

# A Taunton Chest *Redivivus*



**Fig. 1:** Attributed to Robert Crosman (1707–1799), chest of drawers, Taunton, Massachusetts, dated 1729. Painted pine, brass. H. 22¾, W. 22¾, D. 12½ in. Private collection. Photography courtesy of Christie's images, 2006.

by G E R A L D W. R. W A R D

Collecting is a funny business. Although one can pursue it in a logical and “strategic” manner, many interesting “finds” often emerge in serendipitous ways. In a venerable institution with a large collection such as the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, for example, one can occasionally “collect” in storage; re-evaluating long-held objects that, for one reason or another, may not have yet received the attention that they might deserve.

A case in point. In the fall of 2005, it came to our attention that an extraordinary miniature painted chest (Figs. 1a–b) of the type associated with Robert Crosman (1707–1799) of Taunton, Massachusetts, was going to come up for auction in the sale of the collection of the late Mrs. J. Insley Blair at

Christie's in New York on January 21, 2006.<sup>1</sup> It was clearly a magnificent example of this type of early New England painted furniture: signed by the maker, inscribed with its place of manufacture, dated 1729, and in excellent condition. Thus our interest was piqued by this exciting opportunity presented by Mrs.

Blair's Crosman piece coming onto the market. Its potential acquisition would strengthen our already significant holdings of early New England furniture.

Our first response was to reexamine the MFA's related chest with drawers (Figs. 2, 3), a full-size example lent to the museum in 1928

by the noted Boston lawyer and collector Charles Hitchcock Tyler (1863–1931) and included in his large bequest of Americana in 1932.<sup>2</sup> It was probably lent to the museum to be displayed on the Court Level of the museum's then-new Decorative Arts Wing, although it is not pictured in any of the old photographs of the appropriate galleries examined to date. The chest, which lacks an early history, is a full-size lift-top chest of nailed-board construction, with two simulated drawers above a working one, each separated and flanked by strips of applied half-round moldings. All three “drawer” fronts are enriched with characteristic Crosman-style sprightly branches and leaves, each in a slightly different arrangement. The middle section sports a delightful pair of birds facing away from each other and flanking a blind keyhole escutcheon. The chest, which lacks an early history, is a full-size lift-top chest of nailed-board construction, with two simulated drawers above a working one, each separated and flanked by strips of applied half-round moldings. All three “drawer” fronts are enriched with characteristic Crosman-style sprightly branches and leaves, each in a slightly different arrangement. The middle section sports a delightful pair of birds facing away from each other and flanking a blind keyhole escutcheon.

The MFA chest had never been highly regarded by the museum's curators, including myself, principally on the grounds that it was thought to be in less-than-outstanding condition. Contributing to that impression was an old picture of the chest in the museum's files. This black and white image (Fig. 2) from 1929 seemed to demonstrate that the painted decoration on the chest had been “strengthened” or “renewed” at some time, in a monochromatic manner that suggested the piece had been seriously repainted in modern times. Tyler's cabinetmaker/restorer Olof Althin (1859–1920) had worked on many pieces in his collection and had on more than one occasion wielded a fairly heavy paint brush in his treatments.<sup>3</sup> Thus, beginning in 1951 (and perhaps earlier), the chest was placed on long-term loan to the Museum of Fine Arts in Springfield, Massachusetts, where it remained for more than four decades.

The chest was omitted from Richard H. Randall Jr.'s selective catalogue of American furniture at the museum, published in 1965. Randall, who had left the MFA for a position at the Walters Art Gallery in Baltimore, noted in a postcard dated May 6, 1964, to his former colleague at the museum, the prominent silver scholar Kathryn C. Buhler, that “The Taunton chest, like many other things, was left out [of my catalogue] because of condition.” He added: “If you could get a good one, especially a dated one, it would be wonderful.”<sup>4</sup>

Thus, we didn't expect much when we asked for the chest to be retrieved from deep storage and brought to the furniture conservation lab for examination. In our perusal of the literature surrounding this group of about thirty or so pieces—thought to be the largest surviving body of furniture with painted decoration made by a single early American craftsman—we turned initially, like everyone else, to the seminal article on the group published by Esther Stevens Fraser in *Antiques* for April 1933.<sup>5</sup> The MFA's chest was included as figure 4 in her essay entitled “The Tantalizing Chests of Taunton,” in which she summarized the results of about eight years of research into the group. Significantly, she was able to link for the first time the name of Robert Crosman with these objects, an attribution still accepted today. In the figure caption to the museum's chest, Fraser notes, “Bird motive introduced, and some of the C-scrolls assume the aspect of narrow leaves.” She adds: “How much this chest owes to cleaning and restoration is difficult to determine.” However, in the text of the article, Fraser observes, “It is said that this chest has been cleaned, which may account for the sharp clarity of



Fig. 1a: The back of the chest illustrated in fig. 1.



