A Regency Sewing and Writing Table by Morgan and Sanders

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“...a luxurious living room into a comfortable bedroom... magnificent sofas designed with dazzling newness in every line. Their secret so superbly hidden that no one would ever guess at night they convert instantly with fingertip ease to sumptuous beds. The patented folding action makes it possible...” “These ingenious and versatile tables are like magic! They change from cocktail to game and dining tables with the flick of a lever... and can be used as end, lamp or conference tables as well!”

“The lounge chair is gracefully designed, luxuriously comfortable, all foam rubber cushioned. Plus offering a concealed steam iron and ironing board, it has a concealed hair dryer, giving beauty-salon comfort and convenience to Lady guests... in wide color range of washable vinyl covers or decorator fabrics.”

It would be easy to conclude from the syncopated phrasing of these modern advertisements that the various types of furniture they acclaim were invented yesterday. Such is far from the case, however, for convertible furniture has been in use for centuries, and various prototypes exist for the ultramodern sofa beds, adjustable tables, and versatile lounge chairs advertised in these excerpts from a contemporary manufacturer’s brochure. Though hardly as widespread as similar models of today, furniture with “folding action” was known to the Egyptians, who sat on folding stools and slept on collapsible beds in the second millennium before Christ. Several other types of folding or dual-purpose furniture made their appearance in Europe during the Middle Ages, when the folding chair was reintroduced and the settle, or bench chest, was evolved. The tricks of modern expandable tables were foreshadowed in the draw table, a type of dining table developed in England in the mid-sixteenth century, with a seating capacity that could be doubled, though scarcely with “the flick of a lever,” by extending sliding boards that were housed under the top. A rudimentary convertible settee fitted with arms that let down on ratchets to facilitate sleeping was evolved in England and France at the beginning of the seventeenth century, anticipating the sofa bed, which emerged in a fully developed form in England by the middle of the eighteenth century. A design for such a sofa bed (Figure 2) appeared among the plates of Thomas Chippendale’s Gentleman and Cabinet-Maker’s Director, and Chippendale explained its structure in the text of the third edition published in 1762: “a Sofa with a Chinese Canopy, with Cur...
MORGAN and SANDERS'S
Manufacturing for their New Invented Imperial Dining Tables and Portable Chairs.

The best and most approved Sofas, Chairs, Beds, Patent Brass Screw
Four Post & Tent Bedsteads, with Furniture and Bedding complete, at their
(Upholstery and Cabinet Ware-Rooms)

Catherine 16 & 17
Street

Three doors from the Strand.

LONDON

Morgan and Sanders's, New Inventors.

Imperial Dining Tables forming an elegant Set, to Seat from 1 to 20 Persons or any greater Number, the whole Table, draws up into the space of a Large Pembroke Table, the Feet are completely out of the way, & the whole may be packed in a Box, only 18 inches deep... The above Tables, by Morgan, had the honor of showing to Their Majesties & the Princesses, at Buckingham House who according to their accustomed goodness, of encouraging ingenuity, were most graciously pleased to express their highest approbation & sanction of the same.

Portable Chairs, plain & with Arms, of Mahogany, or Elaborate Linen, made to any pattern, a dozen of which pack in the space of two common Chairs.

The best & most approved Sofas, forming an elegant Sofa, may be transformed into a complete Four Post Bed, with Bedding Furniture etc.

The best & most approved Chair Beds, forming a handsome Day Chair, & it with great ease transformed into a Tent Bed, with Furniture & Bedding complete.

Patent Brass Screw Bedsteads, in every respect superior to all others.

These elegant Four-Post & Tent Bedsteads, with Cash or Satin Cover, made upon the best & most approved principles, are raised or taken down, in a few minutes, without the use of Tools... The Furniture is made upon a New Plan, of taking off & on, without Tools, etc.

