
CHILLMAN SUITE

Sinumbra Lamp

Manufactured by H. N. Hooper Company, *Sinumbra Lamp*, c. 1835–40, glass and brass, the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, the Bayou Bend Collection, museum purchase funded by the Jack R. McGregor Endowment Fund, B.2006.10.A-.D.



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?

Sinumbra Lamp

This whale-oil lamp, which cast light roughly equivalent to a 60-watt bulb, would have been placed on a table around which the whole family could gather to read, write, or do handwork. This new technology revolutionized the way people behaved in the evenings.

TRIVIA QUESTIONS



Why is this called a sinumbra lamp?

The word "sinumbra" comes from the Latin, sine (without) and umbra (shadow). The wick and shade are designed to prevent shadows from falling on the table, which would make it difficult to read, write, or do work.



How did lamps like this sinumbra lamp change people's lives?

Before oil lamps providing bright, convenient light became widely available, the only source of light at night was messy, dim, expensive candles. Many people chose to go to bed with the sun because of the cost or inconvenience of staying up by candlelight. Being able to stay up later at night and work or relax with good light changed people's lives and homes permanently.



Where did the fuel come from?

This lamp burns whale oil, which was gathered by hunting sperm whales. America had a large whaling fleet, mostly based out of New England, which hunted whales all over the world and brought back the oil and other products. By the mid-1800s, whale oil was replaced by petroleum products like kerosene as the most popular lamp fuel.

CHILLMAN SUITE

Benjamin Latrobe Chair

Designed by Benjamin Henry Latrobe, made by Thomas Wetherill, *Latrobe Chair*, c. 1808, gessoed, painted and gilded yellow poplar, oak, maple, and eastern white pine with cane, the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, the Bayou Bend Collection, museum purchase funded by the Agnes Cullen Arnold Endowment Fund, B.90.9.1.



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Benjamin Latrobe Chair

This chair was designed by Benjamin Latrobe, an architect, designer, and engineer who contributed to many important public works in America, including the Philadelphia Waterworks, the U.S. Capitol, and the furnishing of the White House.

TRIVIA QUESTIONS



How does this chair reflect Latrobe's work as a designer?

Like many architects of the early 1800s, he also designed furnishings for the home—in this case with motifs drawn from the designs of ancient Greece and Rome. His most famous commission for furnishings was when he helped Dolley Madison redecorate the White House...but sadly his work was lost during the War of 1812 when the British burned Washington.



Why was Latrobe's work as an architect important to America?

Latrobe worked on many major public buildings, most famously contributing to the design of the U.S. Capitol. He also designed the First Bank of Pennsylvania, parts of the White House, and government buildings in Baltimore and Washington, D.C.



Why was Latrobe's work as an engineer important to America?

Latrobe worked on a wide variety of engineering projects, but he specialized in waterworks and steam power. His waterworks in Philadelphia and New Orleans were meant to provide clean, fresh water to large cities and help prevent diseases like yellow fever, which could spread through stagnant water where mosquitoes bred. He worked on canals and steamship lines that would help connect the fast-growing United States.

CHILLMAN SUITE

Sideboard

Joseph Meeks & Sons, *Sideboard*, 1825–35, gilded mahogany and mahogany veneer; white oak, soft maple, ash, eastern white pine, and yellow-poplar, the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, the Bayou Bend Collection, museum purchase funded by Mrs. Harry C. Hanszen, B.676.



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Sideboard

This New York sideboard, with a design based on ancient Roman objects, would have been a fashionable addition to a dining room. It would have been used for displaying elegant silver and china and for serving meals to family and guests.

TRIVIA QUESTIONS



If this sideboard was made in New York, does that mean it was used there? *Not necessarily. As steamboat lines and railroads began to tie the growing country together, elegant objects from the big cities of the Northeast were shipped all over the nation for fashionable customers in newer cities and towns.*



Why would someone want a sideboard that looked like a Roman altar? *Classically inspired styles were very fashionable in France and England, and were often adopted in America by those who wished to follow the latest tastes. In addition, many Americans thought the Greek and Roman antecedents of American democracy and republican government made classical styles appropriate in American homes.*



Why did sideboards come into fashion in American homes? *In the 1800s, the custom developed in wealthy homes of having a specific room designated for dining, and special furniture was purchased for use in the new dining rooms. A sideboard was both a practical place to put food during a meal, and a stylish way to display the fancy dinner wares that were considered necessary for an elegant meal.*

CHILLMAN SUITE

Fireman's Trumpet

William Adams, *Fireman's Trumpet*, c. 1857, silver, the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, the Bayou Bend Collection, given at "One Great Night in November, 2001" by Compaq Computer Corporation in honor of Compaq employees and the brave fire fighters of September 11th, B.2001.26.



