

Comptes rendus de livres

Clive Edwards, *Encyclopedia of Furniture Materials, Trades and Techniques*

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Edwards, Clive, *Encyclopedia of Furniture Materials, Trades and Techniques*. Aldershot, Hants.: Ashgate Publishing, 2000. 254 pp. List of figures, preface, acknowledgements, introduction, guide to use, a-z entries, bibliography, 148 black and white images, 24 colour images, \$200, ISBN 1-84014-639-7.

This is a beautifully packaged work from beginning to end, barring the inexplicable cover photograph of a blue clad gentleman facing away from the camera. Edwards quotes from Sir John Betjeman's *Summoned by Bells* in the frontispiece "The cabinet-maker's shop, all belts and wheels" that serves both as an indication of poetry and machines in motion and a capsule of what is to come — the book discusses the life force of wooden materials as they are riven asunder by mankind via his (and hers, we hope) tools. Yet this is *not* an encyclopedic discussion or record of manufacturers' interiors in action (which would have been interesting). Rather, it is an alphabetical arrangement of snippets of information arranged as a dictionary.

From "abrasives" to "zips" this dictionary encompasses everything about furniture — barring design sources — including materials, artisanal trades and manufacturing. The information included here managed to mesmerize a colleague of mine from the Canadian Conservation Institute who showed up one weekend. "Here, look at this," I said; needing an hour to prepare dinner I knew that he would not emerge until the table was set. Indeed, he was overwhelmed by the information. From his point of view as a leading furniture conservator there was a lot of stuff that both entertained and informed, intriguing the reader and thus keeping his interest — a fair smattering of images with generalist information. From my point of view as a specialist furniture historian I was more anxious to find chronological explanations of techniques and how they had changed over time. I thought an encyclopedia would provide this in a concise

format, however this dictionary only explains (highly) selected details. The first findings of a technique and who used it, where, and to what effect are not discussed. The big picture is certainly not here; anyone asking that crucial question "so what?" will be disappointed. In fact this is a book of "things" rather than of "processes" — the literature is static, unlike Betjeman's embracing of whining saws and screams of tortured wood. It became apparent that the market for this text is for generalists, and the hunter of decontextualized hard "facts."

In calming myself into approaching the book as a dictionary, I began to search out what was included and what was not. I was thrilled to see that many woods were listed under their common names, and even more impressed that "mahogany" received three pages of treatment. From African mahogany (*Khaya ivorensis*) to "white mahogany" (*Rosodendron Donnellsmithii*) we travel the world — through Central America and "Campeachy" (Campeche when I was in the Yucatan earlier this year), Guadeloupe, the Bahamas, Cuba, San Domingo, Brazil to the Philippines and on to Australia to discover jarrah (*Eucalyptus marginata*). Curators stating on catalogues that furniture materials include "mahogany" certainly need to be more accurate. Throughout the mahogany entry there is extensive cross-referencing to other entries, reducing repetitious information. What is most useful are the short sharp bibliographies at the end of each entry — leading the reader on to short extracts published elsewhere (and presumably their information appearing in synopsis form here).

I was also really pleased if not relieved to be asked to review this text in conjunction with Bradford Rauschenberg and John Bivins's masterpiece of descriptive physical features of Charleston furniture. Here I could dip into Edwards to find out what "arris" means and the fact that the first (known, I add) recorded use of the term is a 1677

French entry (“areste”) meaning a sharp ridge created when two planed surfaces meet. I felt empowered and, if humanly possible, more educated than Brad for a nanosecond. I lost the temporal advantage when “trunnion” was not found and linguistic mastery returned to my mentor and his description of Charleston furniture turnings and joints. Yet, having taught a class on “fasteners” at McGill last year I had hoped but failed to find an entry on “Velcro” (*velour crochet*) — a material used more today for fastening cushion upholstery. In other words, Edwards is a great companion book but is far from “encyclopedic” in content.

As a historian of furniture I am really interested in chronological events, discovery firsts, and their implications for society. While Edwards boldly asserts terminology was “first used” at a given time — it is difficult to accept this “fact” as the geographical net is flung to encompass terms only from Britain and America (no, not Canada). Edwards covers a wide assortment of secondary literature but what about the rest of the world? Just as the invention of buttons and buttonholes revolutionized costume manufacture — where do screws play a role? Witold Rybczynski’s *One Good Turn* tells the history of the “world’s greatest little invention” — the screw. An entire text on the screw and its drivers suggests encyclopedic knowledge. Edwards’s entry is a short three paragraphs and slightly misleading at that (“In 1731 three gross of wood screws were valued at £4. 1s.0d.” What does this imply, what salary did the manufacturer make and, lastly, another pet peeve of mine is how to write poundage properly — is that £4:01:00? I am also reminded that Brits name their currency after the weight and value of *nails*).

Obviously, Clive Edwards has spent an inordinate amount of time pulling this “encyclopedia” together. And, yes, I did enjoy looking at it (barring the cover). But I will still use John Gloag’s

A Complete Dictionary of Furniture, Thomas Corkhill’s *The Complete Dictionary of Wood*, and Harold Osborne’s *Oxford Companion to the Decorative Arts* to help fill in the gi-normous gaps in Edwards’s. Even Helena Hayward’s *World Furniture* is good for “dipping” into. This text has been hailed as a “scholarly encyclopedia” but I ask “is this all that furniture has to offer if it is presented in only 254 pages?” Granted that the font size is miniscule, a plot by eye doctors to sell glasses, I still think that there is much much more out there. Consider Rauschenberg and Bivins writing nigh on 1500 pages — with two volumes on Charleston furniture construction details.

Sometimes as a British–American–Canadian furniture expert, I spend time defending each country to another. In this case I feel that Edwards would have better spent his time in Ottawa (Canada) than in High Point (United States), knowing about the *Material History Review* (particularly volume 15) as well as Delaware’s *Winterthur Journal*, accessing our authors’ works rather than just the Americans. On the other hand, I know how time consuming and expensive it is to travel everywhere some other person thinks you ought to go on whichever weekend you have off using that paper that literally grows on trees.

Despite being far from definitive, I must still say that this “encyclopedia” is very informative. I enjoyed seeing what was there while pining for what was missing. I read quotes I had not seen before, while knowing there were others out there more useful. The bottom line is that I wanted an interwoven encyclopedic story but got a smattering of selective shorts; this is not a scholarly encyclopedia but an antiquarian listing. As I keep all my twenty-three dictionaries on their sides — as they are short and stocky, Edwards’s tome will not be found amongst them, as it is tall and thin. It will be stored elsewhere and thus rendered, alas, a secondary less-consulted text.

Bradford L. Rauschenberg and John Bivins, Jr, *The Furniture of Charleston, 1680–1820*

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Rauschenberg, Bradford L., and John Bivins, Jr. *The Furniture of Charleston, 1680–1820*, Vol. I: *Colonial Furniture*; Vol. II: *Neoclassical Furniture*; Vol. III: *The Cabinetmakers*. The Frank L. Horton

Series. Winston–Salem, N.C.: Museum of Early Southern Decorative Arts, 2003. 1440 pp., 1400 illus., including colour, 679 craftsmen biographies, US\$325, ISBN 0-945578-05-9.