A very convenient & highly approved Sofa Bed, constructed on purpose for Captains, Cabin, & Ladies or gentlemen, going to the East or West Indies, with every other article, in the Upholstery & Cabinet Branches, executed in the strictest rules of elegance & fashion.
tains and Valances tied up in Drapery . . . may be converted into a Bed, by making the front Part of the Seat to draw forward, and the Sides made to fold and turn in with strong Iron Hinges, and a proper Stretcher to keep out and support the Sides when open. The Curtains must be likewise made to come forward, and when let down will form a Tent.” The operating mechanism of the convertible described by Chippendale must have been comparable to the “folding action” of its modern counterpart, but the sofa shown in the design from the Director is a typical mid-eighteenth century conceit, its crest running up into chinoiserie pinnacles beneath a heavily valanced canopy draped with side curtains that could be adjusted to “form a Tent” against pernicious drafts.

In spite of the practical advantages of such convertible furniture as the sofa bed described by Chippendale, little demand for this type of furniture existed in England in the eighteenth century, and it was not until the outset of the nineteenth, when cheap serviceable furniture began to be manufactured in quantity for the rising middle classes, that convertible furniture came into its own. For this market the folding chairs, expanding tables, and sofa and chair beds that had been developed over the centuries were produced. The manufacturer’s advertisements for such furniture, however, hailed most of these latter-day convertibles as new inventions, and, like today’s advertising copy, failed to mention any precedents for them.

One of the principal manufacturers of these “new” commodities was the firm of Morgan and Sanders, which advertised its stock by means of a handbill, called a trade card, that was printed for distribution to prospective clients. This handbill illustrated and explained the goods offered for sale in the manner of a modern mail-order catalogue, and boasted of the firm’s “New Invented” stock (Figure 1). The partners Thomas Morgan and John Sanders also placed advertising copy in the pages of one of the principal monthly magazines of that time, Ackermann’s Repository of Arts, Literature, Commerce, Manufactures, Fashions, and Politics. This advertisement appeared monthly in every issue from February 1809 until December 1815, stating the partners’ beliefs and objectives. “At the patent sofa bed and chair bed manufactory, Nos. 16 and 17 Catharine Street, Strand, a newly-invented patent side-board and dining table – Morgan and Sanders have, at a very considerable expence, established a large manufactory, and also built extensive warerooms, for the purpose of exhibiting for sale a great variety of Upholstery and Cabinet Furniture, for the furnishing of houses; a great part of which are articles perfectly new in principle, extremely fashionable, and universally approved of . . . in particular the Patent Sideboards and Dining Tables, combined in one piece of furniture; the Imperial Dining Tables and the portable Chairs; the Patent Four-Post and Tent Bedsteads, and especially the much-admired Sofa Beds and Chair Beds; with every other species of Cabinet and Upholstery Furniture, in the first style of modern elegance and fashion, and on terms the most advantageous for prompt payment. East and West India articles manufactured on purpose for those climates, and upon entirely new principles; very portable.”

The editorial offices of the Repository were at 101 Strand, near the premises of Messrs. Morgan and Sanders at Nos. 16 and 17 Catherine Street, “Three doors from the Strand,” a proximity that seems to have favored an understanding between the two enterprises,
3. Morgan and Sanders’s salesrooms. Plate 10 from Ackermann’s Repository, August 1809. Engraving. 5 5/8 x 7 5/8 inches. Dick Fund, 42.74.2(2)

4. “Pit’s Cabinett Globe Writing Table.” Plate 8 from Ackermann’s Repository, February 1810. Engraving. 5 5/8 x 8 3/4 inches. Dick Fund, 42.74.2(3)

