

The Museum of Early Southern Decorative Arts at the Winter Antiques Show



Room at MESDA from a circa 1795 house in Warrenton, Warren County, Georgia. Displayed are collections from the backcountry, including Moravian furniture.

A Southern Backcountry Perspective

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Nestled in the historic town of Salem, North Carolina, and one of four museums collectively known as Old Salem Museums and Gardens, the Museum of Early Southern Decorative Arts (MESDA) has entered its fifth decade as a center for the study of the artistic traditions of the early South. Founded by Frank L. Horton and his mother, Theo Taliaferro, in 1965, MESDA's mission is to collect, preserve, and study the preindustrial decorative arts of North and South Carolina, Virginia, Maryland, Georgia, Kentucky, and Tennessee. The museum's collections, research, and educational programs have long been considered one of the "best kept secrets" of the decorative arts world. In bringing some of the finest pieces in the collection to the 2007 Winter Antiques Show in New York, we hope to share the secret of this preeminent collection and our comprehensive research program about the early American South.

From the beginning, Frank Horton considered the understanding of the regional context of objects to be an important component of the work at the museum. He identified three regions within the South: the Chesapeake, the Lowcountry, and the Backcountry. Within the museum objects are exhibited and studied within these regional parameters in twenty-four period rooms and seven galleries.

The decorative arts of each region reflect the cultural backgrounds of the people who settled there. In the Chesapeake and Tidewater areas of Maryland, Virginia, and North Carolina, the preference was for furnishings reflecting the latest in British taste. In the wealthy, culturally diverse Lowcountry city of Charleston the decorative arts reflected not only the latest in British style, but also French and German influences.

Fig. 1: Desk and bookcase by John Shearer, Martinsburg, Va. (now W. Va.), (desk 1801; bookcase 1806). Walnut, cherry, mulberry, yellow pine, and oak. H. 108 $\frac{3}{8}$, W. 45; D. 24 $\frac{1}{2}$ in. MESDA purchase fund and anonymous gift. The desk contains a penciled inscription stating that it was "made by me, John Shearer Sepr 1801 from Edinburgh [Scotland] 1775/ Made in Martinsburgh."





Fig. 2: Sideboard by unknown maker, Winchester area, Va, 1795–1805. Mahogany, mahogany veneer, yellow pine, walnut, light wood inlay. H. 38¾; W. 71, D. 28½ in. Gift of Mrs. Bahnsen Gray.

The largest of the three regions geographically, the Backcountry extends down through the Valley of Virginia along the Great Wagon Road into the North and South Carolina Piedmont, through western Georgia, and up into Tennessee and Kentucky. It is the region with the most rugged terrain and the region with the most ambiguous borders. Perhaps it could be argued that the Backcountry was the most culturally diverse as well. Its settlers were of German, Swiss, English, Irish, Scotch-Irish, Scottish, Welch, French, and Scandinavian extraction. Many came from rural settlements and small urban centers and brought with them their own unique religious beliefs, social perspectives, and artistic traditions as they settled the vast expanse of the western reaches of the South. Less a melting pot than a tossed salad of cultures, each group influenced the others without losing its own true flavor.

Some Backcountry artisans worked in traditions quite similar to their coastal contemporaries while others made less

conventional aesthetic choices. The almost whimsical desk and bookcase made by John Shearer at the beginning of the nineteenth century (Fig.1) and the neoclassical sideboard by an unknown maker (Fig. 2) are a case in point. Both were made within ten years and twenty-five miles of one another in the Valley of Virginia, yet are vastly different in appearance.

The work of Backcountry craftsmen often reflects a unique level of creativity not matched by coastal artisans who frequently bound themselves to guidelines offered by design books and/or the work of their contemporaries who followed published sources. The work of Martinsburg, Virginia (now West Virginia), cabinetmaker John Shearer is an excellent example of Backcountry experimentation. Although little is known about

Shearer, one look at the small collection of furniture that survives from his shop suggests much about his personality. Shearer combined baroque, rococo, and neoclassical details to create his own unique stylistic statement. He used traditional motifs such as an urn finial, but turned it upside down—a clear statement that he knew the vocabulary of the period, but preferred to speak it with his own accent. Not shy about expressing his opinions at a time when some Backcountry settlers were dissatisfied with a government they felt was out of touch with their needs, he peppered the interior of his desk and bookcase with inscriptions communicating his political beliefs. The most overt include “God Save the King 1801” and “From a Tory.”

