



Early medieval chest

The chest is one of the oldest and most prevalent pieces of storage furniture. It dates back to pre-history, and is found in both Eastern and Western Cultures. Medieval society, with its nomadic heritage, its need for flexibility, and its practical demands on furniture used this transportable, multi-functional, and easily constructed form as its main item of household furniture.

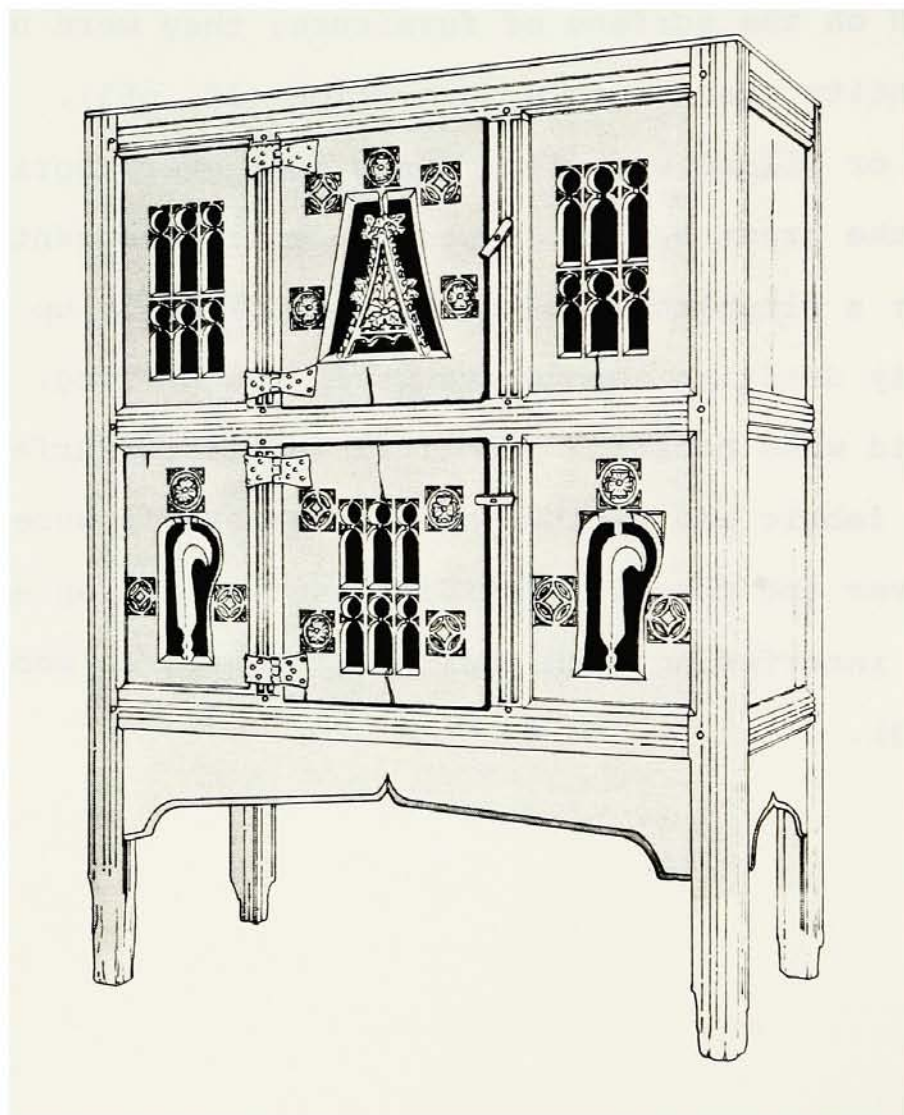
Early medieval chests were usually placed along the perimeter of the great hall. Since they were made with similar dimensions, they could be arranged end to end along the wall providing a continuous storage space and also serving as seats for dining and beds for sleeping. Within the large undifferentiated volume of early chests were stored a variety of possessions including clothing, housewares, weapons, fabrics, tapestries, documents, relics and valuable plates. Already packed in these mobile containers, the possessions were easily loaded on wagons or on the backs of horses when it came time to leave the manor (#9, p273).

Until the 1300's chests were built by the estate carpenter who nailed and strapped massive planks together to create a rectangular box. There were two basic types of chests distinguished by their relative portability. The "traveling chest" was primarily used by the secular nobility. It had handles at both ends and was made with a flat bottom. Its exterior was usually covered with canvas or leather to protect it while in transit. The "standing chest" was more closely associated with the static monastic life style. It was occasionally equipped with handles, but was generally characterized by four corner posts which raised its bottom from the damp floor (#19, p41). The exterior wood of the standing chest was usually left exposed, and the simple techniques of chip-carving and gouge work

Early medieval chest

were often used as incidental decoration (#10, p51).

Through the centuries, as the skill of the craftsmen and the ambition of their clients progressed, painting and gilding became the chief form of furniture decoration. Heraldic images, which were originally placed on shields to tell friend from foe, were a widely understood set of symbols in an illiterate culture. When carved or painted on the surface of furniture, they were used more to establish identity than as pure decoration (10, p81). Furniture that was painted or gilded was given a new coat every spring after a smoky winter in the great hall. It was not until the central hearth was exchanged for a fireplace, and smoke went directly up the chimney rather than slowly drifting through vents in the ceiling, that finely polished or inlaid wood became a practical furniture surface (#10, p39). In the meantime, fabric and pillows of fine materials were often brought out and draped over the chests, providing comfort and an element of elegance without interfering with their performance as mobile containers (#4 , p23).



Medieval aumbry

The chest was by far the most common piece of medieval furniture. There were other furniture forms, however, which were developed by medieval craftsmen to fulfill specific needs. The "aumbry" is a good example of a specialized furniture form developed in the Middle Ages.

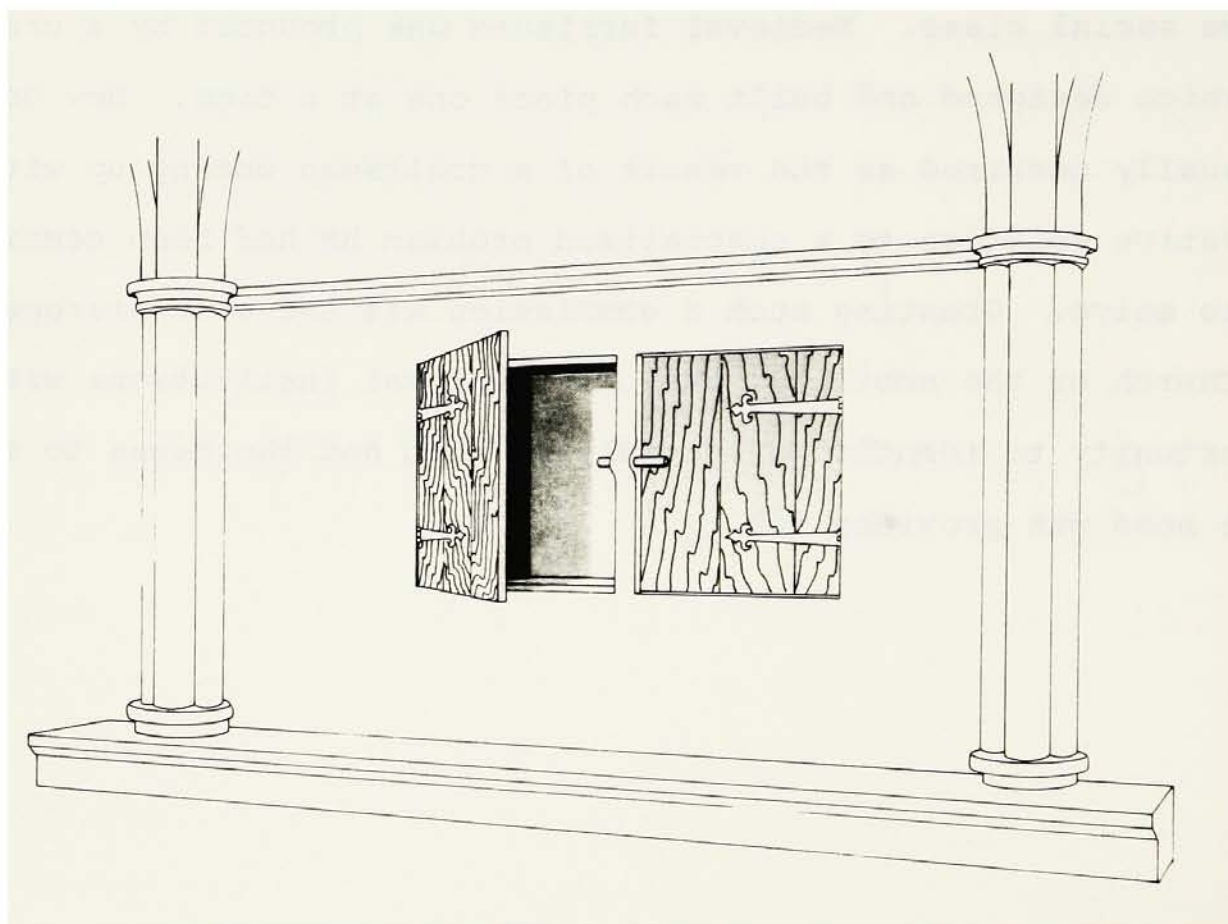
The aumbry, also known as the livery cupboard, was used to store food. It was a rectangular cupboard with a small door in front. The door, as well as the remaining surface area, was pierced by small openings which provided ventilation for the food. Over the years these openings evolved from crude punctures into ornamental patterns cut with a fret saw. These patterns served as a simple decoration on the otherwise plain furniture form (#10, p55).

There were two basic types of aumbry, one large and one small. The large free-standing aumbry was usually placed against a wall in the great hall where it served as a central location for left-over household food. It was up to two feet deep and was raised up off the floor on corner posts. The small aumbry was generally used in the lord of the manor's sleeping chamber. Its height varied from two to three feet, and it was generally eight to twelve inches deep (# 3, p208). The small aumbry contained rations of bread and wine to fend off the master's "night starvation" (#10, p1). The small aumbry was either hung on the wall or was placed on a table where its contents would be safe from rodents.

The aumbry was not designed for the multiple functions and generalized storage of the chest. Its development reflects how furniture became more stationary and functionally differentiated as medieval culture became more stable. The development of the small aumbry is also significant because its specialized function was

Medieval aumbry

applicable only to the most important members of the household. The use of the small aumbry implied a private sleeping chamber, a luxury generally restricted to the lord of the manor, his family, and a small group of trusted vassals. The development of this specialized form was an early manifestation of what was to become a trend in European culture. Though not necessarily conscious, this trend saw new developments in furniture design directed toward the needs of an exclusive social class. Medieval furniture was produced by a crafts system which designed and built each piece one at a time. New developments usually occurred as the result of a craftsman coming up with an innovative solution to a specialized problem he had been commissioned to solve. Granting such a commission was the sole prerogative of the Church or the nobility, the only medieval institutions with the opportunity to identify a specialized need and the means to see that the need was provided for.



Medieval built-in wall cupboards

In contrast to the free-standing furniture of the Middle Ages were miscellaneous architectural fittings, permanently attached to or built into the wall, which were left behind when the manor house was cleared out in preparation for a journey. This category, which will be referred to as "built-in", included items such as stone window seats, wall panelling and door molding, as well as an occasional sideboard or shelf. Most important in terms of storage furniture was the wall cupboard.

Unlike free-standing storage furniture, built-in storage furniture was a long term investment which reflected a commitment to the stability of one's storage needs. It also reflected a confidence that in the future the owner would still be at the same location to appreciate the services that his built-in investment could offer. Along with these static implications, built-ins made a subtle statement about the spatial values of the culture which employed them. While some have directed their attention toward the free-standing furniture objects within a room, those cultures which build in as many furniture functions as possible suggest an aesthetic appreciation for uncluttered space. Though this use of built-in furniture was in part a practical solution to the problem of keeping the floor space free for the multitude of activities happening within the medieval manor house, it was also due in part to what Siegfried Giedion refers to as ". . . a living instinct that space shall be dominant, not furniture." (#9, p304)

The wall cupboard was a storage container built into the masonry at the time that the two to six foot thick interior walls were being constructed. It was both convenient and economical to allow the builder to plan the furniture from the start, and in the absence of

Medieval built-in wall cupboards

a skilled furniture specialist there was little reason to prevent him from doing so (#19, p53). Medieval masons carved-out and reinforced these compartments with the same plastic sense with which they built spiral staircases and deep defensive window recesses. The location of the wall cupboard within a room was a practical matter determined by functional convenience and structural feasibility. The masons and their clients chose the location with little regard for symmetry or a conscious design effort. Nestled flush with the wall, it provided an inconspicuous storage container which did not intrude into the room.

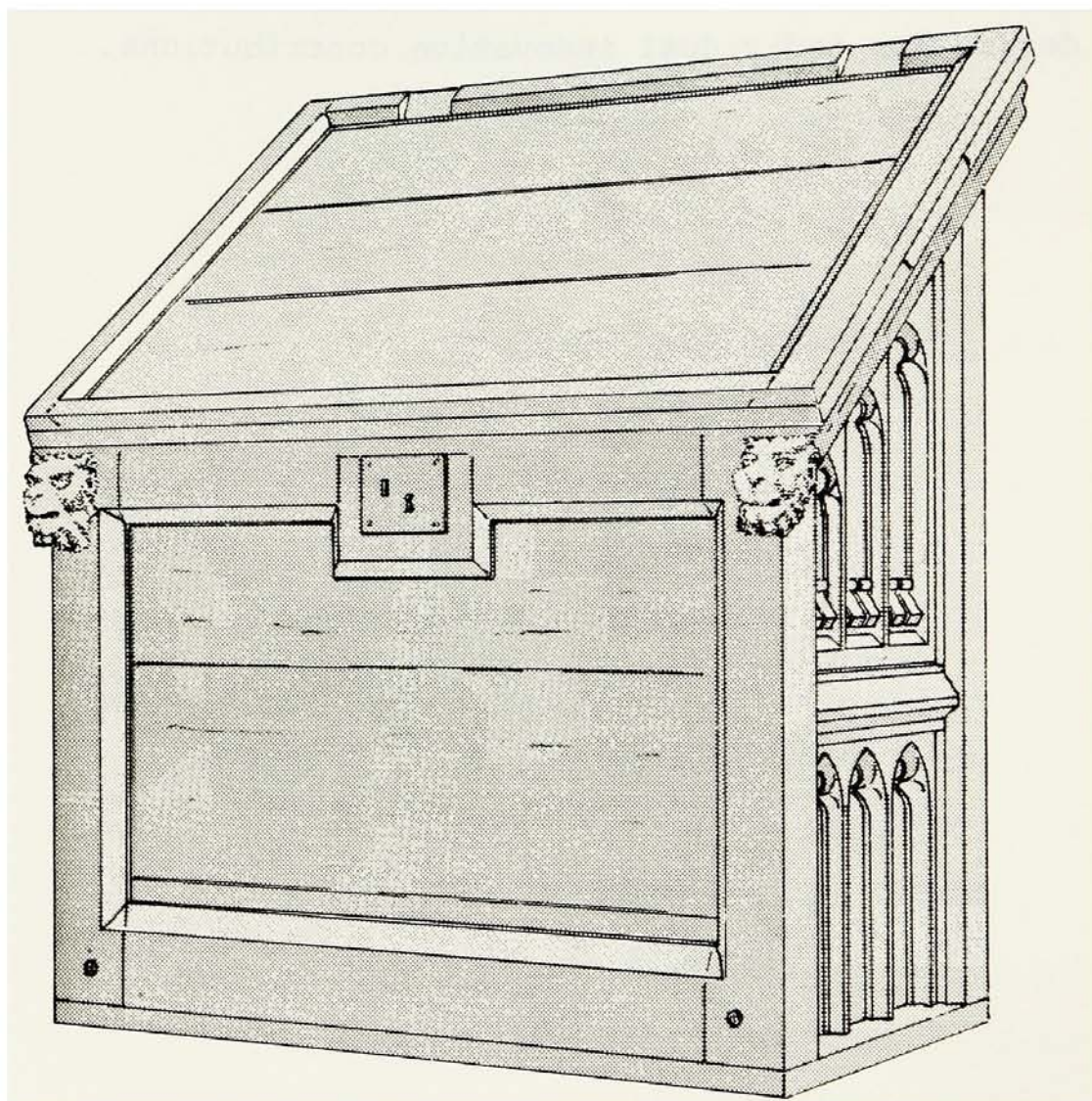
Wall cupboards had single or double doors, and were often fitted with shelves and partitions. When found in private chambers they were usually used as a strong-box for valuables, since they were more secure than a free-standing casket. They were also built into the chimney wall in the food preparation areas to accommodate provisions, spices, and household utensils which could not be conveniently stored in chests, and which could be kept dry by the constantly burning fire in the hearth (#19, p59).

Though no longer considered fashionable by the aristocracy after the late 1500's, wall cupboards continued to be utilized by both the middle and lower classes in their provincial homes well into the 1800's (#19, p 58). In the rural community where the static nature of medieval culture persisted longer, home owners were more willing to make the long term commitment to built-in furniture than were the wealthy with their evolving requirement of flexibility to stylistic change.

It is interesting to note that both the aumbry and the wall cupboard bear a strong relation to the free-standing cupboard forms which came into use centuries later. The fact that the functional

Medieval built-in wall cupboards

advantage of the cupboard form was not expanded upon during the medieval period is an indication of the sporadic nature of furniture development at that time. Medieval furniture makers were not concerned with rationally analyzing the functional efficiency of their products. Furthermore, the cultural assumption of, ". . . supreme values contained in eternally valid forms," (#13, p185) curbed the desire for individual innovative contributions.



Medieval writing box and early variations

The "writing box" is a furniture form which was never in great demand during the Middle Ages, and which provided a limited amount of storage space. Yet it proved to be a significant form because of its influence on the development of European desks. The origins of the writing box pre-date the Roman Empire. During the medieval period it was generally used in the monasteries where most contemporary writing was undertaken.

The lid of the writing box was a smooth, sloped writing surface. The writing surface was hinged at the back and lifted up to reveal a shallow interior fitted with compartments to store quill pens, erasing knives, and other writing equipment. The writing box was a simple, compact, and portable form. When in use, it was placed on the lap or any convenient flat surface such as a work table in the monastic scriptorium. The writing box was intended to assist the anonymous monk in his meticulous copying of one page at a time, and therefore was not required to be very large (#19, p112).

An early though less common variation of the writing box had a larger writing surface which was permanently attached to its own supporting stand. By the late 1400's the open stand was often enclosed with panelled sides. The resulting compartment was accessible by raising the hinged writing surface, and provided an expanded storage space for books and documents. Such an enclosed writing box was less portable than the monastic version, and provided a larger working area and storage capacity than was needed for copying individual manuscripts. It was most frequently used in scholastic establishments and in the counting houses of rich merchants (#15, p33).

In spite of these variations, the small portable writing box remained the primary piece of writing furniture until the 1500's.

Medieval writing box and early variations

It continued in use through the 1700's (# 4, p256), and developed into a rather impressive unit with cloth, leather or inlaid wood exterior surfaces (# 4, pl6). By this time, however, it was no longer competing with the fashionable desks made for the home. By the 1700's the small writing box was intended as a traveling desk.

LATE MEDIEVAL STORAGE FURNITURE

Late medieval introduction

During the 14th century there began a slow but perceptible shift in the medieval culture of northern Europe. The influence of self-sufficient feudal manors was being challenged by independent towns that were becoming the centers of commerce, communication and intellectual exchange (#13, p197). The existence of a growing urban market place and a developing class of wealthy urban merchants enabled more and more craftsmen to leave the retainer of the monasteries and large estates to become independent urban craftsmen (#13, p248). This brought an increase in specialization and competition, eventually leading to the more rapid development of furniture and interior design. Fear of damage and destruction was declining in the walled towns, and the bourgeois patron was taking a new interest in his immediate environment (#13, p262). He wished to reflect his achievements and security in improved physical surroundings. The network of communication between urban centers was providing new information about foreign fashions, and the patron encouraged the urban craftsman to seek an alternative to the functional simplicity of medieval designs (#11, p168).

The early medieval concern for safety, which was reflected in the manor's thick walls and narrow shuttered windows, resulted in a rather gloomy and drafty interior. To add to this uncomfortable situation, the gathering of an extensive community on limited floor space had not allowed for much privacy. It is not surprising, therefore, that certain changes were brought to the design of homes as soon as conditions permitted.

When the merchants, money lenders, and craftsmen first built their urban homes in England, the trend was toward a compact two-story structure. The home was usually entered by way of an outer

Late medieval introduction

staircase which led to the upper level where a private chamber and a kitchen were adjacent to a reduced version of the great hall. The ground floor, which contained a workroom or storeroom for merchandise, was usually reached by way of a protected internal staircase leading from the upper level (#19, p31). This two-story configuration, with its elevated domestic quarters, reflected a growing preference for living above the ground floor dampness, a refinement which the English incorporated after they had been exposed to Mediterranean architecture by the crusades (#5, p39). The small scale of these homes also reflected the break from the clan structure to a more conjugal family arrangement which included two or three generations and some hired servants.

The gradual evolution of medieval culture was also contributing to changes in the design and utilization of the manorial estate. The feudal nobility was undergoing a shift in vocational emphasis from the role of military authority to the role of titled owners of large landed estates (#19, p200). The manor was no longer viewed as a fortress, a seat of administration, and a center of sporadic economic activity. The reduction of the nobility's responsibilities allowed it to become more sedentary and to devote more of its wealth to greater luxury and comfort in fewer houses (#19, p67). New opportunities for employment were opening up in the towns, and those retainers who lacked the ambition to seek their own careers and stayed behind at the manor were downgraded from less honored members of the community to subservient employees of the household.

The widening social gulf between the nobility and its retainers was reflected in an amplification of the class distinctions which had been foreshadowed by the introduction of the dais and private chamber. The hall was still the most important room, but the

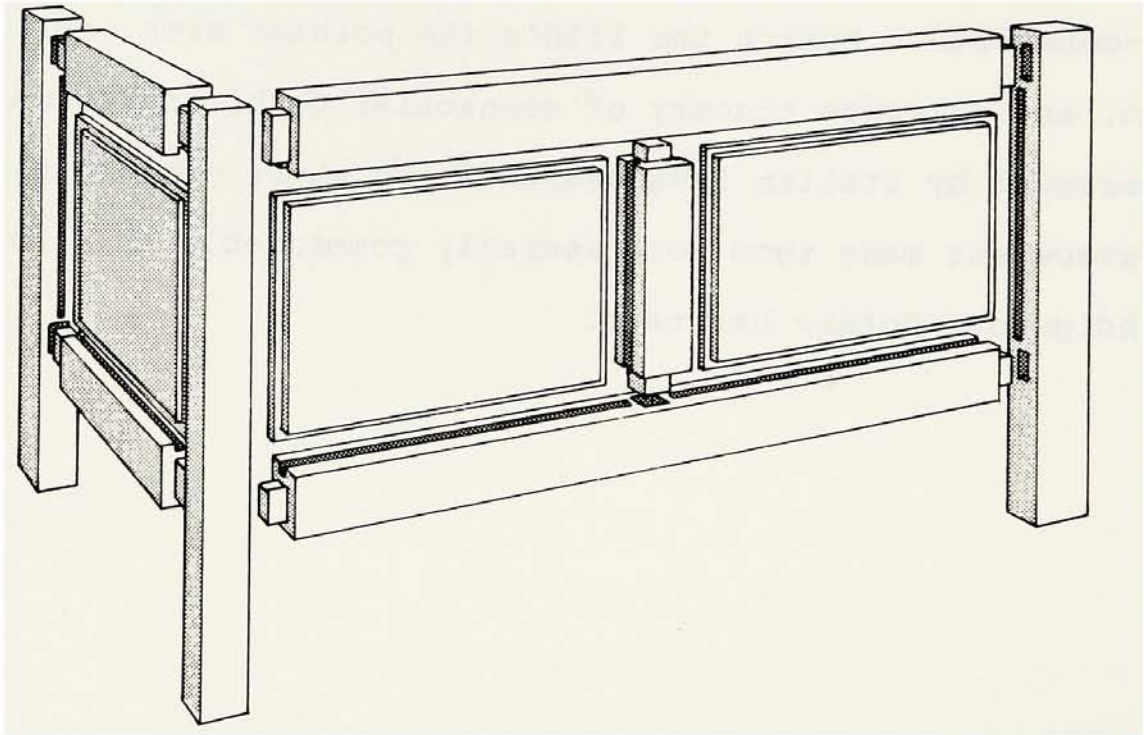
Late medieval introduction

private chambers for the principal family began to evolve into suites of apartments of greater size, number, and comfort (#11, p25). The dais, which had been introduced a few centuries earlier to distinguish between the principal household and the rest of the community, was now used only for ceremonial occasions as more and more noble families began eating in separate, more intimate quarters (# , p141). At the same time, a parallel increase of rooms in the kitchen wing tended to isolate the service household. By the late 1400's these additions to the great hall were being unified into a coherent, almost architectural exterior effect (#11, p67). The earlier undesigned organic expansion of the manor was replaced by a trend toward integrating the three separate wings of the "H" plan into one rectangular form with a continuous roof line (# 8 , p60).

The addition of more rooms to the interior took some of the multi-functional demands away from the great hall and the private chamber. In the early years the private chamber had served as bedroom, parlor, family dining room, and council chamber. The multi-functional demands on its limited space had inhibited the use of nearly all furniture except the bare necessities (#19, p21). As household functions were distributed over a larger number of rooms, it became increasingly possible and socially commendable not only to have more furniture but to have more impressive furniture. This fact coincided neatly with the growing competition among urban craftsmen. The business of furniture construction was being taken away from the broad responsibilities of the carpenter and being turned over to a skilled specialist - the joiner. In time the joiner shared this responsibility with carvers, gilders, and cabinet-makers. These skilled craftsmen were able to build furniture with more specific functions than had been provided by the early medieval chest.

Late medieval introduction

Furniture decoration, which had been an incidental afterthought during the early Middle Ages, now became a key ingredient in furniture design. Medieval craftsmen drew their inspiration for ornamentation from the only decorative example readily available: the naturalistic and organic Gothic patterns found in contemporary church architecture. By the late 1400's the influence of Gothic architecture on northern European furniture design had reached its high-point. By the 1500's, however, new exposure to foreign fashions made northern European craftsmen and their clients increasingly self-conscious. During the 1500's the pointed arch, vertical orientation, and delicate tracery of vernacular Gothic forms were slowly superseded by Italian Renaissance forms whose ponderous classical precedent made them more socially commendable than northern Europe's indigenous Gothic heritage.