for during the time it carried the firm's advertisement the magazine also ran a series of feature articles on the furniture displayed for sale in the neighboring salesrooms. The series was initiated by an article that appeared in the August 1809 issue of the Repository. This article, accompanied by an engraved view of the "ware-room" (Figure 3), described the quarters occupied by the firm and gave an estimate of the total number of workmen employed by the company. "In the premises in which this extensive concern is conducted, formed of six houses united, are daily employed nearly one hundred mechanics, besides other necessary servants. The first floor of these six houses is the principal ware-room. In addition to the number of persons constantly employed . . . above ten times as many are gaining a livelihood immediately in the employ of Morgan and Sanders, in different parts of London and its environs." The description of the furniture shown in the "ware-room" was lifted in part from the firm's trade card: "The exhibition of their patent sofa-beds, chair-beds, brass screw four-post and tent bedsteads, newly invented imperial dining-tables, portable chairs, Trafalgar sideboard and dining-tables, Pitt's cabinet globe writing-table and numberless other articles, on improved plans, in the upholstery and cabinet-making business, evince to what perfection modern ingenuity and invention have arrived in these lines. This establishment, commenced by the present proprietors in 1801, has been the means of infusing new life into every department of the business of furnishing houses." The reporter went on to mention a few particular commissions carried out by the firm: "The exertions of Messrs. Morgan and Sanders have not passed unrewarded. They have been honoured with the patronage of their Majesties and several branches of the Royal Family. Among many others of the nobility whose support they have experienced, they particularly mention the late Lord Nelson, for whose seat at Merton they were executing a considerable order, at the moment when the memorable battle of Trafalgar deprived his country of one of her most brilliant ornaments. As a tribute of respect to the victorious hero, the proprietors were induced to give their manufactory the name of Trafalgar-House." Despite their professed intention of honoring the naval hero, Morgan and Sanders obviously hoped to profit from the patriotic feeling associated with Nelson's victory of 1805 when they named their business premises and one of their items of furniture, a "Trafalgar side-board and dining-table." In a similar gesture, reminiscent of modern advertising at its worst, they named another piece of furniture after William Pitt, the popular statesman who died in 1806. This was "Pitt's cabinet globe writing table" represented in the engraving standing against a pier on the left.

Small spherical inkstands of the sort produced by English silversmiths in the 1790s may have supplied the idea for this table to a little-known inventor, George Remington, who in December 1807 took out a fourteen-year patent on a "globe table . . . made with two moving parts or quarters which work upon hinges." A few months later the rights to manufacture this invention were bought by Morgan and Sanders, who had produced a working model of Remington's patent by 1809, when the first article appeared in the Repository. A more complete description of this model was published in the issue of the Repository for February 1810. This article, which identifies Morgan and Sanders as the manufacturers of "Pitt's Cabinet Globe Writing Table, thus denominated as a humble tribute of respect to a late illustrious statesman . . .," was accompanied by an engraving (Figure 4) representing this table in the different stages described in the text: "It forms externally a handsome globe, which may be constructed of any size. In this form it is represented in fig. 1. In fig. 2, it is seen with two of the quarters let down, in which state it composes a circular writing table. Fig. 3. shews the interior of the lower part fitted up with drawers, pigeon-holes, &c. for papers, and with only one quarter of the globe let down. The whole is secured by a patent lock, contrived in the ball at top."

Though the article avers that this object "is one of the grandest and most elegant pieces of furniture that ever decorated the modern
library,” little evidence of grandeur or elegance can be detected in the squat serviceable piece of furniture represented in the engraving. “Pitt’s Cabinett Globe Writing Table” in fact exemplifies the decadence of English taste brought about in the early nineteenth century by the industrial revolution and the ascendance of a commercial middle class. This class repudiated the aesthetic traditions that had developed in the eighteenth century under the patronage of a landowning class, and demanded new forms and expressions in every branch of the arts. The globular shape, “which may be constructed of any size,” the flat ungainly base and grotesque reptilian feet of “Pitt’s” table were experimental forms designed to satisfy the demands of this newly augmented middle class.

Although Morgan and Sanders may have catered to middle-class predilections when they produced the model shown in the engraving, they also produced other models of this table that met higher standards. The Repository alludes to an example acquired by Queen Charlotte, the consort of George III, that was a much improved version of “Pitt’s” table: “This writing-table, which must be acknowledged equally convenient and superb, is likely to become an indispensible appendage to the library of every person of taste in the fashionable world. It has already obtained the patronage of her Majesty and the Royal Family, who are ever the foremost to encourage real merit.” The item that secured this royal patronage bore little resemblance to the table engraved for the Repository. It is a small mahogany sewing table (Figure 5), dated about 1810 and still in the British Royal Collections, which is marked by none of the awkwardness of the table in the engraving. Its harmonious proportions and slender tripod supports carved with satyrs’ heads and hooves derive from eighteenth century neoclassic prototypes and deserve the adjective “Grecian,” which might have been applied to them. The operating mechanism of this table also distinguishes it from the one described in the Repository: the domed top rotates halfway into the lower half of the table, revealing compartments for sewing equipment in the floor of the table and a marquetry-painted partition at the back containing a mirrored recess.

