

Spindles and Spokes: Windsor Chairs and Their Legacy in America,

February 20, 2004-April 25, 2004

"Windsor" is the generic name for furniture with turned legs and back spindles doweled into a solid seat. Lightweight but strong, suitable for use inside or outdoors, Windsor chairs have never gone out of fashion since they first appeared near Windsor, England, in the 1720s and in this country about a decade later. Very few other household furnishings can match this survival rate.

Due to their versatility, Windsors remained popular throughout the 19th century. In an influential book on interior decoration, *Hints on Household Taste* (1868), English stylemaker Charles Locke Eastlake hailed the humble Windsor as a model of honest construction suitable for every home. It held the same appeal during the Arts and Crafts movement at the end of the century. For similar reasons, Windsors also came to be regarded as an emblem of colonial America in the popular imagination. Because of their long tradition, to this day such chairs are commonly decorated with college seals and sold in alumni shops at many colleges and universities.

Windsor forms continue to inspire furniture design. The minimal structure of Tage Frid's stools for example, is indebted to the Windsor style, while George Nakashima's furniture represents a unique hybrid of Japanese and American aesthetic traditions.

The majority of chairs in this exhibition were collected between 1910 and 1930 by Eliza Greene Radeke, President of RISD and daughter of its founders. Recent gifts of an early English Windsor chair and two reproductions from the early 20th century are presented here for the first time, in addition to other objects that Windsor chairmakers made or inspired, such as spinning wheels.

CHECKLIST OF THE EXHIBITION

A. Wighe, American, active 1849

Trial by Jury, 1849

Oil on canvas

Gift of Edith Jackson Green and F. Ellis Jackson 43.346

Many European travelers visiting the United States in the 19th century were struck by the unusual habit of Americans tilting back in their chairs while reading, smoking, or conversing. The full story behind this painting of a trial set in a barn is not known, although two figures are sitting in Windsor chairs. The well-dressed man at the far right, evidently on trial, is leaning back so far as to test the strength of any chair.



RISD MUSEUM

A.H. Davenport
Irving & Casson
Sack-Back Windsor Armchair, ca. 1920
Pine, maple and oak
Gift of Bank of America Corporate Collection 2003.138.2

In 1914, the firm of Irving and Casson took over the Boston decorating firm of A.H. Davenport. Founded in 1880, Davenport had furnished the Iolani Palace in Honolulu (1882) and the White House for Theodore Roosevelt (1903). The firm maintained close ties with architects in Boston and New York, where the company also had a showroom. By 1900, both firms were leading manufacturers of furniture in a variety of historical revival styles. These chairs were part of the original furnishings of a bank in Boston.



American
Fan-back Windsor side chair, ca. 1790-1800
Chestnut, maple, ash
Gift of Mrs. Gustav Radeke 20.955

The base of this chair has fashionable bamboo turnings, while the back supports have traditional vase, ring, and baluster turnings. The substitution of a narrow rod for a shaped crest rail also anticipates the fully developed rod-back chair. Mrs. Radeke purchased this unusual "transitional" design from Arthur Leslie Green of Newport, a pioneer collector of Windsor chairs who advised her on the formation of RISD's furniture collection.



RISD MUSEUM

Irving Ramsay Wiles, American, 1861-1948
Baby's Holiday (A Cool Retreat), ca. 1893
Oil on canvas
Gift of the Charles M. Kurtz Trust 1991.082

Better than any other image in this exhibition, this painting represents Windsors used outdoors, in this case as porch furniture. The chair in the foreground has been painted white, a common means of creating or updating colonial-style houses and interiors in the 1890s. This painting shows the artist's wife (seated with her back to us), daughter Gladys, and a painting student at Silver Lake in upstate New York, where Wiles ran a summer painting school.



American
Bow-back Windsor side chair, late 18th century
White pine, maple or birch
Gift of the Estate of Mrs. Gustav Radeke D31.576

Following the Revolution, Boston emerged as the leading New England port. Its Windsor chair industry grew as well, reducing earlier demand for Windsors imported from Rhode Island and New York. The central stretcher with thick reel-shaped turnings was a distinctive feature of Boston chairs.