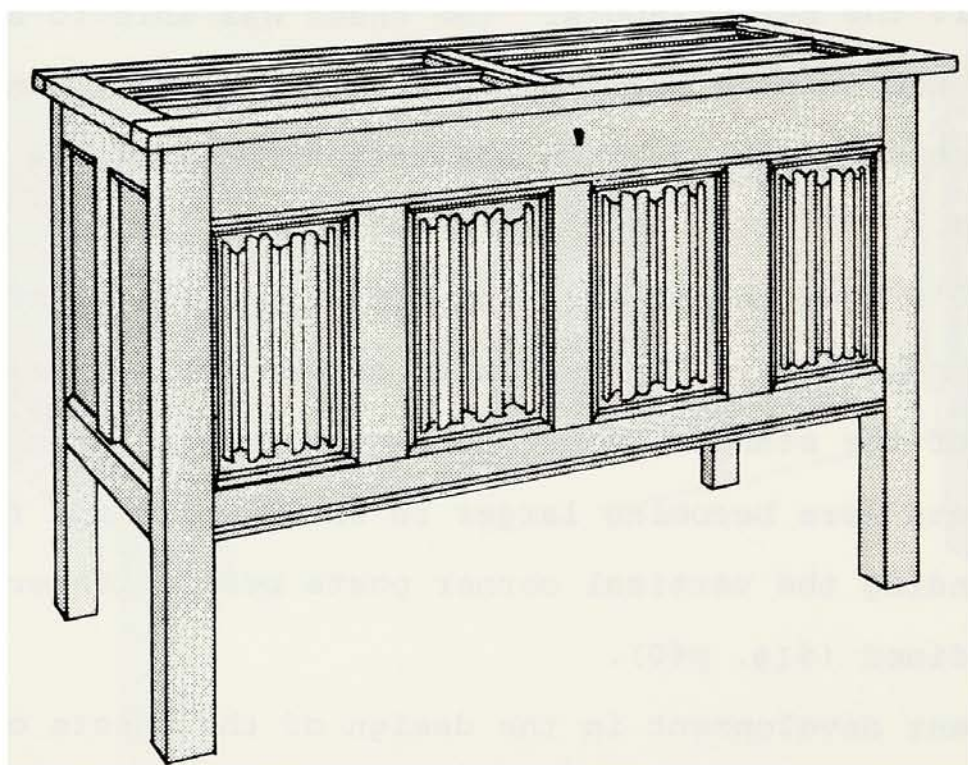


Late medieval chests

Medieval society had a long tradition of bequeathing chests from generation to generation until they were no longer usable. This long life and slow turnover of personal possessions meant that any new furniture forms were developed by craftsmen and absorbed by the public over an extensive period of time and by subtle increments. It was under these conditions that, in spite of new developments, the chest continued to be the primary piece of furniture in the home until the early 1500's. The chest was able to survive in part because of the inertia built up by its long history, and in part because it was able to make certain adaptations to suit the new social realities.

By the 1400's most chests were intended for a relatively sedentary function in a single home. The declining demand for mobile furniture caused the use of the standing chest to supersede that of the traveling chest. Chests were becoming larger in size, while the four legs created by extending the vertical corner posts became longer and more clearly defined (#19, p40).

A significant development in the design of the chests occurred during the 1300's and early 1400's when the structural technique of frame and panel construction was rediscovered. Though practiced by Ancient Egyptian craftsmen, it had fallen into disuse and had been forgotten after the collapse of the Roman Empire. Throughout the early Middle Ages, slabs of wood had been hammered and bound together into the form of a chest, with little concern for expansion and contraction in the wood, and with structural strength insured by massiveness. During the late Middle Ages, skilled joiners found that by starting with a framework and adding panels which "floated" within the framework, they had a lighter and stronger container



Late medieval chests

which was in sympathy with the wood's movement.^{1/} The rediscovery of frame and panel construction indicated a renewed interest in furniture as a subject fit for the development of skilled techniques. It also showed the new influence of the joiner who replaced the carpenter's primitive utility with a concern for the firmness and accuracy of joints (#10, p15).

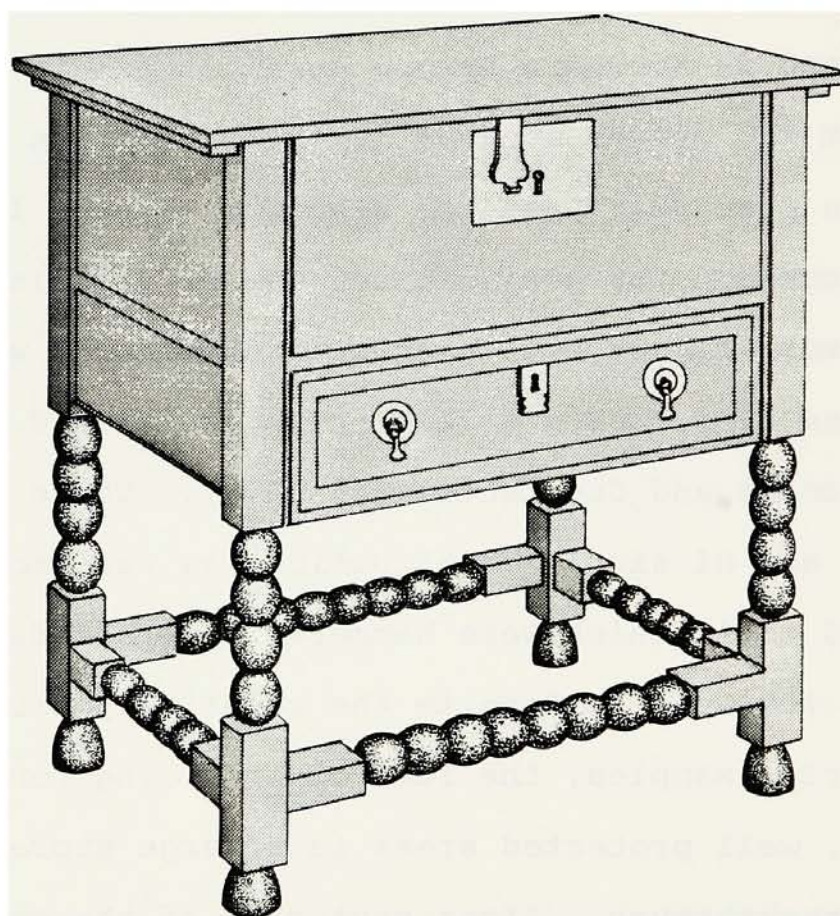
Frame and panel chests continued to be built for several centuries. In the 1500's as benches took over their seating function, many chests were further adapted by being raised on stands to eliminate the need for stooping (#9, p275). While this adaptation was a tribute to medieval culture's fondness for the chest, the traditional value of the chest had been its mobility and flexibility. Attaching it to a permanent stand portends a new generation of specialized, immobile, and more convenient furniture.

^{1/} The rediscovery of this type of construction may have been the by-product of developments in contemporary medieval church architecture. In the construction of Gothic churches, the heavy masonry walls which had carried a uniform load in Romanesque architecture were being replaced by a structural skeleton composed of slender arched ribs with large non-load-bearing windows between them (#19, p88). This progression from a design based on uniform massiveness to one based on optimizing the structural function of the individual elements may have inspired furniture makers to search for similar solutions within their own profession. The rediscovery of frame and panel construction may have been aided by the invention of the sawmill in Southern Germany during the early 1300's. As the use of the sawmill spread, it facilitated the fabrication of more delicately scaled pieces of wood than was customary with the traditional hand-hewn methods (#19, p84).

The drawer and late medieval applications

The origin of the chest dates back sometime before early Egyptian days (#21, p73). The Ancient Greeks were known to have used shelves built along the wall (#21, p78), and a type of cupboard existed during the Roman Empire (#21, p81). Therefore, most of the basic storage furniture forms had been developed in Western culture long before the medieval period. So it was significant when the drawer - the last of the known basic storage furniture forms - was developed in Northern Europe during the late Middle Ages. It is presumed that the drawer evolved in the prosperous regions of the Netherlands, an area which set the standards in the 15th century's growing concern for convenience (#9, p276). Its first applications were most likely ecclesiastical in nature, with an early example, dated 1455, being a large cupboard fitted with drawers to house church records and documents (#9, p277). These early drawers were small and of simple construction, as were most of the "drawing-boxes" and tills which were hammered together during the following century (#10, p15). Despite the relatively primitive nature of these early examples, the idea of providing convenient access to specific, well protected areas in a large storage space was a conceptual breakthrough. After centuries of the chest's undifferentiated storage, which gave one no choice but to sift through the entire contents in order to reach those at the bottom, the discovery of the drawer pointed to a new era of storage furniture forms.

It was a matter of time, however, before joiners learned to deal with the technical skills required to build a drawer, and a matter of even more time before they developed a functional form which took advantage of the drawer's ultimate potential. A small drawer was relatively easy to make. As the size increased, the



The drawer and late medieval applications

stress created by pulling on the front face required strong construction. Furthermore, the need to move the drawer fluidly within the carcass required accurate dimensioning and some system of guidance to keep the drawer from jamming (#9, p307).

One of the first Northern European attempts to incorporate medium-sized drawers into household furniture occurred in the 1500's when two or three drawers were placed in a row at the bottom of a chest intended to store clothing and accessories (#10, p113). Clothes, with their thick bulky material and their simplicity of line, were still folded away in a chest well into the 1500's (#9, p275). That, however, left a need for a more protective space for those increasingly delicate accessories which would have been crushed in such a large container. The solution was to merge the new sheltering form of the drawer with the traditional form of the chest.

Most of these chests-with-drawers were raised up on stands so that the drawer would be easily accessible (#6, p17). When a new chest was not needed, the same effect was achieved by placing a traditional chest on a table which was fitted with a row of drawers beneath its table top (#4, p215). The chest, however, was a mature furniture form. The addition of a newfangled drawer did not keep the wealthy classes from abandoning their top opening chests during the 1500's and 1600's. By the early 1600's the combination of chest and drawer was considered provincial, and its use was relegated to the countryside and the American Colonies (#4, p115).

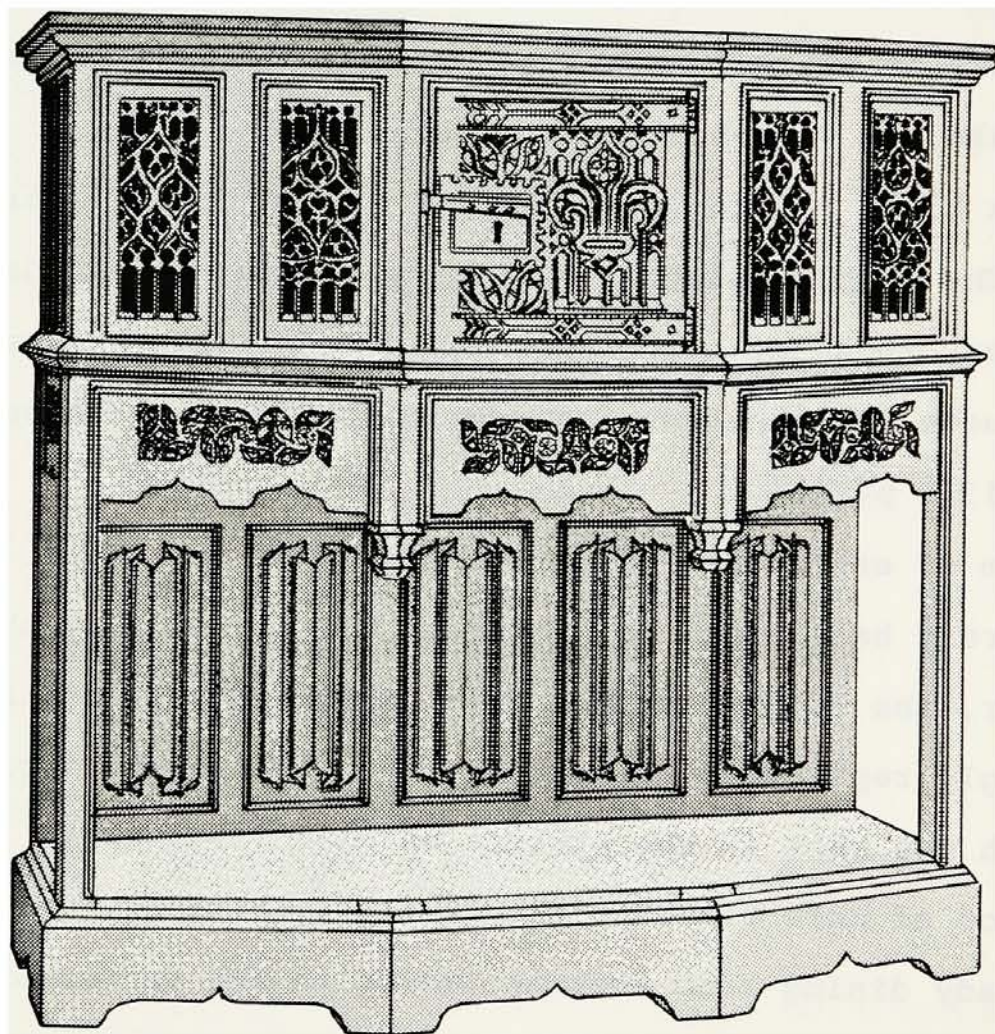
Late medieval sideboards

During the Middle Ages the nobility usually stored its household collection of gold platters, cups, goblets and flagons in a chest. On grand occasions it would take these objects from the safety of the chest and put them on display in the great hall for the admiration of visiting dignitaries. For this purpose the household would erect a set of rough platform shelves and drape them with fine fabrics on which to place the prized personal possessions. The number of shelves was strictly regulated by the rules of etiquette, and served as a blunt but convincing index of the host's wealth and social rank. The display platforms of mere ladies were to have only two shelves, those of countesses could have three shelves, and those of the queen could have up to five shelves without appearing ostentatious (#22, p44).^{2/}

The custom of erecting temporary shelves for ceremonial occasions in the great hall continued up until the 1500's. By the late 1400's, however, the rough shelves, which had no beauty of their own, were increasingly replaced by a new piece of expensively decorated furniture which was kept in the private chamber (#19, p81). With the introduction of more rooms to the family apartments, and with the lord and lady dining from trestle tables in the center of the private chamber, there was more wall space available for the placement of a free-standing furniture form. But space and furniture were both rather rare commodities, and this new piece of furniture was not used for display storage alone. It also served as a

^{2/} In England these display shelves were known as "cup-boards", literally a board for cups. Since the 1600's the term "cupboard" has been used to describe an enclosed storage container instead of an open shelf (#15, p60).

French carved oak credence, late 1400's



Late medieval sideboards

primitive sideboard on which to set dishes, and as a storage container for the few eating implements and other household utensils.

This furniture form had a variety of names: it was known as the credence or plate-cupboard in England, and as a buffet or dressoir in France. There were variations in its construction, but it generally consisted of a rectangular enclosed cupboard raised on an open stand - a form which was similar to the contemporary elevated chest. When fully developed it had an open shelf on top for display and service functions, an enclosed storage cupboard in the middle level, and a base stand upon which less valuable utensils were placed (#19, p79). During the height of the Gothic influence, it was often made with a decorative back panel which supported a wooden canopy projecting out over the upper shelf. This canopy gave the items placed on the upper shelf a quality of majesty and importance (#19, p 82).^{3/}

There are some interesting theories about the origins of the name "credence". Those theories help to illustrate the piece's possible background, as well as its function in the medieval interior. The furniture form may have been derived from the Church and its ecclesiastical "credence": a small table or shelf where the bread and wine were kept before consecration, and which held a bowl and pitcher for rinsing the priest's fingers during the Mass. The secular credence may have derived its name from the ecclesiastical credence because it also held a bowl and pitcher. It was an age

^{3/} Cloth canopies were often hung above the dais to protect the diners from soot and dirt falling from the smoke blackened ceiling. It was probably because of this early connection with the high table that the use of a canopy became a symbol of rank and majesty (#19, p82).

Late medieval sideboards

when people frequently ate with their hands, and the steward would rinse their sticky fingers with scented water during the meal. It is also possible that the credence received its name from the fear that most dignitaries had of being poisoned. When a meal was brought into the room, the steward set it down on the credence and took the first bite so that the lord of the manor could believe - "credere" - that he wasn't being poisoned.

These stories illustrate the credence's ceremonial role in the medieval dining ritual, and help to explain why so much attention was lavished on its Gothic decoration. The credence's emphasis on decorative detailing is an early manifestation of the interest in luxurious surroundings which characterized Continental Europe's upper class homes from the late Middle Ages until the 1900's. To the post-medieval upper classes, the relative luxury of a piece of furniture was not so much determined by the beauty of its materials or the convenience of its form, but by the quantity and the tastefulness of its ornamentation.

RENAISSANCE STORAGE FURNITURE

Renaissance introduction

The Italian nobility had a tradition of urban involvement dating back to the Roman empire. As Italian towns became the focus of increased economic and political activity, the Italian nobility became increasingly involved with urban affairs and the quality of urban life (#19, p69). This active participation by the aristocracy contributed a certain patrician refinement to the Italian city state. This refinement distinguished the Italian urban culture from the middle class urban cultures of Northern Europe.

Upper class Italian Renaissance urban homes, known as palazzi, were multi-story structures situated on large rectangular lots whose proportions, in many cases, had been marked off in the days of the Roman empire (#17, p64). The palazzi were built on the perimeter of the lots surrounding a protected central courtyard. As with the early English urban homes, for reasons of security and comfort the ground floor was not utilized by the principal household. In Rome the ground floor was rented out to shops which faced out on an arcade along the public street. In Florence it was used by retainers and clients of the patron who would not object to the noise, the small heavily barred windows, and the generally dank conditions found in such quarters (#17, p180). Above the ground floor the Renaissance palazzi often had a mezzanine which served as a store room for the shops below, or as a servant's quarters for the principal household on the floor above. This multi-level arrangement established a clearly articulated social stratification which continued the general trend towards isolating the upper classes from contact with the lower classes.

The upper floors where the principal household lived were generally composed of large rectangular rooms whose limited use of

Renaissance introduction

furniture resembled the sparseness of Northern European medieval interiors. The Northern European interior had few furnishings in response to the multi-functional requirements of the great hall and the tradition of spending what little money there was on items other than furniture. In Renaissance Italy, however, where wealthy home owners had a greater number of rooms and more money with which to furnish them, personal taste was the essential motive for keeping interiors relatively unencumbered. The Renaissance upper class had chosen a certain architectural style, not because of functional necessity, but because it liked to be surrounded by certain forms (#24, p36). They had chosen classicism because they liked its well proportioned volumes of space, and they did not wish to have their furniture disrupt their appreciation of that space.

The Renaissance room had inlaid marble floors, boldly carved ceilings, and walls which were two dimensional compositions made up of frescoes, pilasters, and pediments. A few large pieces of storage furniture were usually placed against the wall to complete the visual statement (#13, p300). It was during the Renaissance that the issue of furniture's visual form became an important consideration. This interest went beyond the furniture decoration practiced in Northern Europe. Renaissance furniture was the product of a conscious effort by a professional designer (#10, p97). The serious consideration of furniture's visual form was a by-product of the general interest in artistic merit that occurred during the Renaissance's classical revival. Renaissance scholars studied the ruins and writings of Roman antiquity, and translated their knowledge into precise criteria for sculpture, art, and architecture. Italian architects used these criteria as guidelines for the proper propor-

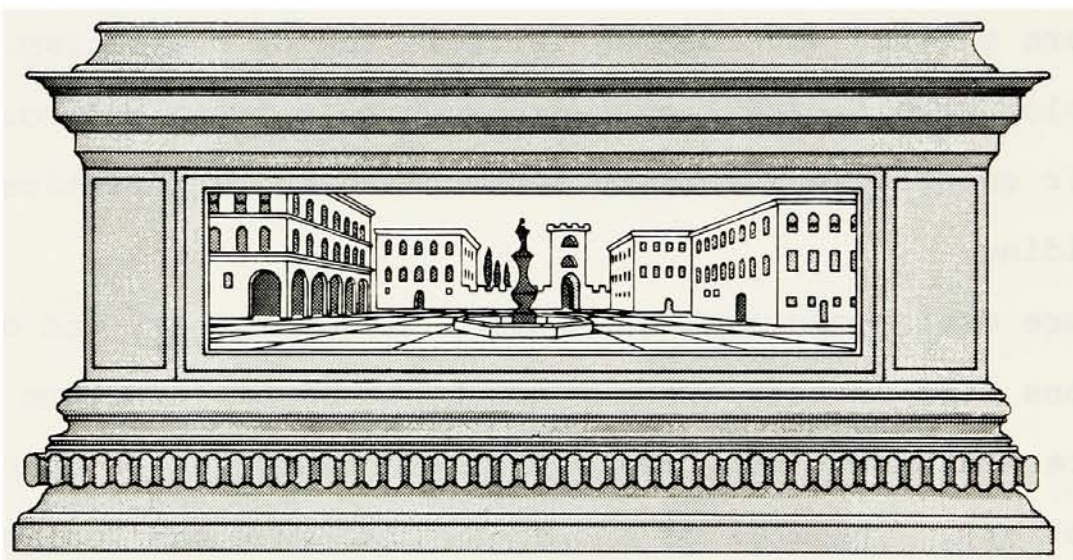
Renaissance introduction

tion and correct detailing of their buildings.^{4/} In time it became clear that furniture, by its mere presence, was going to play an important role in the decoration of a building's interior, and would therefore have to conform to the prevailing classical tastes.

The Romans had not left many precedents in the prosaic field of furniture design. The lack of strict historical guidelines gave the early Renaissance craftsmen some choice about how they applied classicism to their work. Early Renaissance furniture exhibited its classical influence in refined proportions, delicately carved moldings, and painted panels. By the early 1500's furniture designers were getting more daring in their use of classicism, and began to employ architectural elements such as columns and cornices, so that their decorative furniture took on the characteristics of a small building.

Furniture design was taking on scholarly overtones, and aristocratic patrons were commissioning special pieces of furniture with the same care and enthusiasm they would have exhibited in commissioning a work of art. The work of anonymous craftsmen was replaced by the work of well known artists, and patrons were beginning to associate the prestige of a piece of furniture with the reputation of the artist who had made it (#13, p326). In spite of this emphasis on visual form, most Renaissance furniture retained a definable utilitarian purpose (#13, p300). While the quest for good proportion might influence the dimensions of a chest or cupboard, the fact that its primary function was to store household items was not forgotten.

^{4/} The tradition of using aesthetic criteria as a measure of correct living in particular where they are reinforced by scholarly research and philosophical associations, will be referred to as the "Academic Tradition".



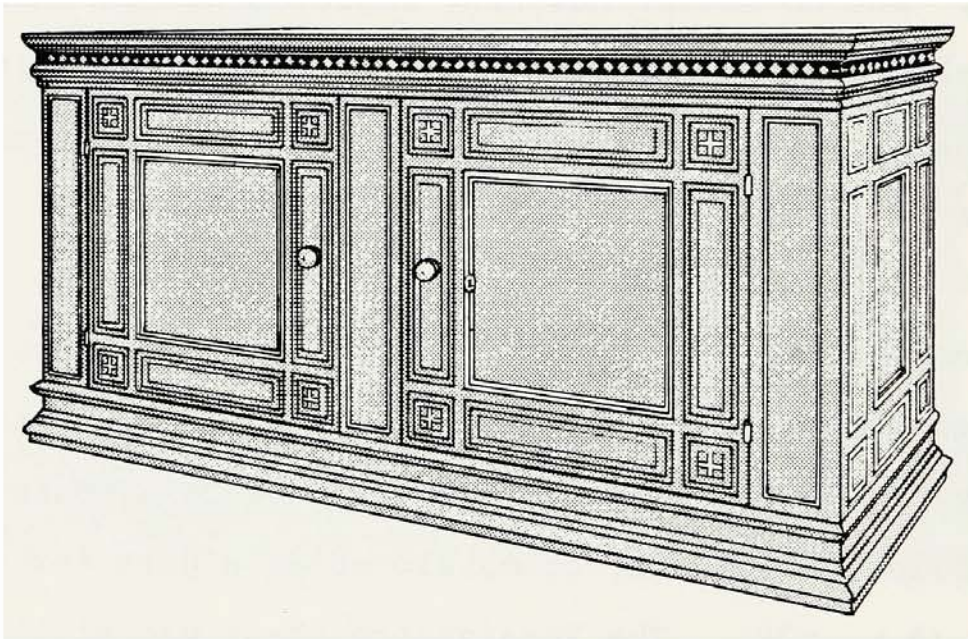
Renaissance chest

The chest was the most important piece of domestic furniture in the early Renaissance upper class home (# 3, p37). The chest was still used to store clothing, and was still placed against the wall, but it was no longer the inconspicuous, mobile, and multi-functional container of the medieval period. It had become more specialized as its functions were perfected. By the 1400's it was common for the interior of a chest to be subdivided by removable trays. These trays allowed for a more orderly arrangement of the stored contents. But no matter how many improvements one made, the basic top opening characteristic of the chest imposed a limit on its potential convenience. One still needed to remove most of the chest's contents to reach the items stored at the bottom.

The type of chest built for the aristocracy during the early Renaissance was designed to be more of a display piece than a utilitarian form. It was often commissioned to commemorate special occasions - a typical example being the pair of wedding chests which great families customarily commissioned as a gift for the bride and groom (# 3, p38). The Renaissance chest was still built with the joiner's frame and panel construction method, but its carefully proportioned frame was delineated by delicately carved moldings, and the panels were commonly painted by the foremost painters of the time.^{5/} The Renaissance chest marks the final stages of this venerable form's development. It marks the period when the chest passed from the useful to the decorative, a passage which opened the way for new furniture forms to take over its day to day functions.

^{5/} Many of these chests were subsequently dismantled, with the detached panels being treated as individual pictures that were framed and hung on the wall (#15, p38).

