

# THOMAS CHIPPENDALE

## Something For Everyone

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By Dona Z. Meilach



*Woodwork, Furniture. English. XVIII, ca. 1771-73. Maker: Thomas Chippendale (1718-1779), possibly. Commode. Shown with doors closed. Wood, ivory, brass gilt. H. 37, L. 59 7/8, D. 25 3/8 in. Provenance: St. Giles's House, St. Giles, Dorset. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Purchase, 1955, Morris Loeb Bequest. (55.114).*

If you're looking for a good trivia question, try: "What was the first furniture style to be identified by the name of its creator rather than the name of the reigning monarch?"

The answer? Thomas Chippendale.

Having a furniture period named for the furniture maker was quite an accomplishment for an 18th century designer; previous protocol named furniture for nobility such as Louis XVth and Queen Anne. Considering Chippendale's humble beginnings, it indicates that opportunity existed during the 1700's; the prolific woodworker shares credit for earning those years the title of "The Golden Age of Furniture."

To help explain the reason for Chippendale's reputation and continuing popularity of his furniture, Franklin H. Gottshall, as far back as 1937, wrote in his book, *How To Design Period Furniture*, "Few styles that were developed before the eighteenth century and as originally conceived, remain practical for present day use, and no really great style has been developed since the close of that century."

Chippendale's accomplishments and influence were far-reaching. In any book dealing with European furniture of the 18th and 19th centuries, Chippendale's name stands out by the sheer number of indexed entries and by the amount of copy devoted to him. Historians suggest that he wasn't a great designer; what he did well was adapt and combine important features of other styles so successfully that he won a distinction enjoyed by few others. He adapted from the French Style of Louis XVth and the Queen Anne style which preceded his own. He used Gothic, and Rococo, and, his later work was so influenced by Chinese artifacts brought into England by traders, that the results are now called "Chinese Chippendale" style.

Not much known about Chippendale himself — There is little personal history available about Thomas Chippendale; no illustrations to show us what he looked like, how his shop was organized, and the tools he employed.



Woodwork, Furniture, English. XVIII, ca 1750-1760. Arm chair: Chippendale. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Cadwalader Fund, 1918. (18.110.46).



Woodwork, Furniture. English. XVIII, 1750-70. Chair, arm: Chippendale style, Chinese manner. Mahogany. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Kennedy Fund, 1918. (18.110.43).

Books note that he was born in early 1718 at Otley, a Yorkshire village. Young Tom learned woodworking from his father, John, who was a "joiner." His mother Mary, was the daughter of Thomas Drake, an Otley mason. In 1727, when Tom was 9 years old, the family moved from Yorkshire to London where John Chippendale opened a shop.

It was in 1748, when young Chippendale was thirty, that he married Catherine Redshaw. Not long afterwards, he struck out on his own in a small shop in Conduit Street, Long Acres. Four years later he moved to St. Martin's Lane, which, apparently, was not too different from areas where contemporary craftspeople gather to open studios. By 1753, as a result of many commissions, business flourished and he leased two adjacent houses in St. Martin's Lane. A third house was added later after the publication of his book in 1754, titled *The Gentleman And Cabinet Maker's Director: Being a Collection of Designs in Gothic, Chinese and Modern Taste, Calculated to Improve and Refine the Popular Taste*. Because the title is so lengthy, the book is usually referred to simply as "Director."

St. Martin's Lane attracted the discriminating clientele from London for whom Chippendale was continually bringing out new designs. Clients did not want pieces that duplicated those their friends bought, so each new piece required a different approach, different elements, or a re-arrangement of those already developed.

As Chippendale's business flourished, he took James Rannie as a partner. Rannie, referred to as an "upholder," died in 1766. In 1771, his bookkeeper, Thomas Haig came into the partnership. Historians report that Chippendale married again in 1777, Elizabeth Davis of Fulham, but there is no indication of when or how his first wife died.

No records are known to substantiate his influential clients before 1760, but there are surviving bills and letters that document later sales of specific pieces of furniture. These show customers as: Nostell Priory sold to Sir Roland Winnat (1766-70), for Landsdowne House sold to the Earl of Shelbourne (1770-72), and for Harewood House (1770-75). Furniture was also sold to David Garrick, the famous manager of the Adelphi Theater (1771). The bills indicate that Chippendale had been supplying some of these houses with pieces before and after the above dates and that he also performed the service of complete decorator or "upholder" and assisted with paperhanging and curtaining, as well. The furniture itself is distinctive enough to be definitely credited to Chippendale, according to historians.