Hugo Breul, American, 1854-1910
Portrait of My Mother, Cecilia Breul, in Her 66th Year, 1891
Oil on canvas
Gift of Alice Miles in honor of Franklin Robinson 1991.143

Like Irving Wiles, Bruel studied with William Merritt Chase, one of the foremost portrait artists in America at the end of the 19th century. By 1880, Bruel had moved to Providence, where with Sydney Burleigh, he was an early member of the Providence Art Club. The simplicity of the Windsor chair in which his mother posed is consistent with the Arts and Crafts aesthetic seen in the rough background and old-fashioned lettering of the title. Mrs. Breul is seated in a "Boston" rocking chair, the most popular Windsor chair design of the 19th century.



RISD MUSEUM

American

Windsor Armchair, 1780-1800

Oak, ash or hickory, maple, and poplar

Gift of the Estate of Mrs. Gustav Radeke 31.427

Chairs with backs and arms made from a single bent piece of wood were an American innovation. These two chairs illustrate different craftsmen's approaches to a well-defined design type. The maker of the green armchair pushed his materials to their limit. By bending the thinnest possible arm at nearly right angles, exaggerating the contours of the seat, and tapering the line of spindles to the point of hugging the sitter's hips, he created a strong visual impression that makes the other chair appear clumsy by comparison.



Tage Frid, American, b. Denmark, 1915-2004, (RISD Faculty 1962-1985, Furniture)

Stool, 1982

Walnut

Gift of the Rhode Island School of Design Class of 1982 82.178

In 1962, Frid left the School for American Craftsmen in Rochester to direct a furniture design program at RISD. Like Nakashima (#), Frid's work was based on his understanding of wood as a material, as well as traditional woodworking techniques he learned in Denmark. Although not intended to imitate a Windsor chair, this stool represents a distillation of Frid's ideas on achieving comfort and strength with minimal structure, a virtue it has in common with Windsor chairs.



American

Comb-Back Windsor armchair, 1750-1775

Maple, ash, poplar

Gift of the Estate of Mrs. Gustav Radeke 31.579

Few 18th-century armchairs are more monumental than this one, whose tall back and broad crest make any sitter appear imposing. As a result of trade and intermarriage among Quakers, Rhode Island maintained close ties to Philadelphia, which account for the importation of furniture from that city and its influence on local furniture designers.



RISD MUSEUM

American

Low-back Windsor armchair, 1760-1770

Maple

Gift of the Estate of Mrs. Gustav Radeke 31.434

In 1764, the Redwood Library purchased twelve armchairs similar to this one for use in the library, which still stands on Bellevue Avenue in Newport. This chair and others like it owned in Newport suggest that it was a popular design inspired by "low back'd" chairs first produced in Philadelphia. The horizontal arms resemble those on the Philadelphia comb-back armchair, but instead of stretchers arranged in an H-pattern, Newport makers favored crossed stretchers, a distinct regional variation.



American

Ebenezer Tracy, Sr., American, 18th century

Writing-Arm Windsor Chair, 1790-1800

Maple, pine

Gift of Edward B. Aldrich 41.124

Although not marked, this monumental chair resembles the signed work of Ebenezer Tracy and his three sons. They and their apprentices dominated the production of Windsor chairs in Connecticut for two generations following the Revolutionary War. According to tradition, this example belonged to an early town clerk of Westerly, Rhode Island, a likely profession for an owner of a writing-arm Windsor.



RISD MUSEUM

American

Fan-back Windsor side chair, 1795-1805

Maple, pine, ash

Gift of Mrs. Gustav Radeke 20.961

The carved upright "stars" at either end of this chair's crest rail are unusual, perhaps an individual carver's version of the more common scroll motif.



American

Arrow-back Windsor side chair, 1820-30

Pine, maple

Bequest of Mrs. Moses Brown Chase 12.139

Chairs like this one are commonly called "arrow-backs" because their spindles resemble arrows, or "thumb-backs" because the tops of the posts extend above the crest rail like thumbs.

