
MURPHY ROOM

Wainscot Chair

Wainscot Chair, c. 1640–1685, white oak, the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, the Bayou Bend Collection, museum purchase funded by Miss Ima Hogg, by exchange, B.94.11.



MISSION

Before the American Revolution, the territories that became the first thirteen states were English colonies. Many colonists looked to England for political, social, and cultural leadership and as the source of national identity. 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?

Wainscot Chair

This chair was made in eastern Massachusetts around 1650, but the design on it is English in origin. A colonial family would have only had one chair like this in their home.

TRIVIA QUESTIONS



Would chairs like this have been common in early America?

No, a family would have been very lucky if they owned one chair like this. Owning a chair of this type would have demonstrated that the family was of high status in 1600s America.



Who would have used this chair?

The head of the family or an honored guest.



Where did the design on the chair originate?

The design and carving on this chair, semicircular arches and abstract leaf carvings, are similar to the carved ornamentation found on chairs made in East Anglia, England.

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Hadley Chest

Hadley Chest, c. 1670–1710,
white oak; southern yellow pine
and red oak, the Museum of Fine
Arts, Houston, the Bayou Bend
Collection, gift of Miss Ima Hogg,
B.69.356.



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Hadley Chest

This chest was made in western Massachusetts in the late 1600s. Its construction is similar to that used in England, but the design is unique to the area around Hadley, Massachusetts, in the Connecticut River Valley.

TRIVIA QUESTIONS



What was this chest used for?

Notice the hinged top and two lower drawers. This chest was used for storage, most likely for valuable textiles imported from England. The colonies could not produce their own fine fabrics at this time.



Who would have owned a chest like this?

Many chests of this type belonged to young women and were often gifts at the time of their marriage. Notice the letters M and A on the front. Those are probably initials of the original owner, but we don't know who she was.



Were chests like these made in England also?

Yes, the storage chest with drawers was a common form on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean. However, the wood used and the style of decoration make this one American.

MURPHY ROOM

Monteith Bowl

Monteith Bowl, c. 1690–1700,
tin-glazed earthenware (delftware),
the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston,
the Bayou Bend Collection, gift of
Miss Ima Hogg, B.59.69.



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Monteith Bowl

This unusual bowl was made in England in a style designed to copy Chinese porcelain. It would have been used for cooling or washing wine glasses.

TRIVIA QUESTIONS



Why would someone want a bowl that looked Chinese?

Asian goods were rare, precious, and very desirable in 1600s Europe and America. Because Westerners did not know how to make Chinese-style ceramics, they created similar-but-different pottery like the tin-glazed earthenware used here.



Why would an American own a bowl made in England?

Americans were unable to make fine ceramics until the early 1800s because they were too complicated and expensive to produce with the resources available in the colonies. If they wanted an elegant and fashionable bowl like this, they had to import it.



Why would an American think this was fashionable?

It was of a type used in England—in fact the name Monteith comes from a Scottish earl who wore a cloak with a scalloped hem like the edge of the bowl. Americans looked to England to know what was most fashionable and purchased similar objects to use in their homes.

MURPHY ROOM

Portrait of Ebenezer Coffin

Nehemiah Partridge, *Portrait of Ebenezer Coffin*, c. 1714–30, oil on canvas, the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, the Bayou Bend Collection, gift of Miss Ima Hogg, B.63.75.



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Portrait of Ebenezer Coffin

This portrait of Ebenezer Coffin, a ship owner from Nantucket, Massachusetts, was intended by the artist Nehemiah Partridge to demonstrate that his subject was an elegant, accomplished gentleman in the best English tradition.

TRIVIA QUESTIONS



What is the significance of the boat in the background?

Ebenezer Coffin was a successful ship owner and built the sloop Nonsuch in 1714.



Is there some significance to the way Ebenezer Coffin is posed?

He is standing in the pose of an English gentleman with his left hand on his sword and his right containing a letter that may refer to his shipping business. The fact that he is holding a letter indicates that not only can he read, which was common in early New England, but can also write, which was the mark of an educated, high-status person.



Is that his real hair?

No, it is a wig, worn typically by only five percent of the colonist men, generally from the wealthiest classes. Choosing to wear a wig demonstrated one was familiar with fashion and propriety, and that one could afford this expensive luxury!



Is this the typical clothing of a colonist?

No, Ebenezer Coffin is a successful businessman. He is wearing a matched suit of clothes and his cravat is made of lace. Most cloth was imported at this time and was very expensive.

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Cupboard

Cupboard, c. 1670–1700, red oak and red maple; white pine and western red cedar, the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, the Bayou Bend Collection, museum purchase funded by the Theta Charity Antiques Show, B.93.11.