Today's woodworker will emphathize with Thomas Chippendale. John Kenworthy-Browne, in his book *Chippendale And His Contemporaries*, says "Chippendale did not make a fortune but was constantly pressed for money as his patrons did not always deem it necessary to pay him promptly."

There is no question that Chippendale was enterprising and ambitious, "but not necessarily the best furniture maker," suggests Kenworthy-Browne. His business ability may have been greater than his craftsmanship. There is also evidence that he employed many artists and craftsmen of high caliber. An article in *The Gentleman's Magazine*, April 1755, reports a fire which broke out in Chippendale's workshop in which the "chests of twenty-two workmen were burned." Tool chests imply cabinetmakers but in addition there were probably carvers, polishers or finishers, upholsterers, clerks and other people required to run what apparently was a factory-like establishment.

There were several furniture makers of note working in St. Martin's Lane and in other fashionable areas at the time, but Chippendale, because of his book and his prolific output seems to have had more published about him. There were



*Woodwork, Furniture. English. XVIII, ca 1760. Desk cabinet. Mahogany. H. 92, W. 77½, D. 19 in. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Bequest of Bernard M. Baruch, 1965. (65.155.24).*

William and John Linnell, William Ince and Thomas Mayhew, Robert Manwaring, Thomas Johnson, William Vile and John Cobb.

**Style characteristics** — Any serious student of antique furniture styles learns to identify the characteristics of each furniture maker and which appear at various times of the craftsman's career. Generally, Chippendale furniture has the following features which help identify, and classify the styles and periods.

1. Mahogany was the dominant wood although rosewood was sometimes used as part of the decoration; in late pieces, more rosewood appears as it increased in popularity.

2. Elaborate carving was the main decorative process. Sometimes the carving was combined with gilt, or richly chased brass and silver mounts. There were also copper mounts, or brass castings. Some work was made of a soft wood and japanned or painted and partly gilt. Later work had ingeniously wrought marquetry or inlay.

3. A cabriole leg, ending in a ball and claw or a scroll foot was common. (Generally, by the end of the 1700's the cabriole leg design disappeared to be replaced by straight, tapered legs.) No stretchers or underbracing on cabriole-legged pieces but light, either straight flat, fret sawed or carved stretchers on straight legged pieces.

4. A quadrangular leg also appeared in some pieces.

5. Splats were intricately carved and pierced. The chair-back flared outward at the top, most backs were similar in

shape and with ladderlike stretchers. Pierced splats were joined directly to the seat stretcher.

6. The top rail of the chairs had distinct shoulders.

7. The chair seats were wide and upholstered.

8. Pilasters or quarter columns appeared on the corners of case furniture.

9. Tall pieces, such as cabinets and clocks, utilized broken pediments that were carved and remarkably rich in design.

10. Richly carved aprons and skirts appeared on tables, chairs, and cabinetry.

11. There were serpentine, bowed or kettle base construction on some of the richest pieces.

12. An absence of turning.

13. Upholstery fabrics were chiefly damasks and brocades exquisitely woven. Some plain fabrics were used on the simpler upholstered pieces.

**The cabriole leg** — In any discussion of Chippendale pieces, the cabriole leg is emphasized. Varying carved designs were among the major identification marks of the style (although cabriole legs had been used in early work by French and English designers). Chippendale carved the expanding part of the cabriole richly with acanthus leaves or other motifs adapted from the rococo period. The feet of the cabriole were most often carved with a ball and claw, but occasionally a dolphin's head or a richly carved scrolled foot were used.

The straight leg appeared in simpler furniture and toward the end of the period. These were almost plain, except for a touch of molding on the outside corner. Those inspired by the Chinese influence were carved with Chinese fretwork or a wider molding.

