

# Historic Opinions

*How Critics Shaped  
American Tastes in Furniture*

by Sarah Fayen

**A**ll styles eventually go out of fashion. Colonial hoop dresses, Victorian handlebar moustaches, and 1960s shag carpeting all enjoyed great popularity before falling out of favor. Similar cycles of taste have governed the history of furniture design. *Going out of Style: 400 Years of Changing Tastes in Furniture*, on view at the Milwaukee Art Museum through September 30, displays four centuries of major American furniture styles alongside scathing commentary written in the period by designers, architects, and writers. Their critiques — which range from sarcastic to downright ruthless — reveal powerful opinions that helped drive the ebb and flow of taste from generation to generation. While the harsh assessments of the past may seem unfounded to antiques enthusiasts today, they remind us that most period styles — even the perennial favorites — were out of fashion at one time or another. The following selections from the exhibition demonstrate that American furniture styles changed not only because of the inevitable desire for new fashions but also because of shifts in the economy, technology, morality, and society.





Folding table, ca. 1680, Boston, Ma. Oak. Lent by the Chipstone Foundation. 1991.16.  
Photography by Gavin Ashworth.

*That dam'd gusto that's been for this sixty years past.*

— William Kent, 1719

The young architect William Kent used the Italian word for taste, “gusto,” to curse the dominant style of his day. Kent included these lines in a letter he wrote at the end of a ten-year sojourn in Italy where he had been meticulously drawing that country’s architecture at the request of his sponsor, Lord Burlington. Both men hoped that England would give up the baroque style, which had been popular for decades, in favor of Palladian design. For Kent and Burlington, baroque featured a hodge-podge of unregulated decorative details like the strapwork brackets and bulging legs on the table seen here. They believed that Italian Renaissance design, especially the work of architect Andrea Palladio, had created the best buildings and furniture in history because it was based on architectural rules established in ancient Greece and Rome. When Kent wrote his criticism of the baroque style in 1719, England was beginning to gain significant power in world economics and assert itself as a cultural authority. For many, it seemed appropriate that a country on the rise would resurrect designs from the Renaissance, a period widely regarded as the height of European cultural achievement.

Desk and bookcase, ca. 1750, carving  
attributed to John Welch, Boston, Ma.  
Mahogany and white pine.  
Lent by the Chipstone Foundation. 1991.10.  
Photography by Gavin Ashworth.

*It may be imagined that the greatest part of the effects of beauty results from the symmetry of parts in the object, which is beautiful. But I am very well persuaded that this prevailing notion will soon appear to have little or no foundation.*

— William Hogarth, 1753

In 1753, when the English engraver and social critic William Hogarth published *The Analysis of Beauty*, his treatise on art theory, the Palladian style had dominated architecture in England and America for many decades. Hogarth disliked the style and publicly accused its supporters of foisting onto the English public ancient designs based on foreign Continental traditions. He wanted a style that was more definitively English, that could be learned without extensive academic training. Nature, he believed, offered beautiful models for free-flowing curves and intricate organic embellishment. The desk and bookcase seen here is among the most sophisticated pieces of Palladian-style furniture made in the American colonies. Its fluted pilasters, carved capitals, and broken scroll pediment reflect the rules of ancient Roman architecture, which the Italian architect Andrea Palladio revived and made popular throughout Europe in the sixteenth century. Hogarth’s prediction that Palladian symmetry would fade in popularity was correct—at least for furniture design. The wilder character of the rococo style dominated by the 1760s.





Side chair, ca. 1770, Philadelphia, Pa.  
 Attributed to Benjamin Randolph.  
 Mahogany with white cedar.  
 Lent by the Chipstone Foundation. 1999.17.  
 Photography by Gavin Ashworth.