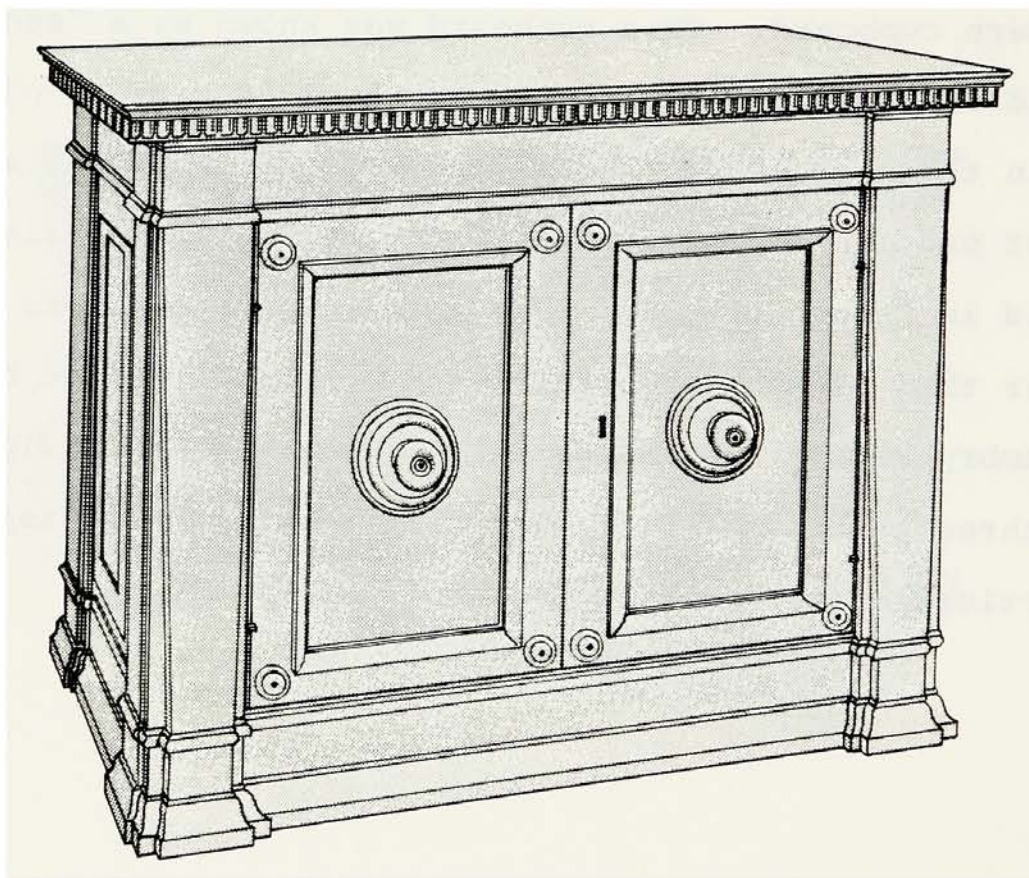
Walnut sacristy cupboard, second half of the 1400's



Renaissance cupboards: the sacristy cupboard

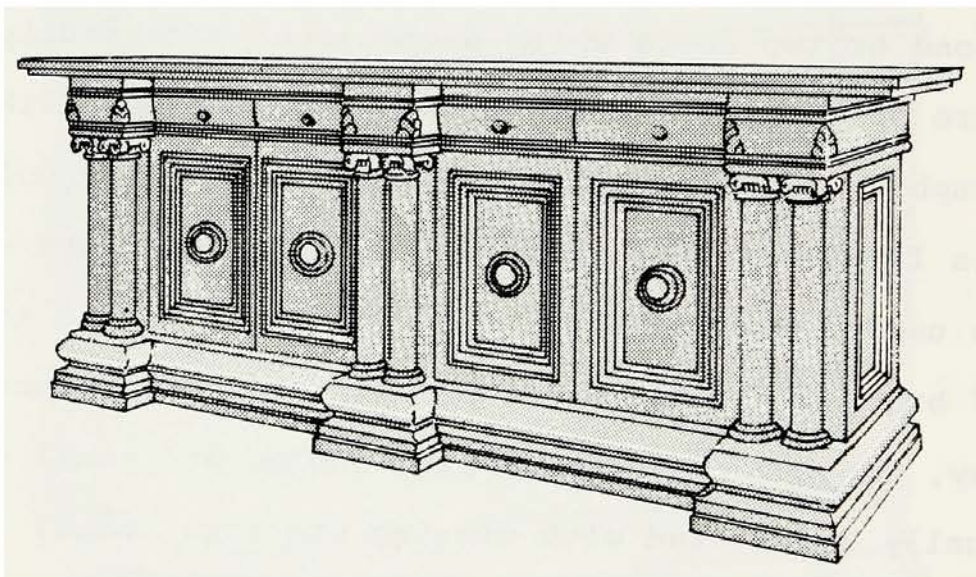
The most important furniture forms to take over the chest's declining storage function were those which developed from an expanded application and refinement of the free-standing cupboard. The concept of a free-standing cupboard had been suggested by the specialized aumbry and the credence-sideboard of the Middle Ages. The Church was the first to develop what could be considered a modern cupboard. This cupboard was known as a "sacristy cupboard", and was introduced as early as the 1300's (#19, p32). It was kept in the sacristy of the church where it provided a convenient yet protected storage space for the sacred vessels that were used in Church rituals. The sacristy cupboard was usually longer than it was tall, and rested on a low molded base. Unlike the aumbry with its awkward narrow doors, it was equipped with two or three generously dimensioned doors which were separated by narrow vertical panels (# 3 , p39).

Small Florentine two door cupboard, first half of the 1500's



Renaissance cupboards: small secular cupboards

During the 1500's there was a growing recognition that the front opening cupboard offered functional advantages which the chest could not match. The earliest cupboards that were built for domestic use were probably simple adaptations of the ecclesiastical sacristy cupboard. By the mid 1500's Renaissance craftsmen had become more familiar with the process of building a cupboard, and the upper class had developed more specific functional requirements. The variety of different requirements contributed to the secular cupboard being built in a variety of different sizes with varying degrees of ornamentation. The smallest cupboards had one or two doors which encompassed a carefully proportioned square or rectangular front. These cupboards, like most Italian cupboards, rested on short feet or on a low molded base. There is little precise information about how these small cupboards were used. They were not deep enough to hold a significant amount of bulky clothing. They had limited shelf space on top for display, and had none of the pigeonholes and small drawers which were usually associated with storing precious items. These cupboards were probably placed at strategic points around the house where they were used to store everyday paraphernalia.



Renaissance cupboards: the credenza

Another variety of cupboard introduced during the mid 1500's was the "credenza". The credenza is a large cupboard form which is believed to have a close functional relationship to the Northern European sideboard, the credence/dressoir.^{6/} The Italian Renaissance house did not set aside a special room to serve as the dining room - a tradition which continued in both France and Italy until the early 1800's. Even the inhabitants of the grandest palaces seem to have eaten at trestle tables which could be set up in the most convenient room (#15 p36). For this reason early Renaissance sideboards consisted of a rough table draped with a linen cloth. This type of sideboard provided a convenient place for servants to lay out dishes in preparation for a meal, but provided no storage space for eating implements. The credenza may have been introduced as a solution to this storage problem.

The credenza usually had three or four vertically proportioned doors which were set in a line across its front face. The credenza's height and depth were similar to those of the small two door cupboards, but the additional doors extended the credenza's length along the horizontal axis. This horizontal extension created an elongated work surface at a convenient height for laying out dishes. The extension also provided ample storage space for eating implements while minimizing the distance which the credenza intruded into the

6/ Some historians use the word "credenza" to describe any large domestic cupboard, without limiting the category to cupboards which served a sideboard function. They use the term "credenzina" to refer to the previously mentioned small, one and two door cupboards (# 3, p40).

Renaissance cupboards: the credenza

room. Both of these characteristics support the idea that the credenza was used as a sideboard. The credenza's large size and lack of any handles suggests that it was kept in one place. Both of these characteristics seem to conflict with the Italian tradition of dining in whatever room was most convenient. A good hypothesis is that the credenza was kept in the room most frequently used for dining. When meals were served in that room the credenza provided a work surface to set dishes on. At other times the credenza merely served as a home base for the collection of household eating implements - the place one would look for a specific utensil even though it could have been last used in any one of a number of different rooms.

The credenza was introduced towards the end of the high Renaissance, a period when the principles of classical architecture had become a dominant feature of upper class furniture. The few credenzas that were built before the mid 1500's are notable for their faithful adherence to the subdued scale of classical architectural compositions. The credenzas built during the late Renaissance, after the mid 1500's, were more elaborately decorated. They had prominent columns and pilasters delineating the space between the cupboard doors, a heavily molded base, and a cornice which projected the top work-surface out beyond the cupboards below.

Renaissance cupboards: cupboards with drawers

A further adaptation of the free-standing cupboard occurred when it was combined with the drawer. The drawer had been developed by the Church in the mid 1400's, but its use in anything other than an ecclesiastical storage form before the 1500's is generally considered rare and precocious (#19, pl06). By the mid 1500's, drawers were becoming increasingly common in domestic surroundings, and by the 1600's Italian craftsmen were often incorporating one or more drawers in a horizontal row just beneath the top surface of a cupboard.

The incorporation of drawers into a cupboard form was motivated by the same probing experimentation which led Northern European craftsmen to place a set of drawers along the bottom of a chest. Incorporating drawers into a cupboard, however, proved to be a more reasonable combination. A drawer situated just beneath a cupboard's top surface was located at a more practical height than was possible in a chest where the top opening lid required placing drawers along the bottom. This adaptation proved to be so reasonable and logical that it continues to be used in the 20th century.

Renaissance desks: the studio

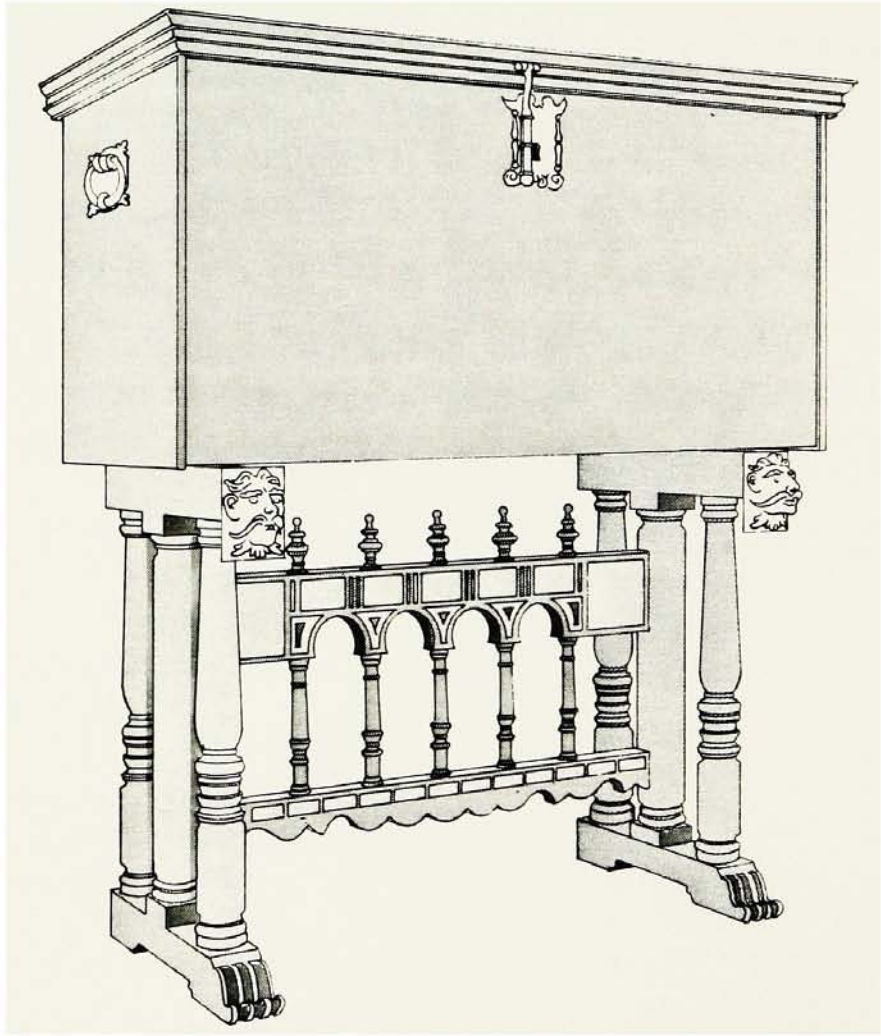
The Renaissance was distinguished by a growing enthusiasm among the nobility and the emerging class of wealthy financiers for literary scholarship. This enthusiasm brought about a new interest in rooms and furnishings which were conducive to scholarship and could occasionally provide work space for increasingly complex business transactions. Previous to the Renaissance the need for such a work space had generally been limited to the Church (#10, p113). The ecclesiastical writing box had been the primary piece of writing furniture, and a private study for the use of a single individual was rare. Both of these precedents reflected monastic simplicity, and neither of them were adequate for the needs of the Renaissance secular upper class.

Elaborate "studios" were often built into the grander Renaissance palazzi to provide scholastic work space. The studio was the sanctum of the master of the house. There he kept his collection of manuscripts and books, and perhaps statuettes, coins, medals and other personal effects (#15, p37). The richest studios had walls and ceilings that were decorated with panelling and paintings by contemporary artists. Studios were generally equipped with built-in furniture including tiers of book shelves and wall cupboards with fitted shelves and panelled doors. The built-in furniture provided virtually all of the storage capacity. Free-standing furniture in such a studio was often limited to a table and a single armchair. During the early Renaissance the table's writing function was usually enhanced by the addition of a small portable writing box. The continued use of this medieval form indicates how little the concept of writing, or "desk", furniture

Renaissance desks: the studio

had evolved since the time of the monastic scriptorium. The writing box's sloped writing surface and minimal storage capacity had remained unchanged. The only development which had occurred was decorative. The simple wooden box from the Middle Ages was now covered with either a pattern of inlaid wood, or carefully tooled leather (# 3 , p36).

Spanish vargueno fall-front desk, from the 1500's



Renaissance desks: the Spanish vargueno

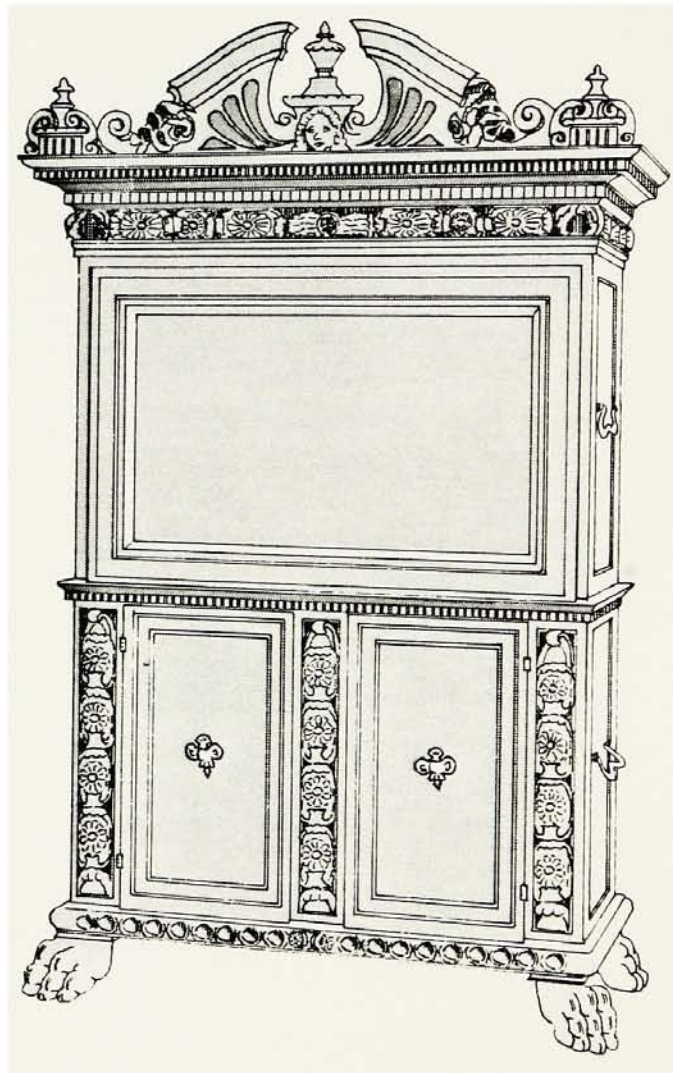
By the early 1500's a more complex piece of writing furniture, known as the "fall-front desk", had been introduced into the upper class Renaissance studio. The fall-front desk had its own unique derivation which set it apart from the closely related front opening cupboard. Its actual origins are unclear, but the fall-front writing desk is believed to have made its European debut on the Iberian Peninsula. It had been introduced to the Spanish by the Moors who gave Spain a tradition of a few simple and portable furnishings (# 4, p54). In Spain it was known as the "vargueño" and was an important element in almost every study and place of business (#7, pVII).

The vargueño had the general appearance of a chest raised on a stand. It was a rectangular box mounted on a trestle or table which was often especially designed for it and from which it could be detached (#19, pl13). The vargueño is referred to as a fall-front desk because of its characteristic front panel which could be lowered on hinges to serve as a writing surface. When lowered the panel rested on two wooden runners which were either built into the desk or into the stand, and which slid out horizontally to support the weight of the cantilevered writing surface. The interior of the vargueño had an array of shelves and small drawers which were used to store correspondence, business records and writing implements.

The vargueño had the medieval nomadic qualities of plain exterior decoration, rugged construction, and flexible mobility. It lacked the classical architectural details found on contemporary Italian furniture. As a rule the exterior decoration was limited

Renaissance desks: the Spanish vargueno

to the ornamental designs of the essentially functional wrought iron hardware. The hardware included items such as the elaborate lock plate and hasp used to secure the fall-front panel, and the drop handles that were used to carry the vargueño. These characteristics suggest that the vargueño was originally designed as a portable writing desk which could accompany a man of affairs on his travels (#19, p113).



Renaissance desks: the Italian fall-front desk

It is not known whether the Italians developed the fall-front desk independently. The most likely scenario is that they were introduced to the fall-front desk during the late 1400's and early 1500's as a result of Spain's growing economic and political power. Under the influence of Italian Renaissance Classicism the fall-front desk metamorphosed from a transportable desk into an ornate stationary desk within the home. The original simple exterior was elaborated upon until it was encompassed by a frieze and cornice, and an array of architectural pilasters. By the late 1500's the Italian fall-front desk incorporated the same prominently carved decoration and projecting molding which typified the late Renaissance credenza. The Italian version still had a front panel which dropped down to reveal an interior composed of small drawers and compartments. The open stand, however, had been replaced by a two door front opening cupboard. The interior of this lower cupboard was either fitted with shelves, or, in some later cases, with a tier of long drawers (# 3 , p37).

FRENCH STORAGE FURNITURE

French introduction: Renaissance Classicism

During the 1600's the French court was regarded as the cultural center of Europe: its art, architecture and furniture were the envy of every European aristocrat who espoused the Academic Tradition. The foundation of this reputation can be traced back to the early 1500's when Italian artists and craftsmen were retained by Francis the 1st (1515-1547) to decorate his court at Fontainebleau in the contemporary Italian Renaissance style. These artisans assisted the French monarchy as it set out to replace the unconscious art of its vernacular tradition with classicism's scholarly form-consciousness.

France was evolving out of the Middle Ages when defensive considerations and communal spirit had contributed to the organic layout of the medieval compound. The need for fortification had declined at the same time as the nobility assumed its new, non-military land-holding role. Following the monarchy's example, the nobility became concerned with the artistic merit of its living quarters and no longer chose to live in ancestral castles and manors. It wished to replace these functional and unpretentious compounds with grand chateaux that had an ordered arrangement and a visual impact.

These homes added more principal household rooms for formal and leisure activities. More rooms meant that the functional demands on each room were reduced, which in turn freed furniture from the traditional medieval requirement that it be portable and multi-functional. During the 1500's most patrons and designers focused their efforts on the building and its interior detailing. Furniture was being recognized as a decorative element of the interior, but had not yet established its own criteria for artistic

French introduction: Renaissance Classicism

merit. It was still largely dependent on the Renaissance tradition of copying elements from classical architecture.

French introduction: Louis the 14th & Baroque

The formal classicism of Renaissance architecture fell from favor during the early 1600's. The new generation found classical architecture's uniformity to be monotonous, and its strict rules to be an impediment to achieving a high level of ornateness. These patrons found their alternative to classical architecture in the work of Italian architects who, since the mid 1500's, had been experimenting with classical forms by arranging them in a manner which deviated from the classical canons of proportion. This new style of architecture replaced classicism's pursuit of balance and harmony with a deliberately restless effect (#20, p59). Its forms emphasized a building's ceremonial potential by increasing the scale of the moldings which framed the windows and doorways until their exaggerated effect reached cartoon proportion. By the early 1600's these experimental deviations had been refined into a distinct architectural style known as "Baroque". By the mid 1600's this unorthodox approach to classicism had lost its radical connotations and had been accepted as the new criteria for aesthetic conformity at Louis the 14th's court.

Louis the 14th adopted Baroque as his official court style because its triumphant scale reflected his political ambitions. He believed that art was essential to the personal glorification of the monarch as well as to the dignity and prestige of the state (# 4, p87).^{7/} During his reign (1643-1715) sparsely furnished Renaissance interiors were replaced by Baroque interiors that were

^{7/} The court's high standards were enforced by the Academie Royale de Peinture et de Sculpture, which was established in 1648, and which dictated elaborate conventions and aesthetic doctrines for the production of works of art (#12, pl0).

French introduction: Louis the 14th & Baroque

richer and fuller. The sumptuous nature of Baroque required a total integration of the interior, and furniture was designed as an integral part of the room's decoration. The late Renaissance tradition of making furniture that looked like small buildings was gradually replaced by a new style. The new style employed a more intricate and more subtle ornamental technique which did not compete with the visual impact of the interior architectural detailing (#19, pl41). Though this style was subservient to the needs of its architectural setting, it represents the first time since the Renaissance that furniture developed its own aesthetic and decorative criteria for artistic merit. Furniture design was becoming an art form in which aesthetics was more important than function. The staff of the French chateau made it possible for the aristocracy to store bulky nondecorative objects at a discreet distance. The furnishings kept in the principal interior were primarily designed for display.

French introduction: Louis the 15th & Rococo

By the early 1700's French furniture designers conformed to the aesthetic criteria of the latest fashions, so that furniture became stylistically obsolescent. When Louis the 15th came to power Louis the 14th interiors and furnishings were removed, not because they were no longer needed, nor to be replaced by more sophisticated forms, but because the French court had grown tired of the grand scale of Louis the 14th's Baroque. Unlike the simple medieval physical surroundings which created a neutral backdrop for the needs of succeeding generations, the Bourbon dynasty used its physical surroundings to reflect and reinforce the individual monarch's prevailing philosophy and self-image. Wings of existing architecture were extensively remodeled and new pavilions were redesigned from the ground up in response to the new mood at Louis the 15th's court. The grandiose images of cold marble and ceremonial galleries associated with Louis the 14th were replaced by rooms with a domestic scale that evoked an image of elegant intimacy. Smaller rooms with lower ceilings were secluded from each other by narrow corridors and ante-chambers (#20, p122). The furnishings of these rooms were decorated in a Louis the 15th style called "Rococo".

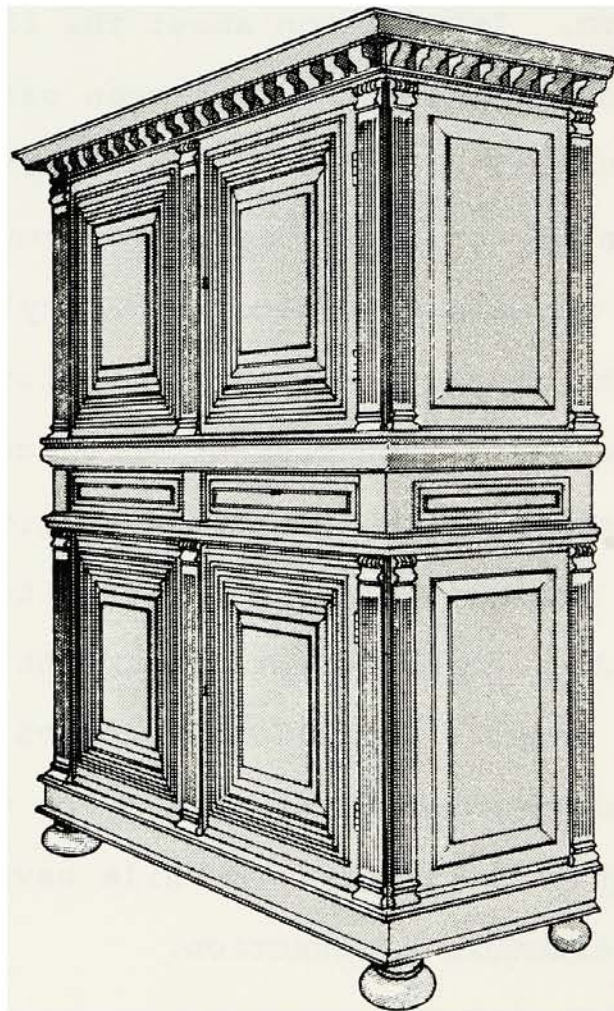
Rococo was a fundamental challenge to classicism which went beyond Baroque's distortion of classical formulas. For the first time since the Middle Ages the artistic community was beginning to question classicism's underlying aesthetic convention that design should be based on the symmetrical arrangement of mathematically derived geometric forms. Rococo was a romantic style which replaced classicism's symmetrical forms and straight lines with

French introduction: Louis the 15th & Rococo

non-symmetrical forms derived from a subjective interpretation of the natural environment. Rococo's popularity during the first half of the 1700's may be attributable to its sympathy with the prevailing social values at Louis the 15th's court. Its sinuous natural forms helped to create an atmosphere of escapist pastoral sensuality (#14, p16). What began as a style of decoration ended by appropriating the form and visually denying the function of the furniture. Where medieval furniture makers have carved an incidental decoration once the structure of a piece was complete, eighteenth century French furniture makers were primarily ornamentalists.

French introduction: Louis the 16th & Neo-Classicism

By the time Louis the 16th ascended to the throne, fashion revolted against the sinuosity of Rococo and rejected the previous generation's hedonism (#14, p140). The new style was an outgrowth of a vogue for the study of Antiquity which swept across Western Europe following the 1738 to 1749 excavations of the Roman ruins at Pompeii and Herculaneum. Information about the life styles and decorative arts of early Roman times had been gathered. The refined simplicity and subdued elegance of the idealized ancient world attracted the attention of Louis the 16th's court, which was searching for a more conservative decorative style. Louis the 16th's court wanted to project an image of virtue and simplicity, and this sentimentalized view of Roman culture provided an academically sanctioned solution. A new generation of craftsmen set out to apply the few forms of classical antiquity to the vast array of cabinets, commodes, desks, and tables which had been developed for the French court. For all the changes and expenses, French interiors remained remarkably the same. The new classical guidelines changed furniture's visual form while having little or no effect on its basic structure or function.



French cupboard forms: the two stage cupboard

By the 1500's most chests, with the exception of a few decorative marriage chests, had been banished from the principal rooms of the upper class home (#4, p105). Taking over their storage function was a growing variety of less portable but more convenient cupboards. Up until the mid 1500's Italian cupboards had generally been made in one stage. Northern European cupboards from the same period, however, were generally made in pairs intended to be stacked one on top of the other (#19, p105).

The stacking of storage furniture components with similar, or "modular", dimensions was a logical step in the development of storage furniture. Northern European craftsmen had a tradition of raising the pre-cupboard forms, the aumbry and the credence, up on a stand. Furthermore, the medieval concern for the efficient use of space had prompted the construction of chests with modular dimensions which allowed them to be arranged end to end along the wall. With this heritage of modular and elevated furniture, it is not surprising that Northern European craftsmen stacked cupboards one on top of the other when the front opening cupboard presented the opportunity.

The Northern European two stage cupboard from the early 1500's had a cornice and plinth at the top and bottom, and matching symmetrical doors on both stages. Though the two stage cupboard was designed as a visual unit, each component was structurally independent and could be separated from the other. The two cupboards were virtually interchangeable because neither cupboard had a permanently attached cornice or plinth. Northern European craftsmen often extended the flexibility inherent in modular cupboards by

French cupboard forms: the two stage cupboard

placing an additional component composed of two drawers between the upper and lower cupboard forms (#19, pl06).

