

# The William & Mary Style

BY CHARLES BENDER

This period ushered in a radical shift in furniture design and construction.

If you ask most people what they know about period furniture, many will shrug and say something like, “Oh, you mean that Colonial-style furniture.” Most woodworkers tend to gravitate to Queen Anne, Chippendale, Federal or Arts & Crafts pieces. Sure, those names represent different styles of furniture but, until you really begin to study them, you may not realize that the periods flow from one into another. As you study the different styles you begin to see how each period builds on the one before it. And as you move backward through the periods, studying the design and construction changes that took place, you’ll eventually come to the one style that kicked off a furniture revolution: William & Mary.

Prior to the William & Mary period (in this country, at least) most furniture was boxy, massive and simply decorated. Chests were simply boxes that sat on the ground or were on stump legs that were an integral part of the construction of the box. Frame-and-panel construction was rampant in this early form of furniture. Decoration was in the form of applied bulbous half turnings or shallow relief carving. To top it all off, much of the furniture was made from that most plentiful of woods, oak.

When William of Orange and Mary II were welcomed into England in 1688 from Holland, they brought with them lots of Dutch craftsmen. They also brought with them a new sensibility in furniture design. In general, furniture became a bit lighter in feel. The ornamentation began to change from the low-relief carving and applied half turnings to turned structural elements, pierced carvings and caning. The choice of primary wood began to shift from



**Enduring design.** The high chest, or highboy, was a form introduced during the William & Mary period that has retained its appeal to this day.

oak to a wood that already had a deep, rich, dark color: walnut.

For you fans of Jacobean furniture, I’m not disparaging pieces from that period. I have a healthy respect for them. I’ve even been known to make one from time to time. But even the most devout fan of Jacobean furniture has to

admit that the pieces made during the William & Mary period shifted design emphasis from a stiff, ecclesiastical design architecture to one that was much more inviting and gracious.

William & Mary furniture is identifiable by its bun feet, symmetry in design, the use of bold mouldings with architectural propor-

tioning and chairs with canted backs. One of the period's greatest contributions to English furniture was the highboy. In this country, the form held favor long after it had faded in England. If we look at the design changes in chairs, tables and case pieces during this period, we can easily see how William & Mary furniture took major steps away from the Jacobean style and ran headlong toward the Queen Anne.

The United States began life as a British colony, so naturally we took our decorating cues from the mother country. And though we may hate to admit it, we looked to England even after the American Revolution to find out how our homes should look.

Why do we now favor Queen Anne and Chippendale? Perhaps because the furniture of those two periods was the furniture of our Founding Fathers. And, while we took cues from England, the furniture from both periods had a distinctly American flair. It deviated from its English counterparts in so many ways that it's sometimes difficult to associate the two in the same context.

So why does William & Mary furniture get ignored by most folks these days? Frankly, the furniture was long out of style by the time of the American Revolution. And, although we added our own flair to the style, it still had a very distinct "English" look to it.

By 1695, the official "starting" date for the William & Mary period, we were no longer a group of ragtag settlers. We had established "civilized" colonies populated with craftsmen who were eager for new settlers to come and buy wares. Because most of the settlers were coming from England and other parts of Europe, they wanted to own things that were familiar to them, yet they wanted to distinguish themselves as Americans.

The presence of a growing number of professional craftsmen changed both the design and construction of furniture in a great number of ways during this period. One such change was drawer construction. We began the period with the side-hung drawers left over from earlier days and moved rapidly toward the paneled bottoms and bottom runners of the Queen Anne period.

## Seating Pieces

If we begin by looking at how seating designs changed in America from the Jacobean to the William & Mary period, we can see some radical things happening. While the joint stool remained popular throughout the Colonial period, chairs saw the greatest changes. Chairs from the Jacobean (or Pilgrim) period primar-



**Change in runners.** In the Jacobean period, drawers were usually on side-hung runners (left). In the William & Mary period, runners slipped beneath the drawers.

ily fell into two groups: turner chairs and joiner chairs. The turner chairs had rush or splint seats and were typically of ladder-back construction. They tended to be rather straight-backed in nature. Most Shaker chairs emulate the turner chairs of this period.