The terms of the patent that Thomas Morgan and John Sanders acquired from George Remington invested the partners with the exclusive right to manufacture globe-shaped tables until the year 1828 and allowed them ample time to develop several different versions, one of which was given to the Metropolitan Museum by Mrs. Paul G. Pennoyer in 1962 (Figure 6). Although the rotund bulk of this table betrays the influence of middle-class taste and distinguishes it from the trim little balloon-shaped example at Buckingham Palace, its fanciful decoration gives it a charm entirely lacking from the table illustrated in the Repository. As in the case of Queen Charlotte’s table, this charm derives in part from the use of traditional motifs. Somewhat irregular applications of such motifs are the eagles’ heads carved on the tripod supports and the band of formal rinceaux around the “equator” of the globe. The inverted eagles’ heads could be mistaken for parrots’ heads, while the rinceau pattern (Figure 8) is executed in a process that was developed in the early nineteenth century as a cheap substitute for marquetry. This process consisted of brushing the background in with India ink, while reserving the outline of the pattern, which could then be
shaded with a pen dipped in ink. Though the resulting patterns often constituted satisfying decorations, they fell far short of the fine effect created by the painstaking technique of cutting and fitting wood veneers, which reached such a high degree of development in the latter half of the eighteenth century. Unlike marquetry, black and white penwork required no technical skill, and could be executed by amateur artists intent on decorating their own furniture. To assist such artists, a number of lithographed designs, some of them entitled “Ornaments for Painting on Wood & Fancy Work,” were published sporadically in the monthly issues of the Repository between the years 1816 and 1821. A design of this sort (Figure 7), which could be traced and then copied directly on a piece of furniture, made it possible for an amateur to decorate furniture with these patterns. The black and white penwork of the Museum’s table, however, derived from no published design, and was probably carried out in Morgan and Sanders’s workshop by one of the firm’s numerous apprentices.

The need to reduce the cost of labor and materials that led manufacturers of Regency furniture to adopt expedients such as penwork also obliged them to simplify the technique of marquetry. Marquetry continued

8. Detail of the Museum’s globe-shaped table, showing the band of black and white penwork. The star covering the keyhole and some of the trim of the architectural backdrop are of alabaster
to be produced, however, and crudely executed examples of it on the Museum's table are the triple spray of leaves on the base, the fronds at the ends of the longitudinal lines above the "equator," and the bands of floral decoration that cross each other at right angles on top of the globe. These examples are supplemented by the highly simplified geometrical marquetry that appears on the brick wall and parquet floor of the miniature architectural backdrop inside the cover.

The opening mechanism is not the same as in Queen Charlotte's table or in the table described in the Repository, for the top half of the globe neither rotates into the lower part nor splits into sections that sink out of view. Instead the domed cover slides to the back and swings over to a vertical position exposing the inner works of the table. These consist of the architectural backdrop with a niche behind a rounded arch that contains five mirrors in charming Gothicizing frames, flanked on the outside by two small mirrors let into sliding panels, behind which two brass candlesticks that can be extended on fixtures are housed, while below lie the compartments and drawers for sewing, with a pincushion at the front. The plainly marked divisions of this fitted interior contain a surprise, for the slot behind the pincushion holds a folded tablet, which when extended forms a writing surface and converts the sewing table into a writing table (Figure 9). Further facilities for writing are provided by a cylindrical brass inkwell and a container for sand, which occupy compartments at the back of the table.

This equipment identifies the Museum's recently acquired table as a dual-purpose convertible piece of furniture of the type that aroused such wide interest in the first quarter of the nineteenth century. It is a significant addition to the Museum's collection of Regency furniture, and in the words of the Repository, "is the contrivance and workmanship of Messrs. Morgan and Sanders, whose ingenious labours in the production of interesting and ornamental furniture, we have so often the opportunity of submitting to our readers."

NOTE

For certain facts about the Museum's table the author of this article is indebted to the donor and to "Regency Patent Furniture" by G. Bernard Hughes, in Country Life, January 2, 1958, which discusses the full scope of Morgan and Sanders's activities.