The ability to separate and rearrange the two stage cupboard theoretically allowed its user to add or subtract storage components as needed. Before attributing this design to a concern for flexibility, one should note that flexibility to changing functional needs is more of a 20th century than a late medieval concern. The fact that the concept of modular component furniture was not elaborated upon until the late 19th century leads to the conclusion that the potential flexibility was not recognized at the time, or was considered unnecessary. One can only speculate about why the two stage cupboard was designed as a series of modular components. The facts suggest, however, that the real motivation was a continuing concern for mobility. A large cupboard dismantled into parts is easier to transport.



French cupboard forms: the dresser

During the mid 1500's the development of the Northern European cupboard split into two directions. The first direction to achieve a coherent form and upper class acceptance was the "dresser". The dresser's function corresponded to that of the late medieval single stage sideboard; the credence/buffet/dressoir (#15, p44). The two stage cupboard made during the early 1500's had been a rather conventional form with only a passing concern for aesthetics. The dresser, however, shared the late medieval sideboard's emphasis on decoration. Under the scholarly influence of contemporary Renaissance classicism the modular dimensions of the two stage cupboard were replaced by a composition which recessed the upper stage from the lower stage. The new composition resulted from an attempt to improve the proportions of the original two stage cupboard. The intention was to achieve a lighter visual effect by "placing a square upon a rectangle" (#15, p42). The interchangeable flexibility of the two stage cupboard was further diminished by the addition of a permanently attached architectural pediment on top of the upper stage.

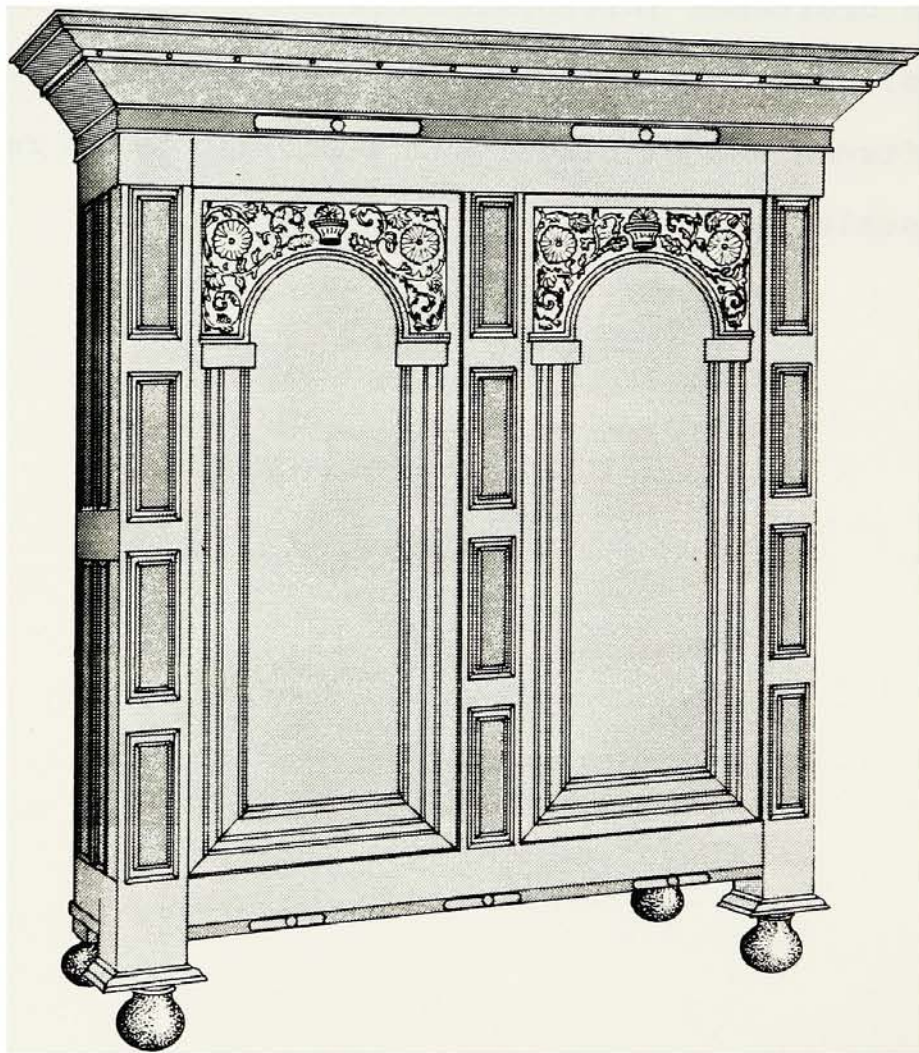
During the second half of the 1500's some French furniture designers and architects began to question the dominating Italian influence. They proposed to develop a style which was more thoroughly French and which provided greater freedom for a personal interpretation of the classical canons of proportion and decoration (#15, p42).^{8/}

^{8/} This challenge to formal classicism parallels the work of contemporary Italian architects which ultimately led to the development of Baroque.

French cupboard forms: the dresser

The new French style made lavish carving an essential part of the design of dressers (#19, p115). The human figure played an increasingly important decorative role, usually in the form of cherubs and mildly erotic nymphs. Towards the late 1500's the carving was further enlivened by an array of exotic creatures such as harpies and griffins.^{9/} These figures exhibit the enthusiasm with which French craftsmen interpreted classical forms and mythological creatures. But they also demonstrate the lack of understanding the craftsmen had of classicism's philosophy of restraint and appropriate scale.

^{9/} One particular dresser was decorated with a long necked chimera terminating in plumed scrolls from which dangled a horse's tail (#15, p43).



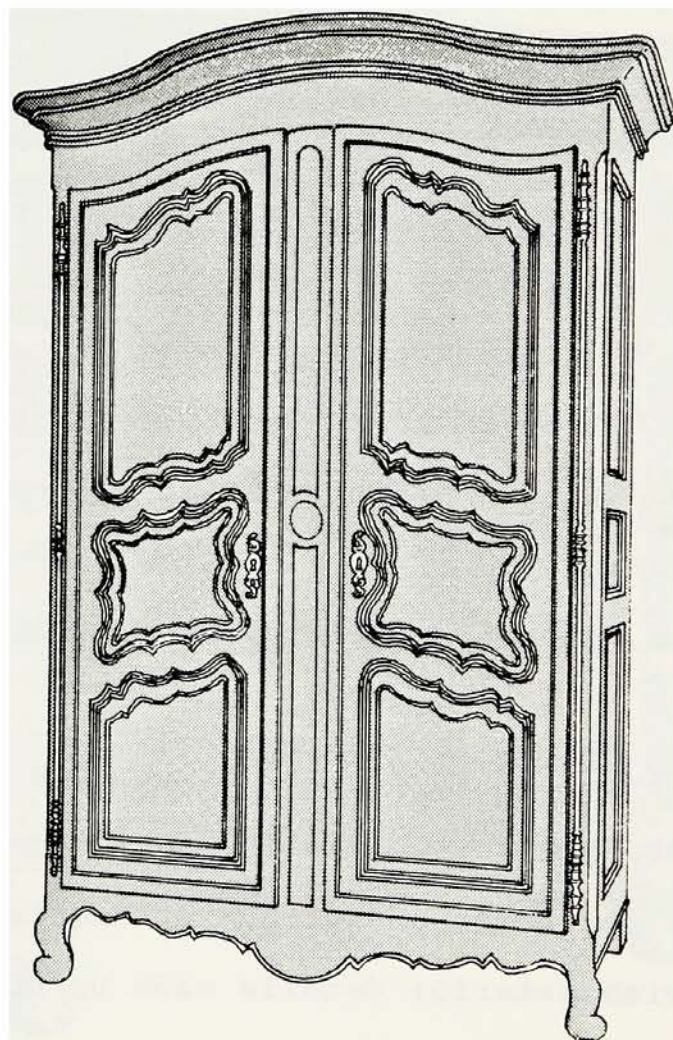
French cupboard forms: the tall cupboard

During the late 1500's France's increased security and wealth paved the way for immobile furniture, and for the two stage cupboard's second phase of development. In the second phase the cupboard's independent components were consolidated into a single vertical component. Throughout the 1500's isolated examples of these "tall-cupboards" were made for specialized purposes. They were equipped with shelves and used in church sacristies, or they were equipped with a row of pegs and placed in the vestibule of a few upper class houses to accommodate cloaks (# 2 , p17). In the 1600's, however, the tall cupboard was increasingly used to store clothing and linen (#15, p44).

Tall cupboards of the 1600's were enclosed by two vertical doors and were usually fitted with shelves. One particular type of tall cupboard, known as the "press-cupboard", often served as a dowry piece. It supplanted the late medieval wedding chest's function of storing the linen inherited or spun by the bride (# 4 , p115).^{10/}

By the second half of the 1600's tall cupboards were being made for Louis the 14th's aristocracy who called them "great" cupboards (#15, p79). Under the influence of Baroque ornamentalists these cupboards acquired lavish exterior details made up of marquetry and gilt brass fittings. Though the great cupboard was never as highly

^{10/} There is some confusion about the three terms used to refer to the tall cupboard: armoire, press-cupboard, and wardrobe. We will assume that "armoire" and "press-cupboard" refer to furniture used in Continental Europe during the 1600's and 1700's, the armoire being used for clothes storage, and the press-cupboard being used for linen storage. "Wardrobe" will be assumed to refer to a more elaborate clothes storage device used in England during the 1700's.



French cupboard forms: the tall cupboard

esteemed as the contemporary, more thoroughly decorative "cabinet", its large size enabled those that were built to become conspicuous showpieces (#15, p79).

While tall cupboards served as showpieces in court society, their use for clothes storage was expanding in the rural areas. There they were known as "armoires" and by Louis the 15th's time they had become one of the most important pieces of provincial furniture (# 4, pl52). Provincial homeowners required that their furniture emphasize structural and functional utility. The interior of provincial armoires were fitted with shelves and occasionally with a few drawers. They had a simple frame and panel construction and their solid wood construction was bluntly exposed, though their carved door moldings often made some lively concessions to contemporary Rococo decorative detailing.

The cabinet

In the aristocratic household of the 1600's the preeminent storage furniture form was the "cabinet". The original meaning of the word "cabinet" dates back to the late Middle Ages when a few kings and princes had small rooms, known as cabinets, where collections of prized objects could be kept and contemplated (#19, p113).¹¹ The function of such a room was similar to that of the studios found in Italian Renaissance palazzi. The cabinet, however, was associated with the avocation of "collecting" and was not as concerned with academic studies or business transactions. By the mid 1500's the avocation of collecting had spread to the rest of the nobility and the word "cabinet" began to refer to a piece of furniture which acted as a receptacle for favorite curiosities (#19, p113).

The cabinet was a rectangular single stage storage container mounted on a stand, reminiscent of the late medieval sideboard, and the early fall-front desk. The cabinet's elevated single stage implied a discriminating selection of stored items, and allowed for a concentration of small scale decorative detailing which would have been incongruous and prohibitively expensive on a larger piece. Cabinets were usually placed at intervals with console tables and gilt mirrors in ceremonial rooms whose frescoed ceilings and purely decorative furniture demonstrated a concern for display rather than habitation (#15, p66).

^{11/} The Duc de Berry was an avid collector during the late 1300's. Among other relics and curios, he thought he owned one of Charlemagne's teeth, a piece of Elijah's mantle, Christ's cup from the Last Supper, drops of the Virgin's milk, enough of her hairs and teeth to distribute as gifts, a narwhal's tusk, porcupine quills, and the molar tooth of a giant (#25, p427).

The cabinet

The rich used cabinets to house collections of rare stones, exotic shells, and other small, precious and non-functional objects (#15, p77). The cabinet fulfilled this role through an array of drawers arranged around a central "tabernacle door" (#15, p91). The array of small square and rectangular drawers was often used to establish the pattern of the cabinet's decorative facade. When a more subdued effect or greater security was desired, the cabinet's array of drawers was enclosed by double doors. Some early cabinets, particularly those made in Southern Germany during the second half of the 1500's, had storage space for writing implements, and were equipped with a fall-front writing surface instead of double doors (#15, p50). During the 1600's, however, the writing function was generally provided by a specialized fall-front desk known as the "writing cabinet". The writing cabinet freed the collector's cabinet from a need to incorporate utilitarian functions, and permitted the cabinet-maker to focus on developing its role as an ornamental element within the interior.



The cabinet: Italian designs

Between 1550 and 1650 the best cabinets were made in Italy and the Low Countries of Belgium and Holland. Italian cabinets tended to have sculptured facades which displayed their various storage compartments rather than enclose them with double doors. These cabinets won their reputation for their intricate mosaic plaques of semi-precious stones known as "pietre-dure". The plaques were used as decorations to highlight the individual drawer-fronts and tabernacle doors. One of the favorite Italian cabinet designs used small columns and pilasters to frame the drawer fronts, and placed a pediment composed of balustrades and sculptural figures along the top of the cabinet. This design was intended to evoke the illusion that the drawer fronts were bays in a miniature Baroque palace (#15, p69). Italian craftsmen had a unique approach to the ivory, agate, lapis lazuli, porphyry, and rare marbles which they worked with. Instead of allowing the natural beauty of the material to speak for itself, Italian craftsmen preferred to carve the material into small pieces for use as elements in a pictorial scene. It was as if the material was admired for its preciousness and the cleverness of its artistic manipulation, rather than for its intrinsic beauty.

Ebony cabinet from the Low Countries, c.1660



The cabinet: Low Country designs

During the early 1600's the Low Countries, and the city of Antwerp in particular, enjoyed international renown for their fine veneered and painted cabinets (#15, p55). It was a period of unparalleled prosperity for the Low Countries. The textile industry had established thriving urban centers, and a growing maritime trade was producing a wealthy merchant class. Dutch merchantmen trading in the Far East returned to Europe with exotic woods such as ebony and rosewood (#15, p72). The wood was too precious to be used in solid slabs, and by the second half of the 1500's Dutch and Flemish craftsmen had mastered the technique of slicing it into veneers.

A popular cabinet design from the Low Countries used ebony veneer on the exterior of a cabinet enclosed by double doors. The craftsmen allowed the lustrous black color and subtle grain pattern of the ebony to be expressed. Though the panels were often carved in low relief, the carved design was only discernible when light played on the polished surface (#15, p78). These cabinets had a relatively somber exterior presence. When the double doors were opened, however, the richly painted interior created a startling contrast. The pictures which were painted on the inside of the door panels and the drawer fronts generally depicted scenes from mythology, the writings of classical authors, or subjects from the New and Old Testaments. The purchaser commissioning the cabinet was usually free to choose the subjects he wished to have illustrated in the painting (#15, p55). A typically provocative example depicts a classical scene in which the goddess Diana cavorts with nymphs and fauns in an idyllic woodland setting. The particular erudite allusion selected by the purchaser was an important element which was not wasted on contemporary academic connoisseurs.

The cabinet: French marquetry

The fanciest of these cabinets were imported by French aristocrats during the first half of the 1600's (#15, p77). France's own craft tradition had degenerated during the religious and political wars which preceded the Bourbon Dynasty (#15, p46). Though Henry the 4th (1589-1610) set out to restore a creative environment which could nurture artistic production, it was not until the reign of Louis the 13th (1610-1643) that significant progress was made. Under the direction of Louis the 13th's advisors, France imported foreign craftsmen to introduce French furniture makers to new woodworking techniques and new styles. By the beginning of Louis the 14th's reign French craftsmen had mastered the basics, and by 1680 they were making their own contributions to cabinet-design.

Craftsmen who produced luxury furniture were known as "cabinet-makers" (#19, p120). They were an elite who separated themselves from the anonymous craftsmen and old vernacular traditions of their profession. French cabinet-makers are notable for their contribution to the technical refinement of applied decoration, and ingenious assimilation of foreign influences. Their technical refinements were in the area of marquetry, a veneering technique in which thin sheets of one or more materials are cut into delicate patterns and applied to the exterior of a piece of furniture. André Charles Boulle helped develop the technique of Boulle marquetry. Boulle marquetry used cabinets as a background for two dimensional scrolls and arabesques cut from tortoiseshell and brass, and sometimes combined with pewter, copper, or mother of pearl (#10, p32). Floral marquetry was a technique which used a variety of woods of different colors to compose a picture. The pictures usually depicted

The cabinet: French marquetry

flowers and trailing leaves arranged in a vase, sometimes including birds and butterflies. Floral marquetry used wood in much the same way as Italian pietre-dure used stone. Though the two techniques are similar, pietre-dure compositions were restricted to small drawer fronts while floral marquetry was usually applied to double door cabinets. The large uninterrupted panels of these doors provided the marquetry artist with an opportunity to work in a more impressive scale. Floral marquetry was not only used on cabinets, but also on later furniture forms. Though it was a feature of Dutch as well as French furniture, the French cabinet-makers were the ones who established its artistic standards (#15, p310).

The cabinet: French chinoiserie

The exotic foreign influences which cabinet-makers helped to assimilate came to France as a result of commercial ventures in the Far East. These ventures imported porcelain, jade and lacquerware to the royal courts of Europe. Among the imported lacquer products were double-door Japanese cabinets. The European aristocracy was fond of mounting these unobtrusive cabinets on ornate gilt wood stands, and using their tops to display collections of Chinese porcelain vases. By the 1680's lacquer cabinets and other Oriental products had become so popular that the importers were unable to keep up with the demand (#15, p117). European craftsmen responded to this demand by manufacturing imitation Oriental products of their own.

Dutch craftsmen were the first Europeans to analyze and perfect the technique of imitating Oriental lacquer (#15, p89). French artisans adopted the Dutch lacquer technique, and made their own contribution by helping to develop the ornamental style of "Chinoiserie". Chinoiserie was a loose interpretation in Western terms of features taken from the repertoire of Chinese ornament (#15, p308). The artisans who worked in the Chinoiserie style did not comprehend the highly organized Oriental system of representing objects in space, nor its relationship to contemporary Taoist and Confucian perceptions. European aristocrats were apparently more interested in the Orient's exotic images than in the subtlety of its minimalist compositions. French cabinet-makers catered to this fascination by using the Chinoiserie style haphazardly to decorate the panels of their lacquer cabinets with brightly colored birds, imaginary pagoda-like structures, dragons, weirdly shaped rocks,

The cabinet: French chinoiserie

and caricatures of Oriental figures.

Chinoiserie continued as a popular decorative style in France and England through the mid 1700's. In England the technique of lacquering was referred to as the art of japanning. A "Treatise of Japanning and Varnishing" had been published in 1688. It contained directions on how to prepare and apply lacquer, as well as twenty-four engraved designs for pseudo-Oriental motifs. By the early 1700's japanning had become a fashionable amateur pastime and was considered a social accomplishment (#15, p89).

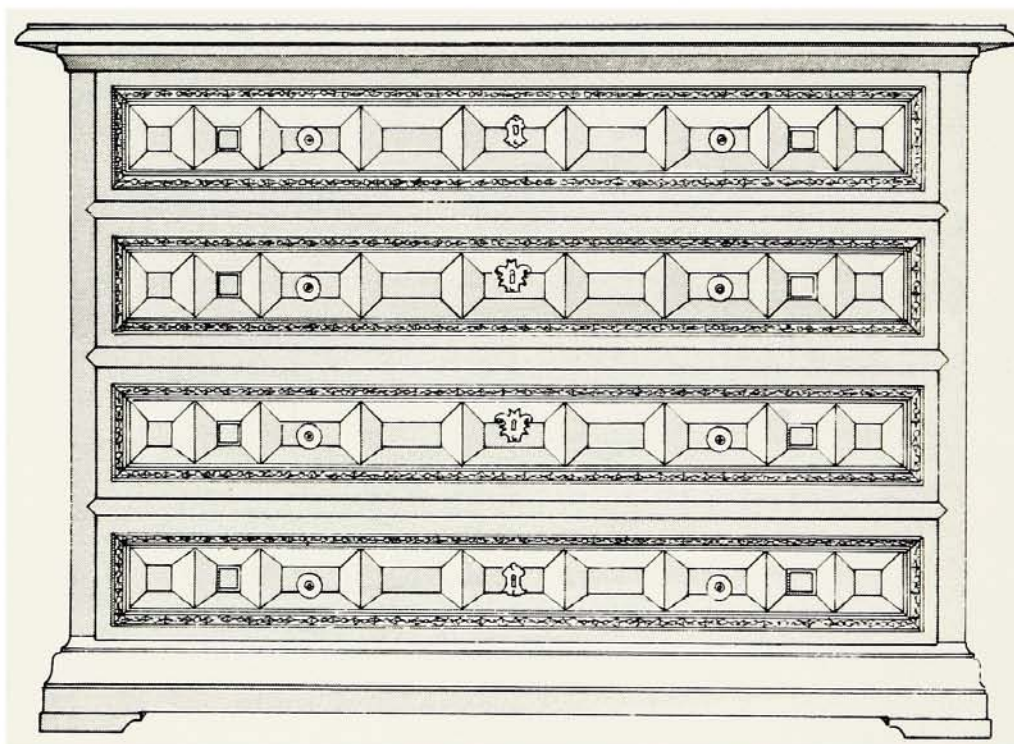
The cabinet: conclusion

By the second half of the 1600's, the exchange of information brought about by the growth of international trade in luxury furniture had begun to blur the distinctive features of cabinets made in different countries. French cabinets were being built with ebony veneer on the sides, and Italian pietre-dure panels on the drawer fronts. Cabinet-makers in Antwerp were building cabinets with painted drawer-fronts framed to look like bays in a miniature Italian Baroque palace. In spite of the wide variety of cabinet designs produced during this eclectic period, there was an identifiable trend in Northern European cabinet design. Aristocratic tastes no longer favored heavily decorated cabinets of an imposing scale (#15, p74). They now preferred a simple rectangular cabinet with refined ornamentation and a barely discernible cornice. The two dimensional decorative techniques of floral marquetry and chinoiserie were particularly compatible with this new taste, and mastery of these techniques by French cabinet-makers insured the success of their products.

The cabinet had been the preeminent piece of sumptuous furniture throughout the 1600's, but in the early 1700's it rapidly fell from favor (# 4, p115). During its long career the cabinet served primarily as a decorative object which provided only an incidental storage function. The fact that it filled a marginal utilitarian need placed the cabinet at the mercy of capricious fashion. The early 1700's saw the grandiose interiors of Baroque architecture replaced by the more intimate style of Rococo. The large vertical mass of the cabinet-on-stand did not fit the new Rococo interior which called for smaller more delicate furniture. Since the cabinet

The cabinet: conclusion

had not provided a significant storage function there was no practical reason for retaining it. After the early 1700's the cabinet was no longer considered an important furniture form. In the context of the history of storage furniture the cabinet is an interesting digression. It disappeared leaving no equivalent form in later generations of storage furniture.



French chest-of-drawers: early form

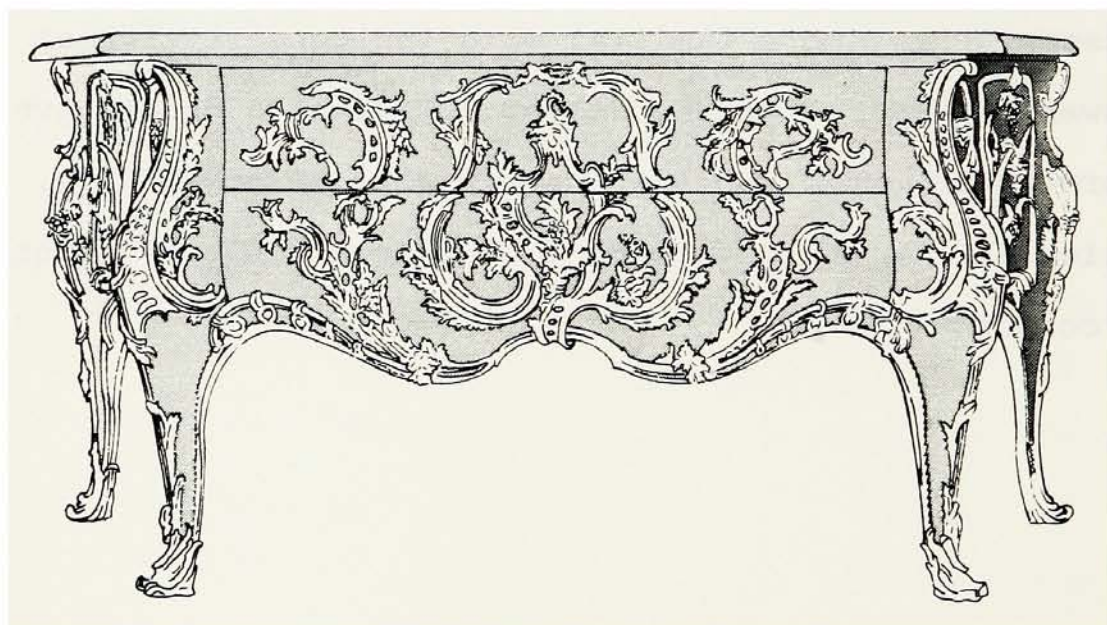
European craftsmen had been searching for ways to improve the structure and expand the application of the drawer since the mid 1400's. Drawers were regularly incorporated into chests, cupboards, and cabinets during the 1500's, but it was not until the 1600's that the "chest of drawers" became popular in the secular home. As was often the case during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, the Church had been the first to commission such a piece. The Church used the "chest-of-drawers" to store and protect vestments. The ecclesiastical chest-of-drawers was usually made with a simple, rectangular wooden frame and was fitted with shallow drawers which had a closer resemblance to sliding trays than to the deep drawers of later design.

During the 1600's, as joiners mastered both the dovetail joint for rigidity and the use of drawer runners for smoothness of operation, the chest-of-drawers became a practical item for secular use (#10, p15). By the mid 1600's it was relatively common for the European aristocracy to store its clothing in a chest of drawers with two small drawers for "dainty accessories" above a tier of three large drawers (#15, p60). The secular chest-of-drawers was usually kept in the sleeping chamber or dressing room of upper class homes. It was a utilitarian piece with little ornamentation. Each drawer was intended to be viewed as an individual entity. The separation between the various drawers was accentuated by horizontal and vertical structural members. The frame was usually made of pine sheathed with a walnut veneer, and the drawers were made of oak to provide the necessary rigidity. The secular chest-of-drawers was often raised on a low plinth to provide easier access to the bottom drawer and to protect the chest from scuffing.

French chest-of-drawers: the commode

When Rococo was introduced to the French court in the early 1700's, new furniture forms were needed to grace the transformed interiors. Intimate rooms had been designed and decorated to satisfy the contemporary taste for informality. Although the previous generation's grandiose furniture suited the state rooms on the ground floor, furniture of a more delicate scale was needed for the small salons, boudoirs, and bedrooms where the 18th century aristocracy lived their daily lives (#15, p110). As French craftsmen became more familiar with the construction of the chest-of-drawers, they recognized its potential as a decorative furniture form which could replace the cabinets of the 1600's. This perception led to the development of a new chest-of-drawers called the "commode".