*Ridiculous, twisted merchandise.*

— Charles-Nicolas Cochin, 1754

In the same year that English designer Thomas Chippendale published his influential design book, *Gentleman and Cabinet-Maker's Director*, in which he praised the rococo style as “modern French taste,” French engraver and painter Charles-Nicolas Cochin published a scathing essay against the style. He found its “serpentine contours” and “sinuous forms” beyond logical reason. Cochin suggested that if French designers continued making Rococo-style objects, they should “serve up” this “ridiculous twisted merchandise” to “all provincials and foreigners” in order to “maintain the superiority of France.” Indeed, the French-inspired rococo style remained popular in England and its American colonies for twenty years after Cochin’s derisive critique. The chair seen here marks the height of rococo design in America. The back splat’s intertwined vines drape over boughs of deeply carved foliage, and the undulating front of the chair descends down to hairy animal feet.



Secrétaire à abattant, 1815–1830, Philadelphia, Pa. Mahogany, burl maple veneer, and white pine. Lent by the Chipstone Foundation. 2001.4. Photography by Gavin Ashworth.

*The solemn affectation of Greek and Roman forms was so ridiculous...it produced ponderous and frigid monstrosity.*

— Benjamin Silliman, 1854

The art and architecture of ancient Greece and Rome have had a lasting influence on Western design. The obsession with classical decoration hit new heights in the early 1800s until some finally rebelled against it. Benjamin Silliman was a Yale University chemistry professor from a prominent family who published an illustrated report of everything he saw at the Exhibition of the Industry of All Nations held in New York City in 1853. Silliman criticized the furniture of the 1820s and 1830s shown at the exhibition for being slavish imitations of Greek temples and Roman monuments. The secretaire à abattant seen here, a French form that gained favor in America in the 1820s, is unmistakably rooted in classical architecture. Its thick columns and pilasters have meticulously carved capitals. The dark mahogany and light maple veneer create contrasting geometric shapes, a decorative device common in ancient architecture. The gilt appliques on the lower doors feature torches, Roman symbols of liberty. Silliman preferred furniture more obviously suited to its intended use.



Tall case clock, ca. 1835. Decorated by J. D. Green, Montgomery (now Fulton) Co., New York; movement by Silas Hoadley (American, 1786–1870), Plymouth, Connecticut. Painted and stenciled white pine and movements. Lent by a private collection. Photography by Gavin Ashworth.

*Graining has become so common that we may almost call it a rage. Like other senseless fashions, it will have its day and pass away. It would be some satisfaction to us could we be instrumental in shortening its reign by a single hour.*

— Henry W. Cleaveland,  
William Backus,  
and Samuel D. Backus, 1856

Grain painting had long been used by ornamental painters to make common pine resemble more expensive woods or marble, but this mode of decoration saw a great spike in popularity with the rise of the Fancy style between 1800 and 1840. J. D. Green, who painted the clock seen here, used bright yellow paint and brown washes to create dramatic swirls and loops that looked even more exuberant than real mahogany or rosewood. By the mid-nineteenth century, the fad for Fancy grain-painted furniture and interior architectural woodwork was waning. The quotation above comes from *Village and Farm Cottages*, a design book for house carpenters.





Sofa, ca. 1850, attributed to John Henry Belter (American, b. Germany, 1804–1863), New York, NY. Rosewood, rosewood laminate, and modern velvet upholstery. Milwaukee Art Museum, bequest of Mary Jane Rayniak in memory of Mr. and Mrs. Joseph G. Rayniak. M1987.16. Photography by Larry Sanders.

*Be it noted—for this is the main point of my argument—that these perfunctory elaborations of structure were not beautiful in any sense.... They were false and detestable, not by being unnecessary only, but by being hideous and inappropriate and mechanical. They were produced simply by a resolve at all events to avoid plainness.*

— Mariana Griswold van Rensselaer, 1880

By the 1850s, most furniture in America was made in factories instead of small shops, enabling more people to furnish their homes stylishly and with less expense. A few decades later, however, upper-class tastemakers concluded that machines made bad furniture. Mariana Griswold van Rensselaer, a fashionable New Yorker who wrote about art, architecture, and gardening criticized industrially produced furniture like the sofa seen here because it flaunted unnecessary and “hideous” ornament and concealed its construction. This sofa was made in a New York factory operated by John Henry Belter, a German immigrant who patented a wood-steaming process that layered thin rosewood veneers on top of one another to produce elaborate three-dimensional floral patterns. This machine-aided system allowed Belter to efficiently create furniture that emulated the appearance of eighteenth-century rococo-style hand carving. In the 1880s, Mrs. Van Rensselaer and her fellow art critics began to shift taste away from the types of elaborate decoration seen on this sofa toward straightforward production techniques and simple ornament.

