THE BENKARD ROOM

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Curator of the American Wing

An important addition to the American Wing was made recently and will soon be opened for the public. It is a paneled room, complete with furnishings assembled over a long period of time by Mrs. Harry Horton Benkard for the parlor of her house at Oyster Bay, Long Island.

The background of the room was the parlor of the Smith-Nichols house in Newburyport, Massachusetts. After Mrs. Benkard's death in 1945, a group of friends formed the Committee of the Bertha King Benkard Memorial Fund, and presented the room to the Museum as a gift last year.

The Benkard Room is a valuable contribution to public education, since it epitomizes the life-long experience and taste of one of the foremost amateur antiquarians and connoisseurs of American art. Although Mrs. Benkard was indefatigable as a collector, she had none of the spirit of sharp acquisitiveness which sometimes taints collecting. She had a perennial curiosity about the early customs and possessions of Americans; her ready assistance in the restoration of historic buildings and active encouragement of beginning collectors was heartening to a wide circle of people. She inherited an interest in collecting from earlier generations in the family. Some of the purchases made by her grandparents, annotated in a sale catalogue of 1815, are included in our room; other pieces were acquired by her mother, and several are family heirlooms obtained from the first owners. This is a welcome commentary on the history of collecting which antedates by many years the widespread fashion for the early American arts current at the present time.

The knowledge that brought together our room is evidenced by the perfect scale of the objects for their background and the attention paid to every minute detail of furnishing. The old satin and damask upholstery shading softly from blue to plum color, the festooned drapery on the sofa, bookcase, and windows—copied exactly from Sheraton's Drawing Book—the contemporary picture frames, the old gilded wood of the looking glasses, the matched blue Chinese export porcelain upon mantelpiece and tables, the early Sheffield silver lamps, the rare carved ivory chess set, all bespeak the meticulous interest of the born collector.

The furniture is not the product of one shop or region, but presents a harmonious picture of the early Federal period, when the classical style received a fresh interpretation in each principal city from Massachusetts to Maryland. Furniture design paralleled that in England, and here pieces based on the widely known Sheraton and Hepplewhite books may be observed, each typical, by its carving, inlay, or turning, of a special group of skilled cabinetmakers. Upon the Baltimore secretary bookcase, chess table, and pair of card tables flanking the fireplace are geometric and bellflower inlays in woods of contrasting colors; the set of eight chairs and a sofa are carved with fans, plumes of feathers, and drapery typical of Manhattan's early classic revival furniture; the sewing table and Martha Washington chair—a duplicate of the chair once owned by John...
The Benkard Room. Gift of the Members of the Committee of the Bertha King Benkard Memorial Fund, 1946
The Benkard Room
Adams—have the spare, shapely outlines and lightly incised carving that Massachusetts cabinetmakers admired. A pole screen with delicate garlands of flowers framed in mahogany is inscribed: "Worked by me in 1803. N.M." Niobe Minturn, an ancestress of Mrs. Benkard, made the embroidery in New York. Other small furniture is more exotic in appearance—the nests of tables in black Chinese lacquer, and the sewing and gaming boxes decorated with scenes in gold that were germane to old houses in New England seaport towns.

The chandelier, some silver-plated lamps, and two candelabra are of special interest. Both shaft and arms of the chandelier are cut in a diamond pattern appropriate to the period of the room. Four rare Sheffield silver lamps were made about 1790 to burn whale oil. In the sale catalogue of Joseph Bonaparte’s possessions at Bordentown, New Jersey, dated 1845, number 118 describes “4 large and very expensive gilt Candelabras of 7 lights each (from France)”; this is followed by an ink inscription which reads: "$14/ Dr. M. Post." The purchaser was Mrs. Benkard’s grandfather, Dr. Minturn Post, and two of the candelabra now flank the mantelpiece, having been cherished, along with the catalogue, by three generations of the family.

The painting above the mantel represents a famous naval battle fought off Sandy Hook in January, 1815, three weeks after the Treaty of Ghent ended the War of 1812, the news of peace having not yet reached this country. The United States frigate President, one of three forty-four-gun frigates built to protect American commerce from Algerian pirates (the Constitution and the United States were sister ships), was commanded by Stephen Decatur at the time she tried to slip past the British squadron blockading New York harbor. Unfortunately, she ran aground during a gale, and cleared the bar only after severe damage to her hull and rudder. At daybreak four British frigates sighted the President, and, owing to the latter’s crippled condition, one of them fast gained ground. The American ship soon fell under repeated fire, and Decatur, hoping to disable the Endymion and thus make possible his escape, gave orders to close in on the enemy at dusk. After two and a half hours of spirited battle, the Endymion was forced to retire, badly damaged, but the other British frigates had made good use of the necessary delay by drawing near. According to Decatur, the President was surrounded about 11 p.m.; with one fifth of his crew lost, his ship crippled, and escape impossible, the gallant Commodore surrendered.

