

The Complicated Lives of Inanimate Objects: A Case (Furniture) Study

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Figure 1. Chest-on-frame. New York. Red Gumwood, Tulip Poplar, Brass drawer pulls and escutcheons. 41.625" (H), 27.75" (W), 13.625" (D). Courtesy Winterthur Museum, Gift of Henry Francis du Pont, 1958.560.

The introductory chapter to a 1970 book entitled *Antique or Fake* asserted, "It seems a logical conclusion that the class of men most connected with furniture were those who actually made it." This statement encapsulates the goals of much modern study of decorative arts objects: to determine when, why, and by whom the objects were made. Although objects often have multiple lives across the span of many years, most scholarship and connoisseurship of objects is limited to the moment of their creation. A culture of reuse, repair, and reproduction of furniture is found in varying degrees throughout American history; it appears in probate inventories from the end of the seventeenth century which include items like "an old trunk," and in domestic advice books of the nineteenth century that explain how to repurpose old furniture. Although identifying the many ways in which various owners might have used an object can be a difficult journey of searching for often ambiguous and sometimes unknowable causalities, exploring possibilities is a crucial step towards understanding the entire scope of an object's life. The continued legacy of reusing objects in American history necessitates that any consideration of an object include not only the original intent of its creator but also the subsequent changes made by its owners.¹



Figure 2. (Left) Chest on Frame, New England, 1680 - 1700. Eastern White Pine, Silver Maple, Brass Drawer Pulls. 36.375" (H), 31" (W), 17.5" (D). Courtesy, Winterthur Museum, gift of Henry Francis du Pont, 1958.686

Figure 3. (Right) Chest-on-frame. Massachusetts, 1670 - 1700. White oak, yellow pine, white pine, poplar, maple. 35.625" (H), 26.5" (W), 18.125" (D). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of Mrs. J. Woodhull Overton, 1969. 69.209. www.metmuseum.org.

This paper will use a chest-on-frame currently in the collection of the Winterthur Museum as a case study to critically examine how a broad approach to authenticity allows for greater insight and nuance in the study of decorative arts objects (Figure 1). This chest-on-frame entered the collection of the Winterthur Museum in 1958 as a bequest from the museum's founder, H.F. du Pont. Du Pont purchased the chest-on-frame no later than 1934, when he loaned it to the Metropolitan Museum of Art for an exhibit of furniture made in New York. The catalogue of the exhibit includes a photo of the chest-on-frame which depicts the object in seemingly the same condition as it appears today. While no information survives about the provenance or maker of this chest-on-frame, its creation is currently attributed to an unknown craftsman in New York during the period of 1675 to 1700. This attribution is primarily based upon the use of tulip poplar and red gumwood, the construction techniques used, and its recognizable Early Baroque style.²

Close examination of the details found on this chest-on-frame calls this proposed origin into question. The top face of the chest-on-frame and the molding underneath it show little of the wear expected in an object of this proposed age. The molding also has a flat profile that appears markedly different from the curved molding found elsewhere on the object. Additionally, the pieces of stamped brass on the drawers and the variety of nails used throughout the chest-on-frame suggest that it was modified in the nineteenth century or later.³

The likelihood that this chest-on-frame was married together from two separate pieces further complicates its attribution. Visible inconsistencies in drawer construction, holes found in the bottom of the chest which could have been used to attach feet, and varying board thickness between the drawers in the chest and in the frame suggest that this chest was used in a different context before it was joined to this frame. The entire chest-on-frame also could have been made at the same time from old pieces of salvaged wood, as the grooves from wear found in the boards supporting the drawers do not seem to result from the use of these drawers. This explanation can in turn be challenged by the consistent layers of paint found over the whole of the chest-on-frame and by the relatively unusual primary and secondary woods, both native to the New York area, that are used on all parts of this object.⁴