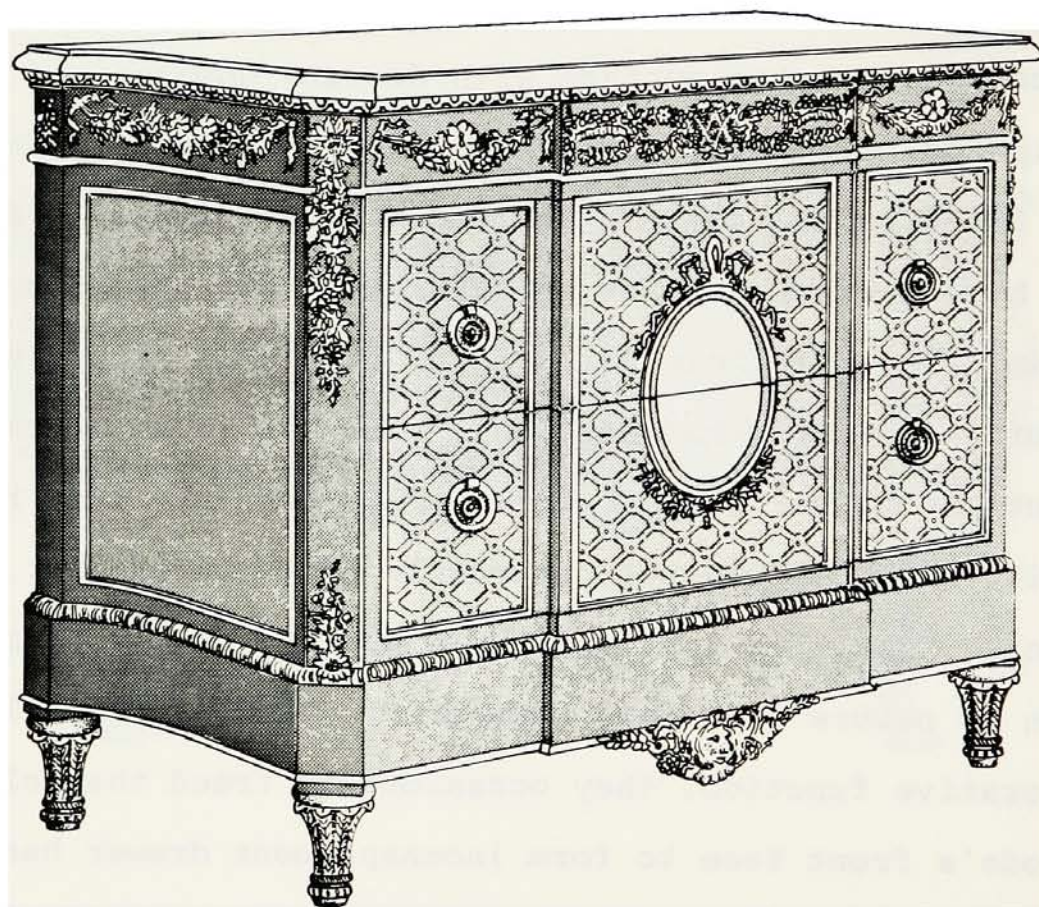
Rococo commode made for Louis the 15th in 1739



French chest-of-drawers: Rococo commode

Early commodes had three tiers of drawers standing on a set of short legs. The resulting visual effect was of a squat, heavy form mildly softened by a curving outline. As furniture designers refined their "sprightly Rococo", commodes were built with a single tier of two or three drawers. Rococo commodes were mounted on slender legs and their rigid sides were liberated until the entire piece undulated in compound three dimensional curves (#9, p308). French cabinet-makers used their recently perfected floral marquetry to adorn the commode's outer surface with designs composed of rosewood, tulipwood, kingwood, purplewood, and satinwood veneers (#4, pl16). The original chest's individually identifiable drawers were replaced by drawers which merged with the total design until only a hair thin line revealed their existence. The metal hardware which on previous furniture forms had served as handles, lock plates, or caps to protect the veneer where it met at the corners, were replaced by swirling gilt bronze appliques generously distributed over the entire exterior. These new appliques were derived from a Romantic interpretation of nature's surface aesthetic. Though primarily serving a decorative function, they occasionally freed themselves from the commode's front face to form inconspicuous drawer handles. The effort to disguise the existence of the drawers was made in response to the principal of unity (#4, pl48). The commode had a significant role in the architectural decoration of a room, and it was considered important that its practical storage function not disrupt the playful atmosphere of the Rococo interior.

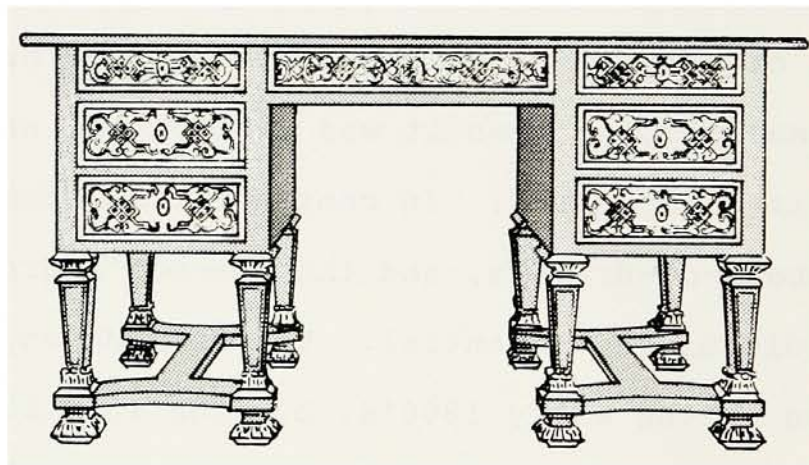
Louis the 16th neo-Classical commode, by Jean-Henry Riesner



French chest-of-drawers: Classical commode

During Louis the 16th's reign there was a reaction against the excesses of Rococo art and a desire to abandon this historically unprecedented style for the classically inspired good taste of the previous century (#15, pl18). As the form of the commode adapted to the changing fashion, the preeminence of the straight line was once more established (#4 , pl20). The late 18th century commode was rectangular and set on short, circular, tapering legs. It replaced the swirling appliques of the Rococo commode with decorative vitruvian scrolls, interlaced palmettes, laurel wreaths, and garlands of flowers (#15, pl22). The facade of the new commode was divided into three vertical sections and was usually equipped with three small drawers on top, and a combination of larger drawers below. The lower drawers were often enclosed by cupboard doors or sliding panels. These doors and panels gave the commode a freer role in the decoration of the room by de-emphasizing its functional purpose, and by providing a large uninterrupted area for the surface ornamentation.

During the 1700's French cabinet-makers were the craftsmen who set the technical standards and initiated the decorative styles for Europe. The commode continued as the preeminent piece of European drawing room furniture for so long as the French aristocracy remained the arbiter of European fashion. The commode and the cabinet are good examples of furniture forms which subordinated their storage function to their decoration. They both illustrate the stylistic obsolescence which results from designing a piece of furniture to suit the prevailing fashion. Unlike the cabinet, however, the commode was more a digression than a dead-end in the development of storage furniture. The cabinet had no precedent and little functional purpose when it was introduced, and left little trace when it disappeared. In contrast, the commode was derived from the chest-of-drawers, and the commode's drawers had a utilitarian, if disguised, potential. The commode may have fallen from fashion in the early 1800's, but the functional development of the chest-of-drawers continued where it left off.

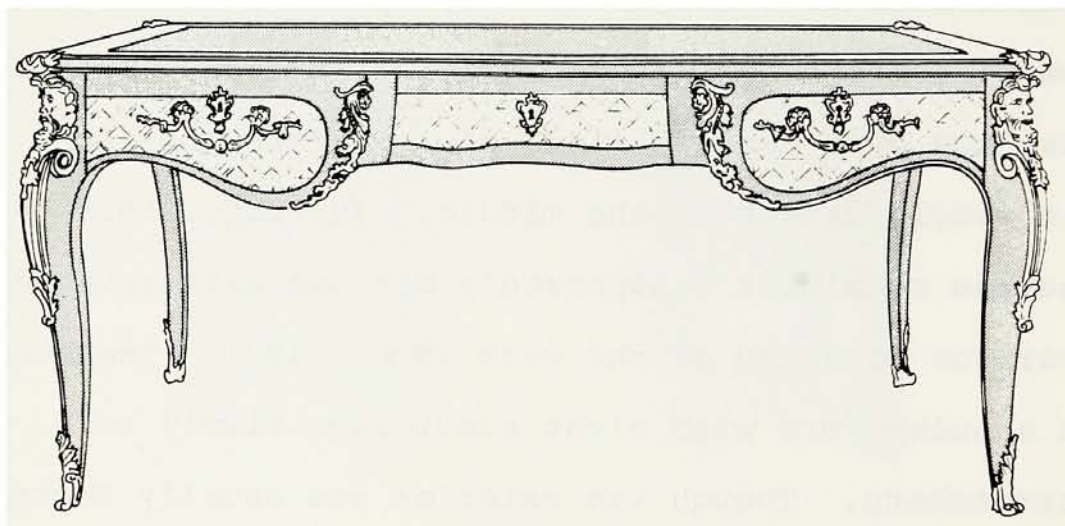


French desks: early flat-top desks

As we have seen, during the Middle Ages the writing box filled the function of the desk. By the late 1400's the new secular interest in scholarship created a demand for a more convenient desk. This demand led to the decline of the writing box and the gradual introduction of two alternative forms: the previously discussed fall-front desk and the flat-top desk.

The evolution of the flat-top desk was the logical result of discarding the writing box and keeping the work table it rested on. The early work table/flat-top desk usually made up for the loss of the writing box's minimal storage capacity by incorporating a horizontal row of drawers beneath the writing surface. By the mid 1600's the flat-top desk had two tiers of three drawers each, separated by a single drawer in the middle. In France this desk was known as a "bureau semainier", supposedly because with seven drawers it had a drawer for each day of the week (#3, p108). The bureau semainier was a bulky form with eight stout legs firmly held together by stretchers. Though its exterior was usually decorated with delicate Boulle marquetry, its sturdy construction did little to disguise its work table origins.

Louis the 15th flat-top desk



French desks: Rococo flat-top desks

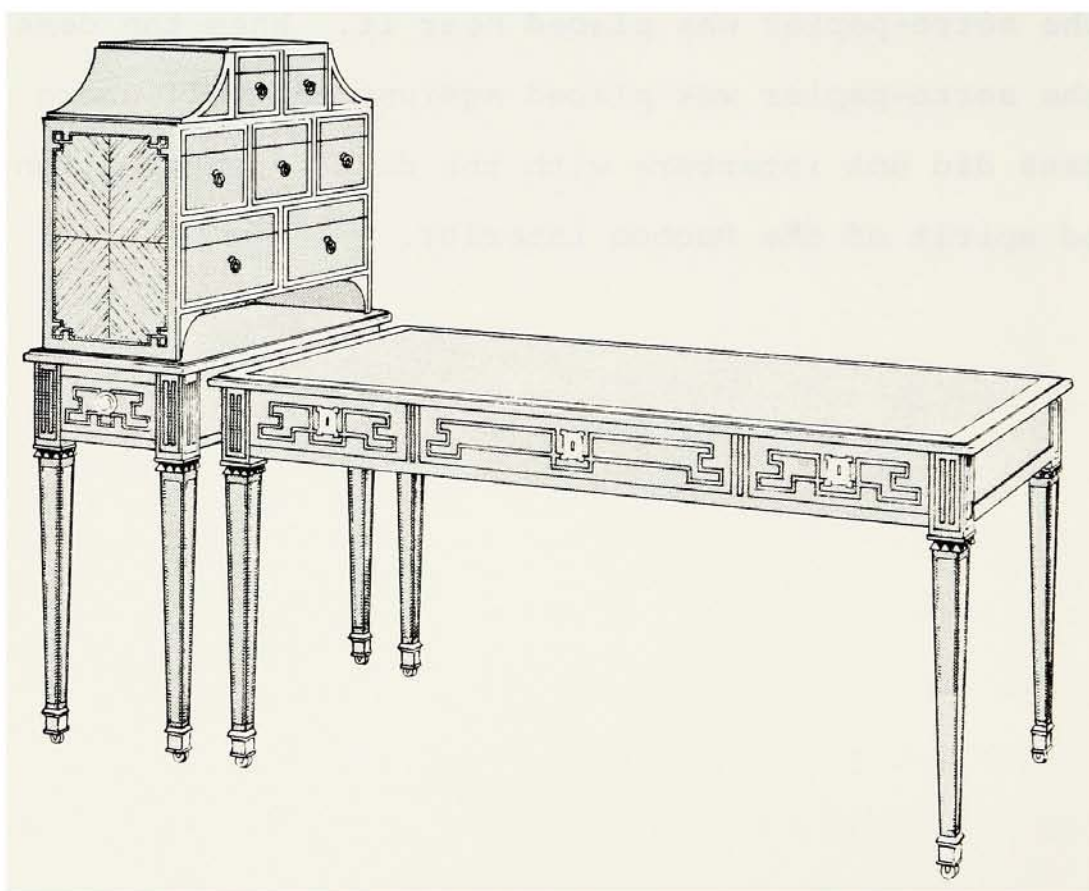
The advent of Rococo during the early 1700's led to the expanded use of the flat-top desk, and influenced the further development of its form. Rococo sensibilities disapproved of massive vertically proportioned furniture, and as a result the fall-front desk virtually disappeared from the private rooms of fashionable French homes. The decline of the fall-front desk allowed the flat-top desk to become the preeminent French form and the focus of much design attention. Contemporary designers viewed its general composition as being well suited to the Rococo preference for horizontal proportion, but the desk's stocky construction was a characteristic which required modification. In accordance with the general tendency to make furniture lighter and more delicate, the eight heavily braced legs were replaced by four delicately curved legs. The new design reduced the bureau semainier's generous collection of seven drawers to a set of three drawers below the writing surface. The central drawer was usually shallower than and slightly recessed from the others so as not to interfere with the writer's legs. The lost storage capacity was replaced by a file which was initially placed on the far end of the leather writing surface. This auxiliary file was known as the "serre-papier", and had small shelves and drawers which were used to store paper and other supplies. The serre-papier tended to clutter the desk top, and was eventually mounted on a stand or cupboard of the same height as the desk (# 4, p110).

This arrangement distinguished the writing surface from the storage area of the desk. Instead of creating a desk with a fixed relationship between parts, it separated the parts into separate functional components. The flat-top desk and serre-papier were structurally independent elements, yet they worked well together

French desks: Rococo flat-top desks

because they were of the same height and had similar decorative detailing. Like the modular early Northern European two stage cupboard, this arrangement suggests the ability to add or subtract storage capacity according to changing needs. Nevertheless, the writing surface and storage area were probably separated because Rococo favored delicate furniture. The flat-top desk was usually placed in the middle of the study or household office where it served as the decorative focal point of the room. When the desk was in use the *serre-papier* was placed near it. When the desk was not in use the *serre-papier* was placed against the wall where its visual mass did not interfere with the desk's contribution to the scale and spirit of the Rococo interior.

Louis the 16th flat-top desk and serre-papier

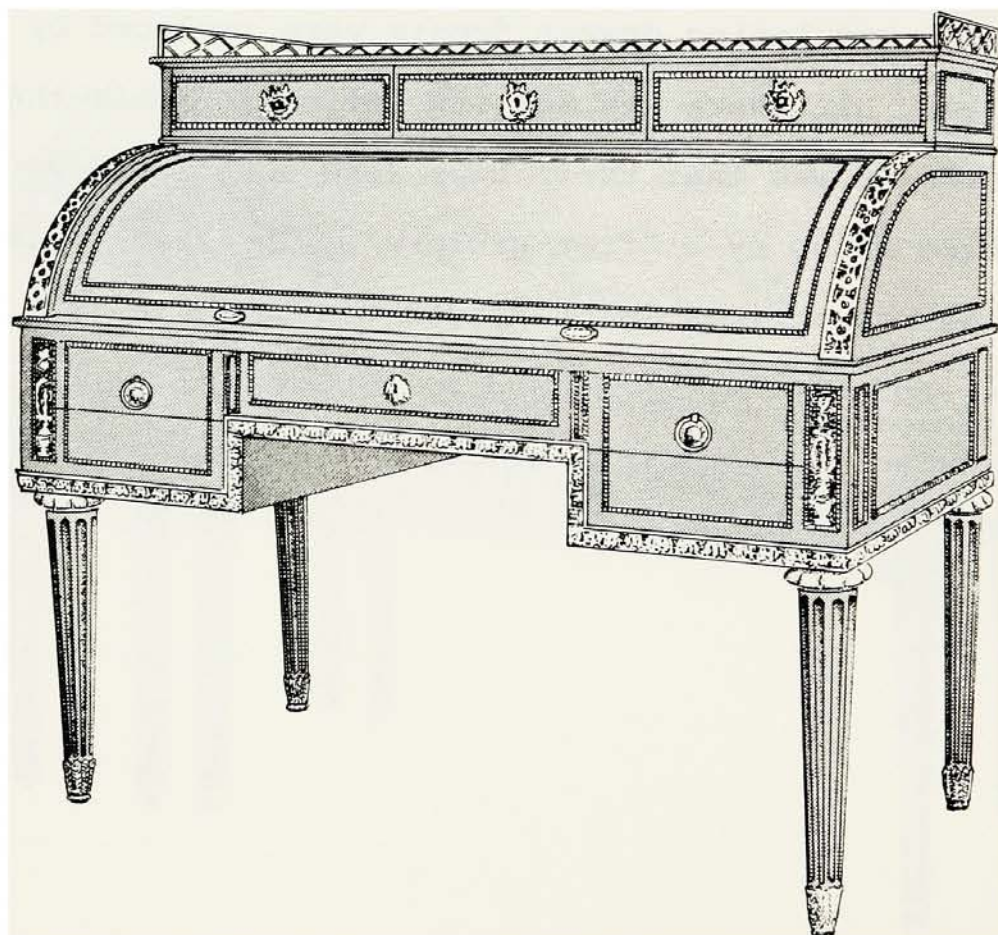


French desks: Classical flat-top desks

The flat-top desks created during the reign of Louis the 16th differed from the Louis the 15th model more in style than in substance.^{12/} Louis the 16th flat-top desks replaced Rococo decorative elements with decorations inspired by the contemporary Classical revival, but the general proportions and distribution of functional elements of Louis the 15th desks remained essentially unchanged. The old delicately curved legs were replaced by rigidly straight ones. The undulating drawer fronts were replaced by a line of crisp rectangles. If there was any innovation in Louis the 16th flat-top desks it was that their tops were occasionally surrounded on three sides by a "fret-gallery". The fret-gallery was similar to the balustrades which ringed the top of early Baroque cabinets, and ostensibly served to contain those objects which might otherwise fall off the far edge of the desk.

^{12/} It has been said that Louis the 16th's cabinet-makers could do little or nothing to improve upon either the comfort or convenience of the flood of new furniture forms which had been introduced to Louis the 15th's court (# 3 , p119).

French cylinder roll-top desk, c.1780



French desks: cylinder roll-top desks

It was during the second half of the 1700's that the flat-top desk slowly lost its status as the preeminent French desk. One of the alternative forms which began to appear, or in this case reappear, was a scaled down version of the fall-front writing cabinet. The fall-front writing cabinet was brought back into fashion because its straight lines and inherently rectangular structure were well suited to the geometric shapes of the Neo-Classical interiors.

In addition to this traditional form there was a new desk known as the "cylinder roll-top". This desk combined the large and stable work surface of the flat-top desk with the secure enclosure provided by the fall-front desk. The cylinder roll-top's surface and drawers were nearly the same as those of the flat-top desk; its innovation was that the work surface was enclosed by a vaulted wooden cover which rolled back into the body of the desk. The vaulted roll-top protected work in progress and eliminated the need to pack things away between work sessions. One of the first cylinder roll tops to be built was the Bureau de Roi which many experts consider to be the greatest piece of cabinetwork of all time (# 3, p119). The design and construction of this desk was started by the cabinet-maker Jean François Oeben in 1760, and completed nine years later by his pupil, Jean Henri Riesner. Stylistically this desk was a rather irresolute transitional piece which spanned the shift from the Rococo to the Neo-Classical style. Its great attraction was probably due to the superb craftsmanship of its construction, and the technical complexity of its mechanisms.

French desks: cylinder roll-top desks

The inflexible nature of the solid cylinder roll-top limited the possible shapes the desk could take, and the technical difficulty of building such a piece limited the number of people who could afford to have one made. It was not until the English developed the "tamber roll-top" in the late 1700's that the roll-top desk became a commonly used desk form (# 4, p332). The flexible tamber top used long thin pieces of wood glued to a linen or canvas backing which could follow the lines and curves of a track paralleling the contours of the desk. This permitted a greater variation of forms, and minimized the storage area consumed by the roll-top itself (#9, p325). The tamber roll-top desk grew in popularity throughout the 1800's and early 1900's, and the ingenuity of its solution continues to intrigue desk users to this day.

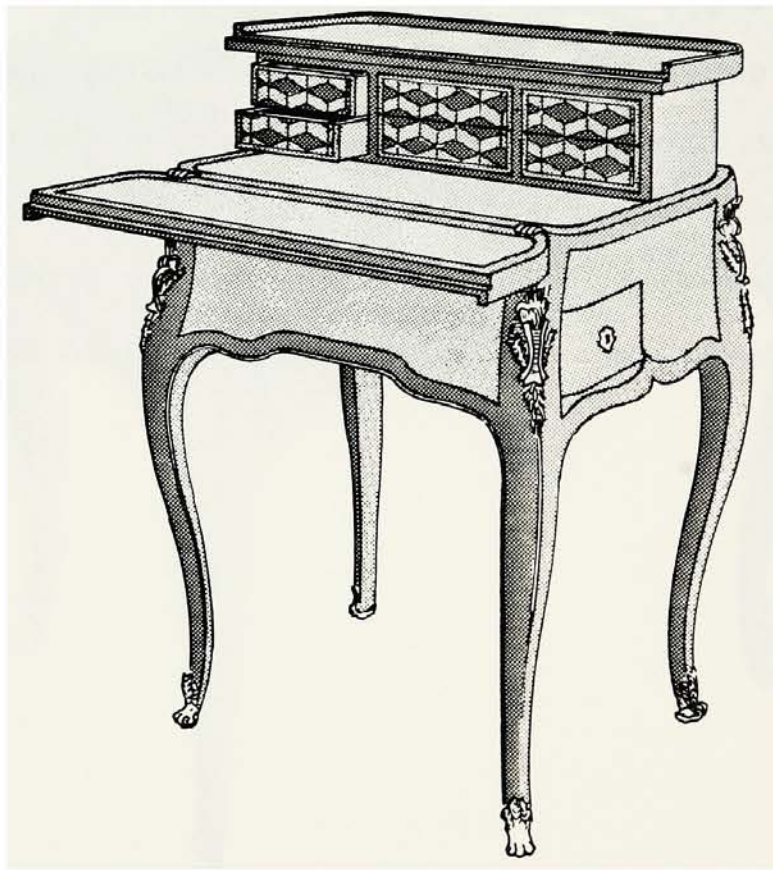
French specialized tables

Most of the aristocratic furniture built during the Baroque 1600's was designed to be placed against the walls of grand ceremonial rooms (#3, p101). During the 1700's, however, large wall oriented furniture was replaced by a wide variety of delicate and easily movable furniture suitable for smaller rooms. The new furniture included a generation of specialized tables designed to serve every imaginable need (#15, p111).



French specialized tables: gaming tables

Gaming tables became extremely popular in France during the 1700's. Most were designed in proportion to fit the number of people who could play the specific game. Small rectangular tables were built for two handed Piquet, triangular tables for three handed ombre, square tables for four handed Quadrille, and pentagonal tables for five handed reversi and brelan (# 3, pl34). One of the most popular gaming tables was not quite so specialized, providing surfaces for checkers, cards, and backgammon. The removable top was equipped with an inlaid board on one side, and a green baize material for card playing on the other side. When the top was removed a recessed well with an inlaid backgammon board was revealed. These tables usually provided each player with a small drawer where game accessories could be kept (# 3, pl35).

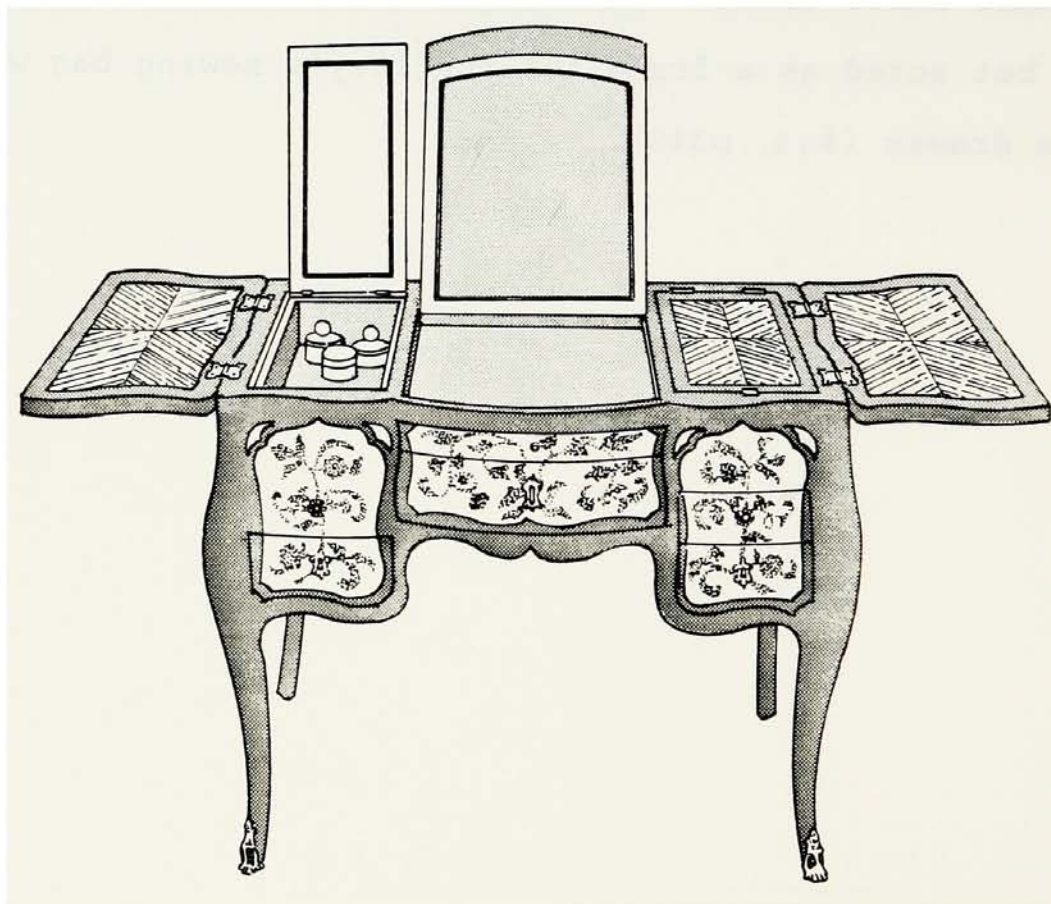


French specialized tables: lady's writing tables

Another specialized table was the lady's writing table. It was often a diminutive version of the gentleman's flat-top desk, equipped with an additional block of small drawers towards the back of the writing surface. One particularly clever design looked like a small table whose top was divided into front and back sections. The table was converted into a desk by flipping the front section forward to reveal a leather covered writing surface, and by using a ratchet to raise the back section with its block of small drawers (#15, p117).