Jacobean joiner chairs were of frame-and-panel construction with plank seats. They, too, tended to be rather straight-backed in nature. With the shift to the William & Mary design sense, we see the joiners' chair backs become canted for comfort. The backs were at a distinct angle to the seats. We also begin to see how

the chairs shifted from having parts that were cut out to emulate turnings to incorporating turnings into the frame-and-panel construction. The back construction changed in that the panels began to lift off the seat, giving the chair a lighter appearance. Once the back rail lifted off the seat, chair backs began to shift from frame-and-panel construction to slatted backs with carved crest rails. This also led to frame construction with the use of caning and leather for the seats and backs of chairs.

The turners' chairs of the William & Mary period also saw shifts in design and construc-



**Curved back.** As the William & Mary period progressed, chairs began to change in design. Here you can see the beginnings of the Queen Anne period with the reversing curve of the back. These chairs were mass-produced in Boston and shipped throughout the colonies due to their popular design.



**Comfortable and showy.** The wing chair (or easy chair) became popular in the William & Mary period. With settlements and trade routes firmly established, the wealthy had access to imported fabrics, which could be shown off on this type of chair.

tion techniques. We begin to see canted backs on them as well. This meant cutting the rear legs out of a larger plank of wood, then offset turning them to create the decoration for the chair. We can see a shift from the ladder-back style to frame construction with slatted, caned and upholstered backs. We even see fully upholstered easy chairs come into vogue. Comfort was being firmly ushered into the world of chairs.

The design aspect of William & Mary chairs also deserves some consideration. For the first time, chairs became something more than a stool with a back (and possibly arms). Chairs began to take on more than merely a function. They began to become visually pleasing, and to make a statement about the owner's decorating taste. In essence, chairs became, for the very first time, works of functional art.

### Casework Pieces

If we look at case furniture, we see the same radical changes occurring. Instead of utilitarian boxes that sat on the floor or ground (depending on whether your home had a

*“Design is everything! Without good design, the greatest craftsmanship is wasted. Not all great museum pieces are of the best craftsmanship. It was design that made them a treasure.”*

— Wally Kunkel (a.k.a. Mr. Sawdust)  
from “How to Master the Radial Saw”

floor or not), we began to see chests gracefully suspended in the air by sinuous legs. We also began to see the use of highly figured and sometimes exotic woods, and veneers being used as “decoration” instead of relying on turned or low-relief carved elements.

Another area of refinement in case furniture was the growing use of brass hardware. This brass hardware wasn't merely a utilitarian addition. Pulls and escutcheons were made in decorative forms or had pictorial chasing; that added interest to the overall piece. These

brasses were set against the background of polished wood. Again, for the first time, hardware became more than a functional method of opening and closing doors and drawers. It became an integral part of the design of the piece of furniture. It added to the artwork's function.

### Quintessential William & Mary

As noted earlier, the biggest contribution to furniture design from the William & Mary period is the highboy, or high chest. If you've ever looked at a Philadelphia Chippendale or a New England Queen Anne highboy and thought, “There's a masterful balance of joinery and ornamentation” (c'mon, I think that stuff all the time), you have William & Mary to thank. If not for them, the highboy might never have been introduced into our vernacular. And it all began with those crazy bun feet.

When builders began to raise chests off the ground, the first method was to extend the corner posts of the frame-and-panel construction to create a space between the floor and the box. It wasn't long before the turners got hold of the design and began adding Dutch-influenced bun feet to chests. Why can't you make something both beautiful and functional? The stuff in the chest really needed to be up off the dirt floor, and those stump feet are fairly plain. So, why not add a bit of style and flash? (That's 17th-century “bling,” for you younger readers.)

From there, it didn't take long to stretch those bun feet into legs. Adding legs to support the chest gave the piece a much lighter look while adding practicality. A chest on legs made it easier to get into the drawers. It also put the chest squarely in your line of sight, making it the perfect showcase for those polished, figured veneers and shiny brass hardware. Again, William & Mary added form to function.