**The "Director"** — The "Director" is an impressive volume for many reasons, points out Kenworthy-Browne. It is comprehensive. It illustrates nearly all kinds of furniture, there is a range and fluency of designs moving in style from classical through French rococo, chinoiserie and gothic. Finally, the engraving and production were excellent. The etchings were engraved on copper and the original folio sold for 2:8:0 Pounds, which was a hefty price in those days. Historians believe Chippendale financed the book's production by pre-paid subscription from influential sponsors to whom the book is dedicated.

Why did Chippendale compile the book? Kenworthy-Browne believes his purpose probably was to gain clients and a large volume of business. At that time it was a masterpiece of advertising because no one had published that type of book before. Chippendale showed courage, technical knowledge and organizing ability.

The "Director" consists of designs that Chippendale collected from work that preceded his own. The examples were not the actual pieces that he created. This book and its subsequent editions were widely used for design inspiration and emulation all during the 19th century. The result was that the word "Chippendale" was adopted as a generic term for much English furniture produced in the mid-eighteenth century. (Actually, very few pieces exist that can be definitely attributed to the Chippendale workshop.)

When the "Director," was first published in 1754, it had 161 folio plates; which were increased to 200 in the third edition of 1762. No book on this scale had appeared in England or elsewhere, before. Rival publications appeared, but nothing with the range of patterns matched it until George



*Woodwork, Furniture, English. XVIII, ca. 1760. Maker: William Vile (d. 1767). Library Table. H. 32, L. 76, W. 63 in. Three-quarter view showing side with drawers. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Rogers Fund, 1924. (24.103.3).*

Hepplewhite's *Cabinet Maker and Upholster's Guide*, in 1788, two years after Hepplewhite's death.

### Theories in The "Director" Based on Classical Space Divisions

Chippendale historians generally concur that the importance attached to the "Director" is exaggerated. They point out that associating the "Chippendale Style" with the plates in the book is a mistake. The designs in the *Director* serve more as a valuable guide to the variety of styles used during the eighteenth century; they are of little help for establishing with certainty the products of Chippendale's workshop. The designs were available and were used, with modifications, by the many cabinet makers and furniture factories of the time and until the early 1800's.

The theories that Chippendale offered regarded spatial organization based on the proportions offered by the classical orders of architecture. These orders were "the very soul and basis of the cabinetmaker's art and appeared in the first plates in the "Director." They were theories that had been handed down from the Greek orders in the Tuscan, Doric, Ionic and Corinthian columns along with a parallel of the ancient architecture with the modern. Because of this, English furniture consistently retained practical and pleasing proportions. Based on the proportion of capital, entablature, column, pedestal, and base, Chippendale divided the proportions of furniture as top, body, legs, feet. A bookcase, for instance, might be constructed like a building and the decor might have portions of columns and entablatures, all in their proper classical proportions. However, the magnificence and heaviness were tempered after the 1760's by using light carv-

ings of acanthus leaves, festoons of flowers, combined with the serpentine contours of the rococo style.

Almost every preface in an 18th century design or architectural book included this division of the Greek order in the same way one might think of Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) today. The designs that appeared in the book had little or nothing to do with the Preface; rather, the furniture displayed often opposed classical designs. The reason? One author suggested that Greek architecture was the prevailing theory of the day, but that it applied to architects. Furniture makers were not architects so did not feel a compulsion to follow those theories closely.

With the designs in the book, Chippendale often offered alternatives such as: "If any of the small ornaments should be thought superfluous they may be left out without spoiling the design," or "If the seats are covered with red morocco they will have a fine effect."

One of the paragraphs in the book states a purpose as: "... being calculated to assist the one in the Choice, and the other in the Execution of the Designs; which are so contrived, that if no one drawing should singly answer the Gentleman's Taste, there will yet be found a Variety of Hints, sufficient to construct a new one."

**Eclecticism** — Many critics have avoided tossing bouquets at Chippendale despite his lasting reputation. They have been cynical and critical. One author believes that the construction of his furniture was "sturdy, sometimes ponderous and not always graceful or well proportioned."

Although some pieces were nearly identical with Queen Anne pieces the lines and contours were often improved by

Chippendale. Still, some of his chair seats, for example, were so wide, that the chair appeared square and somewhat clumsy. Seat rails or legs appeared too large in scale. Some highboys were extra broad and aprons on them were occasionally too low, making the short cabriole suggest an afterthought rather than being well integrated with the design.

