

Amazing American Antiques
The Federal & Classical Periods
.2 CEU

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Beverly Vosko's
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Amazing American Furniture- The Federal and Classical Periods webinar handouts

Welcome to our .2 CEU!

The evolution of American Furniture is really the evolution of furniture as we know it. Today's popular "clean lined" furniture wasn't created in a vacuum; it was inspired by and based upon the traditional furniture forms created in the late 18th and early 19th Century during what was known as the "Golden Age of Furniture". Though you may not realize it, much of the furniture sold in Restoration Hardware, Crate and Barrel, Pottery Barn, West Elm and other popular furniture stores today that we think of as transitional or contemporary, are really selling traditional furniture forms that have been updated and modified to reflect today's taste. This webinar will trace the evolution of American furniture and compare those amazing American Antique pieces that people think of as ancient relics with many of today's popular pieces. You will be astounded to see how today's popular pieces were influenced and inspired by those Antique pieces: some pieces have been copied exactly while others have had their lines simplified and their extraneous decorative details removed.

From the time the Pilgrims landed on "Mayflower" in 1620, and throughout the 18th and early 19th centuries, British furniture design was the principal influence that shaped American furniture production. Then, in the early 19th Century during the Federal and especially during the Classical Period, French furniture design became influential as well. Additionally after the American Revolution, we were very proud of our new country and our new identity; so a new interest in Americanism appeared as well.

After the Revolutionary War a new Neoclassical style emerged in America- which can be subdivided into 2 Eras

1. The Earlier style, which was called the Federal Style 1790-1820, was based upon the Roman Ruins found in the 1st wave of excavations at the newly discovered ancient Italian cities of Herculaneum and Pompeii. This style corresponds to a combination of the English Hepplewhite and Sheraton styles popular in England around 1780-1800 coupled with a new interest in Americanism.
2. The later style which was called the Classical Style 1810-1840, was based upon the Greek Cave Paintings, Vase paintings and sarcophagi found in the secondary excavations of those same cities coupled with an interest in English Regency Design popular in England from 1800-1840, French Directoire/Empire design popular in France from 1790-1840 and Egyptian motifs, because England & France were fighting in Egypt, so people were exposed to & therefore became interested in Egyptian design.

Sotheby's taught me that American furniture design copied English and French furniture design – but that is not entirely accurate... Americans adapted English and French furniture design and created their own style

Period	English vs	American Dates
Hepplewhite/Sheraton	1770-1800	Federal 1790-1830

English Regency and
French Directoire/Empire

1790-1830

Classical 1810-1840

American Period Styles

Federal Style C 1790-1840

Once Congress signed the Declaration of Independence on July 4th 1776, the colonists had neither the energy nor the enthusiasm to keep up with British fashions, so while England embraced Robert Adam and Neoclassicism, Americans continued producing the same Chippendale furniture that they had made for the past 30 years.

It was only after the war ended in 1783 that Americans even saw the “new” English styles and they didn’t begin copying them until after 1790, when the newest styled pattern books, Hepplewhite’s Gentlemen’s and Cabinetmaker’s Guide and Sheraton’s Gentlemen’s and Cabinetmaker’s Drawing Book, appeared in the U.S. The “Federal style” also reflected the new identity of the U.S. which now had a Federal government, a Federal party and was building a federal city. The newly emerging furniture style was therefore aptly called the “Federal Style”.

Furniture in general was far more available in the Federal Period. Chairs, Easy chairs, settees, beds, fall front desks, card tables and dressing tables were able to be owned by most people. Several new furniture forms appeared: Pembroke tables, demi lune table, Ladies work tables, Ladies writing tables, tambour and cylinder desks, sideboards, dining tables, bureaus, secretaries, library bookcases and chest on chests. Highboys and Lowboys were no longer very popular - they were replaced by other furniture forms.

Regional Differences in the Federal Period:

1. Philadelphia which was the most important city in America before and during the American Revolution continued to be a center for furniture design
2. Cities near Washington DC, the new capital of the United States of America such as Baltimore Maryland, and Alexandria and Williamsburg, Virginia also became centers of furniture design and
3. Boston and Salem Massachusetts made lovely furniture as well but often still incorporated old -style Queen Anne and Chippendale design elements into their pieces

Woods used in the Federal Period: The wood of choice during the Federal Period was Mahogany and it was used as the Primary wood on most pieces at this time.