In sharp contrast to Shearer’s creative expression of style is the neoclassical sideboard seen in figure 2. Made in the Winchester area of Virginia circa 1795–1800, the shape, style, and inlay patterns of the sideboard all relate to other examples from the Winchester area,



Fig. 3: (Left) Sidechair by unknown maker, Shenandoah Valley, Va, 1770–1800. Walnut, spilt oak. H. 37 $\frac{3}{8}$; W. 17 $\frac{1}{8}$ in. MESDA purchase fund. (Right) Sidechair by unknown maker, Wachovia area of North Carolina, 1770–1780. Walnut, split hickory. H. 42 $\frac{1}{4}$, W. 18; D. 15 $\frac{1}{2}$ in. Gift of the Mt. Vernon Ladies Association.

yet the unidentified artisan clearly wanted to create an object that adhered to the principles of neoclassical urban design. Winchester, situated on the Great Wagon Road that traversed the Valley of Virginia, became an important market community, and its trade in grain, produced in the surrounding area, strengthened ties with cities such as Philadelphia and Baltimore. An advertisement placed in the *Berkeley Intelligencer* by Shenandoah Valley cabinetmaker William Eaty in 1799 highlights the influence of Baltimore on local furniture: “his work shall be inferior to none, and at a much more reduced price, than at the seaports.... He has brought with him from Baltimore a rich stock of mahogany, and an elegant assortment of Brass Furniture, for Cabinet work.”

A Shenandoah Valley side chair (Fig. 3, left) demonstrates a typical Backcountry blend of cultural influences and period characteristics. The back of the chair, with its curved crest rail and shaped vasiform splat, is a vernacular interpretation of British baroque

style, while the stretcher base of the chair and the hidden secondary rounds to receive the woven seat of the chair tie it to the German-American chairmaking tradition of the North Carolina Moravians. A Moravian side chair (Fig. 3, right) made in Salem, North Carolina, is probably one of the chairs referred to in the 1776 Gemein Haus inventory that lists “6 black-walnut Chairs with woven seats.”²¹ It has a similar baroque crest rail and splat coupled with secondary rounds to receive the woven seating, a characteristic also seen in Bavaria. Although the chair probably dates no earlier than 1770, the turned stretcher base relates it to turned chairs made decades earlier. This tendency toward conservatism is common in furniture

made by artisans of German descent throughout the Backcountry.

Furniture was not the only medium in which German-American artisans clung to traditional practices and styles. The shop sign created in 1773 by Gottfried Aust, the first master potter in the North Carolina Moravian communities, demonstrates many of the central and eastern European techniques and motifs Moravian potters used in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Fig. 4). The shop sign, in the form of a large bowl, served as a sampler of designs available to customers.

Teutonic ceramic traditions flourished in the Backcountry. Solomon Bell, a potter working in western Virginia and Maryland, and his brothers followed in the footsteps of their father, Peter Bell, the son of an immigrant from Wiesbaden, Germany, in creating slip decorated wares showing clear Germanic influence. Solomon created the charming slip decorated lion sculpture (Fig. 5) as a gift for his niece circa 1850.



Painter Jacob Frymire was an itinerant artist of German descent who worked in Virginia and Kentucky, among other places, in the early nineteenth century. Although Frymire did not achieve the level of sophistication attained by artists trained in Baltimore and Philadelphia, the quality of his work suggests he may have had some formal training. His 1801 portrait of Mrs. Peter Lauck (Fig. 6), painted near Winchester, Virginia, has a level of realism missing in typical portraits painted by Backcountry itinerants. Although the overall appearance of Mrs. Lauck is somewhat rigid and flat, Frymire successfully uses the land-

scape seen through the draped window and the details of Mrs. Lauck's clothing and furniture to enhance her appearance and the overall composition of the work.