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Cupboard

This cupboard was made in the Boston area in the late 1600s. Although it was made with American woods, the woodworking techniques and decoration were borrowed from English traditions.

TRIVIA QUESTIONS



What was this cupboard used for?

This cupboard was used both to store valuable possessions like fabrics imported from England, and also to display costly objects like imported ceramics, silver, and pewter.



Who would have owned this piece?

Only a wealthy person could have afforded an elaborate piece of furniture like this. Having something like this, and the objects to display on or to store inside it, would have shown visitors to the home what the status of the owners was.



Where in the home would this object have been placed?

The cupboard would have been placed in the highest-status room in the house—probably the same room where the “best bed” was kept and where dining took place. This is the room where important guests would have been welcomed. However, keep in mind that the average home, even for wealthy people, had only two to four rooms.

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Fuddling Cup

Fuddling Cup, c. 1680–1700, tin-glazed earthenware, the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, the Bayou Bend Collection, gift of Miss Ima Hogg, B.59.91.




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Fuddling Cup

This odd-looking vessel is called a fuddling cup. It is used for a game in which the drinker tries to drink from the cup without spilling the contents all over himself.

TRIVIA QUESTIONS

 How does the cup work?

It requires extreme care not to spill. Its form is of three separate cups, with handles on each side intertwining with the handle of the cup next to it. Although they look completely separate, the bodies of each cup are connected to each other with tubes or holes. When the cup is tilted to a certain angle, the compartment being drunk from is filled by the other two compartments.

 Why might a colonist like something like this?

It was a tradition in England and an adventurous drinking experience!

 Where and when was it made?

It was made in Germany or England in the late 1600s. At that time, American colonists did not have the financial or technological resources to produce fine ceramics like this object.

MURPHY ROOM

Dish with King William III

Dish with King William III, c. 1689–1702, tin-glazed earthenware (delftware), the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, the Bayou Bend Collection, gift of Katharine Prentis Murphy, B.59.122.



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Dish with King William III

This dish, made in the Netherlands in the late 1600s, shows King William III of England (ruled 1689–1702).

TRIVIA QUESTIONS



Why would a colonist want to own a picture of William III?

William III was the king of England, Scotland, and Ireland from 1689 until his death in 1702. Most colonists considered themselves English, and might have enjoyed owning a picture of the monarch in the same way that people own depictions of the current royal family today.



Why would an American own a plate made in the Netherlands?

Americans were unable to make fine ceramics until the early 1800s because they were too complicated and expensive to produce with the resources available in the colonies. If they wanted an elegant and fashionable plate like this, they had to import it. Since William III had been ruler of the Netherlands before assuming the English throne with his wife Mary, Dutch goods and craftsmen often made their way to England in the late 1600s.

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Joined Stool

Stool, 1710–30, soft maple, the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, the Bayou Bend Collection, gift of Miss Ima Hogg, B.58.105.



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Joined Stool

This stool was made in the early 1700s in New England. Stools were a common form of seating in the 1600s and early 1700s.

TRIVIA QUESTIONS



Who would have used this stool?

If the family was wealthy enough to own one or more chairs, a lower-status member of the household would have used the stool—the wife, children, or even a servant, apprentice, or slave.



If the family didn't own multiple chairs, how did they eat meals?

In the early 1600s, sit-down dining around a formally set table was rather rare for most colonists. The American colonies were still very much the frontier at that time, and typical homes had a lot of people crowded together. People might have sat on stools, benches, chests, or even the floor, or might have eaten standing up. The highest-ranking person at the meal would get the best seat, whatever that might be.



Who might have constructed this stool?

Furniture makers, often trained in England, worked in the colonies building objects in the same manner they had learned before immigrating.

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Chamber Table

Chamber Table, c. 1690–1710, red oak, eastern white pine, soft maple, and hemlock, the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, the Bayou Bend Collection, museum purchase funded by the Theta Charity Antiques Show, B.70.24.



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Chamber Table

This small table, made in Boston around 1700, was meant to be placed in the room where one slept and used for holding items used for dressing or personal hygiene.

TRIVIA QUESTIONS



What is especially important about this piece of furniture?

It still has some of its original painted decoration. Paint was often used to decorate furniture in the 1600s, but in most cases the paint has worn away or been removed by later generations as it became faded or damaged.



Is the style of the chamber table reminiscent of English furniture at this time?

Yes, in general American colonists followed English styles, with adaptations to the materials and the skill of the craftsmen available to them.



Would this table be kept in a bedroom?

Bedrooms as we know them today did not exist in homes of the 1600s. The best bed, for the parents, was in the best room of the house, which was also used for entertaining, dining with guests, and other types of hospitality. An expensive piece of furniture like this would likely be in that room. Beds would be placed in other multipurpose rooms and the younger or lower-status household members might sleep in a loft on a mattress without a bedframe.