

# CARVING LESSONS FROM SALEM

The work of Samuel McIntire

BY MARK ARNOLD



When we think of the master craftsmen of early America, a few names immediately come to mind. Certainly, John Townsend of Newport is on the list, as are John and Thomas Seymour of Boston. So are Duncan Phyfe of New York, Thomas Affleck of Philadelphia, and John Shaw of Annapolis. These are men whose skilled hands created many of the furniture icons of the time. Another name worthy of inclusion here is unique because there are no documented pieces of furniture whose construction can be attributed to him.

Samuel McIntire (1757-1811) is one of America's first professional carvers. The amount of carving attributed to him is astounding—a fact which speaks to a prolific career. The number of pieces he carved, however, is not as impressive as the broad scope of his work. He was equally effective in executing small and large scale work in virtually any degree of relief. From the largest of his architectural carvings (1) to the finest detail on the furniture that he embellished (2), McIntire had a masterful command of both motif and material. This virtuosity of the woodcarver's art, however, was not manifest until late in McIntire's working career. His early years were spent as an influential architect of Federal-era Salem and during which he became fluent in the neoclassical vocabulary—a proficiency which would help make his a household name.

*Samuel McIntire: Carving an American Style*, an exhibition at the Peabody Essex Museum in Salem, Massachusetts from October 13, 2007 through February 24, 2008, was the first re-examination of the Salem native's work in nearly fifty years. It was also the first to focus exclusively on his carving rather than his architectural accomplishments. A symposium, "The Art of Wood Carving in America," supplemented the exhibition and drew an international audience. Ten presenters, including Dean Lahikainen, curator of the exhibit and author of *Samuel McIntire: Carving an American Style*, approached the subject of woodcarving in early America from a variety of angles. Each of the presenters added to the discussion of the particular work habits of both well-known and obscure carvers, the international and regional influences on their work, the choice and treatment of their subject matter, and the economic realities of the periods in which they worked. All of these issues are germane



1. Model of a Corinthian Capital (c. 1796-1800); painted pine; Peabody Essex Museum.

2. Detail of a Side Chair, Salem (c. 1795-1800); unidentified maker, carving by Samuel McIntire; mahogany; Peabody Essex Museum.

3. Arm Chair, Salem (1801), unidentified maker, carving by Samuel McIntire; mahogany, 34½" x 21" x 18½"; Peabody Essex Museum.

4. Sign for U.S. Custom House, Salem (1805); painted and gilded pine, 36" x 60" x 11".

to woodworkers today, whether they already incorporate carving into their work or wish to do so.

Alan Miller, who has a lengthy background in restoration carving and antiques consulting, delivered the keynote talk. He emphasized the fact that carving is more than mere decoration since it serves several important functions. Like a molding, it moves light and creates shadow, both sharply and subtly. It creates rhythm through repetition, as in the case of gadrooning. It can add line where none exists. An appliqué, for

example, divides and redefines the surface to which it is applied. Carving also adds content, be it classical, romantic, or naturalistic. Miller's survey of bespoke carvers in Colonial America helped to put McIntire's work into context. While Philadelphia is better known for the carving executed there during the Chippendale period by artists such as Martin Jugiez and the anonymous but iconic Garvan carver, McIntire helped to transform Salem in a similar manner during the Federal period (4).

The vast majority of the approximately 200 symposium attendees were not woodcarvers, however. They were decorative arts historians, conservators, collectors, dealers, and cataloguers at well-known auction houses, gathering to network, to see old friends, and to hear the most recent scholarship on Samuel McIntire and other important American woodcarvers. Due to the scholarly focus of the symposium, the specific techniques used by period carvers were alluded to but not discussed in-depth. Carving tools were present only during the demonstration by furniture maker/conservator Phil Lowe, who also did restoration work on a number of pieces in the exhibit.



5. Urn reproduction by Phil Lowe, based on an original carved by Samuel McIntire (c. 1801). From the front fence of the Peirce-Nichols House, 80 Federal Street, Salem, Massachusetts.

6. Pattern for chair back carved by Samuel McIntire. The crest rail, after it was carved, had a trail of vines extending along the crest rail.

7. Plate I from *An Accompaniment to the Cabinet-Maker & Upholsterer's Drawing Book*, by Thomas Sheraton, 1803 (Reprint, Dover Publications, 1972). At the bottom of the plate, B is a boasting of C.



general outline of the composition, including its overall size and flow, motifs, and the repeat of major elements has to be worked out directly on the surface. While boasting is an important step, one must resist the temptation to render the composition in too great detail (6). Time spent drawing veins, stems and grapes, for example, is soon regretted when tool meets wood. "Part of the ability to carve well," according to Phil Lowe, "is knowing how and where to chop first to create the overall shapes before any detail is added. A lot of people try to do the detail much too quickly before they model the rough shapes."