French specialized tables: sewing tables

Since the Middle Ages nearly every French woman had spent a portion of her day sewing, embroidering, or doing needle-point, originally performed around a communal work table as a family gathering (# 3, pl29). By the mid 1700's, however, upper class ladies required their own work tables (# 3, pl35). One popular type of individual sewing table had three shallow drawers just beneath the work surface. The two side drawers were used to store needles and other small tools. The larger central drawer had no bottom panel, but acted as a frame for the lady's sewing bag which hung below the drawer (#19, p349).



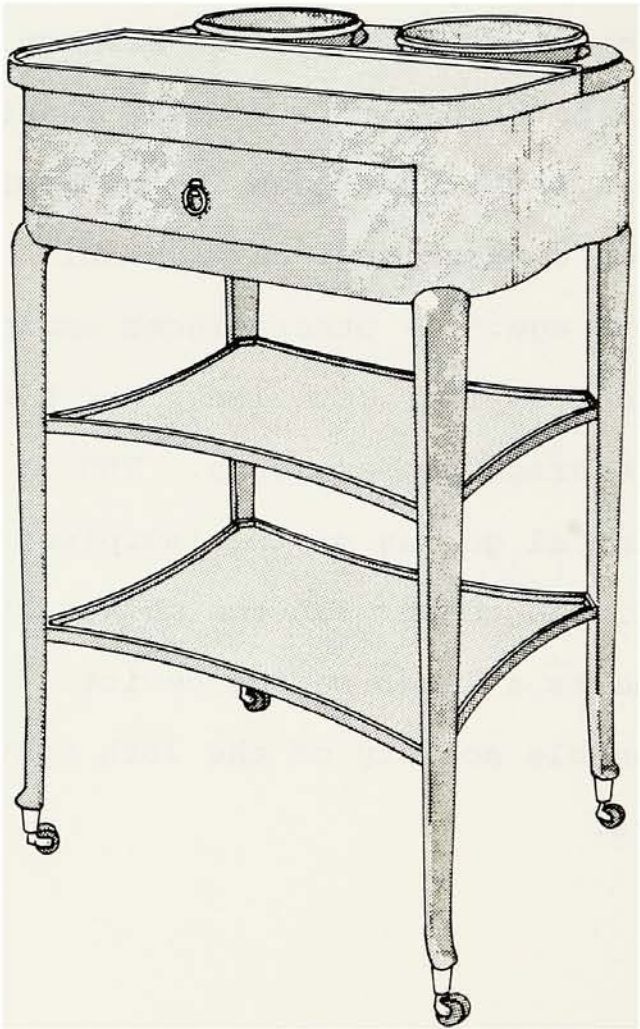
French specialized tables: toilet tables

The toilet table was an important part of every French boudoir where ladies spent hours with intimate friends of both sexes (#10, pl31). The toilet table came in a variety of forms, the most popular of which was the "poudreuse". The top of the poudreuse was divided into three sections. The middle section had a lid which could be lifted up and back to reveal a framed mirror. The side sections had lids which opened outward to create shelves used to arrange the cosmetics contained in the compartments below (# 4 , pl41). The compartments of the most lavish toilet tables were lined with silk, and the toilet articles were made of French porcelain, cut glass, and lacquer (# 3 , pl35).

French specialized tables: notes on "magical" furniture

The poudreuse and gaming table could be transformed, the ratcheted lady's writing table and cylinder roll top desk provided clever functional solutions, and both the writing table and roll top desk supplied secretive compartments. All exemplify the contemporary enthusiasm for "magical" furniture. It was not necessarily the first time that these attributes had been expressed in furniture. Craftsmen had been designing eccentric multi-functional pieces since the early Renaissance (#10, p97). It was not until the 1700's, however, that such attributes became a popular feature in household furniture. Some of this furniture, such as the gaming table with the reversible top, used conventional devices which could have been employed by any previous age.^{13/} Other pieces employed unprecedented mechanisms which ranged from intricate locks and hinges to springs which released hidden storage compartments. Though these mechanisms foreshadowed the mechanical genius of the incipient Industrial Revolution, they had little to do with the modern 20th century perception of a machine as a labor saving device. Rather they appealed to the fashionable society of the 18th century for their value as "magical" toys.

^{13/} Note the conceptual similarity of the French reversible gaming table to the reversible gaming board which was found in Tutankhamun's tomb.



French specialized tables: rafraichissoirs

Another type of specialized table was developed as an accessory to French dining. During most of the 1700's the French upper classes continued to dine in the intimate state bedroom or "chambre-de-parade" which served as the main reception room (# 4 , p107).^{14/} During meals the chambre-de-parade was provided with a collection of tables known as "rafraichissoirs", also known as "tables servantes". These were small tables with a series of lower shelves for food dishes, and a top equipped with a small drawer and one or more metal lined recesses for chilling a bottle of wine. Rafraichissoirs were used for intimate supper parties; one was usually placed next to each guest so that he could help himself to the refreshments without the need for servants.^{15/}

^{14/} This tradition of eating in private chambers began in medieval times and continued until the reign of Louis the 15th when separate dining rooms in the English style were finally introduced to a few aristocratic homes (# 4 , p138). Thus, it was not until well into the 1700's that the French upper class developed a large permanent sideboard of the type found in England.

^{15/} An interesting "magical" sidelight was the table "volante" which Louis the 15th installed at the Petit Trianon in the pursuit of ultimate privacy. When the guests entered the dining room, all that was visible was an empty room. At a given signal the floor panels pulled aside, and a table laid out with a meal rose up from the kitchen below (# 4 , p140).

French specialized tables: conclusion

These specialized tables provided an ingenious array of convenient surfaces and storage spaces designed for a particular pastime or avocation. The tables were skillfully made and beautifully detailed. Their design rarely allowed a decorative emphasis to preempt a functional requirement. For these reasons these tables represent the most significant contribution of French court furniture makers to the development of storage furniture. Like other French court furniture, however, their functions had little application outside upper class boudoirs and drawing rooms.

ENGLISH STORAGE FURNITURE

English introduction

The English monarchy was never as all powerful as France's Bourbon dynasty, and its court style never dominated England's aristocratic tastes in the same way the court style did in France. The closest that England came to a court imposed style was under the Stuart dynasty. When the Stuarts returned from their exile at Louis the 14th's court in 1660, they brought with them an array of cabinets, chests-of-drawers and fall-front desks, and set out to establish an era of splendor and prodigious spending previously unknown to England (# 4, p232). The Stuart court's taste was imitated by a few members of the high aristocracy, but had little influence on the majority of landed gentry and urban merchants that made up the English bourgeoisie (#15, p87).^{16/}

The English bourgeoisie of the late 1600's and early 1700's had a conservative Puritan heritage characterized by self discipline and a rational outlook on life. Their interiors projected an atmosphere of prim sobriety (#15, p128). Instead of the tangled web of cherubs and ceiling frescoes found in contemporary French bourgeois interiors, the English bourgeoisie outfitted simple rectangular rooms with crisp wooden moldings that merged with the wall surface. The first half of the 1700's is regarded as the "Golden Age of English Cabinet-Making", a time when English craftsmen exhibited a sophisticated appreciation for the nature of the materials they were working with and the functions they were trying to serve (# 4, p259). It was a time when lavish surface ornament

^{16/} The Stuart court's influence came to an abrupt end when Parliament replaced the Stuarts with the Dutch couple, William and Mary, during the Glorious Revolution of 1688.

English introduction

was abandoned in favor of smooth surfaces whose beauty depended on careful proportion and skillfully selected walnut veneers (#15, pl28). But most important to storage furniture, it was a time when English craftsmen and their patrons experimented with most of the permutations that could be derived by assembling drawers, shelves and cupboards into storage furniture.

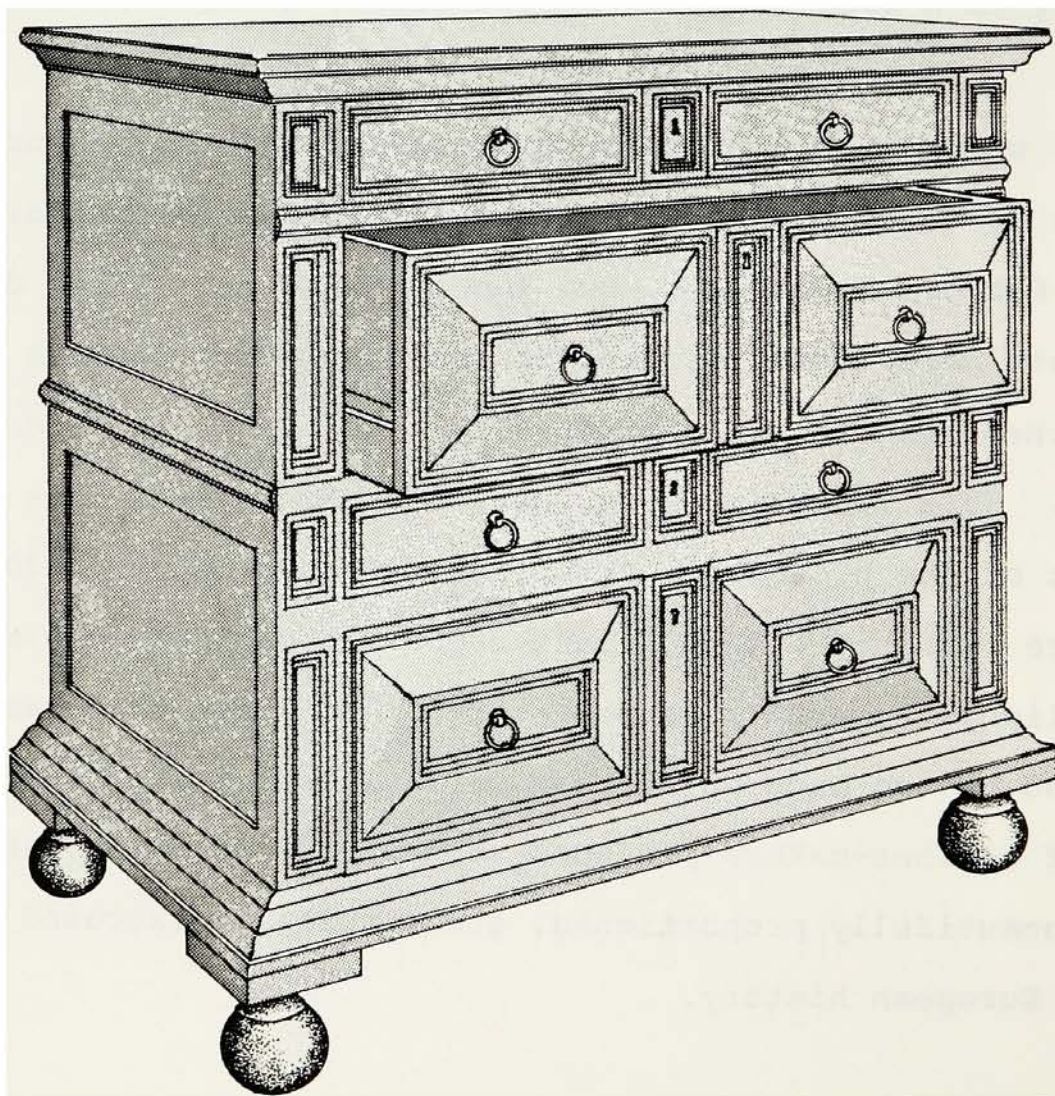
The English high aristocracy's attitude towards home furnishings was parallel to, yet distinct from, that of the bourgeoisie. Neither the aristocratic nor the bourgeois patron was as concerned with contemporary fashions as was his French counterpart. Both social classes had been influenced by the Age of Enlightenment's scientific viewpoint and its sense of man's linear progress, and both sought a timeless excellence in their furniture. Each social class, however, had its own distinct manner of achieving an idealized furniture form. The bourgeois patron was willing to let his cabinet-maker experiment with a wide variety of unprecedented forms as long as the furniture provided a rational distribution of function. This emphasis on utility, and the generally concomitant lack of concern for contemporary fashion, gave the bourgeois cabinet-maker's furniture a timeless beauty of its own. The aristocratic patron, on the other hand, had little confidence in these empirically derived forms, and sought established models whose propriety was beyond dispute. The arbiters of aristocratic taste chose classicism as their model, and during the early 1700's they set out to acquire the scholarship needed to build correctly and furnish politely.

By the mid 1700's an increasingly prosperous and culturally self-conscious middle class shared the academic tastes of the aristocracy. Though few could afford to build stately homes, many encouraged their cabinet-makers to abandon their unadorned furniture

English introduction

designs in favor of the styles which had been developed for the interiors of the aristocracy's neo-classical homes. The bourgeoisie's initial desire to emulate the aristocracy's academic propriety soon led to a less rigorous concern with the general topic of style. Curious and alluring furniture styles followed one upon the other in rapid succession. By the mid 1750's classical correctness was giving way to a wide range of exotic Greek, Gothic and Chinese motifs.

The list of English furniture designers during the second half of the 1700's is highlighted by the names of Thomas Chippendale, Robert Adam, George Hepplewhite, and Thomas Sheraton. These designers' reputations are more closely linked to the ornamental devices attributed to them than to any particularly significant functional contribution. This form-conscious luxury furniture trade has received most of the historical attention. Throughout the 1700's, however, there remained a significant number of cabinet-makers who, with their clients, shared a respect for common sense that was never weakened by too much enthusiasm for exotic fashion (#10, pl41). This group of cabinet-makers produced some of the most innovative, functional, beautifully proportioned, and flawlessly executed furniture in European history.

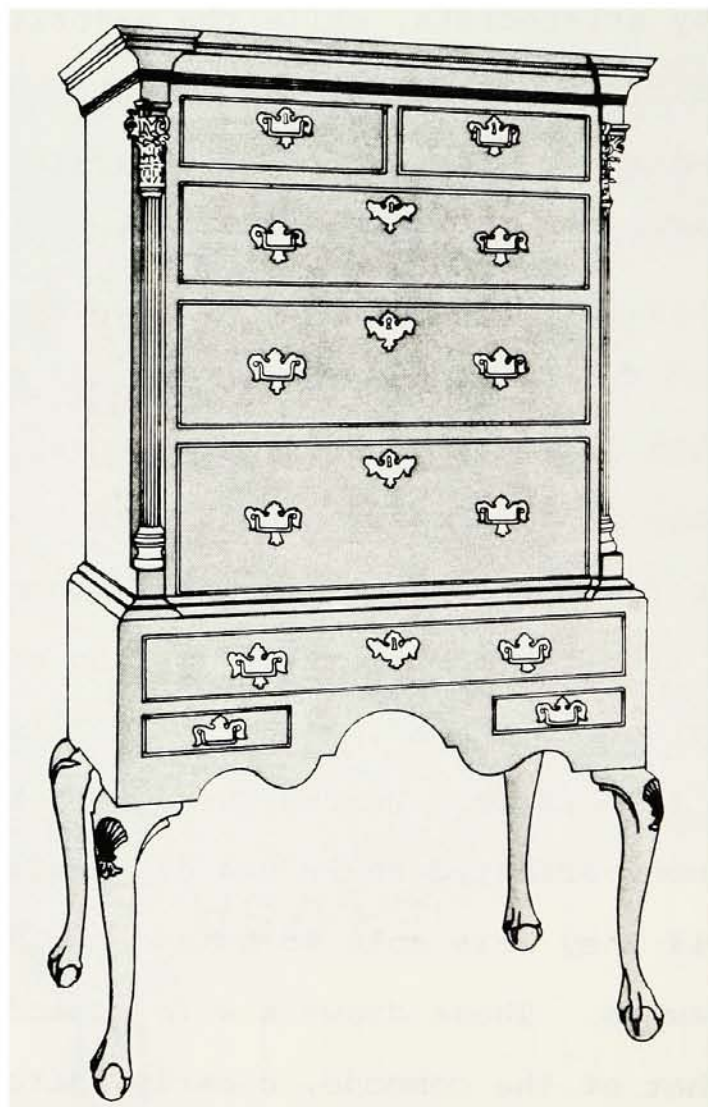


English chest-of-drawers: the high-boy/low-boy

When the Stuarts returned from France in 1660 they brought examples of the small rectangular chest-of-drawers commonly found in the dressing rooms of the French aristocracy. During the first half of the 1600's the use of such a chest-of-drawers was limited to the homes of wealthy aristocrats, while the majority of Englishmen continued to store their clothes in medieval chests. By the 1700's, however, the chest-of-drawers had replaced the medieval chest as the primary piece of domestic storage furniture in England (# 4 , p245).

This relatively rapid acceptance of a new storage furniture form was in part due to English appreciation for the practical advantages provided by the drawer. It was also the result of a series of technical and functional developments undertaken by English craftsmen. Unlike the French, whose contemporary commode was an ornamental digression from the functional evolution of the chest-of-drawers, the conservative English adopted a more utilitarian approach to the development of the drawer. During the second half of the 1600's English craftsmen perfected their use of precise measurements and rigid joinery until they were able to build snugly fitting and smoothly operating drawers. These drawers were placed in a rectangular frame which, unlike that of the commode, clearly articulated the arrangement of the drawers. The frame in turn derived an austere beauty from its exterior of unornamented veneers.^{17/} When cut from the same log, thinly sliced sheets of veneer have similar grain configurations. English craftsmen took advantage of this fact by

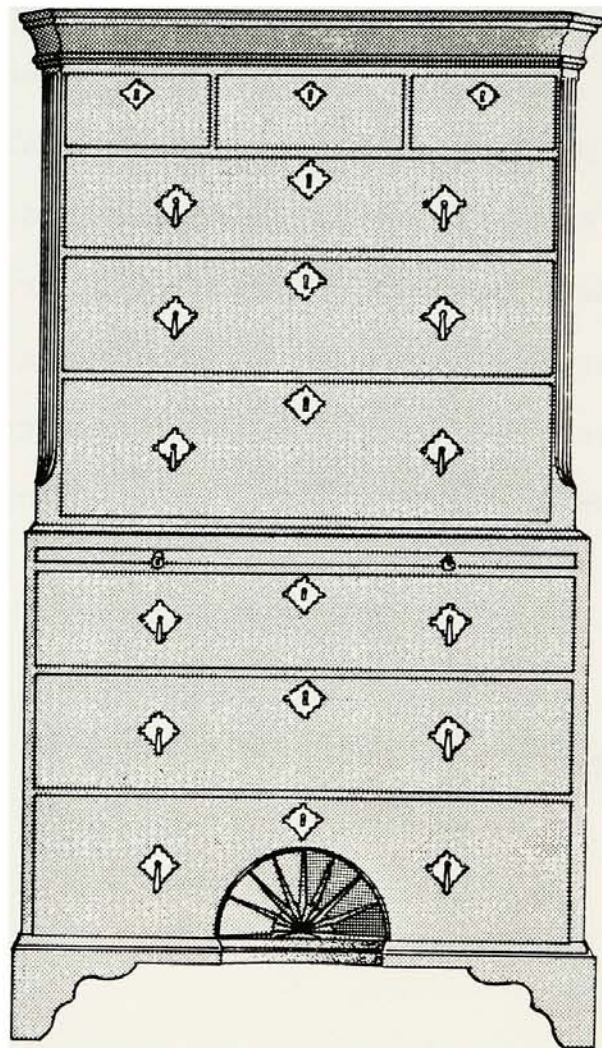
^{17/} The use of veneer was uncommon in England before 1660, but it had been developed to a high art by the French Huguenot craftsmen who immigrated to England during the late 1600's (#15, p91).



English chest-of-drawers: the high-boy/low-boy

arranging the veneers in such a way as to create an aesthetically symmetrical pattern (#15, p96).

By the early 1700's English craftsmen had mastered the basic form of the chest-of-drawers. Once they were familiar with its construction they began to experiment with adaptations which could make it more convenient or increase its storage capacity. One of the early adaptations consisted of placing the chest on a matching stand, with the two elements referred to as the "high-boy" and the "low-boy" (# 6, p7). The low-boy was a small table with two or three drawers in a row beneath its top surface, which theoretically could be used by itself as a small writing desk or dressing table. This particular adaptation was most popular in America where, during the 1700's, it replaced the colonial chest in upper middle class homes along the Eastern Seaboard (#4 , p258).



English chest-of-drawers: the tall-boy

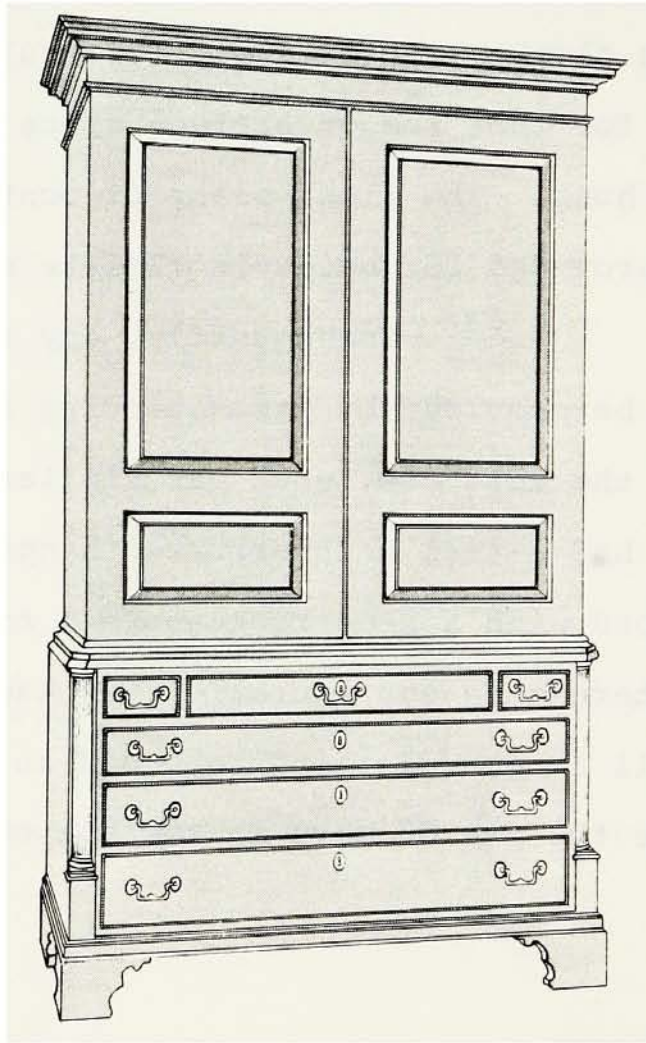
Chests-of-drawers were also designed to be stacked one on top of the other, an arrangement which resembled the early French two stage cupboard. The double chest-of-drawers was known as the "tall-boy," and was introduced around 1700. It provided up to six feet of vertical storage while consuming a limited amount of floor space. A sliding shelf was often added to the tall-boy between the upper and lower chest-of-drawers in much the same way that French craftsmen had added a row of horizontal drawers between the upper and lower cupboards. This sliding shelf was intended for use by the valet as a work surface upon which he could brush the clothes before he laid them out. The addition of this device to the tall-boy is a good example of a furniture craftsman subtly providing for the user's need. The English craftsman did not achieve this utility by means of a magically clever device, but by incorporating into his product inconspicuous extras which are there when you need them and which merge with the total design when not in use. The additional storage provided by the tall-boy was well received. At a height of six feet, however, the contents of the upper drawers were difficult to see and to retrieve. Though the tall-boy continued to be made throughout the 1700's, this problem limited its convenience and eventually led English craftsmen to devise more functional adaptations of the chest-of-drawers (# 4 , p258).

English chest-of-drawers: the wardrobe

The conditions which caused medieval furniture to be flexible were no longer prevalent in the England of the 1700's, and soon the subconscious perception of furniture as a series of stackable elements also disappeared. As the craftsmen and the patrons who commissioned their work became more confident about the functions they wanted the furniture to perform, independent storage elements were unified into continuous structural frames.

Fashion was making clothes increasingly difficult to fold without wrinkling, and for that reason storage space was needed in which clothes could be hung. The floor plans of contemporary European homes rarely provided for built-in closets short of full-fledged dressing rooms .^{18/} Consequently, any full length clothes storage had to be provided by free-standing furniture. The resultant form was the wardrobe, which was similar to the French armoire. The wardrobe had a tall uninterrupted hanging space. Its bottom was often equipped with a shoe rack above a row of small drawers. A popular alternative configuration was used to store jackets rather than full length clothing, and had an equal proportion of hanging space in the top and drawers in the bottom.

^{18/} The regular use of walk-in closets is actually a North American tradition which dates back to the early 1800's.



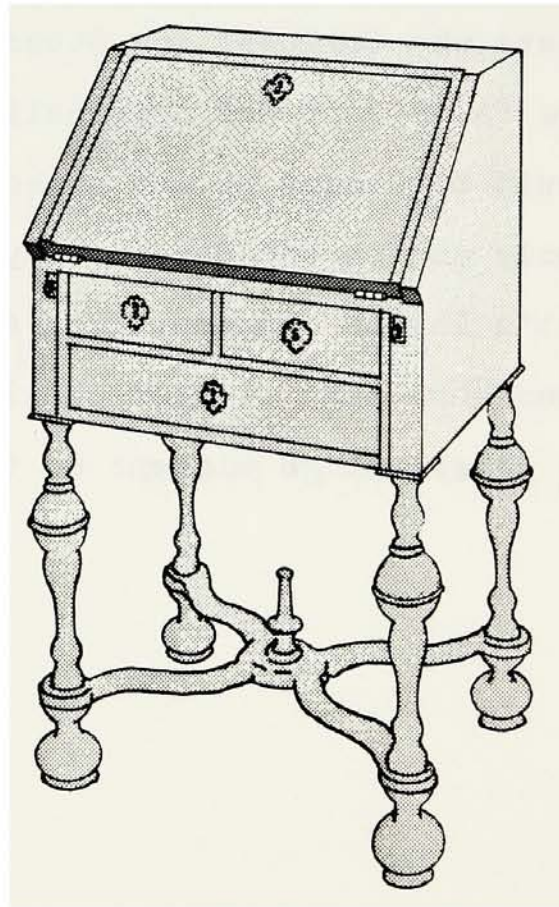
English chest-of-drawers: the clothes-press

The popular "clothes-press," introduced in the mid 1700's, was similar in form to the French linen-press from the 1600's, and was intended to replace the tall-boy. Its lower portion had a set of drawers like the tall-boy, but its upper half was equipped with a set of shelves behind protective cupboard doors. This solved the problem of viewing the contents of the upper half of the tall-boy. The real innovation in the clothes-press was that the shelves were no longer immobile. Instead they could be pulled out like a sliding tray (# 4 , p301). This was a beautifully simple solution which integrated the functions of the shelf and the drawer, maximizing the functional characteristics of each element.