Along with the above was criticism that he mixed motifs indiscriminately; Gothic, Renaissance, Classical and Oriental details were often found on the same piece of furniture.

Yet another writer upholds Chippendale's designs as satisfactory and states: "... for all products, details were worked out with great precision, usually from scale models, and complicated methods of calculations were used to ensure perfect proportions, particularly in the design of highly elaborate Chinese and Gothic ornamentation."

**Types of pieces** — There was no dearth of types of pieces to execute; the variety is astonishing. Probably most well-known are chair legs with the claw and ball and the ribband-back dining chairs. Other pieces produced in the Chippendale workshop were upholstered chairs, wing chairs, double chair settees or love seats, stools, sofas, a variety of tables including gate leg, swing leg, card tables, sideboard tables which seldom have drawers, piecrust tilting tables, and dining tables. There were also lowboys, highboys, (which may not have been called that at the time), chests of drawers, desks, secretaries, mirrors and beds.

**Chippendale in America** — Given the premise that Chippendale furniture pervaded the tastes of the English aristocracy for many decades in the 18th and early 19th century, it is not surprising that wealthy Americans of the period derived some furniture styles from those with which they were familiar. Colonial American furniture was open to interpretation so ideas and materials were imported. There was, in the state of Philadelphia, a Chippendale Style created by designers Savery and Gostelow. Despite the prevailing American Federal styles, European Neo-Classic and Neo-Gothic designs in the Americas always reflected the European scene. However, they were truly individual, with regard to materials used and execution.

There is one peculiar feature that distinguishes the American from the English chair, and that is almost invariably the stump form of the back legs. While the appearance is less handsome than the back legs normally associated with Chippendale chairs, the stump was actually more costly to make than those of the English chairs. A 1929 book, **English and American Furniture**, written by Herbert Cescinsky and George Leland Hunter, explains that the fashion is borrowed from the Queen Anne walnut models from the Midland Counties. The American term "side" chair accounts for the style.

"The dining room chair, when not in use, was placed against the side wall of the room, a position in which the back legs would not be noticeable. When placed up to the table, it is only the servants who see the back view of the chairs, and they did not matter. The back of the chair was, therefore, left plain (not to say ugly) of a deliberate purpose. It was a tradition of the time, in America, especially in states where Negro help was the rule. A similar idea has pertained in all periods, one which is seldom remarked. A chair is the only piece of furniture which is intended to be viewed from all sides, but where the back is left plain of deliberate purposes. A Chip-

pendale chair is never carved at the back, it is a walnut chair veneered. If the covering of the front be of silk, velvet or needlepoint, then a simple and inexpensive material is invariably selected for the outside back. This is one of the little things which is never noticed — perhaps because it is so obvious."

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**His son carried on the business until the style died** — After Chippendale's death in 1779, his eldest son, Thomas, (1749-1822) inherited the business which prospered until 1796. The changing fashions moved away from the Chippendale designs and in 1804 Tom Chippendale Jr. declared bankruptcy.

During the 19th century, a firm was established that copied Chippendale's designs exclusively and since then the name Chippendale has become synonymous with the style of the 18th Century. The majority of genuine Chippendale pieces that still exist can be seen in the Victoria and Albert Museum, London, and in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

## GLOSSARY

**cabriole** - a curved furniture leg ending in an ornamental foot.  
**Japan Work** - An English imitation of Chinese lacquer work.  
**neo-classic** - a style relating to the revival of the classical style.  
**Chinoiserie** - designs influenced by Chinese art and design.  
**rococo** - a late phase of the Baroque period; the term was applied from about 1720 to 1770/80. Rococo designs were generally lighter and more fluid than those of Baroque ornamentation.  
**shoulder** - the portion of the chair resembling the human shoulder.  
**splat** - a single, flat, thin, often ornamental member of a chair back.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dona Z. Meilach is the author of five books about woodwork including: **Contemporary Art with Wood**, **Creating Modern Furniture**, **Woodworking: The New Wave**; **Creating Small Wood Objects as Functional Sculpture**, and **Contemporary Art With Wood** (Crown Publishers). She has authored over 40 books about contemporary crafts in various media and is a frequent contributor to a variety of art and craft publications.