

The New Criterion ^{35th} anniversary

December 2016

A monthly review *edited by Roger Kimball*

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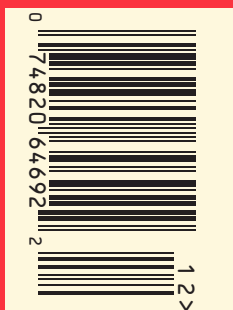
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Volume 35, Number 4, \$7.75 / £7.50



emotional content and a distinct, prodigious style simultaneously. The painting regularly resides in Dublin on indefinite loan from the local Jesuits, whose generosity in this case cannot be overstated.

Most of the other artists presented fare poorly in comparison to Ribera and Caravaggio. Cecco del Caravaggio's two contributions, one from Apsley House and the other from the Ashmolean, are especially derivative and tinny—genre scenes at their most banal. In addition to being his assistant, Cecco is rumored to have been Caravaggio's lover, but if the two did have relations it seems little of the Caravaggio genius found its way to the young disciple. Matthias Stom, Gerrit van Honthorst, Dirck van Baburen, and Hendrick ter Brugghen all carry the torch (sorry) for "Utretcht Caravaggism," that Dutch strain of tenebrism, which all the aforementioned seemed to have picked up in Rome. Their pictures tend to rely on that *bête noire* of tenebrism—the presence of a central candle serving as a light source. Caravaggio himself never used the trope, but so prevalent was it among his followers that the great master's reputation has been duly tainted. The most extreme example of the tendency is found in Adam de Coster's *A Man Singing by Candlelight* (1625–35), which depicts the subject of the title holding a candle, the top of which is obscured by a music stand. The light given off is flamboyantly strong, especially when set against the deepest of black backgrounds. The sumptuously attired singer, with his fur collar and feathered cap, emerges as a hyper-realistic vision, his face a varied topography of light and shadow. Here is chiaroscuro at its most tarted up, and, while hardly the most technically proficient picture in the show, it retains a certain charm for its dedication to the tenebristic contrivance.

Special mention among the candlemongers must be given to Georges de La Tour, whose scenes, with their playing-card-faced inhabitants, present a somewhat surreal take on the Caravaggesque style and as a result register as deeply original. His *Dice Players* (ca. 1650–51) mostly obscures the candle which lights the scene and gives a startling gloss to the roller's

hand, which in its spindly woodenness has the look of a mannequin's. The light amplifies the colors of the figures' costumes, drawing out a resplendent orange-red in multiple places and intensifying the gold brocade of the central figure's arms. The painting, thought to be de La Tour's last, is proof that the influence of Caravaggio could indeed be applied judiciously and to great effect.

If the National Gallery's intention in bringing together "Beyond Caravaggio" was to prove the worth of Caravaggio's followers then the result is fairly middling. If, however, the aim was to show how Caravaggio did it first, and best, then the show can be considered a great success. Following the show's tenure in London, it will travel to Edinburgh and Dublin, giving the population of the entirety of the British Isles the chance to judge for themselves.

—Benjamin Riley

"Art and Industry in Early America:
Rhode Island Furniture, 1650–1830"
Yale University Art Gallery,
New Haven.
August 19, 2016–January 8, 2017

Our eye is immediately drawn to the carved mahogany concave and convex shells, fans of radiating flutes, and ribs with lyrical edges that act as dynamic protrusions and recesses across the front of the eighteenth-century desk. This "block-and-shell" design, a unique symbol of our distinctly American aesthetic, was the product of the woodworking titans of one very small region—Rhode Island. The miniature state has historically been given the lion's share of credit for virtuosity in American decorative arts, and its masterpieces have dominated furniture scholarship as well as the auction market.

It will be surprising to learn, then, that it has been almost a half century since the last major survey of Rhode Island furniture. But at long last, a more complete story of the colorful history of Rhode Island woodworking and its influence has come to light in the illuminating exhibition "Art and Industry in Early America:

Rhode Island Furniture, 1650–1830,” located in the almost-as-diminutive State of Connecticut at the Yale University Art Gallery.

Two equally important components were vital to the conception of the exhibit—the lifetime research of Patricia F. Kane (the Friends of American Arts Curator of American Decorative Arts at Yale University Art Gallery) and the establishment of the Rhode Island Furniture Archive at the Yale University Art Gallery.

