
BELTER PARLOR

Mantel Clock

Théodore Doriot, *Mantel Clock*,
c. 1870, gilt metal, steel, poplar, enamel,
the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston,
the Bayou Bend Collection, gift of
Mrs. Eugenie Bullitt Branch in memory
of Mr. and Mrs. Eugene Girault, B.85.14.



MISSION

In the 1800s, people asked what freedom, a cornerstone of American identity, meant in a country made up of people with many different rights, desires, and opportunities. The question was especially complicated to answer when rights and opportunities conflicted. 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?

Mantel Clock

This large, gilded mantel clock from France depicts an imagined hunting scene from an unspecified time in history. It might have appealed to Americans who lived in modern cities far away from nature.

TRIVIA QUESTIONS



Why would the buyer choose a clock with a historical scene?

Many people in the 1800s looked nostalgically to the past as a better time than the complicated present, which was very different from the lives of their parents and grandparents (and possibly even their own childhoods). They enjoyed having objects in their homes that made historical references, often to an imaginary or storybook past rather than real history.



Why would such a clock displaying a large image of a hunt surrounded by the plants of the woods be appealing to a homeowner in this period?

This was a period in which nature was idealized because people left it behind for industrialized cities with their factories. Also, with the hunter subduing the boar, man is conquering nature, as the inventions of manufacturing and improved transportation were doing at this time.

BELTER PARLOR

Side Chair

John Henry Belter, *Side Chair*, 1855, rosewood and rosewood veneer; ash and black walnut, the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, the Bayou Bend Collection, gift of the estate of Miss Ima Hogg, B.81.9.5.



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Side Chair

This lady's chair was made in New York City by a German immigrant, partially with steam technology, and shipped to Georgia, where it was sold to a family who had made their fortune through cotton plantations.

TRIVIA QUESTIONS



What can this chair tell us about the changing roles of women?

This chair was specifically made without arms on a slightly smaller scale than the armchair so that it would be comfortable for women, who had generally smaller frames and who wore large crinoline petticoats. The manufacture of furniture specifically designed for women marked the growing sense of the importance of women as the center of family life in this period, which was a step toward recognition of female equality.



How does the manufacture of this chair reflect the 19th-century economy?

This chair, manufactured in 1855, is an example of the manufacturing process developed by John Henry Belter, who was a part of the large immigration movement from Germany, and who represents the rise of urban industrialism because he set up his company in New York City, a thriving industrial hub that marketed to the whole country.



How does this chair demonstrate a connection between the North and South?

Since transportation had become faster and easier, furniture from New York could be much more easily sent around the new nation, including to the southern plantation outside of Milledgeville, Georgia, where the original owners of this furniture lived.

BELTER PARLOR

Child's Plate

Child's Plate, c. 1830–60, lead-glazed earthenware with transfer print, the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, the Bayou Bend Collection, museum purchase funded by family and friends in memory of Frances M. Sacco, B.2005.5.



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Child's Plate

This child's plate features the alphabet around the edge and is decorated in the center with a scene of enslaved people picking cotton on a southern plantation.

TRIVIA QUESTIONS



Does this plate show a realistic view of growing cotton?

No. In the illustration, nicely dressed adults and engaged children are lifting small quantities of cotton into a basket, much as people would collect flowers on a lovely picnic day, rather than depicting the real situation of heavy bags being slung over the shoulders of enslaved people, including children, exerting great effort in a dirty setting.



Whose point of view does this plate reflect?

Made in England in the years just before the American Civil War, it illustrates an idealized, or unusually beautiful and positive, view of the picking of cotton, which would have been a more typical attitude of southern slaveholders than of northern slave abolitionists.



What is the importance of the fact that this illustration is found on a child's plate?

It illustrates a way in which this positive view of slavery was perpetuated from a very early age in many families.

BELTER PARLOR

Portrait of Lydia Smith Russell

George Peter Alexander Healy, *Portrait of Mrs. Jonathan Russell (Lydia Smith, 1786–1859)*, 1813–14, oil on canvas, the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, the Bayou Bend Collection, gift of Miss Ima Hogg, B.71.39.



