

ANTIQUES

And The Arts Weekly

***** March 28, 2008



Published by The Bee Publishing Company, Newtown, Connecticut



American Style *Russell Kettell's Pine Furniture*

By FRANCES McQUEENEY-JONES MASCOLO
CONCORD, MASS.— The enduring pleasure of a well-formed object is almost tangible. A collection of early American pine objects made, used and gathered lovingly is a testament to that pleasure.

"American Style: Russell Kettell's Pine Furniture," on view at the Concord Museum, exemplifies these pleasures as it showcases the objects of daily life and allows visitors to appreciate each and every piece. Kettell was among the first to discover and

revere the idiom of pine, and the furniture and articles on view are evidence of that reverence.

This is a contemplative show, allowing the eye to meander along the lines of a box or a chest or a tool that was made to be used and was softened by that use. It is as much about the objects and about pine as about an extraordinary man.

The objects on view were made with care to please the maker and the user. Not meant for grandees or designed to create an impression, they are the arti-

cles of the ordinary household. The objects are at rest now, but each speaks of the demanding tasks of early American life and those who performed them. As Concord Museum curator David F. Wood observes, "Every one is well worth contemplation."

Collector, educator, craftsman, historian, museum designer, preservationist and author, Russell Hawes Kettell celebrated the beautiful but humble, what

(continued on page 40)

From Sharon Platt's collection, the New England painting on panel "Mother and Child" is a circa 1835–1845 work. It hangs above a painted Massachusetts pine chest from the mid-Eighteenth Century, also from Platt's collection. The coastal New Hampshire side chairs were carved with fishtail crests and date from 1740–1775. They are from the Hollis Brodrick collection.

www.AntiquesandTheArts.com

Originally Published in Antiques and The Arts Weekly, The Bee Publishing Company, Newtown, CT.
Republished here with permission. May not be reproduced for further dissemination,
either in print or electronically, without express permission of the publisher.

American Style

Russell Kettell's Pine Furniture

(continued from page 1)



The Seventeenth Century chest was found in a barn in Hampton, N.H., and is part of the Kettell collection at the Concord Museum. It is scratch carved with double lunettes and geometric lozenges, one of which was compressed to meet the end of the board. The opening for the lock was probably chewed out by rats. The pine document box, from the same area and the same period, is decorated similarly and is from the Brodrick collection.

he termed “admirable joinery” and the merits of lowly pine. Born in Boston in 1890 and educated at the Middlesex School in Concord, from which he was graduated in 1910, he went on to Harvard where he interrupted his graduate studies in architecture to design hospitals for the US Army in World War I.

Kettle returned to Middlesex in 1921, where he taught a wide range of art and aesthetics, including the art of carving that he had learned there as a student, and served as hockey defense coach until 1956. Far more than a teacher, he was a renaissance man in the guise of “Mr Chips.” Former students still remember him with affection.

In the 1920s and 1930s, Kettell single-handedly determined an aesthetic appreciation for early American vernacular furniture based on the classical principle of *dulce et utile*. As an active supporter of the Concord Museum, known then as the Concord Antiquarian Society, he was instrumental in the museum’s 1930 relocation and reconstruction and the design of then-state-of-the-art first-period rooms that would help the museum establish a high profile.

His involvement there lasted throughout his life as he added detailed exhibits of Seventeenth Century joinery, early iron hardware and brass furniture pulls; and study collections of lighting devices, looking glasses and ceramics. Most were sequential, allowing a student to observe the development of a particular form.

Kettell, in his 25th anniversary report to Harvard, attributed his longevity to “an acquisitive appetite for Carver chairs, shadow moulded [sic] wainscot and hand wrought nails.”

For Kettell, integrity, simplicity and frugality were the essence of a well-designed object. He promulgated that philosophy in his landmark books, *The Pine Furniture of Early New England* from 1929 and *Early American Rooms, 1650–1858*, first published in 1936. Those qualities were also the hallmarks of his collections, which he donated to the Concord Museum. He gathered much of the material in New Hampshire and Massachusetts. Wood reports that Kettell acquired very little from the Concord area as it had already been pretty much “picked over” by the time he started collecting.

Some 120 objects culled from the more than 1,000 pieces Kettell collected are on view, with others drawn from the collections of Portsmouth, N.H., dealers Hollis Brodrick and Sharon Platt. Wood says that Platt and Brodrick introduced many objects whose existence was previously unknown.



In *The Pine Furniture of Early New England*, Kettell writes of the weather vane, “We concluded he was originally a cod, and repainted him accordingly....If his coloring is wrong, you may blame the encyclopaedia.”

Both Platt and Brodrick cite the transformative power of “The Book,” by which they mean Kettell’s *The Pine Furniture of Early New England*. Brodrick stumbled across it at the ripe old age of 9 and was hooked. At 10, already a collector of muskets, he was lecturing on the subject alongside his father. At 15, he applied

and was hired for a summer position at Sturbridge, perhaps on the basis of the list of 116 books in his antiques library that he included in his application.

Platt says she found Kettell’s book in the 1970s, while still living in Michigan. As an antiques dealer, she routinely drove 21 hours each way to exhibit at New England antiques shows. The book “sparked a passion,” says Platt, who describes herself as “a sponge soaking up Kettell’s aesthetic.” The color and the hues of early New England pieces have great appeal, she says, exemplified by some of the exceptional decorated pieces on view from her collection.

Wood and Brodrick say the idea of the exhibit has its genesis in 25 years of conversation on the subject of first period furniture. They determined to mount an exhibit five years ago.

On a recent sunny afternoon at the Concord Museum, Platt, Brodrick and Wood continued the ongoing conversations about one of their favorite topics — Kettell. The man himself is very much a presence, despite having died in 1958. As for the objects, they are a living part of the conversation, embodying the connections between the maker, the user, the collector and their Twenty-First Century admirers.

