

## TANGIBLE SOCIAL HISTORY: THE ONTARIO FURNITURE COLLECTION OF THE NATIONAL MUSEUM OF MAN

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For many years the History Division of the National Museum of Man has been collecting artifacts that are linked with Canada's social history. Some years ago, when the division became aware of my long years of concentrated research on Ontario furniture, it was felt that I could be of some help. After much discussion a decision was made to focus on the acquisition of an Ontario furniture collection that would provide strong tangible evidence of Ontario's social history. My association with the project was to locate and recommend suitable pieces, that is, furniture that was not only representative of the many and varied lifestyles that make up Ontario's past, but that could also lead, through further research, to new historical insight.

Obviously the limits of such a collection had to be defined carefully and goals had to be set. The range of the collection is wide. It includes eighteenth-, nineteenth-, and twentieth-century furniture used in Ontario. This furniture might have been made in Ontario; it might well have been constructed elsewhere and shipped, either knocked down or assembled, to be sold in Ontario; or it might have been brought to the province as settlers' effects.

Since the collection is representative, high quality of design and craftsmanship are not important criteria. All grades from bad to excellent can be found in the collection. A group of furnishings all from one source is considered only if its acquisition can serve to illustrate either the accumulations of several succeeding generations of a family or the work of a particular cabinetmaker. Duplicates or near duplicates are not sought unless they are part of a set, as is often the case with chairs, or unless they are needed to authenticate the work of a school of cabinetmakers or a specific craftsman.

Furniture with some damage, such as missing trim, is considered for acquisition if there is enough left to provide an accurate pattern for repair. Furniture bereft of all trim, or sometimes even of whole parts, is usually bypassed because restoration could only be conjectural at best. For this reason many chests of drawers and sideboards are rejected because at some time their backboards were removed and lost. Even so, if the item being considered is of such rarity or provenance that it is important to the collection, it will be acquired despite its deficiencies. The same rule applies to altered pieces if the change is found to be early and pertinent to changing lifestyles. For instance, old chairs were often cut down to provide a low chair for a bedroom; rockers might have been added or a hole cut in the seat to make a commode

chair. Similarly, many of the old four-poster, rope-spring bedsteads were cut off at the bottom to conform when changing taste decreed that lower beds were in style.

Artifacts considered for the collection under the above criteria are also checked for authenticity. Style, material, construction, and provenance must be in harmony. For example, a chest of drawers in a pre-Victorian style supposedly made by a cabinetmaker working in the 1820s will not have even, machine-made dovetails. However, sometimes evidence that at first glance seems to be at odds can be explained. Consider a chest of drawers in the same early style, made totally by hand tools and of wide boards, yet with strong provenance purporting it to have been made by a specific cabinetmaker at the end of the nineteenth century. The facts in this case *are* compatible since, despite the advent of machinery in Ontario, a certain number of woodworkers continued to make furniture by hand using the methods, styles, and tools of the past as long as there was some market for their products or for as long as they lived.

Probably the most severe problems encountered in selecting furniture for such a historically oriented collection arise from provenance. In recent years, especially since the centennial year of Confederation, rising interest in Canadian heritage and related objects has led to massive importation of antiques to meet the demand. Usually it is not difficult to detect the differences in styles, materials, and craftsmanship between European- and Canadian-made furniture; but if provenance links one of these recent arrivals to an old and historically important family that could have had imported furniture, it is another matter entirely. In most cases the seller, whether dealer or family, will feel that oral tradition is enough to establish proof of long ownership. We in turn ask for some documentation indicating at least that the family did own such a piece of furniture for a long period of time. However, even documentation, unless it is very specific or is an actual photograph, is usually not enough to prove that the piece in question is in fact the one mentioned. Then it comes down to a matter of judgment. Certainly a premium will not be paid for provenance that is doubtful, even if a decision is made to acquire the piece.