As the English became familiar with the chest-of-drawers' practical advantages, they incorporated it into a variety of furniture forms until it became an important component in desks, bookcases and sideboards. Unlike France, where fashionable standards tended to limit the chest-of-drawers to the form of the commode, the lack of an established fashionable standard in England permitted experimentation with a large variety of functional combinations.

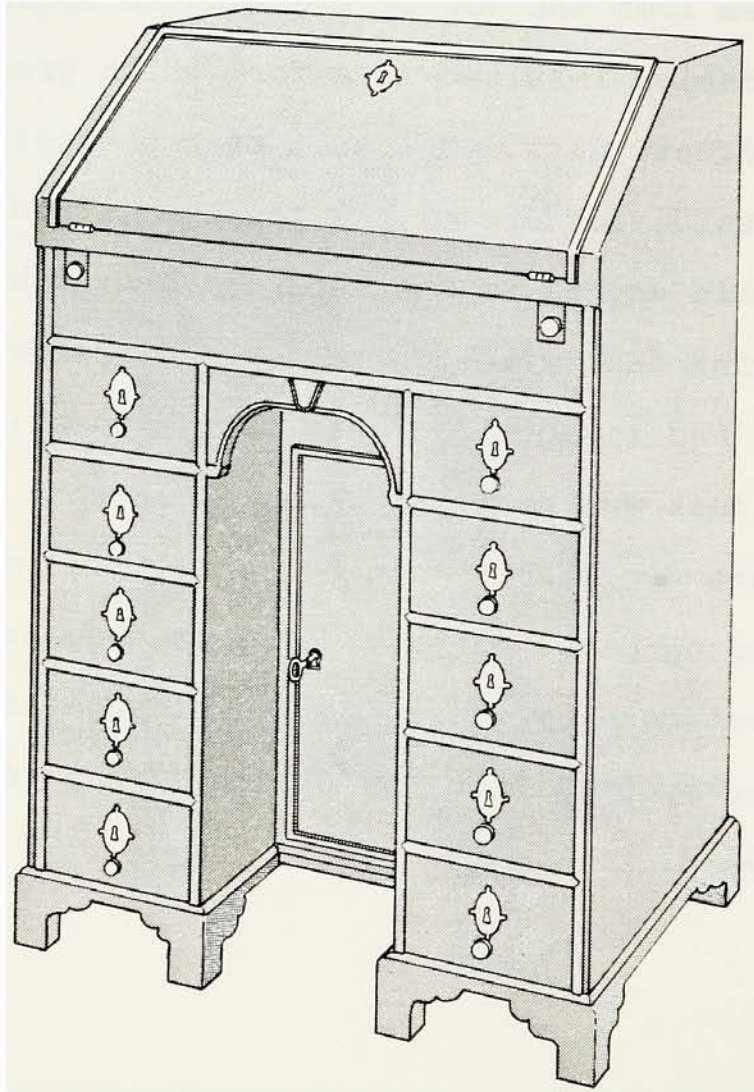
English desks: early forms

Until the second half of the 1600's writing furniture played an insignificant role in the English home. Those who needed a desk generally used a work table and writing box. The Stuarts introduced England to a new type of desk when they returned with a number of French writing-cabinets. These decorative fall-front desks were copied by English cabinet-makers, and became a popular form among those aristocrats who followed the Stuart court's fashions (# 4, p245). The fall-front was originally developed as a traveling desk which could be closed up and moved like a chest, and was never a particularly convenient day in, day out work space. Though the writing cabinet's lavish ornamentation appealed to the English court, its inconvenience kept it from gaining widespread acceptance among the more conservative element of the English upper class.



English desks: the slant-front desk

Most of the English desks developed during the late 1600's and early 1700's were derived from the writing box. The English writing box of the 1600's was larger than the original monastic form designed for working on a single page at a time. It was still relatively portable, but was often placed on an open stand. One of the first and most important modifications of the writing box was to move the hinges from the top of the slanted surface to its bottom. This modification resulted in a form which grew to be known as the "slant-front" desk. The user of the original writing box worked on the outside surface of the top and lifted up the writing surface to gain access to the interior of the box. The user of the slant-front desk wrote on the opened inside surface of the top, and thus had immediate access to the interior of the box. The slant top desk was similar to the fall-front desk, but had a smaller and more manageable folding panel. In spite of the relatively small folding panel it provided a writing area equal to that of the fall-front desk by recessing the storage towards the back of the case, and by utilizing the slanted front to extend the writing surface forward.



English desks: the knee-hole base

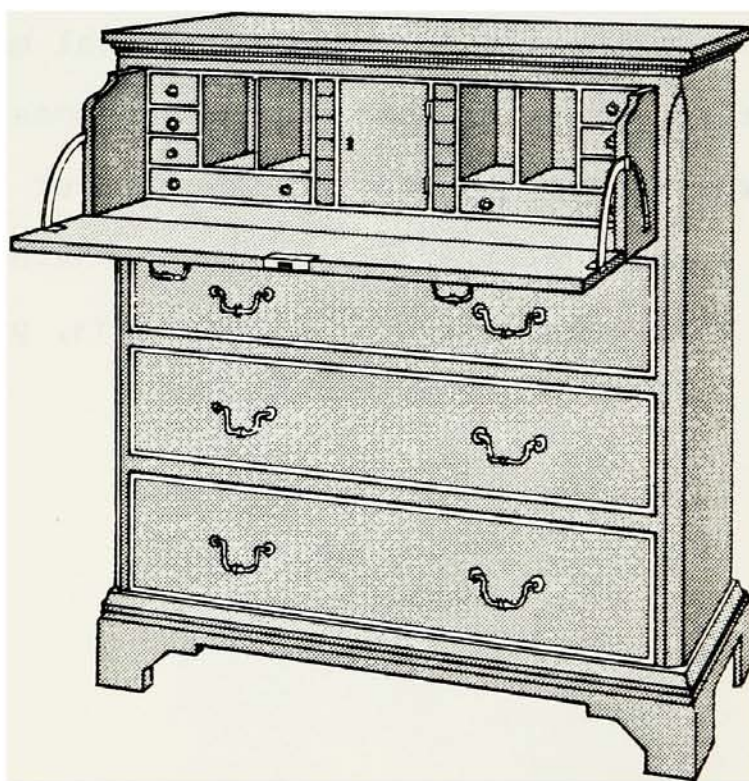
By the late 1600's the English were ready to accept the desk as a specialized piece of furniture that warranted its own place in the interior. They replaced the slant-front's open stand with a chest-of-drawers which rendered the piece immobile, but provided convenient additional storage space.

In most early slant-front desks the drawers ran across the full width of the face and down to the ground. The drawers were probably adapted from drawers designed to store clothing. They were longer than necessary for desk storage, and left no space for the user's legs. The development of the "knee-hole" base was a refinement that resolved this problem. The knee-hole base had two tiers of drawers separated by a recessed central compartment which usually housed a small cupboard. The knee-hole base was similar to the base of the French flat-top bureau semainier of the late 1600's. The fact that the French desk's drawers descend only half way to the ground from the desk top, however, emphasizes its derivation from the table, while the solid mass of the knee-hole base suggests its derivation from the chest-of-drawers. The precise origin of the knee-hole design is unknown, but by the early 1700's it had become a popular base for slant-front desks in England.



English desks: the secretary-cabinet

The slant-front desk was further modified during the early 1700's by the addition of a tall two-door cupboard, which was placed on the narrow ledge at the back of the slant-front. These cupboards had two wooden doors enclosing shelves and tall, narrow ledger compartments. They were used to store less frequently used items. This composition was known as the "secretary cabinet", and became one of the most popular English desks. Its design remained basically unchanged through the 1700's, despite several minor variations. The secretary cabinet's most notable concession to the classical revival was the replacement of the earlier flat or double arched top with a triangular broken pediment which included a central pedestal for a porcelain vase or a bust (#15, pl31).



English desks: the fall-front drawer

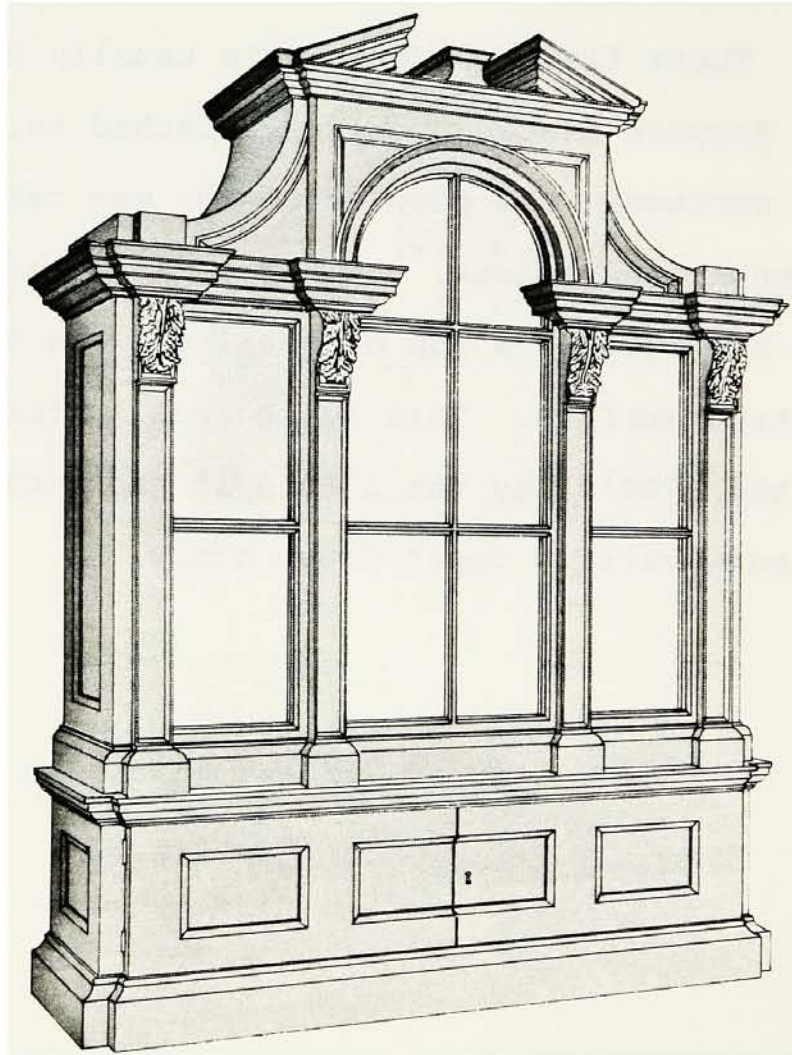
During the mid 1700's letter writing was considered a form of artistic expression (#10, p164).^{19/} Contemporary standards dictated that every family room be furnished with some kind of desk (#10, p164). The standard called for writing facilities, but not necessarily a full fledged desk, a distinction which led to the development of the fall-front drawer. The slant-front desk had survived for over one hundred years as a vestige of the medieval writing box. Though the slant-front was not necessarily the most practical configuration, the distinctive sloping silhouette provided a clearly recognizable symbol connoting the function of a desk. When homes were expected to have a writing facility in most rooms, however, what was needed was versatility and discretion rather than a stalwart symbol. The fall-front drawer fulfilled this need beautifully. It could be placed at the top of almost any tier of drawers where it looked like just another drawer. Its anonymity allowed it to be incorporated in a number of furniture forms from bookcases and china cabinets to bedroom chests-of-drawers.

The fall-front drawer had a hinged front-face, with recessed storage in the back. When the drawer was pulled out, the face folded down in a manner similar to the writing surface of the slant-front and fall-front writing desks. One of the functional advantages of the fall-front drawer was that it could be pulled out to any desired distance, rather than the set distance determined by the size of the panel on fall-front and slant-front desks. This was especially necessary because the fall-front drawer was usually located above a tier of drawers rather than a knee-hole base.

^{19/} It is interesting to speculate how this emphasis on letter writing may have influenced the English preference for wall oriented desks. Letter writing is an intimate endeavor fostered by a feeling of privacy and security. A desk which is nestled against the wall and looms overhead provides a greater sense of protection than a flat-top desk in the middle of the room.

English desks: miscellaneous forms

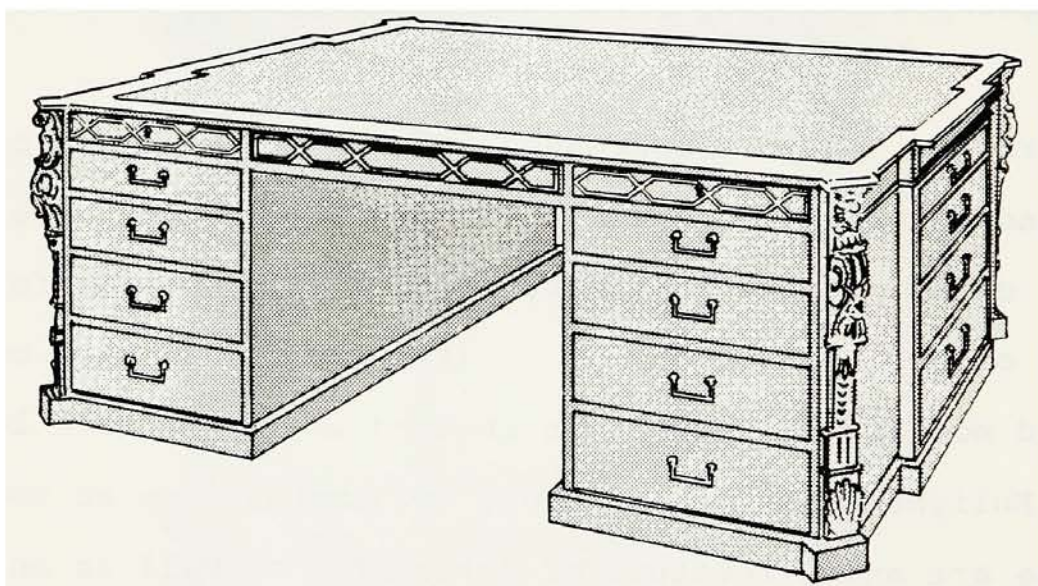
The slant-front desk, secretary cabinet and fall-front drawer were the most typical English desks. Other English desks were derived from a variety of sources, such as the tamber roll-top which evolved from the French cylinder roll-top (# 4, p332). There were also a number of flat-top desk designs, several of which used the knee-hole base. These flat-top desks were usually equipped with a row of small drawers placed upon, or attached to, the far side of the writing surface. One popular design was reminiscent of the "magical" French lady's desk. It had a ratcheted mechanical device which raised and lowered a row of small drawers housed at the back of the writing surface. This design was introduced during the second half of the 1700's; by the 1780's it had become quite popular in English and American upper class homes.



English bookcases: early built-ins

Before the 1700's there was little need for free-standing domestic bookcases. During the Middle Ages most significant book collections belonged to the monasteries. The monasteries viewed book storage more as an archival responsibility than as a matter of providing convenient access to the books. Their emphasis on preserving books caused them to set aside a special room where the books could be kept secure. These rooms were probably equipped with rows of simple shelves. They may also have had special cupboards or "bookpresses" for particularly fragile or rare books (#10, pl11).

The concern for academic awareness in Renaissance Italy created a secular demand for books. As books were collected they were housed along with the other objects in the built-in wall cupboards found in the studios of the high aristocracy (#9, p323). Secular book collections did not really surface in England until the late 1600's. The incipient Enlightenment Movement put new emphasis on an understanding of the art and literature of Antiquity, as well as an understanding of new scientific discoveries. By the late 1600's developments in printing and engraving technology made books more accessible, and some aristocratic homes were designed to include a room called the "study" or more commonly, the "library". Library walls were lined with shelves which either extended from floor to ceiling or rose from a row of low, built-in cupboards. The shelves were occasionally enclosed by glass-panelled doors, but as a general rule were left open. The library was usually furnished with a few comfortable armchairs and a centrally located table. The library table was often large enough to have tiers of drawers



English bookcases: early built-ins

opening on all four sides, while the broad surface of the table top provided ample space to lay out large folios. During the first half of the 1700's the built-in shelves became a popular medium for architectural expression by Palladian designers. Under the Palladian influence they took on massive proportions and were framed by Classically inspired columns or pilasters, which in turn were surmounted by an entablature (# 4 , p269).

English bookcases: free-standing bookcases

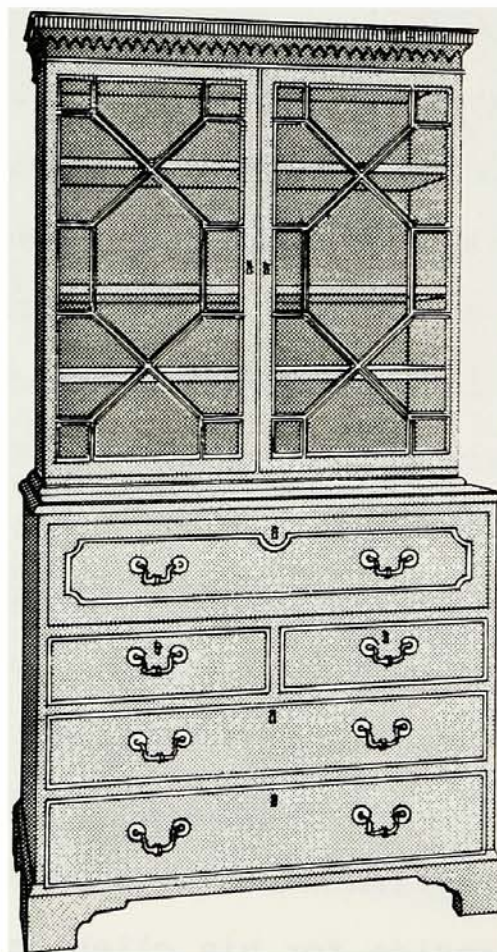
By the mid 1700's a commercial book market had begun to replace the traditional patronage system of supporting authors, and books were becoming a popular commodity (#14, p53). Books were read for entertainment as well as scholarship, and were collected by those who could not afford a separate library. At the same time books became a common element in the day-to-day life of the English upper class, and were distributed throughout the family rooms of the house rather than being isolated in a central, formal library. These factors contributed to the development of free-standing bookcases.

English break-front bookcase, c.1750's



English bookcases: the break-front

The "break-front" was a bookcase which was first introduced around 1740 (# 4, p281). It was quite large by today's standards; often seven feet tall and ten or more long. At this size the break-front embodied elements from built-in as well as free-standing furniture. It was no doubt originally conceived as a smaller free-standing version of built-in book shelves, yet it reflected the structural techniques and restrained decoration of its builder, the cabinet-maker. The break-front was named for its three vertical bays composed of a central section projecting forward from two side wings. Each of the three bays was in turn divided into a lower section containing tiers of drawers or cupboards, and an upper section with book shelves protected by glass panelled doors. As a result of the growing demand for writing surfaces, late 18th century break-fronts often incorporated a fall-front drawer in the central bay. Further variations occurred when books were standardized in a smaller format than that of the earlier bulky folios. The smaller format encouraged the incorporation of a narrow ledge that served as a place to rest a book while looking through it. The ledge was created by extending the lower cupboard out from the upper shelves. Such variations in the design of the break-front exemplify the English cabinet-maker's ability to anticipate and subtly to provide for his client's needs.



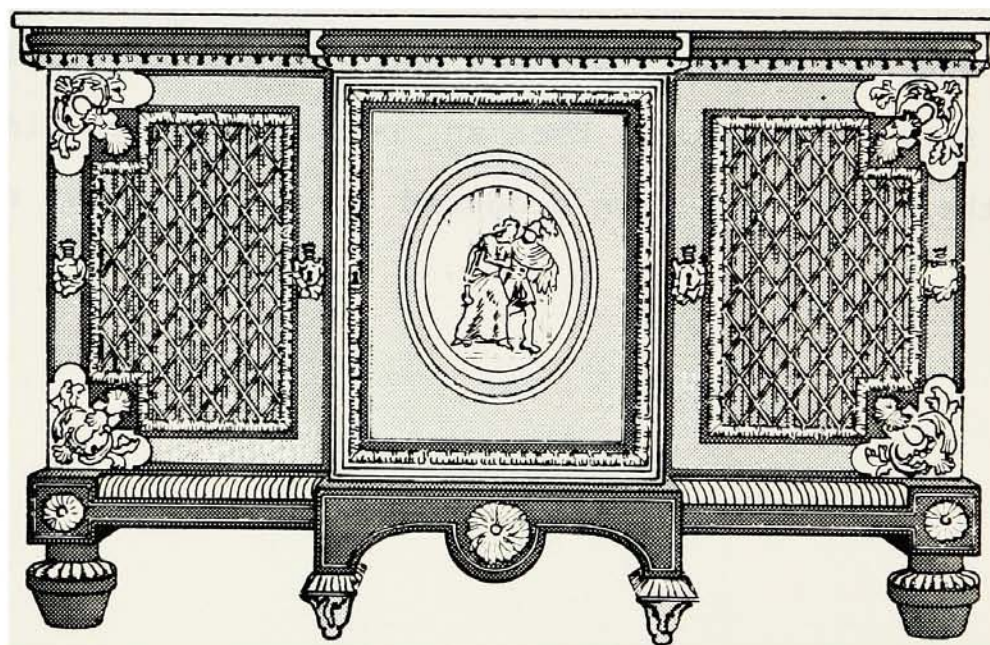
English bookcases: the secretary-bookcase

Large rooms were required to accommodate large break-fronts. Consequently, smaller bookcases were developed for smaller rooms. The most popular of these was the "secretary bookcase", whose size was roughly equal to that of a single bay from the break-front. Its small scale allowed it to be placed discreetly in many rooms in the upper class English home. The secretary bookcase had a fall-front drawer and chest-of-drawers base identical to those of the secretary cabinets built after the mid 1700's. The only significant difference was that the secretary bookcase replaced the wooden doors and irregular array of shelves and ledger compartments of the desk's upper cupboard with glass panelled doors and standardized shelves running the full width of the piece.

English bookcases: miscellaneous forms

Bookcases similar to the secretary bookcase were developed using a slightly different arrangement of storage components. These included: bookcases mounted above a standard chest-of-drawers with no fall-front drawer, bookcases above a cupboard with two wooden doors and bookcases whose upper and lower sections were both provided with shelves enclosed by glass doors. All had a simple rectangular elegance and a functional clarity. These bookcases were generally built by anonymous cabinet-makers whose designs reflected their technical experience and the client's needs. Under the influence of Chippendale's pattern books, some designers incorporated Chinese lattice-work glazing bars, or rococo swirling lock plates in their bookcases. Even so, bookcases which did not lose track of their function were produced through the rest of the 1700's.

Low French bookcase with curtain, c.1770

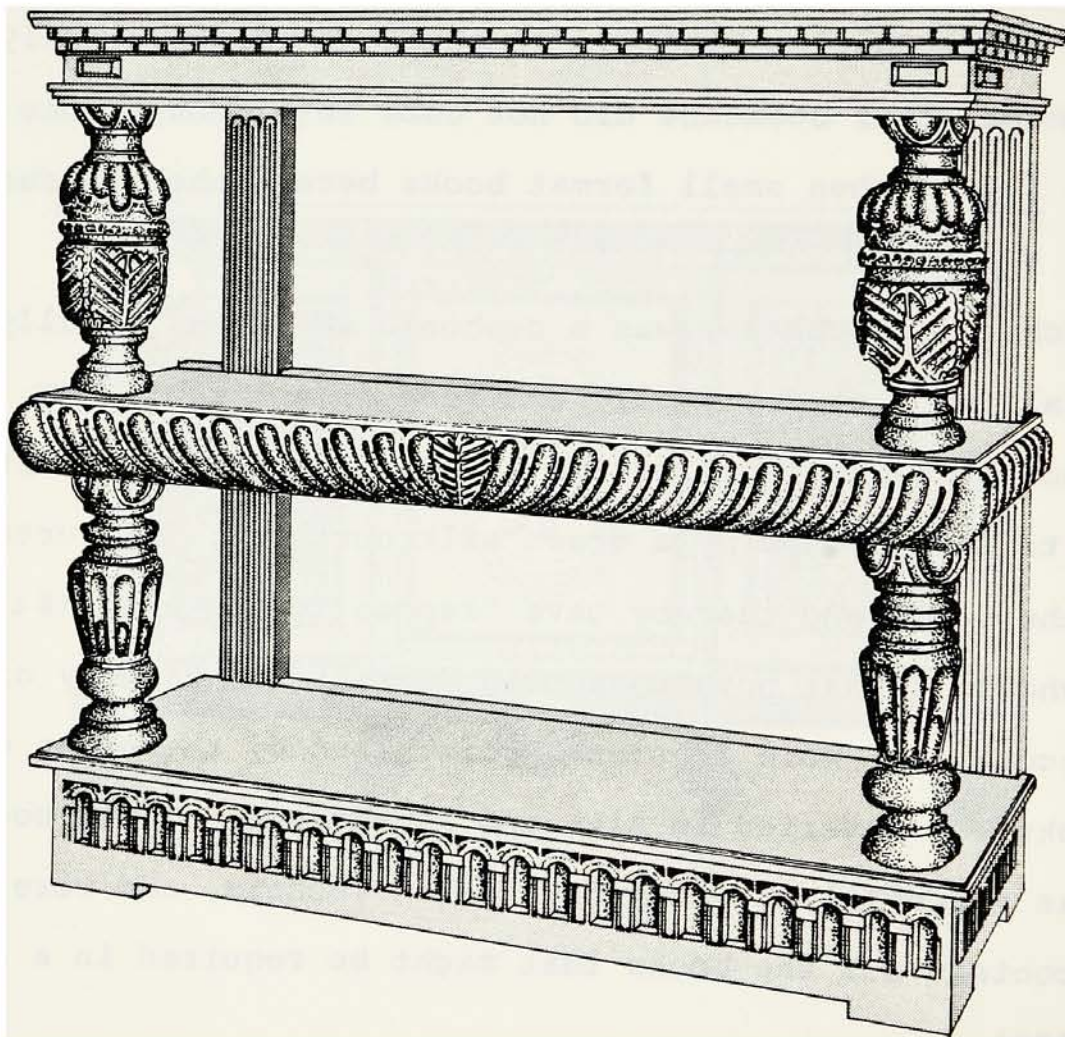


Bookcases: the low French bookcase

About this time, French courtiers were also attracted to the convenience of free-standing bookcases. The most popular bookcase at the French court was long and low, in harmony with the contemporary taste for furniture with a horizontal proportion. It was originally introduced during the early 1700's, and is generally attributed to André-Charles Boulle. In spite of its relatively early development, this bookcase did not come into general use until the mid 1700's when small format books became the standard (# 4, p115).