Parlor cabinet, 1860–1870, attributed to Alexander Roux (American, active 1847–1881), New York, NY. Wood with inlays, porcelain, gilding, and gilt metal. Milwaukee Art Museum; bequest of Mary Jane Rayniak, in memory of Mr. and Mrs. Joseph G. Rayniak, M1985.58. Photo Larry Sanders.

*A wearisome exhibition of well-educated imbecility...*

— John Ruskin, 1851

Monumental sideboards and cabinets like the example seen here brought the sophistication of the Italian Renaissance into homes in the late nineteenth century. The delicate vase and vines depicted in toned wood in the central marquetry panel were based on designs from ancient Roman frescoes. Also inspired by the art of antiquity were the architectural columns, capitals, and circular plaques enameled with romanticized images of angels. For a young art and social critic named John Ruskin, however, the Renaissance Revival style represented the unthinking tendencies of market-driven designers to cobble together unrelated classical details. In reference to these willy-nilly attempts, Ruskin wrote, “the inferior detail becomes principal.”

Ruskin hated standardization and thought that the various mid-nineteenth-century revival styles were creating a “desert of ugliness.” He wanted artists and designers to develop their own hand skills and systems of ornament. Ruskin’s writings helped prompt the creation of guilds of artisans throughout England, Canada, and America, who worked in the more reserved styles of the Aesthetic and Arts & Crafts Movements.



Lounge chair, ca. 1932, Marcel Breuer (German, b. Hungary, 1902–1981). Produced by Embru Werke (Rüti, Switzerland, founded 1904). Aluminum and painted wood. Milwaukee Art Museum; gift of Friends of Art. M1992.241. Photography Larry Sanders.

*Deathlike...*

— Emily Post, 1930

Emily Post not only promoted traditional manners in her etiquette books and newspaper columns, she also voiced her conservative tastes in home furnishings. Modernist furniture was “deathlike,” in her opinion, because its undecorated, cold metal surfaces reminded her of crypts and mausoleums. She preferred Colonial Revival furniture because its historically based appearance and wooden construction “imparts a quality of ancestry.” In contrast,



architect and designer Marcel Breuer created furniture—including the iconic lounge chair shown here—that rejected all reference to historic ornament and construction. He and his collaborators at the influential Bauhaus design school in Germany believed that beauty did not come from decoration but from objects well designed for their intended uses. New industrial materials and techniques, they hoped, could allow modern designs to improve everyday life. What Emily Post saw as morbid, others considered progressive and exciting.



Carlton room divider, 1981,  
Ettore Sottsass Jr. (Italian, b. 1917).  
Produced by Memphis, Milan, Italy.  
Wood and plastic laminate.  
Courtesy of the Cleveland Museum of Art.  
The Mary Spedding Milliken  
Memorial Collection,  
Gift of William Mathewson Milliken.  
1992.232.



*I hope that Memphis will finish as soon as possible and we will start with something else.*

— Ettore Sottsass, 1986

Italian designer Ettore Sottsass was a founding member of the Memphis design company, which got its name one evening in 1979 when he and a group of collaborators came up with new ideas to jolt the design world while listening to Bob Dylan's album *Memphis Blues Again*. The group's goal was to blur the lines between high art and popular culture by using bright colors, bold patterns, unconventional materials, and exaggerated shapes. For about five years, Memphis was extremely popular and challenged traditional ideas of "good taste" worldwide. By 1986, Sottsass had left the group. Unlike Thomas Chippendale and William Kent who championed a single style, Sottsass has worked in many different modes. He does not set out to create a particular "look" but, rather, to make a point. His tactic of using furniture to comment on the state of design is now seen as an early step in the postmodern movement, which continues to influence furniture styles today.

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*Going out of Style: 400 Years of Changing Tastes in Furniture* is on view at the Milwaukee Art Museum through September 30, 2007.  
For more details call 414.224.3200 or visit [www.mam.org](http://www.mam.org).

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