This chest-on-frame has a complex history of repurposing that makes identifying a single design source challenging. The small amount of information available about this object's creators, owners, and origin prompts speculation, yet its distinctive form gives clues as to why it might have survived. This object is an unusual example

of a chest-on-frame. While other surviving chest-on-frames in the collections of the Winterthur Museum and the Metropolitan Museum of Art are similarly sized, they are attributed to New England rather than New York (Figures 2 and 3). These chest-on-frames rely on carved patterns as the primary form of ornamentation and have different turning patterns on their legs. Most other surviving chest-on-frames have a chest with a hinged lid on top of a frame rather than a chest of drawers on a frame. This chest-on-frame seems to bear more stylistic similarities to surviving early American high chests than to surviving chest-on-frames. Of the twenty one known surviving American pieces of furniture with twist turnings, there are only four known pieces of case furniture with twist turned legs, this chest-on-frame and three high chests. Even when compared to similar pieces in the collections of the Winterthur Museum and the Metropolitan Museum of Art, this chest-on-frame stands out. (Figures 4 and 5) It is significantly smaller and has longer legs, giving it a more vertical than horizontal form.⁵



Figure 4. (Left) Chest of drawers. New York, 1675 - 1700. Walnut, Red Gum, Tulip Poplar. 49.25" (H), 42.625" (W), 26.125" (D). Courtesy, Winterthur Museum, Gift of Henry Francis du Pont, 1958.559.

Figure 5. (Right) High Chest of Drawers. New York, 1695 - 1720. Sweet Gum, Yellow Poplar, Yellow Pine, White Oak. 58" (H), 45" (W), 24.5" (D). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Rogers Fund, 1936. 36.112a, b. www.metmuseum.org.

This chest-on-frame suggests many possibilities with few definitive answers about its creation. By shifting the questions asked of this object, however, one can uncover and interpret the long arc of American culture. While much ambiguity surrounds its creation, focusing on details like the lock system, layers of finish, and brass pulls and escutcheons of this chest-on-frame brings to light the way it has both facilitated and been shaped by human behaviors throughout its varied uses. The evidence of changes made to this chest-on-frame record the shifting needs of the object's owners.

The upper three drawers of the chest-on-frame were secured by a wooden spring lock system. The bottom drawer of the chest has a keyhole and four holes on the interior of the front face around the keyhole which indicate a lock box was likely once attached, while the top and middle drawers both have wooden spring locks. This lock system created a secure storage place where objects could be protected from most pests, some natural damage, and light-fingered servants or acquaintances. The removal of the lock box from the bottom drawer and the nailing shut of the spring locks on the upper drawers point to shifting behaviors as ease of use and access became more important to its owner than security.

This object's function as a display piece is apparent from the layers of surface finish. Most layers on the legs, front, and sides of the chest-on-frame are not found on the back, suggesting that this piece was generally placed against a wall. The absence of layers of paint on the back also implies that these layers only needed to be applied to areas that people could see throughout the history of the object. The layers of paint found on this chest-on-frame

map owners' changing display sensibilities. Whether they chose to apply a new paint layer or to leave an old finish, owners demonstrated their own vision of style and custodial care. Based on the photograph of this chest-on-frame included in the catalogue of the 1934 exhibit of New York State Furniture, H.F. du Pont and the Winterthur Museum have chosen to keep the same finish on this piece for at least eighty years. In its role as an accessioned museum object, leaving the finish of this chest-on-frame untouched is more valuable than adding a new layer of paint that reflects current tastes. Both du Pont and Winterthur have also chosen to not remove any layers of the paint, preserving the archeological stratigraphy built up by previous owners.⁶

The stamped brass pulls and escutcheons found on all of the drawers are decorative and functional. While all of them have practical purposes, only one escutcheon actually surrounds a keyhole. The other escutcheons serve to establish visual symmetry and pattern. The inner sides of the drawers have marks left by larger cotter pins than those currently used to affix the brass pulls, indicating that a different set of pulls was once affixed to these drawers. Each escutcheon is attached with three nails, but these nails are not put through the three holes included in the design of each escutcheon. This could be the work of a sloppy or inexperienced craftsman, or perhaps the nails were put in holes in the drawer faces left by earlier escutcheons. The marks indicate that a previous owner replaced an earlier set of pulls and escutcheons with the brass work currently on the drawers, presumably to improve appearances or signify orderly care and maintenance.

The amalgamated nature of this object makes the identification of a single design source difficult. When an object has been put together from pieces, should scholars evaluate its design as a whole, or as a sequence of individual parts? The layers of this chest-on-frame challenge conventional notions of original design intent and subsequent change, as the creator of this object could be specified as the person who put these pieces together in its current form or as those individuals who made each of its parts. The people who painted or modified this chest-on-frame were also its makers. Accepting a broad definition of creation, which includes both the original design of the chest-on-frame and the subsequent changes made to it, allows for consideration of how design elements can be repurposed to suit different needs at disparate points in an object's existence.