Fig. 2: Photograph taken in 1929 of the chest illustrated in fig. 3.

the design against the usual brownish-black ground. I am unable to find evidence that the paint has been touched up, so it is possible that other Taunton chests may have looked as striking as this when first completed. Possibly this particular example has been unusually well cared for during the two hundred years of its existence.” These were prophetic words, although little heeded at the time.

With the assistance of Gordon Hanlon, Head of Furniture and Frame Conservation, and his colleagues in the MFA's furniture and scientific laboratories, we were able to put Fraser's observation about the condition of our piece to the test. It passed with flying colors (see Figs. 3, 4).<sup>6</sup>





**Fig. 3:** Attributed to Robert Crosman (1707–1799), chest with drawer, Taunton, Massachusetts, about 1727. Painted pine, brass. H. 32½, W. 37½, D. 17¾ in. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; bequest of Charles Hitchcock Tyler (32.215).



**Fig. 4:** Detail of painted birds on the front of the MFA chest illustrated in fig. 3.




**Fig. 5:** Detail of drawer construction, illustrating the use of a wooden pin to secure the drawer side to the drawer bottom, on the MFA chest illustrated in fig. 3.



In their examination through infrared microspectroscopy, the museum's scientists determined that the chemical composition of the paint on the museum's example seemed to match that used on the Blair chest, which had been analyzed by the conservators at the Winterthur Museum prior to the Christie's auction.<sup>7</sup> The binder for the MFA chest's reddish ground color is protein-based and the pigment is probably a red iron oxide. The whitish elements consisted of lead white with a protein binder. Some of the reddish areas had been re-touched with toluidine red, a twentieth-century colorant.<sup>8</sup>

Physically, the chest was also in good condition. One construction technique that quickly emerged is that the working drawer—created with dovetails in an ordinary manner—also has small wooden pins used to fasten the drawer sides to the drawer bottom. This unusual, quirky detail is found on other Taunton chests and can be considered a diagnostic feature of the group (Fig. 5).

We were also interested to learn a fact not previously noted in the museum's records, namely that the date 1727 is scratched and then over-painted in the outside of the chest's back (Fig. 6). Although the veracity of this date remains to be determined conclusively, it falls almost perfectly within the stylistic progression of the Taunton chests as outlined by Fraser and others. The paint used for the date contains a protein and silicate (such as clay), and some goethite (yellow ocher) may also be present. Significantly, the red colorant in this instance is hematite (red iron oxide), a period pigment, suggesting that the date may indeed be accurate.

Armed with this fresh analysis of our own piece, we chose not to pursue the Blair piece at auction, even though it is an outstanding example. Instead, the museum's own Taunton piece, newly understood, has recently been put on display in a gallery in the museum's Evans Wing. There, in a sense reborn, it can be enjoyed—for perhaps the first time—by our visitors. 

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1 *Property from the Collection of Mrs. J. Insley Blair*, sale 1618 (New York: Christie's, January 21, 2006), lot 519, pp. 44–51.

2 Tyler is profiled in Elizabeth Stillinger, *The Antiquers* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1980), 102–104.

3 The MFA collection includes a chest by the Swedish-born Althin (1980.229). His career has been discussed in Erin M. Sweeney, "Olof Althin (1859–1920): From Swedish Apprentice to Boston Businessman" (MA thesis, Winterthur Program in Early American Culture, University of Delaware, 1998).

4 Object file for 32.215, Art of the Americas department, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

5 Esther Stevens Fraser, "The Tantalizing Chests of Taunton," *Antiques* 23, no. 4 (April 1933): 135–38. All Fraser quotations are from this essay.

6 I am grateful to Gordon Hanlon, Head of Furniture and Frame Conservation at the Museum, and Nonie Gadsden, Carolyn and Peter Lynch Assistant Curator of Decorative Arts and Sculpture, Art of the Americas, for their assistance in analyzing this chest.

7 The Winterthur examination report is reprinted in *Property from the Collection of Mrs. J. Insley Blair*, 50.

8 The paint analysis was conducted by Michele R. Derrick of the museum's scientific laboratory. Her report is in the object file for 32.215, Art of the Americas department, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

**Fig. 6:** Date of 1727 scratched and painted on back of the MFA chest illustrated in fig. 3.