If the furniture being considered is American-made, there are even greater difficulties since the styles, wood, and craftsmanship can often be remarkably similar to that found in Ontario. To make it worse, a lot of furniture used in Ontario was actually imported from the United States for sale in Ontario. Sets of chairs from C. Robinson of Rochester, New York, abounded in certain areas of the province. Again, the decision for acquisition must be made from a consideration of provenance plus the knowledge and judgment of the collector.

In the case of signed furniture, although all other provenance should be noted as well, it is not always the most important factor in choosing a piece for the collection. Labels, stamps, or brands of furniture

dealers and makers can be checked out in old directories or furniture catalogues and will provide a starting place for further research. Thus, provenance in such instances, even if it is at variance with a signature, does not matter except that it might serve to indicate where the piece was last used and who used it.

It should be noted carefully that not all signatures found on furniture are valid. A few old, cabinet-makers' brands are still in existence. If they should fall into the wrong hands they can be used to upgrade the price of many objects by giving them stamped provenance. Remember also that many people besides cabinetmakers had printing sets or stamps made up for their own use and often it is their names that are found, particularly on desks. Unfortunately such evidence is seized upon with great glee by some who immediately "document" it as being a maker's signature. Of course it can be, but it is just as likely to indicate the name of a former owner. In the latter case the piece so signed can still be of some interest to a historical collection.

Pencil signatures in particular are dangerous provenance. Take, for instance, the Chippendale-inspired furniture made in the Niagara Peninsula and sometimes signed in pencil. The early style is so easily recognized and remembered by the inset quarter columns and the ogee bracket feet that examples of it have become prestigious and outlandishly expensive. However, this furniture is not exclusive to the Niagara Peninsula. Speculators have gradually discovered several other areas in Ontario and in Pennsylvania where it was made; in fact in some cases the forebears of the peninsula cabinet-makers originated in those areas. Since such furniture commands much higher prices in Ontario, it is brought from the United States and given Ontario provenance. Sometimes that is achieved by a pencil signature carefully copied from one known to be authentic; in other cases the piece is linked by initials to an early-settled peninsula family with a German name or connection. Often such relationships are made even without a signature, merely the style and formation of the ogee bracket foot are offered as proof of Ontario provenance. Again, as in all cases, the collector must use his knowledge and judgment.

In the event that the piece is chosen, all provenance must be noted carefully, whether or not it is accepted as being completely valid. Even in the short term it can lead to field research, that is, interviews with descendants of cabinetmakers or owners of the furniture. The results of this research must also be recorded faithfully. In the longer term of integrated research, provenance may well provide the clue that leads to a better understanding of the piece in its original time and place.

The background required to build such a collection includes a knowledge of furniture styles (mostly North American and European), wood (particularly North American), furniture construction, and Ontario

geography and history (especially settlement, economic conditions, and genealogy). One might add to this list great vitality (or foolish determination), dogged persistence, endless patience, common sense, and, above all, a sense of humour.

When I began my training some thirty years ago, there was very little offered in Canada in the way of courses that combined such subjects or even dealt with some of them. Therefore, after attending what lectures there were, I had to train myself by pursuing the subjects mentioned in the previous paragraph and gradually developing research techniques. Other requirements found to be necessary for this study were many trips to Canadian and American museums, restorations, historical societies, and archives to see furniture and related objects and to learn what was known about their makers, users, and origins. Subsequently, an ever-increasing collection of relevant Ontario furniture was needed for study and analysis. Numerous trips were undertaken to estate auction sales all over Ontario to observe, photograph, and compare furniture. Such trips led in turn to more field research, such as interviews with descendants of cabinetmakers and visits to households still containing furniture amassed by several generations. Those interviewed were always assured that the purpose was research, not acquisition of their furniture, and, moreover, that their privacy would be strictly guarded. Field research was followed by archival research. In time, I began to give lectures in order to share some of this newfound knowledge and also in the hope of learning about fresh research possibilities from those in attendance. Finally, as I became aware of a need for more widespread knowledge of Ontario furniture to be preserved, let alone appreciated, I began to write a series of inexpensive but instructive books that could easily be acquired and absorbed even by non-students of Ontario furniture.<sup>1</sup> Once again, I asked for and received help for my research from the readers of these publications.