American

Step-down Windsor side chair, ca. 1820

Maple, pine, ash or hickory (?)

Gift of Mrs. Gustav Radeke 20.806

Late Windsor chairs often have flat, vertical crest rails (sometimes with "stepped" ends, as on this example) that were ideal for painted and stenciled decoration. On this chair, only fragments of its original floral design survive, a reminder of how decorative these chairs could be.



RISD MUSEUM

American

Rod-back Windsor side chair, ca. 1790-1810

Maple, ash, pine

Gift of Mrs. Gustav Radeke 20.920

The delicacy of this chair's structure and its shield-shaped seat reflect the influence of neoclassical taste on American furniture at the end of the 18th century. Its simulated bamboo turnings reflect the novelty of Chinese goods imported to America beginning in the 1780s. Bamboo turnings also required less time and skill to produce than the ring, vase, and baluster turnings on earlier chairs. They could be made in greater quantities by more craftsmen, which accounts for their appearance on furniture made in every region of the country.



American

Candlestand, 1800s

maple; pine

Museum Appropriation Fund 31.340

The same craftsmen who supplied turned legs and spindles for Windsor chairs produced similar components for large and small spinning wheels. Their construction is essentially the same as a chair with turned legs and upright supports doweled into a solid plank.

American

Child's tablet-top high chair, 1845-1860

White pine, maple, birch, aspen, paint

Museum Works of Art Fund 43.580



RISD MUSEUM

American

Fan-Back Windsor Side Chair, 1780 - 1790

Pine, maple, ash or hickory

Gift of the Estate of Mrs. Gustav Radeke 31.436

American

Braced Bow-back Windsor Chair, 1780-1800

Maple, ash, pine

Gift of Dr. and Mrs. William Colaiace 1991.178.2A

American

Toy Windsor Rocking Chair, 1800s

Pine

Gift of Mrs. Henry Vaughan 44.519.73

American

Toy Windsor Rocking Chair, 1881

Pine

Gift of Mrs. Alonzo Williams 48.136.2

An inscription on the underside of the seat of this toy chair associates it with the first annual New England Manufacturers and Mechanics Institute exhibition, a showcase of regional industry, machinery, and products held in Boston in 1881. This piece of miniature furniture may have been a souvenir offered by one of several participating chair manufacturers.

RISD MUSEUM

American

Toy Windsor side chair, 1800s

Pine

Gift of Mrs. Henry Vaughan 44.519.76

American

Bow-back Windsor side chair, ca. 1780-1810

Maple, pine, ash (?), paint

Gift of the Estate of Mrs. Gustav Radeke 31.437B

In the early 1800s, bedrooms painted white and furnished with white furniture and fabrics were the height of fashion. This chair clearly shows how the original dark green paint has been "updated" by multiple coats of white paint, perhaps as the chair migrated upstairs from outdoor use. Its present appearance presents a challenge for curators and conservators-whether to restore the chair to its original appearance or preserve its later paint, now almost a century old in its own right.

American

Doll's tablet-top Settee, 1830-1850

Maple

Gift of Mrs. Henry Vaughan 44.519.4

RISD MUSEUM

William B. Savage, American, active, 1880-1890

Spinning Wheel Armchair, ca. 1886

Red oak, basswood, and buttonwood

Gift in memory of Nathalie Lorillard Bailey Morris by Elizabeth Morris Smith 78.157

Constructed just like a Windsor chair, this design incorporates recycled elements from spinning wheels made obsolete by the advent of large textile mills throughout New England. The seat is the only new piece of wood. As with historical Windsor chairs, black paint helps to unify the disparate parts, while also evoking Asian lacquer, which was all the rage among wealthy collectors at the time.