Additionally, there was a clear shift in construction methods. High chests, or highboys, were essentially dovetailed boxes set on legs. Prior to this period, chests were primarily of frame-and-panel construction. By shifting to the dovetailed box method of construction, larger flat surfaces were created that facilitated the use of the figured veneers.

### Table Design

Tables also saw a radical change in function and design. Prior to the William & Mary period, tables tended to be four legs with stretchers and aprons, and a fixed top. During the William & Mary period we saw a shift to adaptable furniture. Tables began to have moving parts. The

**A drop of style.** Hardware became more of a decorative element during this period. With the growing popularity of lace in clothing, brasses often were pierced and chased to mimic the interlacing designs.



**Fancy feet.** Feet became decorative elements during the William & Mary period. Instead of being merely part of the side panel construction, turned ball or bun feet added a new element of design.



**Smaller appeal.** With the advent of the high chest, or highboy, dressing tables also came into fashion.



**Room for more.** Gateleg tables became the rage because they could be closed into a much smaller piece. This allowed the table to be placed against the wall leaving the room open for other uses.

collapsible table was introduced, and the gateleg began yet another design revolution.

Until late in the 18th century, rooms in houses tended to be multi-functional. In the earliest homes a table of fixed size was often an obstruction. By adding the design features of a swing leg and drop leaves to tables, we could finally fold a table up to a small enough size that it was out of the way. Even with the leaves in the down position, one could still use the table. You could work or entertain on the center section. If you had more work or more company, you could extend one or both leaves. This was a design innovation that would change the furniture world as we knew it.

Another addition to the design culture of the late 17th and early 18th centuries is the dressing table, sometimes referred to as a lowboy. It's hard to tell whether this form should be discussed as a piece of case furniture or as a table. Clearly, they were in use as tables yet they relate to highboys, or high chests. They were not overly useful as storage pieces, nor were they intended to be used as work or entertaining tables. Their size was perfect for storing one's personal effects and giving just enough workspace for applying wigs and makeup. Constructed using the same methods as the highboys, dressing tables were usually smaller versions of the base of the matching high chest. Design and decoration usually followed that of the highboy.

### Enduring Influence

With all these radical design and construction innovations, is it any wonder Americans were

reluctant to give them up easily? If we look at the highboys and lowboys built by the Goddards and Townsends in Newport during the latter part of the 18th century, we see the same construction techniques are held over from the William & Mary period. These masterpieces of American furniture are constructed using the same techniques as their predecessors – dovetailed boxes atop legs. While the construction methodology changed in most of the country during the Queen Anne period to the now familiar mortise-and-tenon construction, in Newport they saw fit to continue the earlier method.

We see the gateleg table shift and change throughout the Queen Anne and Chippendale periods, becoming even lighter in appearance and incorporating the new design elements of the cabriole leg. Chairs also continued their change in construction and design, first by adding the cyma, or reversing curve, to the shape of the back then eventually adding the same shape to the seat.

Over time, the William & Mary penchant for pierced and carved crest rails would find its way into the pierced and carved splats of Chippendale-period chairs. The bun foot on chests would eventually be replaced with the bracket foot. But without that first bun foot, we might never have known the graceful curve of the ogee foot.

Throughout furniture history, styles and construction methods have built upon everything that came before. Chippendale built upon the foundation of Queen Anne by expanding the Chinese and French influ-

ences in design and construction. Hepplewhite and Shaker furniture shifted to a less ornate sensibility. Sheraton and the Neo-Classical furniture makers hearkened back to the Chippendale period with a nod to Egyptian, Roman and Greek architecture. Stickley and the Greens took their cues from the pre-Queen Anne days.

So the next time you're wandering in an antique shop or your favorite museum, take a moment to look over that piece of William & Mary furniture. Even if you're not a fan, you might just begin to appreciate that the "Glorious Revolution" that began in 1688 had more influence on your favorite furniture style than you may have imagined. **PWM**

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