Fabrics popular in the Federal Period were leather, gros point and petit point (fine stitch embroidery) hardy durable woolens, cotton chintz, Toile de Jouy, silk and silk damask. Silk and silk damask were especially popular among wealthy Philadelphian’s and Washingtonian’s for their drawing room furniture and curtains.

Stylistic elements of the Federal Period: Everyone who was able to, travelled to Herculaneum and Pompeii to see the excavations there and then visited Rome. The Roman arch was reinterpreted as circles, semicircles and ovals which were used as the new furniture forms. This translated into straighter, less exaggerated lines, soft curves and simpler pieces.

Symmetry became important.

Marquetry (which is the cutting out of a recessed surface in the veneer of a piece of furniture, and replacing it with numerous woods and other materials in a jigsaw puzzle-like fashion to create a pictorial design) became very popular and replaced carved detail as the main decorative form. Marquetry were erroneously called inlay then and is still called inlay to this day. Popular Marquetry motifs were Marquetry designed in small strings of delicate detail such as strings of bellflowers, and Marquetry banding and stringing. Banding was a ½” – 1” band of a different colored wood placed on the outer edges of a piece where the grain of the different colored wood ran at an opposite angle to the grain of the rest of the piece. Stringing was a thin line – only 1/16” thick that was used as an outline on the perimeter of drawers to highlight them. Most pieces were embellished with just a few of these Marquetry details and some pieces were devoid of any extraneous details whatsoever.

Furniture:

Chairs were designed in either Hepplewhite style with shield backs or heart shaped backs or in Sheraton style with square backs and vertical back posts

Easy Chairs throughout most of American had straight Marlborough legs

Sofas had oval backs, straight tapered legs decorated with marquetry or turned fluted legs and monopodium supports which were one arm/leg combination

Many tables were made in either straight, slightly serpentine or demi lune shapes resting on straight tapered legs and spade feet or turned fluted legs

Others are still made with central pedestal and tripod base

A new table, the Ladies work table, was created to house the needlepoint or sewing a lady “worked on”.

Dining tables came into greater use during Federal Period and were now placed in Dining Room
Federal Case Furniture, especially bureaus were made in manner of Hepplewhite and Sheraton
Desks were exception to rule: made in several designs displaying English & French influence:

Desk was first furniture item to show French Influence; a Bureau with long legs and drawers topped with a superstructure of drawers, like the French Bureau-a-Gradin with either tambour or cylinder doors, became popular in Federal Period as well as an English Fall-Front desk

A new item, the Sideboard appeared, also intended to sit in the Dining Room

Bookcases were designed in several pieces or stages: the lower stage being a bureau, the upper stage being a bookcase with either wooden or glass fronted doors, a cornice, a pediment and some decorative feature above the pediment, and with some sort of desk in the center – either a fall front desk a cylinder desk or a tambour desk. This piece was called a Secretary because it often incorporated a “Secretary drawer” named so by Thomas Sheraton – and tall pieces like this with desks and bookcases are still called Secretaries to this day.

A Library Bookcase was a new piece that was an enlarged version of the Secretary

Highboys were not as popular in Federal Period – as they were replaced by other pieces such as the chest on chest – which provided more needed storage.

Classical Style C 1810-1840

The Classical Style utilizes a totally different version of Classicism than the one popularized by Hepplewhite and Sheraton and was based upon 4 distinct styles:

1. The secondary excavations of Herculaneum and Pompeii that had been discovered and that were the rage in England and France in the early 19th C based upon Grecian cave paintings, vase paintings, and sarcophagi
2. Egyptian Motifs popularized due to France and England's fighting in Egypt...
Coupled with an interest in both
3. French Directoire /Empire design...and
4. English Sheraton/Regency design

Furniture was even more available in the Classical Period than it had been in the Federal Period. Chairs, Easy Chairs, settees, beds, card tables, dressing tables, Pembroke table, demi lune tables, ladies work tables, ladies writing tables, fall front desks, tambour desks, cylinder desks, sideboards, dining tables, bureaux, secretaries, library bookcases and chest on chests were able to be owned by most people. Furniture had progressed to a point that only a few new pieces such as the Library table and the Sofa table, were added to the extensive furniture repertoire. Rather than adding additional furniture pieces, the cabinetmakers instead changed the furniture shapes and design forms. This happened because at some point during the Classical Period furniture stopped being placed around the periphery of the room and started to be placed in a designated spot in the room in what is known as the "Informal Arrangement of Furniture". Therefore furniture no longer had to fit up against the wall or be rectangular in shape. So many new Round furniture forms, especially round tables, developed at this time.