The exhibit is deceptive. It occupies only two galleries, but the density of the material on view is remarkable. The immediate impression is that of the warm and inviting honeyed tones of mellow wood.

The maker of a simple pipe box on view endowed it with astonishing decoration: the curves and stepped ogee elements along the edges of the humble box match front to back and side to side. It simply sings.

A very early looking glass, for which Kettell paid \$9, was once a simply framed mirror — later superimposed on a larger backing that was carved with crow’s feet



Three pine candlestands hold an array of lighting devices. The stand on the left, circa 1740, is from eastern central Massachusetts; the tall one is a coastal New Hampshire piece from about 1790–1810, and the one on the right is circa 1750–1780 from central eastern Connecticut.



A carved document box made in about 1730 around Bedford, Mass., is carved with diamond devices. The chest was made of oak and pine in Boston around 1690–1730. It had some repairs over the years. Both are gifts of Kettell.

The Pennsylvania painted tulipwood wall box was made circa 1780–1800 and decorated with leaves and flowers.



Concord Museum curator David F. Wood and dealers Sharon Platt and Hollis Brodrick are pictured among the objects they treasure.

and leaves. The carving is similar to work executed on a spoon rack displayed at the Wayside Inn in Sudbury, Mass. Such make-do pieces had particular appeal and resonance for Kettell.

Brodrick describes Kettell further: "He was the first to photograph the furniture, to see the common thread of form and symmetry." Kettell, according to Brodrick, affectionately referred to the furniture and household objects that he sought for his collections as "friendly objects."

Kettell was also an early proponent of conservation of objects, of supporting the integrity of a piece. He supported the fragments and was even the first to acknowledge and display the ravages of time and everyday use, even including items disfigured with rat holes. One such example is on view, a Seventeenth Century scratch carved chest that retains a hole chewed out by rodents.

Platt concurs, looking across the gallery, which is alive with boxes, tables, candlestands, looking glasses, six-board cases, cupboards, hanging shelves, ceramics and metal. She says, "Kettell taught us to forgive what is missing and love what remains." She adds, "He raised the importance of the term 'everyday objects.' While some documented their objects in great detail, Kettell provided dimensionality."

Curator Wood avows a number of favorite objects on view, but gives special mention to the "Pine-Ceiled Room," an interior from a house in Hampton, N.H., that Kettell salvaged in 1930. Although only part of the room is on view, it is sufficient for an appreciation of the carefully crafted wall boards.

Brodrick discovered three of the four Hampton, N.H., pieces that are featured in the exhibition. The court cupboard on view traveled to North Carolina with a local family during its early existence. Only when it was passed down to a grandson did it resurface. It is a homemade pine (with ash spindles) interpretation of the fancier oak examples commonly produced by urban cabinetmakers of the period.

American style, as Kettell saw it, embodied integrity, simplicity and frugality; the objects he venerated exhibited "honest use in their abraded paint surfaces, worn edges and corners." Nothing on view is perfect in the conventional sense; the irregularities of use and wear elevate each object. However, each embodied the definition of perfection to this pioneer collector.

Wood says Kettell believed that pine was the embodiment of the new American democracy that was obtained when these objects were made. There is little to which he did not turn his attention. There are Seventeenth and Eighteenth Century lighting devices, boxes and desks, hardware, including latches and hinges, drawer pulls, back plates and escutcheons, weathervanes, a candle drier and a scouring box.

Collectors Claudia and Carroll Hopf and their son, Perry, loaned several pieces from their collections to round out the exhibition. The Hopfs, too, admit to being captivated by Kettell and his books. It is a family passion, and they are gratified by the representation of the common man.

Claudia Hopf, who is a well-respected paper cutter, and Carroll said they love early New England pine and, pointing around the gallery, noted, "This stuff talks to you; you just fall in love with it!" He added, "It is incredible that it has survived."

Several of the early objects on display have "been around," known by collectors for decades in reference not only to the item itself, but also as to whose collection it currently resides. A much admired document box, made in Hampton, N.H., is on loan from the Hopfs. It was acquired from Brodrick many years ago. While form and patina were surely factors in their purchase, its history was, too. Brodrick related at the time of the sale that the rare box had been unearthed in a utility shed, little more than 20 miles from where it had been made. "I kept it and studied it for some years before selling it to the Hopfs," stated Brodrick, reinforcing his position in life as part-historian, part-curator and part-antiques dealer.

Wood commented that the survival of the everyday object is problematic. He makes the analogy that a large museum collection might include 50 gentlemen's waistcoats, but not a single working man's shirt. "They were used and used until they were no more," he said.

Kettell's *The Pine Furniture of Early New England*, published originally by Doubleday, Doran, and *Early American Rooms, 1650–1858*, published initially by the Southworth-Anthoensen Press, have been reissued by Dover publications and are available online.

"American Style: Russell Kettell's Pine Furniture" remains on view through May 18 at the Concord Museum, 200 Lexington Road. For information, 978-369-9763 or www.concordmuseum.org.

A very early looking glass, for which Kettell paid \$9, was once a simply framed mirror later superimposed on a larger backing that was carved with crow's feet and leaves. The carving is similar to that on a spoon rack at the Wayside Inn in Sudbury, Mass. Such make-do pieces had particular resonance for Kettell.



On View At The Concord Museum



Three gaily painted boxes exhibit varying degrees of artistic skill, which is their charm, but each is decorated exuberantly. The top one, from coastal New Hampshire, is painted and incised with hearts and a central globe and was made around 1710–1750. The middle example has a freeform design and was made somewhere in New England between 1750 and 1780, while the example on the bottom was made between 1710 and 1750.