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Portrait of Lydia Smith Russell

Lydia Smith Russell was a well-educated and well-traveled artist, who, at the time of this painting, was the widow of the diplomat Jonathan Russell.

TRIVIA QUESTIONS



What do Lydia Russell's activities tell us about the changing roles of women in the 1800s?

Lydia Smith Russell was an example of the emerging view of women as more equal to men and worthy of being educated and allowed to develop their own talents.



What kind of education did she receive?

She studied with Gilbert Stuart and, according to family lore, with Benjamin West. While in France, she studied at the rigorous school of Madame Campan whose philosophy for raising young women was to "not give way to a belief of the impossibility of uniting, in a girl perfectly educated, accomplishments and duties, which general opinion falsely deems incompatible" Ms. Russell was a product of a growing appreciation of women's abilities.



Where had Lydia Russell traveled?

As a child, Ms. Russell lived in France and England with her parents and later traveled with her diplomat husband.

BELTER PARLOR

“The Flight of Eliza” Vase

“La Fuite d’Elise,” c. 1852–60, biscuit and glazed hard-paste porcelain with polychrome enamels and gilding, the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, the Bayou Bend Collection, museum purchase funded by Jas A. Gundry in memory of his mother, Genevieve Lydian Dutton Gundry, B.2000.6.1.



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“*The Flight of Eliza*” Vase

This porcelain vase depicts a scene from *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, a book which Harriet Beecher Stowe wrote to call attention to the inhumanity of slavery in the South. On the vase we see the scene where the house slave, Eliza, has learned that her son, Harry, has been sold away from the family who owned her; and she is now trying to escape with him.

TRIVIA QUESTIONS



What does Eliza have to do to escape?

She has to run away from the men who own her and her son, braving an icy river in winter to get to freedom in the North on the other side of the river. If she is caught before she gets there, she will lose her freedom and that of her son.



What was the effect of this book?

Uncle Tom’s Cabin vividly communicated the cruelty of southern slavery to the North. It played a part in the abolition movement, which contributed to the Civil War. That war led to the abolition of slavery across the entire country.

BELTER PARLOR

Mantel Mirror

Mantel Mirror, 1855–65, eastern white pine, gesso, gold leaf, bronze paint, and glass, the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, the Bayou Bend Collection, gift of Miss Ima Hogg, B.71.38.



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Mantel Mirror

This fashionable and decorative mantel mirror was probably made by an immigrant carver in a northeastern city, but it could have been purchased by a customer anywhere in the United States.

TRIVIA QUESTIONS



Where was this mirror probably made?

This object could have been made in New York City, Albany, or Philadelphia between 1855 and 1865; however, because of the new fluidity of commerce from city to city, brought about by improved transportation and communication, it could have been sold in other cities and states. Similar designs to these were for sale in Galveston, Texas, around this time.



Who probably made this mirror?

Much elegant furniture was produced by the influx after 1848 of talented carvers from Europe, who immigrated to the developing nation. The lure of an economy growing stronger and stronger in America, where the wealthy were eager to acquire the objects that these craftsmen could produce, was a strong attraction, while unrest and economic disruption at home motivated immigration as well. America promised a better standard of living.

BELTER PARLOR

The Heiress

Attributed to the Liverpool School, *The Heiress*, c. 1860s, oil on canvas, the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, the Bayou Bend Collection, gift of the estate of Edward M. House II, B.99.13.



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The Heiress

This painting shows *The Heiress*, which was based in Galveston in the 1850s and 1860s. She was part of the cargo shipping trade that served the biggest port in Texas and helped tie the Southeast to Europe and the East Coast of the United States.

TRIVIA QUESTIONS



What kinds of products might such a ship take to these other ports and what kinds might it return with?