None of the initial layout lines will remain once the composition has been roughed out. Lines may be added at any point in the modeling process, but boasting is best thought of as a sketch whose lines are followed at first, but then "remembered" as the carver progresses into the work. Pencil lines drawn on a plane are ultimately replaced by abrupt transitions on an undulating surface, bridging the appropriate points of an invisible matrix.

The method used to lay out a design was a function of the composition and its motifs. Patterns simplified the layout of repetitive motifs, such as those found on moldings and friezes, while more elaborate asymmetrical compositions were likely drawn free-hand (7). In McIntire's day, the preparation of a workpiece for pictorial or naturalistic carving was often done without the use of a pattern or template and not always by the carver himself. McIntire probably boasted his own work, but in highly specialized carving ateliers such as those in London or Paris, a dedicated boaster would prepare the workpiece and then pass it to a carver. The variability of piecework carving made patterns impractical

In his presentation, Lowe discussed the practical applications of gouges and punches—specifically those that he used in reproducing a set of Sheraton chairs for the recently restored Peirce-Nichols House (3). He also showed how McIntire likely carved the swags of the massive wooden urns that sit atop the gate posts in front of the house (5).

#### THE VIRTUE OF BOASTING

Although the main focus of the symposium was academic, when the fundamental issues of wood, tools, and techniques were broached, four recurring themes emerged. The first of these is the importance of good layout skills, or what is referred to as "boasting." In the language of carving, boasting is generally meant to describe the rough shaping of material prior to fine detailing, but

here it refers primarily to the layout of a composition. A knowledge of botany, anatomy, and mythology, as well as competency in drafting and a command of the classical design vocabulary, are essential to good boasting. Just as McIntire copied designs from George Hepplewhite's *Cabinet-Maker's and Upholsterer's Guide*, a design library is an invaluable resource for the aspiring carver. Today, great emphasis is placed on having a fully-rendered drawing with every grape or leaf tip drawn in minute detail. A drawing, however, is merely a two-dimensional representation of a desired three-dimensional outcome. It is like a silhouette: it gives us an idea of the space occupied by the subject, but no inkling as to the fullness or roundness of its main features.

Before a carving can be undertaken, a

cal; a skilled boaster could have a layout done in the time required to tweak or alter a pattern to conform to the job at hand. Today, woodcarvers are usually responsible for the design and layout of the compositions that they execute. It stands to reason, then, that even a technically good carver can work more quickly if his layout skills are improved. Carving, however, is one of the few disciplines where boasting is encouraged!

#### CARVING A NICHE IN THE MARKETPLACE

The second theme developed over the two-day symposium is that of the carver's pursuit of greater production and therefore greater profit. A large number of cabinet shops today, for expediency or cost, have foregone carving altogether to offer their customers only mass-produced appliqué available in an ever-increasing assortment of sizes, motifs and configurations. Some of these are wood—usually maple but sometimes other species—fabricated by a computer-controlled router (CNC), while others are cast of polyurethane or a similar compound. The latter, if not painted, require a heavily-pigmented finish such as glazing to blend them in with the surrounding wood. In either case, these appliqué have a consistent cookie-cutter appearance that belies their method of manufacture. Purists may frown on these less-than-desirable alternatives to hand-carved wooden ornament, but castings have been around for centuries, largely due to economic factors.

Carvers were tasked with creating molds into which a composite material, or compo, was pressed and allowed to set up. Compo formulae were proprietary, but consisted primarily of hide glue, gesso, whiting, and linseed oil. Though an old technique, compo ornament is still available today. In its heyday, an enormous amount of compo was produced and applied to ceilings, walls, moldings, mantels and other interior trim.

8. Bust of George Washington (1805), from the West Gate of Washington Square, carved by Samuel McIntire; painted pine; Peabody Essex Museum.

9. Model for a figurehead (1790-1795); painted pine; 28" x 8½" x 15". Carved early in McIntire's career; compare to the hands in #10.

10. Detail from "Figure of Yamqua" (1801); the head and hands were carved by Samuel McIntire; painted wood; Peabody Essex Museum.