Other versions of this battle were painted by Thomas Butterworth and the Italian emigré Michele Felice Corne. Although a rare English engraving depicts the same action as our painting and is inscribed: "After a sketch by Capt Wm Skiddy," there is no clue to the identity of the artist responsible for our picture.

The paneling of the Benkard Room was made for a three-story brick house at number 5 Harris Street in Newburyport, one of two matching houses that Leonard Smith, a rich merchant, built for his sons, William and John. Although Newburyport was only an hour’s ride on horseback from Salem, where Samuel McIntire was then at the peak of his fame, our room is independent of his school. The difference may be observed in the bold scale of the cornice and dado, and the treatment of the chimneypiece where the architectural enrichment of the room is concentrated. Both colonial and neo-classic elements are merged together here in an unorthodox way, but if this union of two dissimilar styles has a provincial mark, its originality and strength seem to compensate for the unusual combination. The principal rooms in the Clark-Currier, Tenny-Hall, and Plummer-Dyer houses in Newburyport are similar to ours, and this repetition indicates a local style. The composition ornament upon the mantelpiece and dado was inspired by plates 23 and 24 in Asher Benjamin’s Country Builder’s Assistant of 1797. The overmantel is paneled with a crosseted frame, a method of ornament familiar to us from colonial chimneypieces seen in the pre-Revolutionary rooms of the American Wing.

Leonard Smith’s niece, Sarah Ann Emery, gave this account of Newburyport when the famous “square” houses that line its old streets were newly built: “Foreign, West Indian, and
coastal trade combined with the country traffic caused the wharves and business streets to wear the aspects of a thriving mart. Vessels were constantly arriving from Honduras, the Straits, and the North of Europe. Money was plentiful, and ships arrived almost daily with a choice of the finest in household furnishings. Turkey rugs, English carpets, and oriental dinner sets and silks were easily come by, while at hand were expert cabinetmakers, clockmakers, and silversmiths of renown. . . . Ornate gold and mahogany mirrors reflecting the girandoles on the mantels, syllabub tables, drop-leaf tables, small pianos with tapering legs, and family portraits by Copley, Stuart, and some of the talented refugees were considered requisite furnishings for houses. . . . A large china closet was often planned in the parlor from which led a staircase down to the master wine closet in the cellar.” The legend of “Lord” Timothy Dexter sending shiploads of warming pans and millins from Newburyport to the West Indies in return for rum and sugar, although lately diminished by his biographers, still typifies the ingenuity of Yankee traders in finding markets for their cargoes and fortunes for their old age.

The Great Fire in 1811 laid waste the warehouses, loaded ships, and the business districts of Newburyport; Leonard Smith’s losses were irretrievable, and in 1812 the two houses occupied by his sons were sold. The one from which our parlor came was bought eventually by Captain William Nichols. He and succeeding members of his family lived there for more than a century.

Captain Nichols, the son of a Revolutionary sea captain, early went to sea, and his vessels were captured all too frequently by privateers. At the outbreak of the war in 1812, he commanded the Decatur, a fourteen-gun brig with a crew of 160, and seized valuable cargoes and prisoners from British ships. Finally the Decatur was taken by the enemy, and its captain was confined for thirty-four days in a wooden cage on the deck of a prison ship off Barbados. Upon his release, he took command of the Harpy, a fourteen-gun brig with a crew of a hundred men. Making several cruises out of Baltimore, Salem, and Portsmouth, he successfully preyed on enemy ships and brought in rich cargoes of food stuffs, Madeira, ammunition, manufactured goods, and British currency. Known as the “Holy Terror” by the British, the captain was nevertheless capable of humanity, as a record left by one of his prisoners indicates: “Capt. William Drysdale, late of the ship William and Alfred, captured January 2, 1815, by the brig Harpy, returns his grateful acknowledgement to William Nichols, Esq., commander of the said brig, and all his officers for their great civility, indulgent lenity, and humane usage while on board and generously delivering up all his private property. And should, at any future time, Captain Nichols or any of his officers come to London, Captain Drysdale will be happy to see them at his house, Stepney Green, near London.”

After the war, Captain Nichols made many voyages to Holland, Denmark, and Russia. In 1845 President Polk appointed him Customs Collector of Newburyport, and he also served as State Senator and Selectman. He died in 1863.

When it was found necessary to demolish Captain Nichols’ house ten years ago, the woodwork of the parlor was purchased by Mrs. Benkard and incorporated in a wing of her house on Long Island.

Miss Charlotte C. Bayley, curator of the Newburyport Historical Society, kindly furnished data not otherwise available concerning the original owners of the Smith-Nichols house.

The fight between the “President” and the “Endymion,” January 15, 1815

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