

Herms, Terms & Therms: Synonymous Terms?

by Mark Arnold



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/THərm/

noun

1. the tapered foot or leg of a piece of furniture

verb

1. to taper with cabinet-making tools, as a therm
2. to turn a workpiece whose mass lies outside the axial center of a lathe

The English language has an ever changing vocabulary. In 2009, the one millionth word was added to the English lexicon and in the five years since, roughly 20,000 new words have been added, most in the realms of science and technology. Vocabulary can be a nebulous concept to grasp even for native speakers as new words are added with almost daily regularity and lesser-used terms become obsolete.

For some words to survive, their original meanings must change, often with interesting results. As woodworkers and furniture makers, we have become accustomed to an arcane technical vocabulary that may sound foreign to the uninitiated. For example, kerf, quirk, pith, and muntin are just a few terms that we can all quickly visualize in our minds because we have learned the specific attributes of each and because there is consensus on their meanings.

There is a group of interrelated terms, however, whose precise meanings have eluded such unanimous agreement for fascinating and sometimes inexplicable reasons, and because their meanings have changed considerably over time.

The tapered legs and feet of neoclassical furniture have been labeled *herm*, *term*, and/or *therm* by furniture designers of the 18th century, by furniture scholars today, and by cabinetmakers through the ages. One or more of these three terms have been used either inconsistently, or to the exclusion of others in period sources. Some 220 years later, there still appears to be no universal agreement as to when and where each term is best used.

Certain of these terms apply to feet only, while others refer to the entire leg from the table apron or chair rail to the floor. And some