Figure 6. *The Healing of the Lame Man*. Raphael, 1515-16. Bodycolor over charcoal underdrawing on paper, mounted on canvas. The Victoria and Albert Museum, on loan from HM Queen Elizabeth II, rcin 912946. Public domain, accessed via Wikimedia Commons.

The twist-turned legs are perhaps the most visually striking part of this object. They also articulate previous owners' visions for its use. These twist turnings have rasp and file marks, indicating that they were made by using hand carving that required considerable time and skill. The turnings on the legs communicated not only the talent of the artisan who made them, but also the means of the owner who could afford to pay for them. A structurally unnecessary fifth leg privileges aesthetic design over utility. The legs display the wealth and fashion preferences of owners, while also drawing upon an extensive design history that was part of a shared European stylistic vocabulary.⁷



Figure 7. The Baldacchino of St. Peter's Basilica, Rome. Created by Gian Lorenzo Bernini, 1623 - 1634. Public domain, accessed via Wikimedia Commons.

The maker of the single bine, spiral-turned legs of this chest-on-frame treated them as miniature columns, a stylistic convention common in European furniture. This type of column is known in architecture as a Solomonic column, a name that derived from a large set of spiral marble columns brought to St. Peter's Basilica in Rome. After the installation of these columns in the fourth century, a legend sprang up which claimed that they were originally from King Solomon's Temple, hence the term Solomonic. The columns in St. Peter's and the allusion to Biblical scripture helped disseminate this helical form. Raphael copied them in a 1516 cartoon used to design a tapestry that spread throughout Europe (Figure 6). Baroque architects across the continent embraced Solomonic columns, most visibly in Bernini's Baldacchino, which was installed in St. Peter's Basilica in 1653 (Figure 7). The Solomonic form served as a visual link to antiquity for all of those who visited Rome, especially those on the Grand Tour of Europe.⁸

The use of the Solomonic column in early Baroque architecture and technical developments in furniture making led to the use of spiral turning in English, French, and Dutch furniture produced in the seventeenth century. Spiral turning was most common on chairs and tables but is also appeared on case furniture, clocks, and metal work (Figure 8). The popularity of furniture with spiral turnings in the seventeenth century is corroborated by period images that establish the use of spiral turned legs as a distinct design element in the Early Baroque style (Figure 9). This tradition was transmitted to the American colonies through printed media, imported furniture, and migrant artisans. Furniture with spiral turned elements in the Early Baroque style was produced in British American colonies through the beginning of the eighteenth century and occasionally surfaced thereafter as a variation among turned stair balusters in elite homes.⁹

The form re-emerged and flourished during the 1840s. While spiral turnings in architecture and furniture were commonly found in the Jacobean and Restoration periods of history, nineteenth century commentators described the



Figure 8. (Left) Table. New York, 1680 - 1710. Walnut, Pine. 28.25" (H), 42.875" (W), 19" (D). Courtesy, Winterthur Museum, museum purchase, 1959.5.

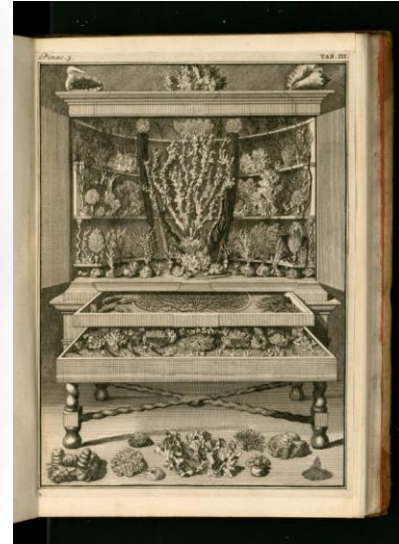


Figure 9. (Right) Illustration from *Wondertooneel der Nature*, Tome 2, pg. 295. Levinus Vincent. University of Strasbourg. Public Domain, accessed via Wikimedia Commons.