She carried cotton, pecans, hides, and other products from Texas to the East Coast and Europe. She could have brought back goods from the East Coast industrial centers such as New York, where the furniture in this room was manufactured, and Europe, where the vase based on Uncle Tom's Cabin and the mantel clock were made.



How could such improved transportation have changed the new nation?

In earlier times, without such ships, products had to be sold more locally, and products bought elsewhere took a long time to reach Texas. Thus this improved transportation provided economic advantages to far-flung parts of the country. It also helped to unify the very large land mass that the United States had become during this period, both through ideas that were more quickly communicated and through a more interdependent economy.



How does *The Heiress* represent new technologies in shipping?

These 19th-century ships, or barks, represented new strides in transportation because they had three masts for speed and were rigged so that fewer people could be used to sail them than earlier designs.

BELTER PARLOR

Infant Flora

Erastus Dow Palmer, *Infant Flora*, 1861, marble, the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, the Bayou Bend Collection, gift of William J. Hill in honor of Mr. and Mrs. Harris Masterson III, B.94.18.



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Infant Flora

The sculpture *Infant Flora* depicts the Roman goddess of flowers and spring-time as a child. Artist Erastus Dow Palmer intended to appeal to his audience's interest in an idealized version of nature in an increasingly industrialized world.

TRIVIA QUESTIONS



Why did he choose the Roman goddess of flowers as his subject?

He was using the concept of an idealized or "unusually beautiful and perfect" nature as the opposite of the new world of his time, which was urban rather than rural, and industrial rather than agrarian, or farm- and nature-based.



What was Palmer trying to achieve in his sculptures?

This piece exemplifies Palmer's view that the "mission of the Sculptor's art is not to imitate forms alone, but through them to reveal the purest and best of our nature." He saw childhood as a simpler time in life, compared to the demands upon the adult of an urban, industrialized world.

BELTER PARLOR

Oranges, Nuts, and Figs

Lilly Martin Spencer, *Oranges, Nuts, and Figs*, 1860s, oil on panel, the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, museum purchase funded by the Museum Collectors, 97,200.



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Oranges, Nuts, and Figs

This still life of fruit and nuts was painted by Lilly Martin Spencer, who was one of the most popular female painters of the mid-nineteenth century.

TRIVIA QUESTIONS



How does Lilly Martin Spencer's life reflect changes in the roles of women?

In this period it was a new and unusual situation for a woman to have a career outside of the home as most men did. It was a sign of the ways women's lives were beginning to change.



How important was her career to her family?

She was the chief breadwinner in the family. Her husband helped her with household chores, the care of their thirteen children, and her artistic business.



How did she bridge the gap between the view at the time of women as the nurturer of the family and home and the new idea of a career?

Not only did she have great support from her husband, but also the artist's subjects typically reflect familiar home scenes, as in this still life.

BELTER PARLOR

Girandole with Gothic Churches

William F. Shaw, *Set of Girandoles*,
c. 1849–52, patinated brass,
marble, and glass, the Museum
of Fine Arts, Houston, the Bayou
Bend Collection, museum purchase
funded by the Houston Junior
Woman's Club, B.94.71.2.3.



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Girandole with Gothic Churches

The candelabras (also called girandoles) are decorated with likenesses of the chapel at Mount Auburn Cemetery in Cambridge, Massachusetts. The Gothic Revival style of the chapel, borrowed from Europe, was especially popular in settings related to religion or education.

TRIVIA QUESTIONS



Why would someone want a lighting fixture decorated with a building from a cemetery?

In the 1800s, cemeteries were not just places of rest for the dead, but also public green spaces for the living. Communities took pride in creating beautiful cemeteries with elegant architecture and landscaping, and the public treated them like parks—as a place to walk, picnic, and enjoy fresh air in rapidly growing cities.



Why would the people of that time think an American chapel should look like a medieval European church?

Many people in the 1800s looked nostalgically to the past as a better time than the complicated present, which was very different from the lives of their parents and grandparents (and possibly even their own childhoods). They enjoyed having objects in their homes or communities that made historical references, often to an imaginary or storybook past rather than real history.