This proved to be a double-edged sword whose effects are still felt today: this early method of mass-production resulted in a decreased demand for skilled carvers. Easily-reproducible decoration fostered an economical and egalitarian aesthetic during the Federal period while simultaneously hastening the demise of the carver-specialist. McIntire is known to have carved molds for compo as well as to experiment with limited production techniques. He carved a series of low relief busts of George Washington, presumably to meet a demand for likenesses of the first President (8). Other carvers began offering plaster casts of important commissions in order to increase their earnings.

#### CREATIVE METAMORPHOSIS

A third common thread throughout the symposium was the notion that the carved surface is a canvas that requires no signature. The artist can be identified, albeit sometimes anonymously, and his existence better understood by changes in his individ-

ualized approach to the craft. Few elements, decorative or structural, serve as a calling card the way a carved surface does. Given a body of work, the evolution of the craftsman's skills can be traced from piece to piece, chronologically. As a result, certain inferences can be made regarding the date and place of completion, design influences, and perhaps even the identity of the client or maker. The maturation of McIntire as a carver is a fitting example of this and was an important focus of the *Carving an American Style* exhibition. While McIntire began carving at a fairly high level, his work did progress over the span of his career. McIntire began by mastering the designs and motifs that were available to him before he began to improvise and eventually develop the style that is now attributed to him.

As Lahikainen stressed in his lecture on the connoisseurship of McIntire's work, Salem's most influential craftsman "did not just start carving masterpieces." Over the course of his career, McIntire progressed



from an artisan-carpenter to an artist. The evolution of his carving style transitioned, from that of an unsure, sometimes naïve, imitative hand (9) to the competent, efficient, and masterful hand of a mature carver (10). This feat could not have been accomplished without the patronage of Salem's wealthy Derby family. McIntire was given the opportunity to expand his design vocabulary and to push his creative talents to greater heights on projects commissioned by the Derby's. Lahikainen points to a camel-back sofa made for the family as an example of McIntire's most sophisticated carving (11). While McIntire executed the basket of fruit motif found many times—on this sofa, on the splats of chairs, on the friezes of high chests, on mantels, and on the aprons of card tables—no two baskets are identical (12).

Certain other motifs became more refined, such as the folds in the drapery of figures (13) or the way he rendered organic motifs. A raised spine in the center of each leaf became one of the hallmarks of his carved foliage. Also present in his leaf carving are pairs of veins radiating from the center spine. He executed rosettes for the pediments of case goods wherein he employed the flower of an acanthus leaf—a motif used by few others (14).

In sculpture, one may tend to think that the more realistic the work, the more evolved it is. This viewpoint is limiting, since we can also find an evolution in methodology and work habits. In the world of make-piece carving, proficiency equals efficiency. On much of the woodwork he carved for the Derby family, McIntire used a grapeleaf motif (Derby family symbol) which is a blunt-leafed carving more reminiscent of a daisy since the leaf lobes radiate from a central spine. McIntire modeled each lobe with short simple veins—usually two, but some-

times three. This was quick work with a veining tool, yet quite effective. He often stippled his backgrounds with a 6-pointed star or asterisk. The result was a cross-hatched background textured much like burlap over which his carved ornaments—eagles, cornucopia and fruit baskets—boldly stand out. McIntire learned to use fewer and broader strokes on his large architectural carvings and to use shorter, repetitive cuts and easily repeatable motifs on his furniture carvings to produce a surface that was still lively and eye-seducing yet required less modeling than one might expect. This efficiency of technique is a result of familiarity with the material being worked and the need to get the work done quickly. As Alan Miller noted, “a carver could only increase his earnings by carving faster.”

#### CRAFTING AN INDIVIDUALITY

The role of the carver, like that of the gilder, decorative painter, or inlay specialist, is to embellish a piece of furniture. Even the finest artist, however, can rarely compensate for a poor substrate. This is perhaps one of the first lessons learned by all aspiring furnituremakers: good design trumps any amount of decoration. The overall form and its proportions are of primary importance, while embellishment is secondary. McIntire, on the other hand, actually elevated the forms on which he worked and, according to Phil Lowe, “was able to turn rudimentary chair designs into true masterpieces through his carving (15).”