contemporary usage of spiral turned columns as a part of the Gothic or Elizabethan Revivals.¹⁰ The Gothic Revival was truly an international movement. Craftsmen and designers in England, France, and America all produced works in accordance with the writings of men such as John Ruskin, who emphasized the moral and aesthetic superiority of the Gothic Revival. Andrew Jackson Downing took up this theme in America and popularized the Gothic Revival with the American public. He emphasized the use of twisted columns in architecture, interior design, and furniture to create a domestic space that he felt was particularly comfortable for women. He also noted the international and romantic inspirations for his designs, attributing the use of spiral columns to a range of historical times and places, including Ancient Rome, Flanders, Elizabethan England, the French Renaissance, and towns on the Rhine. The design prescriptions of Downing and other Gothic Revival authors might have been an inspiration to the person who put disparate pieces together to create this chest-on-frame. Regardless of when this object attained its present form, nineteenth-century owners would have interpreted its spiral turned legs through the lens of Elizabethan and Gothic Revival design reforms.¹¹

These reformers freighted domestic design with moral and ethical principles that molded responsible behavior. Associating the American origins of what he called the Elizabethan style with the virtues of Puritan immigrants, Downing urged people to lead a more frugal and creative life by adopting tastes that were appropriate to their financial condition. Abstracted and simplified in the 1840s and 50s as cottage furniture, Elizabethan Revival styles laid the groundwork for the twentieth century Colonial Revival, when furniture makers advertised their ability to reproduce Gothic and Elizabethan furniture as well as Colonial styles.¹²

This confusion of comingled styles is found throughout the design history of the spiral column, which was first used in Europe as a revival of an Ancient design, and subsequently reused in the furniture and architecture of many revival movements. The continual reinterpretation of spiral elements marks the continuity of design elements in varying times and locations. The designs used in these revivals were never quite the same as the original styles which they imitated; even reproductions bear touches of the period of their conception as well as design elements brought from the past.

The spiral turned legs of this chest-on-frame are a part of a rich design history, yet they make up just one element of this object. The legs evoke centuries of international design experiment while simultaneously showing the limits of looking at an object only at the moment of its creation. The continual re-imagining of spiral turned legs makes it impossible to draw upon a single design genealogy as the source of this piece. Just as spiral turned elements were reused and reinterpreted to fit designers' visions throughout history, this chest-on-frame is a product of changing uses and needs.

This chest-on-frame brings together different pasts to form a new object; it is a literal hybrid of pieces joined in a moment of re-use, re-formation, and re-purposing. Because no information survives to indicate when, where, or

how this merger happened, it is difficult to explain the motives behind this object's creation. The important question to ask is whether this information matters. The origin of this chest-on-frame is masked in ambiguity, yet the person who designed this piece found value in it. Instead of discarding old pieces of wood and buying something new, the creator(s) recycled the past to use in the present. All objects, including those accessioned into museum collections, take on multiple identities as owners adapt them to suit their desires.

This tradition of reuse is continued at the Winterthur Museum. At its most basic level, the collections of the Museum are recycled objects that have been repurposed to educate and engage the public. The interpretation of value in this context is predicated upon the assumption that the items in the collection are authentic. Curators typically dismiss a piece like this chest-on-frame, as compromised or "fake," but narrow definitions of authenticity limit scholarly interpretation. This chest-on-frame is an example of objects' mutability and stubborn durability. It is a symbol of the ways in which humans take things and alter them to suit their purposes. The clues of the past—from tiny holes left by a lock, to layers of paint, to the changing meanings of its spiral turned legs—mark the evolving and interdependent relationships of objects and owners. This chest-on-frame reveals the many ways in which the lives of humans and objects intertwine throughout history.