American

Child's Windsor High Chair, 1800-1820

Pine and hickory

Gift of the Estate of Mrs. Gustav Radeke 31.465



American

Child's low-back Windsor chair, 1850 - 1870

Pine, maple

Gift of Mrs. Arnold G. Talbot 47.682.5

American

Child's fan-back side chair, 1780 - 1800

pine, maple

Gift of Mrs. Gustav Radeke 20.1000

RISD MUSEUM

American

Child's High-Back Windsor Armchair, 1785 - 1800

Ash, maple and pine

Gift of Mrs. Henry Vaughan 44.519.5



Sydney Richmond Burleigh, American, 1853-1931

In Ye Olden Times, late 1800s-early 1900s

oil on canvas

Gift of Mrs. Anna D. Moore in memory of Sally Hume Lincoln 80.130

In an effort to evoke "olden times," Burleigh posed his subject in historical costume and seated the person in a bow-back Windsor chair, by then a familiar emblem of an idealized colonial American past.



Wallace Nutting, American, 1861-1941

The Maple Sugar Cupboard, 1909

Salted paper print, hand coloring

Museum Collection 1986.102



RISD MUSEUM

Children's Windsors

Before the 18th century, children were regarded as miniature adults. In the 19th century, many forms of children's furniture and toys attest to growing recognition of children as young individuals to be nurtured. The stylistic development of children's Windsors paralleled that of adult furniture. These were costly objects (considering how quickly children outgrow high chairs) that indicated social status as well as parental affection.

American

Child's Windsor high chair, 1770-1800

Oak, maple, chestnut, ash and hickory

Gift of Mrs. Gustav Radeke 20.965



English Origins and the First American Windsors

English

Sack-back Windsor Armchair, ca. 1750

Elm, yew, hardwoods

Gift of Anna Templeton-Cotill 2003.112

According to the silver plaque on the back of this chair, Joshua Fisher imported it to Philadelphia in 1754, probably to furnish his recently completed house at 110 South Front Street. It was around the same time that the first references to American-made Windsors appear in Philadelphia newspapers. A prominent Quaker, Fisher was a successful fur trader and dry goods merchant who established the first line of packet ships to run regularly between Philadelphia and London.



From Fan Back to Thumb Back: A Chronological Survey

Fan-backs, whose spindles fan or flare outward, were a variant of taller comb-back armchairs, the earliest form of Windsor. They were most popular in Pennsylvania and New England.

RISD MUSEUM

American

Fan-back Windsor Side Chair, ca. 1790-1795

Maple, pine and ash

Gift of Mr. Frank Brownell Bishop 51.122

Collectors of antique furniture have often favored Windsor chairs with legs set at a raked angle, creating a dynamic silhouette. The legs on this chair, however, are splayed well beyond their capacity to support someone's seated weight, prompting a later owner to reinforce the base with wire.



Materials Pushed to the Limit

American

Continuous-arm Windsor chair, 1780 - 1800

Pine, maple, ash or hickory (?)

Gift of the Estate of Mrs. Gustav Radeke 31.429

Paint and Upholstery

Paint concealed the use of multiple woods, preserved chairs from the elements, and enhanced their decorative appeal.

Mr. Hoxie, American, late 18th century-early 19th century

Braced bow-back Windsor armchair, 1780-1810

Maple, ash, pine and mahogany

Gift of William S. Redmond in memory of Dorothy M. McVay 84.236

Unfortunately stripped of all paint, this armchair nevertheless displays the finest turnings on any chair of its kind in the Museum's collection. When new, all but the mahogany arms would have been painted. At the end of the 19th century, many chairs were stripped of old paint as owners came to value "honest" materials over concealment and hand craftsmanship over mechanical uniformity.



Paintings

James Earl, American, 1761-1796
Portrait of Captain Samuel Packard, ca. 1795
Oil on canvas
Bequest of Miss Louise B. Bowen 21.485

Samuel Packard was born on North Main Street in Providence. He became a wealthy merchant, having commanded and owned dozens of sailing vessels engaged in international trade during the 1790s. Shortly after this portrait was painted, he built for his family a three-story house on Westminster Street, near the site of the present Fleet Bank. The sack-back Windsor armchair in which he posed could have been one of his own possessions or else a prop that the artist provided. Packard's spyglass is in the collection of the South County Museum.