Ms. Kane, a tireless champion of American decorative arts, is the driving force behind this exhibition. With expansive abilities, from analysis of stylistic details and deciphering the mysterious cursive markings on furniture drawers to divining rare historical documents from regional judicial archives (such as eighteenth-century indentures stipulating a young apprentice’s winter tutoring), she continues to inspire fellow researchers, collectors, and potential exhibition lenders alike.

The Rhode Island Furniture Archive (RIFA) was established in 2010 under the stewardship of Kane. An ever-expanding, publicly accessible digital archival trove, it contains more than three thousand images and text entries related to the furniture of the Rhode Island cabinetmaking trade during the Colonial and Federal periods as well as its makers and owners. RIFA and the many similar online collections launched within the past decade represent a new golden age of archiving. With an eminently accessible digital form, the ascendancy of twenty-first century archiving has led to an explosion of shared knowledge, new connections, and inevitable reattributions.

In this exhibition, Kane and her colleagues weave the scholarly threads collected from over ten years of RIFA research and bring to life the data and objects—telling us new stories and challenging our previously formed conclusions about the Colonial and Federal American experience, whether it be about the Rhode Island mercantile economy or the roles of women, children, Native Americans, or African Americans.

Moving from archival abstraction to the physical present, as we proceed through the

galleries we are taken chronologically through the evolution of the Rhode Island style and its influences—illustrated by the more than 130 works on view, including side chairs, clocks, bureaus, desks, high chests of drawers, tables, and upholstery. Each gallery is carefully arranged to create an intimate relationship between viewer and object. The pieces are artfully placed to encourage a visual interplay between the objects, and their interrelatedness is an essential element of the discursive exhibition.

We are introduced to Rhode Island cabinetmaking in the early Colonial period (1650–1700) with chests and “wainscot” and “carver” chairs from Providence to Westerly, demonstrating the newly understood importance of Rhode Island woodworking dating from its founding. The previously under-explored “pre-golden” 1700–1740 period is next examined, highlighted by dramatic burl-veneered exteriors set off by rectangular bands of inlay on desks and high chests of drawers. The exhibit also shares new evidence of a much larger eighteenth-century chair- and upholstery-trade in Rhode Island than has previously been recorded.

The presence of the woodworker is near as we see videos of carvings and hear the sounds of chisels tapping from recordings in several galleries. The exhibition-goer is placed in the workshop to view a disassembled high chest of drawers from 1759 by John Townsend, with its drawers removed to virtually float on an adjacent support, allowing the viewer to have a complete view of the piece inside and out. We explore the glue blocks, dovetails, markings, and secondary woods, a view usually only accessible to curators or certain furniture collectors at an auction-house viewing.

The exhibition crescendos mid-way through with the “golden age” of Rhode Island furniture (1740–1780) and a rare assembly of five signed “block-and-shell” bureau tables of Newport-trained cabinetmakers. Dramatically installed along the length of a single gallery, it’s a veritable trove of Townsend and Goddard masterpieces. Our eyes jump back-and-forth between these similar forms, displayed in close proximity side-by-side, to experience the nuanced variations on a theme.

Ending on a quiet note, the exhibit concludes with restrained Federal-era examples from 1790–1830. The pieces, some in the Hepplewhite or Grecian styles, reflect the eventual waning influence of the Rhode Island cabinetmaking trade, which suffered from the rise of other industrial centers including Boston and New York.

Effectively reuniting icons of American decorative art with their historical context, this exhibit helps us bridge the gap between human experience and object. What has the collective wealth of countless sources and careful study for this exhibition revealed? As Patricia F. Kane reported succinctly in the

recent Oswaldo Rodriguez Roque Symposium, held at Yale on September 15: “Fluidity.” Scholars are now beginning to understand the true extent of the organic rapid movement of ideas, people, and products in seventeenth- to nineteenth-century America.

The show’s related publication, an impressive seven pounds of almost five-hundred pages of scholarly analysis and images of each piece from this exhibit, is the most up-to-date analysis of Rhode Island decorative art currently available. This catalogue is sure to be considered the American furniture community’s handbook for the foreseeable future.

—Genevieve Wheeler Brown

Forthcoming in *The New Criterion*:

Free speech and the academy: a symposium

with essays by Nigel Biggar, Peter Bonilla, Anthony Daniels, Dominic Green, Daniel Johnson, Roger Kimball, Andrew C. McCarthy, Peter Wood & others

The perils & promises of populism

with essays by James Piereson, Andrew C. McCarthy & others

Dantan Jeune: sculptor of musicians *by James F. Penrose*

Letter from Hungary: political polarization & private pleasures
by Paul Hollander