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Fireman's Trumpet

This silver fireman's trumpet was presented as a retirement gift to a fire chief from Hoboken, New Jersey. Firefighters were a growing necessity for America's large cities in the 1800s.

TRIVIA QUESTIONS



What does this object have to do with firefighting?

Early firefighters used tin trumpets to communicate at noisy fire scenes. The silver trumpet, which resembles the tin ones but which would not be practical to use, was made as a gift to commemorate the chief's service as a volunteer firefighter.



Why were volunteer fire companies important to cities in early-1800s America?

As cities grew in size and density, the danger of fire increased as well. Remember that at this time all heating and lighting was done with open flames in lamps, stoves, or fireplaces. In addition, the poorest city residents often had to resort to cheap fuels like burning fluid, a mixture of alcohol and turpentine, which could be explosive under the right circumstances. The common use of open flames, in combination with crowded, often cheaply built, city structures, meant that fires could spread quickly and endanger many people.

CHILLMAN SUITE

Portrait of Henry Robinson

Rembrandt Peale, *Portrait of Henry Robinson (1775 or 1784–1848)*, c. 1816–20, oil on paper, mounted on canvas, the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, the Bayou Bend Collection, museum purchase funded by the Theta Charity Antiques Show, B.7717.



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Portrait of Henry Robinson

Artist Rembrandt Peale painted this portrait as a gift to his good friend Henry Robinson. Peale and Robinson were also business partners with an interest in the new technologies of the 1800s.

TRIVIA QUESTIONS



What kind of businesses were Robinson and Peale engaged in?

Robinson and Peale were partners in the Baltimore Gas Company, which hoped to bring the new technology of coal gas lighting to the city. Robinson also invested in Peale's museum, which showcased both works of art and American manufactures.



What do we know about Peale as an artist?

Peale was the son of Charles Willson Peale and a member of a family that included many artists (like his uncle James, whose still life hangs over the sideboard). Like his father, he was a very well-known and successful portraitist but had many different business interests.



What do we know about Peale and Robinson's friendship?

Robinson invested in Peale's businesses and also served as guardian to Peale's daughter Rosalba while Peale traveled abroad. They seem to have had both personal and business ties; Peale painted Robinson three times.

CHILLMAN SUITE

Girandole Mirror

Girandole Mirror, c. 1810–15, pine, gesso, gilt paint, ebonized wood, glass, brass, the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, the Bayou Bend Collection, gift of Miss Ima Hogg, B.69.73.



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Girandole Mirror

This eye-catching mirror provided a decorative element for an elegant parlor and helped brighten the space by reflecting candle and lamplight. Even new technologies of oil lamps and gas light were quite dim by modern standards.

TRIVIA QUESTIONS



Why would a mirror like this be useful in a home?

Although much better than the candles used in the 1700s, oil lamps still provided a light that was fairly dim by current standards; they were also expensive and difficult to clean so a family might only own one or two. Having mirrored surfaces in a room would increase the amount of light by which one could see.



What rooms in the house would be home to a mirror like this?

Girandole mirrors might appear in any of the formal rooms of the house, perhaps the parlor or the dining room. Entertaining in an elegantly decorated room with proper manners was one way to demonstrate to others that one understood how to navigate the complicated new world of modern life.



How does this girandole reflect changes in the American economy?

As America's economy and population grew, Americans no longer needed to import the most elegant goods from Europe. They had the financial resources and technology to produce complicated items like mirror glass, porcelain, and fine metalwares.

CHILLMAN SUITE

Idealized Portrait by Rembrandt Peale

Rembrandt Peale, *Idealized Portrait*,
c. 1845, oil on canvas, the Museum of Fine
Arts, Houston, gift of Frank J. Hevrdejs,
2004.2104.



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Idealized Portrait by Rembrandt Peale

This romantic portrait by artist Rembrandt Peale was not intended to depict a particular person. Instead, the idealized woman seems to have stepped out of a storyteller's imagination. Imaginative art and literature were popular in the 1800s as an escape from the mundane world of cities and farms in which Americans spent their lives.

TRIVIA QUESTIONS



What does it mean that the style of this painting is “Romantic”?

Romanticism was a movement in the arts and literature that celebrated emotion and imagination. Notice that rather than showing a real-life woman, the artist was creating a fairy-tale portrait that would fit into the stories of exotic intrigue and adventure that were popular in the 1800s as a change from the everyday world.



What do we know about Peale as an artist?

Peale was the son of Charles Willson Peale and a member of a family that included many artists (like his uncle James, whose still life hangs over the sideboard). Like his father, he was a very well-known and successful portraitist but had many different business interests.