Since there are now many courses offered in universities and community colleges on subjects related to furniture, the knowledge that I acquired in the past from books, museums, and furniture construction can be obtained today in a much easier fashion. The knowledge gleaned from field research cannot. Estate auction sales are now salted with artifacts that are desirable but of doubtful origin. What better way of giving a potentially saleable piece good provenance! Interviews, in most cases, are worse than useless since almost every old house in Ontario has been canvassed during the past decade by at least one antique buyer on the pretext of research or by a well-meaning but often ill-prepared student who succeeds only too frequently in leading the person being interviewed to an unwarranted conclusion that becomes a "fact."

Unfortunately it would seem that the time for much valuable field research is running out. However, it is to be hoped that those who have done this kind of work in the past will make their material available to

research institutions such as the History Division of the National Museum of Man. There it will, along with the material already documented, give added meaning to the existing collection of furniture and perhaps suggest valuable direction for future acquisitions and research.

What is the potential use of this furniture in the study of Ontario history? The collection will be used in conjunction with archival and technological research to establish the range and progression of style, construction, material, finish, and quality to be found in Ontario furniture; it will serve to establish the capabilities and business practices of many Ontario craftsmen; and it will help to pinpoint preferences for certain styles and types of furniture to specific groups of settlers and even to specific regions.

How will this work? Although research and expanded knowledge of the collection will result from the work of specialists in many fields, here are at least some of the possibilities. First of all, signed furniture and furniture with good provenance regarding its maker or owner will give archival researchers something specific to hunt. Since there are literally hundreds of woodworking craftsmen to be found in a week's perusal of archival documents, it is heartening to do an in-depth search for one whose product can still be identified. Also, very often, without such evidence to point the way, many craftsmen associated with furniture might be overlooked since they were not always listed as cabinetmakers. However, once a name is known, it can usually be located, at least in a census, and perhaps something can be learned that will help establish the veracity of the claim. Even the names of furniture owners can be used to point to a specific region to be researched. After sufficient archival research is done, it should be possible to link many of the artifacts in the collection more closely by maker and by region.

Fortunately archival research can be done at any time in the future. The material is safe, whereas furniture that can be documented is not since great social change and public demand has resulted in its widespread diffusion and destruction. Nor is archival research difficult. Its main requirements are direction and time, and the latter can be provided by numbers of intelligent and diligent researchers.

As for technological research, all of the furniture in the collection can be used in one way or another. Possible identification through similarity in style and proportion of two pieces can be checked for verification by a comparison of construction methods. Pieces with many coats of overpainting may provide new information about changing colour and decorative preferences in society, as well as about different paint formulas. Original finishes can be examined and then compared for age with style, construction, and field and archival information. The furniture itself, furniture hardware, and trim can be researched in old catalogues or with the cabinet-makers' patterns, decorations, and mouldings that

are also being gathered as part of this collection.

The research possibilities emanating from the collection are exciting and endless. Conversely, the time for collecting such pertinent raw material, that is, Ontario furniture in which there is still some possibility of positive identification, is gradually running out. For all of these reasons, the making of a research collection of Ontario furniture is a rewarding and worthwhile project. Indeed, it is an *urgent* project, for it is an important key to unlocking the past.

#### NOTE

1. This series, published by The House of Grant, Toronto, includes the following titles to date: *All About Ontario Chests* (1973), *All About Ontario Chairs* (1974), *All About Ontario Beds* (1975), *All About Ontario Tables* (1976), *All About Ontario Cupboards* (1977), *All About Ontario Desks and Secretaries* (in press).