One artist painting in the Backcountry known to have had formal training was Ralph E.W. Earl, the son of the American portrait painter Ralph Earl. After working with his father in New England, Ralph E.W. Earl studied in London. On his return to America he traveled throughout the South before settling in Tennessee, where he became friends with President Andrew Jackson, married into the Jackson family, and became known as Tennessee's first professional artist. Earl's

Fig. 4: Shop sign by Gottfried Aust, Salem, N.C., 1773. Earthenware. Diam. 21¾, D. 5 in. Collection of the Wachovia Historical Society on long term loan to Old Salem Museums and Gardens.

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Fig. 5: Lion figure attributed to Solomon Bell, Strasburg, Va, circa 1850. Earthenware with lead glaze over slip wash, manganese dioxide, and copper dioxide. H. 11, W. 6, L. 14½ in. Gift of Frank L. Horton.





The Cumberland River (Fig. 7) painted circa 1820 shows that he was clearly influenced by the developing European landscape tradition during his travels abroad, and used the genre to evoke awe for the limitless possibilities of the American frontier.

Also evoking an image of frontier settlement but in a different way is a charming little chest from eastern Tennessee (Fig. 8). While the cabin depicted on the front of this walnut chest may well have existed in reality, it also resembles the buildings seen on samplers of the period. The original purpose of the chest is unknown, but it may have functioned as a sugar chest; the front panel of the top portion of the chest slides out offering an intriguing hint to its as-yet unconfirmed purpose. The regional furniture of eastern Tennessee demonstrates strong ties to that of the Shenandoah Valley and Piedmont North Carolina; hardly surprising, given the settlement patterns that followed a path through the Valley to North Carolina and then west.

One of the most engaging aspects of Backcountry decorative arts is the multitude of appealing motifs used by artisans to adorn their works, such as the fylfot on a small circa-1780 Piedmont North Carolina cabinet (Fig. 9). The fylfot is an ancient symbol that has meant slightly different things at different times and in different cultures, but in the Backcountry German-American milieu seems to have been a symbol of good luck and was used to decorate everything from furniture to pottery.

The little chest seen in figure 8 also demonstrates perfectly the dichotomy of the Backcountry. The fluted consoles just under the projecting cornice are a formal detail

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Fig. 6: Jacob Frymire (1770–1822), *Amelia Heiskell Lauck (Mrs. Peter)*, Winchester, Va., 1801. Oil on canvas, 32 $\frac{3}{16}$ x 27 $\frac{3}{16}$ inches. Gift of Frank L. Horton.

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Fig. 7: Ralph E. W. Earl (1788–1838), *The Cumberland River*, Nashville, Tenn., 1820–1823. Oil on canvas, 35 $\frac{1}{2}$ x 42 inches. Gift of Mrs. Theo Taliaferro.

slightly out of sync with the vernacular flavor of the fylfot inlay and the creative construction demonstrated in the bed molding and feet, which on each side are cut from a single board. This mixture of the formal with the imaginative is a fitting representation of the Backcountry, where cultural diversity laid the groundwork for a mingling of approaches in design, construction, and decoration.

While this article has focused on the Backcountry, MESDA has taken a leading role in collecting, researching, and documenting objects from each of the three regions. Even so, much remains for the enthusiastic collector and researcher to contribute. It is MESDA's hope that by showing some of its finest objects at the 2007 Winter Antique Show it can lend a uniquely Southern perspective to this important event. For more about Old Salem Museums and Gardens and the work of MESDA visit our Web site at www.oldsalem.org. @



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¹ The Gemein Haus was a community building in the Moravian community, which included housing for the pastor as well as a chapel and other meeting rooms. The quote is from the *Congregation Diacony Furnishing Inventories 1776* at the Moravian Archives, Winston-Salem, North Carolina. Transcriptions and translations are available in the MESDA Research Center.

Fig. 8: Chest by unknown maker, eastern Tenn., 1820–1830. Walnut, poplar, light wood inlay. H. 16¾; W. 16¾, D. 11¼ in. MESDA purchase fund.

Fig. 9: Valuables cabinet by unknown maker, central Piedmont, N.C., 1780–1790. Walnut, yellow pine, maple. H. 15, W. 12; D. 9 in. Gift of Mr. and Mrs. R. Philip Hanes, Jr.