The French court bookcase was a cupboard which was usually three and a half to four feet tall, and five or six feet long. It often replaced the glass panel of the English bookcase door with a brass wire trellis backed by a green silk curtain. The curtain camouflaged the books and thereby gave "repose to the eye" (#4 , p372). The French, who felt that nothing should disrupt the harmony of the room's decoration, were apparently disturbed by the sight of a line of books which varied in size and appearance. These bookcases were viewed as a convenient accessory to an armchair, and were designed to contain all the books that might be required in a sitting room (# 4 , p372).

English three shelf court cupboard, c.1600



English sideboard & display furniture: the court cupboard

The English had a tradition of storage furniture associated with eating which dated to the late Middle Ages. One of the first of these forms was the credence. Because of the multi-functional demands on the private chamber, the credence served three functions: work surface, display space, and enclosed storage.

During the second half of the 1500's Elizabethan England enjoyed a rising standard of living. Old homes were renovated, and a number of architecturally influenced estates were built from the ground up. One of the rooms regularly designed into the principal family apartments was a "dining parlour" furnished with a "table dormant". This new permanent dining table replaced the demountable boards and trestles of the medieval period (#15, p57). The relative specialization of the dining parlour and table dormant reveals that dining was an important ritual for the English upper class (#19, p100).

The furniture in the dining parlour no longer had to provide generalized domestic storage. This reduction in functional requirements opened the way for a replacement for the credence. The new "court cupboard" was originally designed to display the family's collection of plate. Its name was derived from the original use of the word "cup-board" to mean rough shelves for exhibiting plate, and from the fact that it was rarely more than four feet tall.^{20/} The court cupboard was originally built with three open shelves supported by four corner posts. The top shelf held the most valuable

^{20/} In French the word "court" means short (#15, p60).

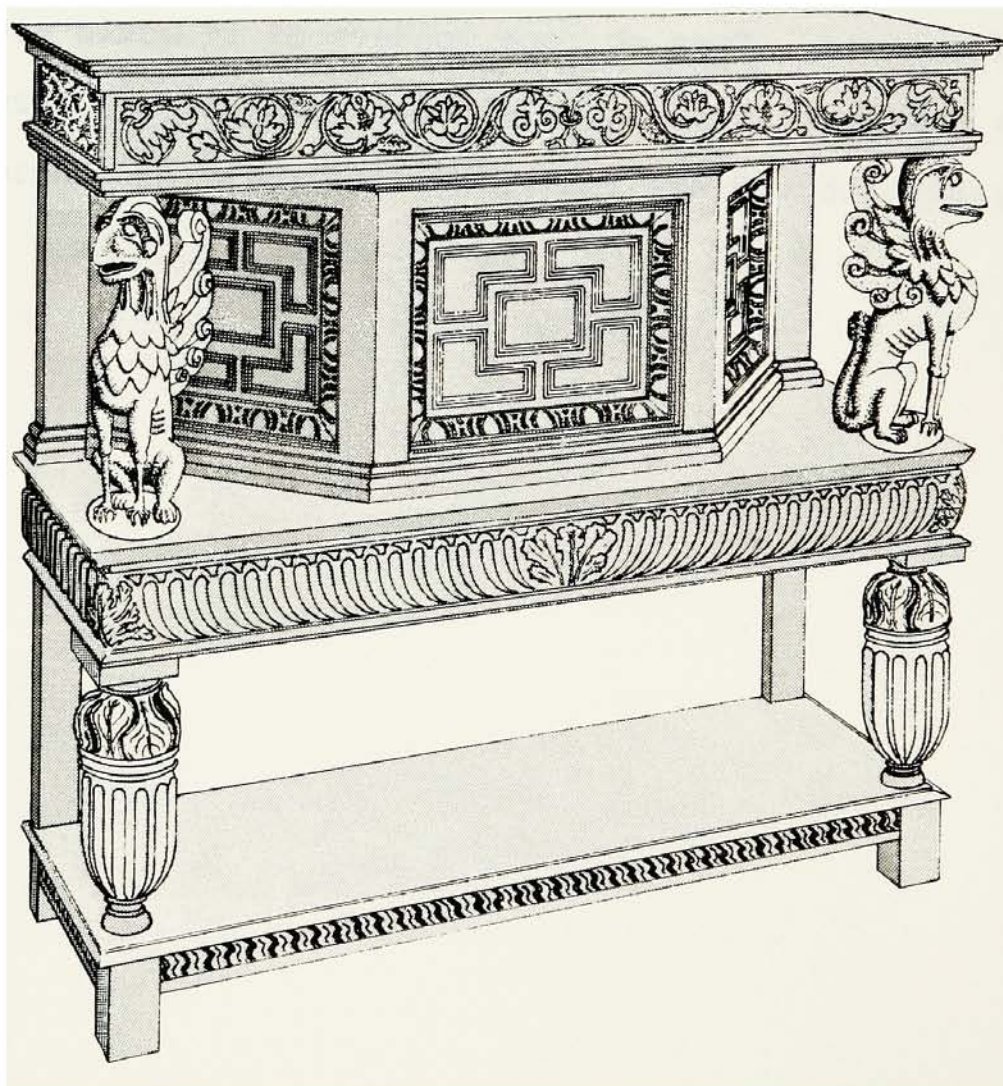
English sideboard & display furniture: the court cupboard

objects, while the two lower shelves held platters and dishes for use during meals, as well as a pitcher and bowl of scented water (#6, p21).

In keeping with its display function, the court cupboard was an elaborately carved and decorated piece of oak furniture. Its ornamental inspiration was based on an integration of vernacular English heraldic forms with a Northern European interpretation of Italian Renaissance designs (#10, p95). The shelves were usually decorated with pseudo-classical dentil moldings and geometric patterns, while the corner posts were carved in the form of heraldic beasts or bulbous spheres. The result of this hybrid decorative effort was a vitality reminiscent of the heavily sculpted French dresser.

English sideboard & display furniture: the court cupboard with drawers

Two variations on the court cupboard were prevalent during the first half of the 1600's. The first variation added a drawer to each of the shelves, so that the enclosed storage was incorporated in furniture essentially designed for display. The result was a rather unorthodox distribution of drawers and shelves not seen before or since. The motive behind adding the drawers must have been to update the design of the court cupboard without changing its fundamental nature. Even so, one wonders if it would not have been more appropriate to start with an entirely new form which systematically distributed the functions of display and enclosed storage.



English sideboard & display furniture: the enclosed court cupboard

During the second quarter of the 1600's the Puritan Ethic discouraged the tradition of displaying plate. The decline of the court cupboard's primary display function led to the popularity of a more radical variation. This variation enclosed the space between the middle and top shelves with a "cupboard" in the modern sense of the word. The cupboard had a central door about one-third the width of the cupboard's front, while the two sides of the cupboard were canted on a diagonal line. It is uncertain what brought on this angular arrangement, but it may have been to provide for the continued use of heraldic beast corner posts.

The successive adaptations illustrated the popularity of the original court cupboard in the same way that late medieval chest variations paid tribute to the long tradition of the chest. The end result of the adaptations, however, was to return the court cupboard to the multi-functional duties of the credence. The court cupboard was an important element in English upper class dining rooms for nearly one hundred years, but its popularity began to ebb during the Commonwealth of the mid 1600's. After the Commonwealth, the court cupboard, as well as other heavily carved oak furniture, was replaced by a new generation of furniture (#15, p60).

English sideboard & display furniture: new forms of the late 1600's

England's exposure to French culture during the late 1600's inspired the aristocracy to refine its domestic life style, and led to a new standard of sophistication for the dining ritual. As a result the court cupboard's multiple functions were subdivided and redistributed; the display function was taken out of the dining room, the enclosed storage was minimized, and the work surface was expanded.

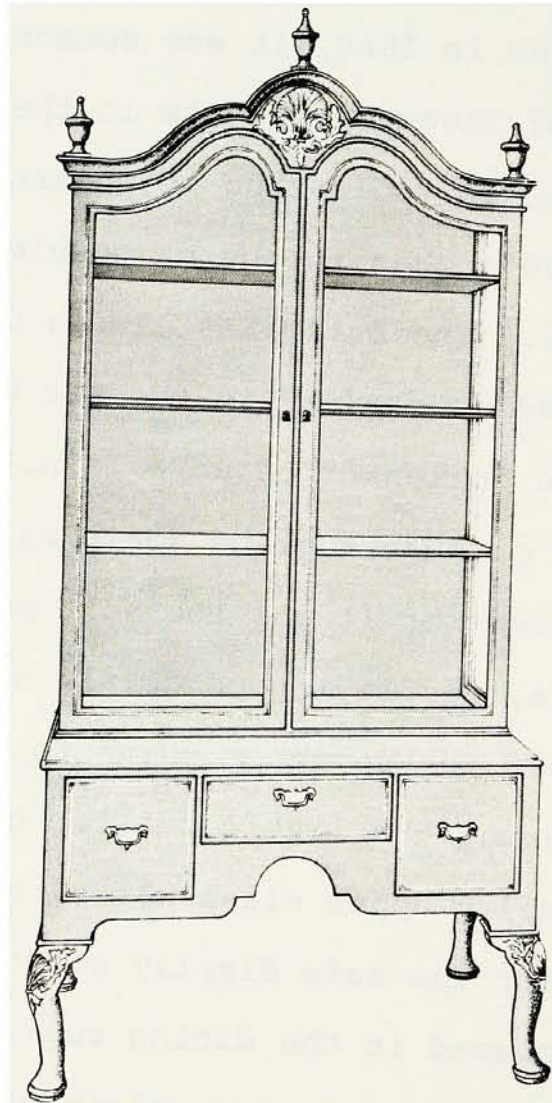
English sideboard & display furniture: the china cabinet

The blunt tradition of displaying precious metal plate was replaced by the more esoteric and subtle fashion of collecting porcelain. The interest in collecting porcelain dated back to the second half of the 1600's when the Dutch, English and French East India Trading Companies began to import Asian porcelain. After the Stuart Restoration in 1660, it was common to find porcelain stacked on top of lacquer cabinets in the homes of the aristocracy. This fashion for collecting porcelain reached its height during the late 1600's when the Dutch couple, William and Mary, came to the English throne. The Dutch East India Company was the most powerful European trading company in the Far East (#12, p823), and Queen Mary was an avid collector of porcelain.^{21/}

Collecting porcelain on such a grand scale as to warrant setting aside a special room for it was the sole prerogative of the very wealthy. Furthermore, displaying porcelain on top of furniture and on open shelves exposed the delicate china to dust and to the risk of breakage. During the 1700's smaller collections of porcelain appeared in simpler upper class homes, and special china cabinets were developed for the safe display of porcelain. These china cabinets were not placed in the dining room. Unlike medieval plate which could be used for dining, porcelain was displayed for its aesthetic and connoisseur value alone. During the 1700's china cabinets were placed in the family rooms of upper class homes in the same way that bookcases and secretary cabinets had been added over the years.

^{21/} After Mary's death in 1694, an inventory of a single room revealed a collection of 143 pieces of fine china arranged on tiered shelves above the chimney manel and door lintels (# 4, p251).

English china cabinet with cabriole legs, early 1700's

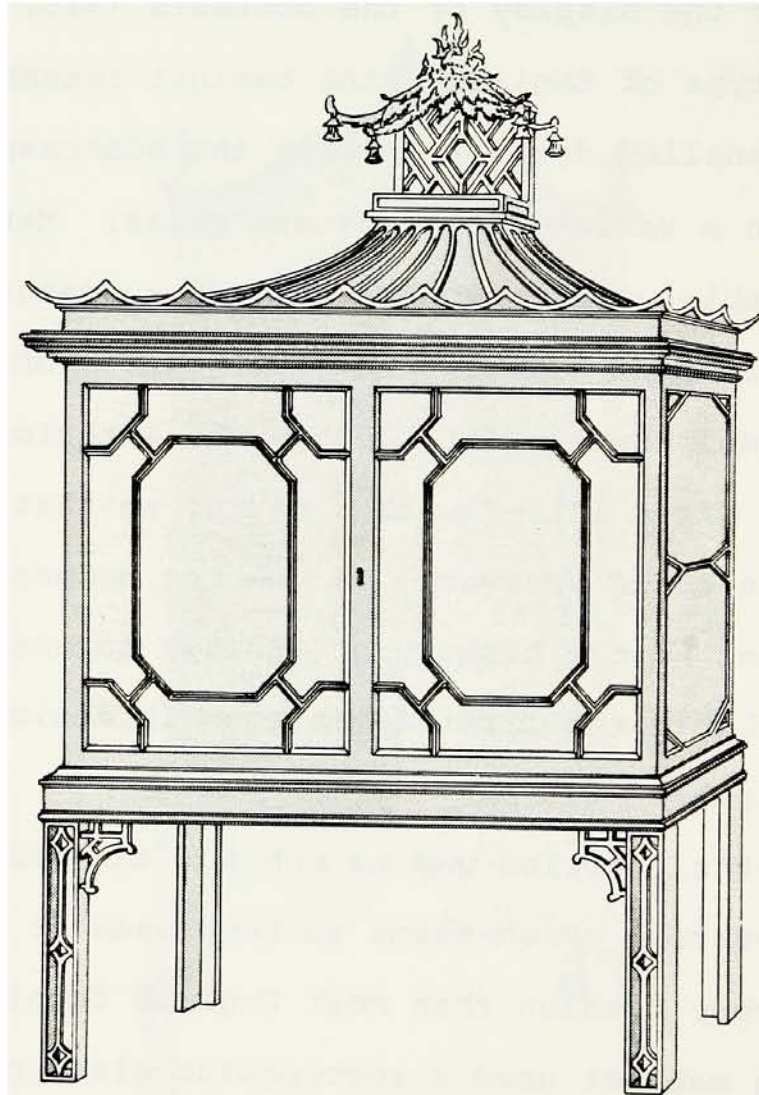


English sideboard & display furniture: the china cabinet

Two basic types of china cabinets evolved at this time. One is thought to be of Dutch origin, and came into use in England during the reign of William and Mary (# 4 , p251). This china cabinet was a tall corner cupboard with two long wood panelled doors. Its interior was usually decorated with lacquer so that the doors could be left open for the display of the contents (#15, pl68).

The most common type of English china cabinet resembled a bookcase with glass panelled doors. As with the bookcase, these cabinets were built in a variety of forms and sizes. Many were virtually interchangeable with bookcases, but those cases specifically designed for porcelain usually had glass panels on the sides as well as on the front. By the late 1700's the interior back walls of such cabinets were often fitted with a mirror so that the backs of the porcelain could be seen. Though not necessarily a significant development in the history of storage furniture, the china cabinet was probably the first intentionally designed "enclosed display" piece.

The china cabinet's function was to enhance the display of its contents, a decorative role which seems to have made it more susceptible to contemporary fashion than most English furniture. One mildly stylized china cabinet used a rectangular glass panelled case mounted on cabriole legs. In contrast to the cupboards which usually supported weighty bookcases, this china cabinet's cabriole legs tended to accentuate the weightlessness and delicacy of its contents. This dainty quality was taken even further and given a form-conscious association to the origins of porcelain in a china cabinet which Chippendale introduced in his 1754 edition of the Gentlemen and Cabinet-Maker's Director. Chippendale's cabinet



English sideboard & display furniture: the china cabinet

resembled a small pagoda with a sweeping roof-line and orientally inspired lattice-work framing bars. It remains a good example of the contemporary fashion for furniture designed in the exotic "Chinese Taste" (#15, p135).

China cabinets continued to be popular in England until the early 1800's when collecting porcelain fell out of fashion. The new function of those china cabinets which remained in upper class homes was to store and display the wide range of machine made curios and knick-knacks which were admired and collected by 19th century Victorians.

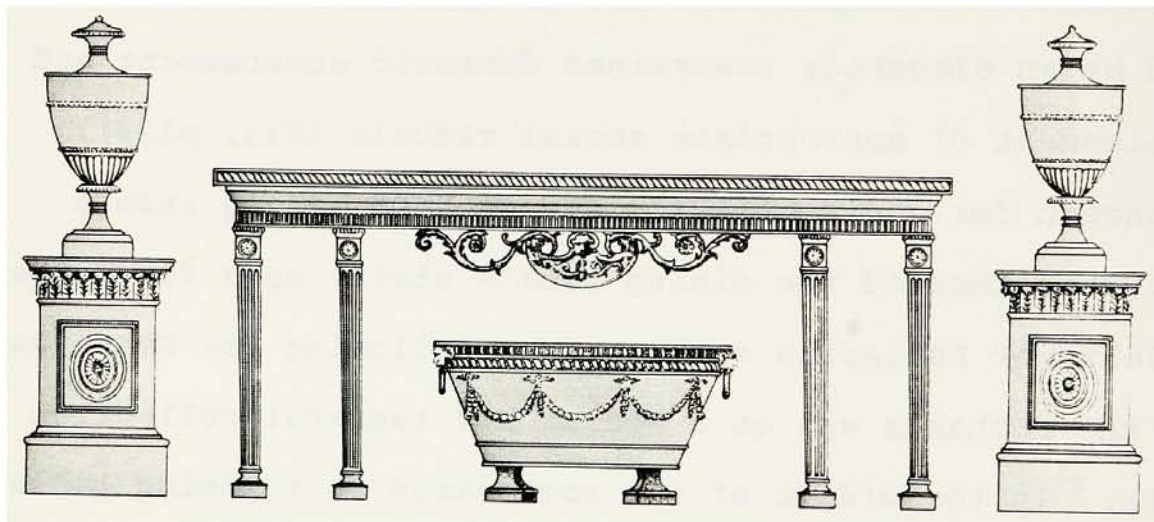
English sideboard & display furniture: Palladian & neo-Classical sideboards

England's preoccupation with refining its domestic life style culminated with the aristocratic standards of the 1700's. England was in the midst of a cultural and scientific Renaissance, while its foreign colonies were giving it new economic and political power. In spite of the pragmatic and frequently brutal nature of her mercantile and colonial policies, England's aristocratic home life was nestled in academic propriety. This dawning vision of classical correctness and atmosphere of self-conscious good breeding was accompanied by an elegantly restrained domestic environment and by the development of appropriate social rituals (#15, p128).

The concern for social rituals transformed eating into a stately art, and insured the dining room's status as a fit subject for the talents of Palladian architects. Following the Renaissance tradition, the emphasis was on a sparse but tasteful collection of furniture. In the middle of the room stood an imposing table-dormant surrounded by a set of chairs, and along the wall was a sideboard devoid of drawers or cupboards. The sideboard's primary function was as a work surface where meat could be carved, and where serving dishes could be placed. The only enclosed or long-term storage regularly found on the sideboard was a pair of matching knife boxes which were usually placed at either end of the work surface (# 4 , p281).

This type of minimal sideboard remained the prevailing form in aristocratic homes until 1762, when the neo-classical architect, Robert Adam, introduced his formula for a correct sideboard. It consisted of an elaborate group of elements including a long

Neo-Classical sideboard by Robert Adam, 1774

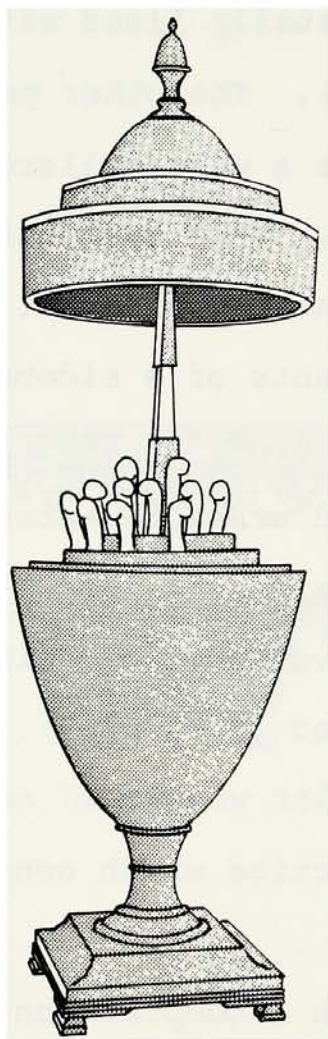


English sideboard & display furniture: Palladian & neo-Classical sideboards

sideboard flanked by two decorative Classical urns mounted on pedestals. Underneath the sideboard was a wooden, barrel-shaped wine cooler lined with lead (# 4, p197). Over the next twenty years new storage functions were added to this composition in several clever ways. First to be modified were the pedestals which were equipped with carefully disguised storage cupboards. The interior of one pedestal was usually lined with tin and fitted with a plate warmer (# 4, p297). The other pedestal was used either as a pot cupboard, or as a wine cellaret which replaced the wooden wine cooler (# 4, p320). This reflected the trend toward refining the visual effect of Adam's original composition by reducing it to the formal elements of a sideboard flanked by two urns mounted on pedestals. In order to justify the continued use of the classically inspired urns, new storage was often built into the urns themselves. Towards the late 1700's the urns were outfitted as knife cases with velvet lined slots arranged concentrically around a central rod (# 4, p337). They were also used to hold water for the butler who would rinse cutlery and glasses during the meal, a practice which continued through the early 1800's (# 4, p320).

Robert Adam felt that such a composition was appropriate to the splendour of the dining rooms of great houses where, he asserted, political decisions were made over a bottle of wine (#15, p141). Some furniture historians consider this sideboard composition to be one of Adam's most important and far reaching contributions to furniture design (#15, p141). In spite of the enthusiasm which this composition generated, its primary role in the dining room was that of a classically inspired visual element. The basic

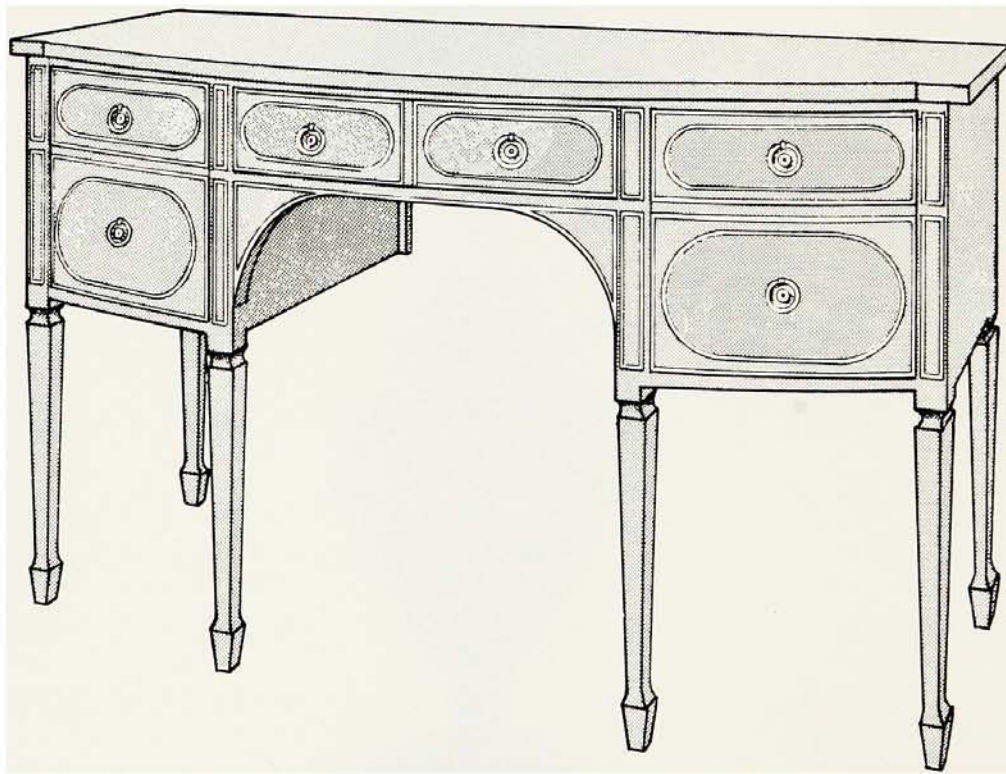
Classical urn knife-box in the style of Hepplewhite, c.1790



English sideboard & display furniture: Palladian & neo-Classical sideboards

configuration of Adam's composition did not evolve as its storage duties were expanded. Instead, new storage facilities were incorporated into the existing visual form. Though Adam can be credited with popularizing the concept of the sideboard, he cannot be credited with developing its functional form.

Hepplewhite sideboard, c.1790



English sideboard & display furniture: Hepplewhite and Sheraton sideboards

Adam's furniture was designed for a few great houses where it set the standard for the English aristocracy (#15, pl42). By the last quarter of the 1700's, however, cabinet-makers were developing a more practical sideboard. This new design became popular in smaller upper class and bourgeois homes after it was published in George Hepplewhite's The Cabinet-Maker's and Upholsterer's Guide. Hepplewhite's Guide contained several variations of Mr. Adam's formal composition. Along with these requisite designs, however, it also contained a design for a sideboard which systematically distributed various necessary functional elements. Hepplewhite's sideboard had a broad flat work surface five to nine feet long (# 4, p335), and an array of enclosed storage compartments underneath. The general composition of this sideboard was similar to the Renaissance credenza, but its storage facilities were more specific and functionally refined. The sideboard had a shallow central drawer flanked by two deep drawers. The central drawer was usually designed to hold cutlery. The right hand drawer was lined with lead and was used to keep up to ten bottles of wine chilled on ice. The drawer on the left had a variety of possible uses, including those of plate warmer, rinse water container, or conventional drawer (# 4, p335). As Hepplewhite's Guide described it, "The great utility of this piece of furniture has procured it a very general reception; and the convenience it affords renders a dining room incomplete without a sideboard."

A variation of this sideboard was illustrated in Thomas Sheraton's Cabinet-Maker's and Upholsterer's Drawing Book, published between 1791 and 1794. Sheraton's sideboard had a brass rod which extended the length of the back. The rod was elevated several inches above

English sideboard & display furniture: Hepplewhite and Sheraton sideboards

the work surface, and was used to support large decorative platters. The rod was often equipped with a centrally mounted branched candle holder (# 4 , p335). Sheraton probably included the brass rod to create a distinctive design which could be distinguished from Hepplewhite's sideboard. Though the function of the brass rod may have been a bit superfluous, it did reflect the recurring English affinity for plate and china display.

CONCLUSION

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Until the 1800's European furniture was produced by a craft system which found its most sophisticated expression in "one of a kind" decorative pieces produced for the aristocracy. Events during the 1800's radically changed the way furniture was designed, built and marketed.

The decline of the aristocracy's political and economic influence brought an end to aristocratic patronage. Aristocratic needs no longer inspired new furniture functions and aristocratic tastes no longer dictated a uniform aesthetic standard. The suppression of the French guilds broke up the traditional hierarchy of the craft system, and freed cabinet-makers to reorganize their craft and compete with each other on a commercial basis. Machine technology led to mass production methods while large factories supplanted small production shops. "One of a kind" designs were superceded by designs emphasizing standardization and modular components.

During the 1800's democracy and egalitarianism were becoming the new social ideals. Mechanization, mass population and mass markets were the new facts of life. By the late 1800's workers at kitchen-cabinet factories in Indiana, rather than French and English cabinet-makers, were producing the innovations in storage furniture, and the age of the academic tradition had ended.

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