**Curators’ Note**

Among the first objects to enter the American Wing were several of the earliest masterpieces illustrated here. The Ipswich chest (Figure 1) came in company with the great banister-back armchair (Figure 5) and the richly veneered slant-top desk (Figure 7). They were part of the collection of over seven hundred works assembled by a heritage-conscious Bostonian, Eugene Bolles. Some of these were lent to the Metropolitan Museum for its Hudson-Fulton Celebration of 1909—an exhibition staged in part to test the question of whether or not American decorative arts deserved a place in an art museum. The resultant reviews and public response were so favorable that the Bolles objects were purchased and presented to the American Wing in 1910 by its first great benefactor, Mrs. Russell Sage.

From this auspicious beginning a sixty-five-year process of learning, refining, and acquisition by five successive curators and their colleagues has led to the formation of the most comprehensive collection of American decorative arts in the nation. As a result of its foundation and during the progress of its development, all other such American collections, both public and private, were inspired to be, and the science of the study of American decorative arts was established.

A half-century’s accumulation of experience and knowledge affords the refined qualitative and aesthetic judgments that we have made for your pleasure today. Individually, and then as a group, the American Wing staff has painstakingly selected from over ten thousand pieces our most eloquent statements of changing tastes in American craftsmanship. Whether or not these individual works are all to the contemporary viewer’s admiration, they stand apart in this collection and among those elsewhere as superlative expressions of their time and as a tribute to their skillful makers.

Berry B. Tracy
Curator-in-Charge
American Wing

The artistic accomplishments of our country from the seventeenth through the early twentieth century are the subject of this exhibition, which honors the Bicentennial. Impressive as these objects are, they are only the very tip of the iceberg. From our collection of thousands of examples of American architecture, painting, furniture, photography, prints, sculpture, ceramics, glass, silver, and textiles—the nation’s, and the world’s, most extensive assemblage of this
material—members of the various departments had to select approximately one hundred objects. It has been an exhilarating and difficult, and more than occasionally frustrating, task to choose from among the many available works. We had to ask the hypothetical questions curators often ask of themselves: What is the absolute best in the collection? If I could retrieve only a few things in a disaster, what would they be?

Every curator has personal preferences, but they, like collectors, tend to agree on what lends a certain work that specialness that sets it apart. Among the attributes to consider is rarity. Just how many masterpieces can an artist create? Are the materials or the subjects rare? In what numbers have the objects survived? Certainly, age is another element. Great age usually implies rarity but age may also contribute historic distance, scholarly recognition, and other physical and mental patination. Condition is another vital concern. Does the object retain its physical integrity? If it had a reasonably happy existence, and maybe a little extra care, it should not be too different now from when it was new. But the greatest must be judged on their intrinsic quality—and if quality is there, any amount of tears, scratches, scrapes, fading, breaks, patches, and even additions can be surmounted or be of less concern.

The objects in the Bicentennial Treasury are rare; they are old; and, amazingly, they are for the most part in superb condition; they are of the highest quality. But in the final analysis, they have been selected because they are beautifully designed, drawn, painted, carved, polished, joined, or sewn. In them, we find a wonderful variety of creativity wherein the artist’s mind, eyes, and hands have worked magically together to create that specialness that makes a masterpiece. Here is presented a part of the cultural heritage of the United States of which we can be proud.

John K. Howat
Curator of American Paintings and Sculpture
Co-ordinator for the exhibition

The works illustrated in *A Bicentennial Treasury: American Masterpieces from the Metropolitan* have been discussed by the following: American Paintings and Sculpture: Doreen Bolger, John Caldwell, John K. Howat, Lewis I. Sharp (who also served as joint co-ordinator of the exhibition), and Natalie Spasky; American Wing: Marilynn Johnson Bordes, Frances M. Gruber, Morrison H. Heckscher, R. Craig Miller, and Berry B. Tracy; Prints and Photographs: David Kiehl, the late John McKendry, and Weston J. Naef; Twentieth Century Art: Henry Geldzahler.