Rocking Chair and Stools

American
Windsor rocking chair, ca. 1810 - 1820
Maple, pine, walnut
Gift of Mrs. Wallace Hoge 1994.099.1

The earliest references to chairs fitted with rockers in America date to the 1740s. By the mid-1800s, rocking chairs were present in most homes, as their soothing motion appealed to others besides the elderly, invalids, and nursing mothers. Rocking chairs were an affordable substitute for upholstered easy chairs and were often fitted with seat and back cushions for added warmth and comfort.

Spinning Wheels and Other Equipment

American
Spinning Wheel,

RISD MUSEUM

Maple, oak

Museum Works of Art Fund 45.166.6

The Colonial Revival

Throughout the 19th century, nostalgia for "the simple life" of the pre-industrial past inspired a variety of artistic and literary revivals based on an idealized image of the colonial era. For many, the Windsor chair embodied Yankee ingenuity in a bygone era of "yeoman craftsmen."

A popular epic poem by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, "The Courtship of Miles Standish" (1858), led to a fad for spinning wheels as domestic symbols of industriousness and self-reliance. At least one Boston furniture manufacturer, William Savage, found he could make profitable use of old spinning wheels by recycling parts into a novel chair design that captured aspects of both Windsor and Japanese aesthetics.

Guided by early publications, such as *A Windsor Handbook* (1917) by Wallace Nutting, RISD and other U.S. museums began to assemble notable collections of this distinctively American furniture. Once he had published the definitive book on the subject, Nutting began to manufacture reproduction Windsors, some of which appear in popular photographs he produced of "colonial" house interiors with people in period costume.

Wallace Nutting, American, 1861-1941

Braced Bow Back Windsor Chair, ca. 1920

Pine, maple and oak

Gift of Bank of America Corporate Collection 2003.138.1



The Growth of Windsor Chair Production after the Revolutionary War

American

Braced bow-back armchair, ca. 1780-1800

Pine, maple, ash or hickory

Gift of the Estate of Mrs. Gustav Radeke 31.428

Refinements associated with Rhode Island Windsors after the Revolutionary War include mahogany arms and vase-turned spindles. The braced back was another specialty of Rhode Island craftsmen, requiring the seat to be extended at the back. The fashion for mahogany arms was first established in Philadelphia. In order to compete, Providence chairmakers advertised chairs "in the Philadelphia manner."



Windsor Legacies

Windsor chairmakers who mastered the techniques of bending and clamping wood often used those skills to branch out into different areas of design. For example, Samuel Gragg began as a traditional Windsor chairmaker in Boston, but eventually developed his own original design for a bentwood "elastic" armchair.

In the 20th century, studio furniture makers naturally responded to the structural clarity of the traditional Windsor chair. Two among many, George Nakashima and Tage Frid are designers working respectively in the Japanese and Danish traditions who have produced modern studio furniture owing a large debt to the Windsor chair, but going far beyond its style.

Samuel Gragg, American, 1772-ca. 1855

Elastic Armchair, 1808 (patented)

White oak, hickory, soft maple, beech

Gift of the Wunsch Americana Foundation, Inc. 85.024

As a Windsor chairmaker, Samuel Gragg was familiar with the techniques of bending wood to make furniture. The "elastic" chair design he patented in 1808 marks a dramatic departure from his earlier work. The name refers to the chair's flexible back, no doubt more comfortable than vertical spindles, but ultimately less strong, judging from the iron braces that were added under both arms shortly after this chair was made.



Writing-Arm Windsors

The practical combination of desk and chair was an American innovation dating from the end of the 18th century, a portable precursor of modern office systems designed for "multi-tasking." The plank and spindle construction of Windsor chairs is well suited to multiple configurations, of which the writing-arm is one of the most elaborate, requiring extra supports and seat extensions to stabilize the broad writing surface and drawers.

Anthony Steel, American, fl. 1791-1817

Low-back writing-arm Windsor Chair, 1791-1800

Maple, pine, oak, hickory, poplar

Museum Appropriation Fund 31.341

In addition to a writing surface, this chair has three drawers of different sizes, each fitted with a lock for secure storage of letters, pens, papers, and other desk accessories.

