
DINING ROOM

Dining Table

Dining Table, c. 1800, mahogany, the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, the Bayou Bend Collection, gift of Miss Ima Hogg, B.69, 168.



MISSION

During and after the American Revolution, Americans wished to demonstrate their identity as an independent nation worthy of respect from themselves and people of other nations. With this in mind, what do these historic objects tell us about American identity—what it meant to be an American—during this time period?

Dining Table

This English table was used by collector Ima Hogg as the centerpiece of her dining room.

TRIVIA QUESTIONS



Why is there an English table in this room if this museum focuses on American history?

In this specific case, the collector, Ima Hogg, was not able to find an American table from the period that was right for her museum. But in fact, although America had many talented furniture makers, some people just preferred European goods and continued to buy English furniture even after the American Revolution.



Is this how the table would have looked in 1800?

The table is set for formal dining with a set of historic dishes. One thing that is missing is that a good housekeeper of this time would have covered the carpet underneath the table with a crumb cloth to protect it. In the days before vacuum cleaners and rug shampoo, keeping rugs and carpets clean was much harder.



How would a formal meal be served on this table in 1800?

In this style of entertaining, dinner was brought to the table in two or three courses. Many different dishes were placed on the table at the same time, and the diners would choose those that they preferred and then serve each other from the dishes near them. No one was expected to try everything—in fact you would be considered greedy if you did. Later in the 1800s, the fashion for having everyone eat the same food at a dinner became common, and some people disliked the new style because they considered it rude for the hostess to decide for everyone what they were going to eat.

DINING ROOM

Tucker Pitcher

Tucker China Factory, *Pitcher*,
c. 1826–38, hard-paste porcelain
with enamel and gilding, the
Museum of Fine Arts, Houston,
the Bayou Bend Collection,
museum purchase funded by
the Alice Sneed West Foundation
in memory of Natalie Gallagher,
B.89.8.



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Tucker Pitcher

This 1828 pitcher made by William Ellis Tucker came from the first factory in the United States to successfully produce porcelain ceramics.

TRIVIA QUESTIONS



Why was it important to Americans to be able to make porcelain in the United States?

Porcelain was considered the most elegant and desirable of ceramics. For many generations, the secrets of manufacturing it were known only in Asia. Finally, Europeans figured out how to make porcelain, but it was decades more before America's first successful porcelain factory opened.



Why did it take so long to manufacture fine ceramics in the United States?

Running a ceramics factory was very complicated and expensive. It also required workers with a lot of experience in making pottery, of whom very few lived in colonial America. It was not until well after the American Revolution that the financial, staff, and technological resources for making fine ceramics were in place. Once they were, however, it was a point of pride for Americans to be able to make the same kinds of objects that would otherwise be imported.



Was the Tucker factory the first in the United States to produce porcelain?

No, but it was the first to do so in quantity over several years. A few entrepreneurs had experimented with making porcelain much earlier, even before the Revolution, but they could never compete successfully with Chinese and European ceramics.

DINING ROOM

Willing Porcelain Dinner Service

Teabowl and Saucer Dish from a Dinner Service, c. 1800–10, porcelain, the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, the Bayou Bend Collection, museum purchase in honor of the Bayou Bend Docent Organization on the occasion of its 50th anniversary, B.2011.5.126; B.2011.5.148.



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Willing Porcelain Dinner Service

This very large set of Chinese porcelain dinnerware, decorated with symbolism from ancient Greece and Rome, belonged to a successful Philadelphia businessman named Thomas Willing around 1800.

TRIVIA QUESTIONS



Why would an American businessman want porcelain from China for his dinner dishes?

Chinese porcelain was considered to be one of the most fashionable and elegant forms of dinnerware available to the wealthy. It also reflected America's new status as an independent nation, able to trade with countries like China directly instead of being forced to purchase imported goods from English merchants.



Was this kind of pattern common for Chinese porcelain?

No, Thomas Willing or his agent probably ordered it especially for the Willing family. It would have taken about two years for the order to go to China on a sailing ship, be made, and come back to Philadelphia.



Why would Thomas Willing have chosen to put Greek or Roman symbolism on a Chinese porcelain dinner service?

Furnishings with classical design elements were becoming fashionable in Europe as exploration of ancient ruins and sites helped people learn more about Greek and Roman society. European fashion was still considered the model for good taste in America, even though it was now an independent nation. Also, ancient Greek and Roman government had been models used in forming the new American government.

DINING ROOM

Side Chair

Side Chair, One of a Pair, 1785–1820, mahogany and holly; ash, the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, the Bayou Bend Collection, museum purchase funded by the Theta Charity Antiques Show, B.92.11.1



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Side Chair

The set of chairs around the dining table was made in New York City around 1800. The decorative motifs were borrowed from ancient Greece and Rome, as interpreted by English furniture makers and copied by American craftsmen.

TRIVIA QUESTIONS



Would people have considered furniture from New York City to be fashionable?

Yes! After the American Revolution, New York began to develop into the economic and fashion center of America. Although it was not until the 1820s and 1830s that it really pulled ahead of cities like Boston or Philadelphia in terms of power and influence, in 1800 it was already a very important American city.



Why would Americans want furniture with Greek and Roman motifs?

Furnishings with classical design elements were becoming fashionable in Europe as exploration of ancient ruins and sites helped people learn more about Greek and Roman society. Also, ancient Greek and Roman government had been models used in forming the new American government.



These chairs look uncomfortable, since they have very little padding. Are they?

Good manners did not allow people to slouch or lean back at a formal dinner. They would sit up straight without allowing their backs to touch the back of the chair. Formal American manners were adopted from Europe, although many visitors found American society to be more relaxed than that of England or France.