¹ For examples of connoisseurship focusing on object creation, see: Charles F. Montgomery, "Some Remarks on the Practice and Science of Connoisseurship," in Thomas J. Schlereth, ed., *Material Culture Studies in America* (Nashville: American Association for State and Local History, 1992 [1961]), 143-52; E. McClung Fleming, "Artifact Study: A Proposed Model," *Winterthur Portfolio*, vol. 9(1974), 153-73. [Jstor]; Jules D. Prown, "Mind in Matter: An Introduction to Material Culture Theory and Method," *Winterthur Portfolio*, vol. 17 (1982), 1-19. [Jstor]. This paper draws upon ideas about the lives of objects, objects' impact on humans, and object entanglement as presented in Ian Hodder, *Entangled: An Archaeology of the Relationships between Humans and Things* (Malden, Mass. And Oxford: John Wiley and Sons, Inc., 2012) and Arjun Appadurai, "Introduction: commodities and the politics of value," in *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Political Perspective*, ed. Arjun Appadurai (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1986). Charles Hayward, *Antique or Fake?: The Making of Old Furniture* (London: Evans Brothers Limited, 1970), 7; Probate Inventories and Wills, Col. 61, The Downs Collection of Manuscripts and Printed Ephemera, The Winterthur Library; Lydia M. Child, *The Frugal American Housewife*, (Boston: Carter, Hendee, and Co., 1832), 10, 88, 114; Catherine Beecher, *Housekeeper and Healthkeeper* (New York: Harper & Brother, Publishers, 1873), 128, 139, 194, 340.

² Joseph Downs and Ruth Ralston, *A Loan Exhibition of New York State Furniture with Contemporary Accessories*, (New York: Dover Publications, 1969), 4, and fig. 34.; "Conservation Report. No. 1958.0560", Winterthur Conservation File, The Winterthur Museum.; Rosemary Krill, *Early American Decorative Arts, 1620 - 1860, A Handbook for Interpreters* (New York: AltaMira Press, 2010), 35.

³ *Early American Copper, Tin and Brass* (New York: Medill McBride Company, 1950) 92 - 93.

⁴ A pending examination of the surface stratigraphy should soon uncover more information on this point and will hopefully provide some clarity about this object.

⁵ Frances Gruber Safford, *American Furniture in the Metropolitan Museum of Art: I. Early Colonial Period: The Seventeenth-Century and William and Mary Styles* (New Haven, Yale UP, 2007), 253 - 262, 306; Peter M. Kenny, "Flat Gates, Draw Bars, Twists, and Urns: New York's Distinctive, Early Baroque Oval Tables with Falling Leaves," In *American Furniture, 1994*, ed. Luke Beckerdite (London: The Chipstone Foundation, 1994), 122 - 123.

⁶ Isabel O'Neil, *The Art of the Painted Finish for Furniture & Decoration: Antiquing, Laquering, Gilding, & the Great Impersonators* (New York: William Morrow & Company, Inc., 1971), 21.

⁷ Kenny, "Flat Gates," 123; and Adam Bowett, *English Furniture, 1660 -1714: From Charles II to Queen Anne* (Woodbridge: Antique Collectors' Club, 2002), 74 - 75.

⁸ Bowett, *English Furniture*, 72; Anthony Blunt, "Rubens and Architecture," *The Burlington Magazine*, Vol. 119, No. 894 (Sep., 1977), 613, 621; J.B. Ward Perkins, "The Shrine of St. Peter and Its Twelve Spiral Columns," *The Journal of Roman Studies*, Vol. 42, Parts 1 and 2 (1952), 27, 33; and Michael Snodin and John Styles, *Design and the Decorative Arts: Britain 1500 - 1900* (London: V&A Publications, 2001), 262.

⁹ Snodin, *Design and the Decorative Arts*, 56, 58, 73; Bowett, *English Furniture*, 14, 72, 174

¹⁰ Snodin, *Design and the Decorative Arts*, 208; and Mary Jean Smith Madigan, *Nineteenth Century Furniture: Innovation, Revival, and Reform* (New York: Art & Antiques, 1982), 7.

¹¹ Snodin, *Design and the Decorative Arts*, 338; John Ruskin, *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* (New York: Harper, [n.d.]), 49; and Andrew Jackson Downing, *The Architecture of Country Houses* (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1969) 345-346, 377, 391, 408, 448 - 450; and Henry Carey Baird and David Hanks, *Victorian Gothic & Renaissance Revival Furniture: Two Victorian Pattern Books Published by Henry Carey Baird; with a New Introduction by David Hanks* (Philadelphia: Athenaeum of Philadelphia, 1977), ix - x.

¹² Downing, *The Architecture of Country Houses*, 449- 450; and David P. Lindquist and Caroline C. Warren, *Colonial Revival Furniture: With Prices* (Radnor, PA: Wallace-Homestead Book Co., 1993), 49, 54, 87-89, 116.

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