Regional Differences in the Classical Period: New York began to flourish and had its "heyday" during the Classical Period especially due to the wonderful furniture made by 2 great cabinetmakers: Duncan Phyfe who combined the Grecian style and the English Regency style and the Frenchman Charles Honore Lannuier, who combined the Grecian style and the French Directoire/Empire style. Duncan Phyfe and Charles Honore Lannuier produced some of the finest American Antique furniture pieces ever made.

Woods used in the Classical Period: The Classical Period was still the Age of Mahogany. Mahogany from Honduras was imported to the United States in large quantities but now Rosewood became popular especially in New York on some of the new "high fashion" furniture. Cherry was used in place of Mahogany and Rosewood in the New England /Boston area where it was indigenous ie local. Walnut was used in place of Mahogany and Rosewood in the Philadelphia and Washington DC areas where it was indigenous ie local. These local woods were stained a deep red with potassium chloride to simulate Mahogany and Rosewood. Mahogany and Rosewood were mixed with lighter woods such as Satinwood to create lovely marquetry designs.

Fabrics popular in the Classical Period were leather, gros point and petit point (fine stitch embroidery) hardy durable woolens, cotton chintz, Toile de Jouy, silk and silk damask. Now fabrics with French design motifs became very popular. Since Napoleon loved bees, small repetitive bees became a popular motif on fabrics. And since the United States was so proud to be independent, eagles and stars were popular motifs on fabrics as well.

Stylistic Elements of Classical Style 1810-1840:

Large classical motifs such as lyres and caryatids became very popular. A caryatid is a female form used in the shape of a column. Eagles, stars, bees, swans, dolphin and classical and mythological figures became popular motifs as well.

Chairs were designed based upon the Greek Klismos chair and had rolled top rails, horizontal splats and either 4 sabre legs or turned tapered reeded Louis XVI style front legs and sabre back legs.

Sofas had turned reeded legs and monopodium supports that were one arm, leg combination.

Tables now rest upon a central shaft with 4 (rather than 3) splayed legs, 4 turned reeded (convex) legs, or 2 supports (one at either end of the piece) often in the shape of a lyre. 2 different styles of Case Furniture were popular: one based upon English Sheraton designs and the other based upon French Empire designs.

Pieces of case furniture in the English Sheraton style had round, tapered, reeded (convex) sometimes ringed legs that extended up through the entire piece as a decorative detail and looked like columns at either end of the piece.

Pieces of case furniture in the French Empire style had dark wood, flat panels, sharp edges and large ormolu mounts. Ormolu is gold mixed with mercury for strength.

Classical style Mirrors were convex, had round gilt frames and usually were surmounted by an eagle.

Many pieces today look like these Federal and Classical Pieces,

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Biography

Beverly Vosko, Allied Member ASID, RID, UDCP, (Universal Design Certified Professional) CAPS, L.E.E.D Green Associate, CGP (Certified Green Professional) is a full service, Registered Interior Designer in Texas #6333. She is President and founder of both Beverly Vosko Interiors and InteriorDesign-ED; both DBA's for C. V. Design Inc. For over 25 years, she has been designing homes across the United States and Europe, specializing in creating custom residential and commercial environments, be they traditional, transitional, contemporary or eclectic, that match her design clients' every need, through her design firm, Beverly Vosko Interiors. For nearly 20 years, she has taught Interior Design: first at Rice University, then at the University of Houston, and for the last 10 years nationally, with her Continuing Education company, InteriorDesign-ED. Specifically, she has taught Interior Design, Aging in Place, Green/Sustainable Design, Lighting and Antiques. She graduated Phi Beta Kappa, Magna Cum Laude from the University of Pennsylvania, studied Art History at Harvard University, received her MBA in Marketing from NYU Stern Graduate Business School, and completed Design and Antiques training from Sotheby's, the world-renowned Inhbald School of Design and Houston Community College. Please view her websites, www.vosko.com and www.InteriorDesign-ED.com.