DINING ROOM

Hong Bowl

Punch Bowl, c. 1770,
hard-paste porcelain
with enamel and gilding,
the Museum of Fine
Arts, Houston, the Bayou
Bend Collection, gift of
Miss Ima Hogg, B.671.



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Hong Bowl

This punch bowl was made in China in around 1770, before the American Revolution. It shows the area of Canton (now known as Guangzhou) where Western merchants traded for Chinese goods. The Americans would join the China trade shortly after the revolution ended.

TRIVIA QUESTIONS



Why was the China trade important to the new American nation?

Before the Revolution, Americans were required to purchase all imported goods through British merchants. This meant that American businessmen were denied the opportunity to participate in the lucrative Asian trade, and American customers paid more for goods that were sold through a middleman. After the Revolution, Americans were very eager to start trading with China under the flag of their new nation.



What made the China trade challenging to engage in?

It was difficult for merchants to get their crews safely there given the hazards of weather, navigation, disease, and pirates between America and Asia. In China, the process of trading was highly regulated and taxed. Westerners were required to live and work in one neighborhood in the city of Canton (Guangzhou) and use a special group of Chinese merchants as their go-betweens to the farmers and craftsmen producing the goods desired in the West. America's first millionaire made his money in the China trade.



How do we know when the punch bowl was made?

Look closely at the flags. There is no American flag flying over the trading district yet. Instead, there is a plain white flag that represented the East India Company.

DINING ROOM

Pier Glass

Pier Glass One of a Pair, 1785–1820, gilded eastern white pine; composition, the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, the Bayou Bend Collection, gift of Miss Ima Hogg, B.69.386.1.



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Pier Glass

This pier glass could have been made in England or America, or by combining English glass with American woodwork. It reminds us that the commercial relationship between the two countries was both close and complicated.

TRIVIA QUESTIONS



Why might an American craftsman use English glass when making a mirror?
Mirror glass was difficult and expensive to produce, and America came later to making it in quantity than England did. In some circumstances, English glass might have been cheaper and better quality than the American kind.



Why would Americans want a looking glass with Greek and Roman motifs?
Furnishings with classical design elements were becoming fashionable in Europe as exploration of ancient ruins and sites helped people learn more about Greek and Roman society. European fashion was still considered the model for good taste in America, even though it was now an independent nation. Also, ancient Greek and Roman government had been models used in forming the new American government.



How would you use this pier glass?
You would hang it between two windows (this area is called the pier) to reflect more light into the room and to make the room look bigger.

DINING ROOM

Commode

Commode, 1800–25, mahogany; mahogany, eastern white pine, yellow-poplar, and cedrela, the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, the Bayou Bend Collection, gift of Miss Ima Hogg, B.69.83.



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Commode

This chest of drawers, shaped like half an oval, would have been a fashionable form of storage for a modern home in 1800. It was inspired by similar objects from France or England.

TRIVIA QUESTIONS



How does this commode reflect new ideas about style after the American Revolution?

The smooth surface, geometric shapes, and small, delicate feet are all part of a new style of furniture design, inspired by European fashions, which became popular in America after the Revolution.



Why would an American want an object that reflected English or French tastes?

Americans still looked to Europe, particularly England, to discover what was considered most fashionable and elegant. To many Americans, being in step with European preferences demonstrated that the new country possessed taste and respectability.



Where was a commode intended to be used in a home?

Some were meant to be used in bedrooms, and had top drawers customized to hold small items a lady or gentleman needed to get dressed, like hairpins or jewelry. Others were designed to hold linens and could be used in a dining room or other more public space. The one here is actually meant as a bedroom piece although we are displaying it in the dining room.

DINING ROOM

Gentleman's Desk and Bookcase

Gentleman's Secretary, 1790–1820,
mahogany, eastern white pine, soft
maple, and unidentified inlay; birch,
yellow-poplar, and eastern white pine,
the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston,
the Bayou Bend Collection, gift of
Miss Ima Hogg, B.61.94.



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Gentleman's Desk and Bookcase

This combined desk and bookcase, also known as a secretary, was used for reading, writing, and office work when it was made in Salem, Massachusetts, around 1800.

TRIVIA QUESTIONS



Why is there an eagle on this desk?

The eagle was a symbol of the new American nation and was often used to decorate objects in the home.



How does the desk reference the classical world?

The eagle had also been used as a symbol by the Romans, who had created the world's first republican government. The Roman government had been one of the examples studied in the creation of the U.S. Constitution.



Why would Americans want furnishings that reminded them of Greece and Rome?

Furnishings with classical design elements were becoming fashionable in Europe as exploration of ancient ruins and sites helped people learn more about Greek and Roman society. European fashion was still considered the model for good taste in America, even though it was now an independent nation. Also, ancient Greek and Roman government had been models used in forming the new American government.

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Sideboard

Sideboard, 1785–1815, mahogany and unidentified inlay; yellow-poplar, eastern white pine, and black cherry, the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, the Bayou Bend Collection, gift of Miss Ima Hogg, B.69.199.



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Sideboard

The sideboard was a new type of furniture in America around 1800. It was used to store and display the textiles, china, and glass required to serve an elegant dinner.

TRIVIA QUESTIONS



How does this sideboard reflect new ideas about furniture design?

The smooth surface, thin legs, geometric shapes, and wood inlay are all part of a new style of furniture design, inspired by European fashions, which became popular in America after the Revolution.



Why did sideboards become popular in American homes?

After the Revolution, we see Americans following European custom by dedicating specific rooms in their houses to dining. The sideboard became an essential part of a fashionable dining room.



Where did ideas about these new fashions come from?

Americans still looked to Europe, particularly England, to discover what was considered most fashionable and elegant. To many Americans, being in step with European preferences demonstrated that the new country possessed taste and respectability.