When we consider that carving, by its very

nature, is an absolute act—either the wood is there or it isn't, either it has been removed or it has not—McIntire's accomplishments are all the more impressive. Other forms of furniture embellishment are alterable, if not reversible. Inlay as a substitutive process removes one material and replaces it with another. Painted and gilt surfaces can be stripped or reapplied. In woodcarving, material is permanently removed through the controlled and repetitive use of chisels and gouges. A carving tool, unlike a paint brush or gilder's tip, must completely obliterate the visible surface to reveal the finished surface. In its wake, the carving tool leaves a new, not wholly predictable surface. This uncertainty is an inherent quality of all things crafted by hand—a phenomenon that noted author David Pye calls the workmanship of risk. Variables, both within and beyond our control, conspire to make each piece unique. Was some hidden defect within the wood revealed? Did a deep cut weaken a structural member or encroach on the wall of a mortise? Is the depth and direction of the cut consistent with the fifty others just done? Was a critical detail damaged? Does the crest of this chair now match the five others in the set? For the beginner, the unpredictable and irreproducible nature of carving wood by hand produces a variety of emotions—fear, hesitation, and doubt about one's own abilities, as well as awe and reverence of the abilities of others. Yet it is precisely because of its unpredictability, flaws and all, that woodcarving is so highly esteemed. This belief that the carver is unique within the trades because of his autonomy is the fourth idea developed during the woodcarving symposium.

Unlike the tasks of stock preparation, cutting joinery, or finishing, carving is not a necessary step in the production of fine furniture. Queen Anne furniture has little or no carving, and Shaker furniture would

11. Sofa crest rail detail, Salem (c. 1800-1805); unidentified maker, carved by Samuel McIntire; mahogany and upholstery; private collection.

12. Detail of appliqué carving from Derby family chest in #16.



11



12

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PHOTO BY MARK SEXTON



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look very odd indeed adorned with foliage and festoons. The presence of carving generally has no bearing on how a piece is constructed. While the sequence of assembly may differ slightly, the carved and uncarved piece of furniture are fashioned from similar quantities of wood, the same joinery, and the same finish. When carving on furniture, the time necessary to carve and then finish the carved areas, as well as the intricacies of locating joinery such that it will not be weakened by the removal of material are all factors to be considered.

Ornate surface carving is usually not an option in the production shop today due to the lack of highly-skilled carvers. The demand for such a skill does not warrant keeping a professional carver on staff. A handful of production shops do offer hand-carved elements on their pieces—a ball-and-claw foot or shells-and-flame finials, to name a few—but for shops that do want to offer their clients something special yet are infrequently asked to do so, there are a number of woodworkers who specialize in piecework carving—Frederick Wilbur and Dimitrios Klitsas are a few of the more recognizable names. These modern day specialists are vestiges of the division of labor practiced in larger urban markets and surely akin to the type of work that became McIntire's bread and butter. It is difficult, if not impossible, for an individual craftsman today to be fluent in all areas of furniture

13. Detail of the figure of America on the Derby Chest-on-Chest (1806-1809); unidentified maker, carving by Samuel McIntire; mahogany, ebony, satinwood, white pine; Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

14. Desk and Bookcase, detail, (1795-1800); unidentified cabinetmaker, pediment rosettes attributed to Samuel McIntire; mahogany, white pine; 91½" x 45" x 23"; Peabody Essex Museum.

15. Detail of Side Chair (1791); attributed to Jacob Sanderson, carving by Samuel McIntire; mahogany, 38" x 21½" x 18½"; Peabody Essex Museum.

16. Derby Family chest-on-chest (1806-1809); unidentified maker, carving by Samuel McIntire; mahogany, ebony, satinwood, white pine, 90¾" x 46¾" x 23"; Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

design, construction, embellishment, and finishing. Certainly, we may know more than our period counterparts, yet the task of creating a masterpiece is no less daunting today than it was when McIntire carved the chest-on-chest that appeared in the exhibit (16). "I think if you have the right support group," Phil Lowe says, "relying on one another's talents, we could probably pull something like this off, but you have to seek out the very best of the different disciplines."

In some respects, this idea runs counter to

our desire to be the very best craftsperson that we can be. Craftsmanship, like artistry, has come to be a singular celebration of the individual. In a world of cyber-reality and thirty-minute attention spans, we may see the output of our shops, whether for profit or pleasure, as a permanent physical manifestation of who we are, both as humans and as the contemporary keepers of the arts and mysteries of the craft we practice. A professional furniture-maker and restorer for over thirty years, Lowe cautions against such an inward view, "I think it's hard for everybody to be the master of everything, even today. I think at some point you fall short in one area or another. Somebody that carves all day long is going to have better control over it than somebody who only does it every so often." For any given task, a craftsman must strike a balance between the desire to push his skills to the limit and the realization that his skills are indeed limited. The manner in which each of us chooses to confront this dilemma depends on a number of factors. While creativity is at its heart, efficiency and productivity have always been the realities of craftsmanship. This is perhaps the most important lesson from Salem.

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