

John A. Fleming, *The Painted Furniture of French Canada, 1700–1840*

EDWARD S. COOKE, JR

Fleming, John A. *The Painted Furniture of French Canada, 1700–1840*, Camden East, Ontario: Camden House Publishing and the Canadian Museum of Civilization, 1994. 179 pp., numerous color and black and white illustrations, appendixes, bibliography, index. Cloth \$34.95, ISBN 0-921820-85-2.

For the past thirty years, Jean Palardy's *The Painted Furniture of French Canada* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1965) has been the seminal text for furniture historians investigating the works of joiners and turners active in New France. Like Irving Lyon, whose *The Colonial Furniture of New England* (1891; reprint ed., New York: Dutton, 1977) set the standard for the study of that region's furniture making, Palardy used inventories, newspapers, and manuscripts to discuss furniture making practices and furnishing trends; identified period terminology for forms, illustrated a wide range of formal variations, and compared French Canadian examples with French prototypes; and charted stylistic and formal change over time.

In *The Painted Furniture of French Canada, 1700–1840*, John Fleming acknowledges the influence of Palardy but seeks to use the approach of new material culture studies to provide the theoretical underpinning for a fresh examination of New France furniture that "attempts to go beyond description and the 'how' of its subject to ask 'what' and even 'why'" (p. 10). Devoting sections of the book to the settlement of French Canada (including construction and layout of houses), French furniture styles and their morphology in Canada, the materials and constructional features of the Canadian furniture, and the decoration and surface treatment of the furniture, Fleming seeks to explore the stylistic and decorative features of surviving furniture with original painted surfaces, the functional and psychological values of single pieces of furniture, and the French Canadian notion of decorative ensemble. Fleming celebrates the exuberant and harmoniously proportioned furniture made in New France between 1660 and the mid eighteenth century, but laments the influence of Anglo-American furniture traditions and the

use of paint for mere decoration rather than for sacred and secular meanings after the 1760s.

Fleming offers a very helpful discussion of the French origins of the Louis XIII, XIV, and XV styles and successfully demonstrates their confluence in French Canadian forms. He has also made many articles written for Canadian journals or in French more accessible to furniture historians unfamiliar with French Canadian sources. The numerous large colour plates illustrating a wide variety of surviving examples greatly surpasses the grainy black and white photographs of stripped furniture that make up the bulk of illustrations in the Palardy book. However, Fleming's interpretation of the furniture remains unconvincing and aesthetically based. With each bold assertion of the meaning of the furniture, he retreats to a mere descriptive passage without systematic or rigorous analysis of the context of production or use. The section that best approaches some degree of convincing proof is the one on interior space, which explores the relationship between interior finish and movable furniture and charts an increasing "consciousness of decorative values" among the upper classes and a more intensive valuation of individual pieces of furniture among the habitant class. Yet the subsequent discussion of the furniture itself shies away from using this framework to discuss the changing environments of habitants and drawing upon the illustrated examples to develop the argument.

Conceptually the book seems flawed. In his discussion of style, Fleming continues to use the term "folk style," viewing the French Canadian work as charming incorrect simplifications or stylizations of an idealized high style. Celebrating the folk joiner's ability to directly express traditional folk motifs, he describes the work as "spontaneous, untutored, rooted in tradition, sometimes humorous, never commercial, associated with the everyday experiences of ordinary people" (p. 68). Such a notion of naive or derivative folk style has certainly fallen out of favour with American and British furniture historians, who instead use the concept of vernacular to explore regional work on its own terms without reliance upon a monolithic trickle-down model. Fleming's notes and

bibliography make no mention of work by Robert Trent, Robert St George, Bernard Cotton, or other scholars who have produced more theoretically sophisticated case studies. Such works may not have provided helpful images of related examples for comparative purposes (he dismisses American "overviews or specialized analyses" as irrelevant on page 12), but would have provided helpful models for the exploration and analysis of local material expression and shed light on the process of creolization.

Current American scholarship might also have helped Fleming understand that issues of high style versus vernacular style are not simply explained through an urban versus rural model. Shops in either location might make painted pine furniture or varnished butternut or birch furniture in more academic styles. Even the joiners who made elaborate work for the wealthy of Montreal were in some respects "vernacular craftsmen" when compared to the Royal workshops back in France — they had to work within local economies for specific local needs. A better sense of lines of production within different types of shops would have added significantly to the discussion of changing patterns of furniture consumption over time and between locations. Such patterns are lost in the parade of colour plates.

Throughout the volume, I sensed a greater concern with the crustiness of an original finish and an interpretive direction that privileged the present condition and merely projected a meaning back into the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Fleming emphasizes the meaning "in the evidence of worn surfaces or repairs and the aesthetic dimensions of colour that had

oxidized and softened with age and the marks of human activity" (p. 102). The captions for the colour plates all focus upon the layers of colours, for example noting the "pleasing surface colors" produced by the oxidation of original blue paint (p. 42). The design of the book further underscored the aesthetic presence of the objects and precluded the development of an interpretive argument. The plates are interspersed throughout the volume without consideration of the points made in the adjoining text. Colour photographs even appear within the footnotes and bibliography, making the book seem like a picture book with some text accompanying the images.

In the preface, Fleming writes that his book may be controversial in that it challenges certain myths about French Canadian furniture. Instead I would argue that the book does not live up to its intent to incorporate new material culture perspectives, but rather remains very traditional in its approach. Fleming's descriptive assessment of aesthetic intent and formal analysis are reminiscent of John Kirk's *Early American Furniture: How to Recognize, Evaluate, Buy, and Care for the Most Beautiful Pieces — High Style, Country, Primitive, and Rustic* (New York: Knopf, 1976). Fleming's *The Painted Furniture of French Canada, 1700–1840* will certainly get readers to look more closely at and appreciate the elements of the region's furniture but will not satisfy furniture historians more interested in analysis. It does not sufficiently explain the world of the furniture craftsmen and the context and meaning of their products. In the end Fleming has written a book that will not replace Palardy but rather should be used in conjunction with it.

Jessica H. Foy and Karal Ann Marling, *The Arts and the American Home, 1890–1930*

ELIZABETH C. CROMLEY

Jessica H. Foy and Karal Ann Marling, eds., *The Arts and the American Home, 1890–1930*, Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1994, xxiv + 194 pp., 58 illus. Cloth \$32.95, ISBN 0-87049-825-8.

In essays on the arts and the American home (from the McFaddin-Ward House Conference in

1990) nine authors have researched diverse aspects: music, the piano, reading, needlework, paintings, photographs, furniture, and fireplaces. The time period begins with Victorian clutter and sentiment and ends with modernity and "rationalism," giving the authors an opportunity to account for major shifts or continuations. Women's contributions are given a central