Why would Peale paint an imagined portrait instead of a realistic one?

This painting was intended as a demonstration that an American could paint in the style of European masters. Romantic art was considered very up-to-date in the early 1800s.

CHILLMAN SUITE

Temperance Pitcher

Temperance Association Pitcher, c. 1840–50, hard-paste porcelain with enamel and gilding, the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, the Bayou Bend Collection, museum purchase funded by Jesse H. Jones II at “One Great Night in November, 2011”, B.2012.5.



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Temperance Pitcher

The pitcher is decorated with imagery relating to the temperance movement against the abuse of alcohol, a serious social problem in the 1800s perhaps connected to difficult living conditions in a rapidly changing society.

TRIVIA QUESTIONS



What tells us that this object relates to the temperance movement?

The words "Temperance Association" are written on the front of the pitcher, but even if those were missing we might be able to guess that this is a temperance-related object. The water fountains on each side of the pitcher probably refer to campaigns to get people to substitute water for intoxicating beverages.



Why would people organize against alcohol abuse in the early 1800s?

By the 1830s, the average American consumed about 7.1 gallons of alcohol per year, about 3 times the average today. This was also a significant increase over the amount consumed in the 1700s. Alcoholism was particularly hard on women and children, who had fewer legal rights than today. There were many reports of intoxicated husbands who abused their families or spent all the family income on drinking. Business owners worried about problems caused by impaired workers, and community leaders were concerned about crime and disorder.



Why were women involved in the temperance movement?

Women were very active in the movement from the early years. Because alcoholism was seen as damaging to family life, especially in an era when divorce was difficult to obtain, many women considered it to be a particularly important issue.

CHILLMAN SUITE

Watercolor of *View of the Great Fire*

Nicolino Calyo, *View of the Great Fire in New York, 1835, 1837*, gouache on wove paper, the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, the Bayou Bend Collection, museum purchase funded by C. Berdon Lawrence, Mark Lawrence, Charles B. Lawrence, Jr., and David Mitchell in honor of Rolanette Lawrence on the occasion of her birthday at "One Great Night in November, 2012". B.2013.3.



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Watercolor of *View of the Great Fire*

This painting shows the city of New York during a devastating fire in 1835. Fire was an ever-present danger to rapidly growing, densely packed cities.

TRIVIA QUESTIONS



How badly was the city of New York damaged during this fire?

The fire burned 17 city blocks and damaged hundreds of buildings. It caused \$20 million worth of damage (in 1835 dollars), and 23 of the 26 fire insurance companies in New York City collapsed in the wake of such enormous claims, leaving building owners with few resources.



Why was fire such a constant danger to America's cities and towns?

As cities grew, the danger of fire increased. All heating and lighting was done with open flames in lamps, stoves, or fireplaces. In addition, the poorest residents often used cheap fuels like burning fluid, a mixture of alcohol and turpentine, which could be explosive. The use of open flames, in combination with crowded, cheaply built, city structures, meant that fires could spread quickly and endanger many people.



Why would an artist be interested in painting such a scene?

Nicolino Calyo knew there was an interest in New York City, which was becoming a center of fashion and power in the United States, and especially in a sensational event like a major fire. He turned his paintings into large-scale exhibitions (panoramas) that one could visit, and also prints that could be purchased inexpensively. In the era before photography, prints were often the only visual depictions of events, people, and places available to ordinary people.

CHILLMAN SUITE

Basaltware Ewers

Josiah Wedgwood & Sons, *Wine Ewer and Water Ewer* "Sacred to Bacchus," c. 1820–50, stoneware (black basalt), the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, the Bayou Bend Collection, gift of George Valian, B.67.2. 3.



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Basaltware Ewers

Although these pitchers were made in England, the images on them come from ancient Greek and Roman myths. Neptune, the Roman god of the oceans, appears on one pitcher representing water, and Bacchus, the Roman god of wine and vineyards, appears on the other to represent wine.

TRIVIA QUESTIONS



How do these designs relate to the social concerns of the 1820s and 1830s? *Abuse of alcohol was considered a serious and growing issue in the 1800s. Many Americans chose not to serve alcohol in their homes as a sign of their participation in the temperance movement, which tried to solve the problems of alcoholism.*



Why are these pitchers black? *Josiah Wedgwood, an English pottery manufacturer, developed a type of ceramics called basaltware. It is meant to look like the stone basalt, and also ancient Greek ceramics that were colored black.*



Why are there images from Greek and Roman myths on ceramics that were made in England and sold to Americans in the early 1800s? *References to ancient Greece and Rome were very popular in Europe and America in the late 1700s and early 1800s. Some people considered these early examples of democracy and republican government to be role models for the American experiment in government.*