

Art & Industry In Early America:

Rhode Island Furniture, 1650-1830

Yale University Art Gallery



By Kate Eagen Johnson

NEW HAVEN, CONN. — The Arts and Crafts sage William Morris believed that “the true secret of happiness lies in taking a genuine interest in all the details of daily life.” Patricia E. Kane, the Friends of American Arts at Yale curator of American decorative arts, seemed to have adopted a similar career credo. Her fascination with excellence and detail has given rise to “Art and Industry in Early America: Rhode Island Furniture, 1650–1830,” an exhibition and companion catalog for which she served as the principle organizer.

Kane recollected, “When I first came to Yale in 1968, I loved looking at the Rhode Island furniture. ... It was superior to other furniture at Yale in appearance as well as in the skill and care with which it was made.” To her way of thinking, it was not just

The John Brown desk and bookcase is one of the objects that first attracted Kane to the study of Rhode Island furniture. Kane has attributed it to Daniel Spencer, who started his career in Newport before moving to Providence. It exhibits the block and shell style Spencer brought with him from Newport, as well as a type of rosette identified with Providence on the pediment. Desk and bookcase attributed to Daniel Spencer, Providence, 1772–90. Mahogany (primary); American black cherry, chestnut and Eastern white pine (secondary); 107 ¼ by 44 11/16 by 25 3/16 inches. Yale University Art Gallery, Mabel Brady Garvan Collection.





the fineness of design, but also the meticulousness of craftsmanship that extended to the quality of the dovetailing and to the choice of woods used in the drawer linings.

Reminiscent of the motif of richly flowering vines springing forth from a basket seen on embroidered upholstery in “Art and Industry of Early America,” the exhibition and catalog blossomed from the Rhode Island Furniture Archive database, also a brainchild of Kane’s. In 2010, the [RIFA website](#) was launched after almost a decade of data collection. Thanks to the efforts of Kane, former and current students at Yale (in particular Dennis Carr and Jennifer N. Johnson) and associates in the field, RIFA online contains the names of roughly 2,000 woodworkers and information on 4,000 pieces of furniture. The authentic and gracious Kane gives a special shout out to the *Antiques & the Arts Weekly* community for its help.

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The distinctive cross-stretcher configuration was likely derived from the roundabout chair form. Newport merchant Aaron Lopez shipped high and low back Windsors to the Caribbean and other locales as early as the 1760s. High back Windsor armchair, Newport, 1765–70. Maple and hickory, 42 $\frac{7}{8}$ by 26 $\frac{3}{8}$ by 17 $\frac{5}{16}$ inches. Winterthur Museum, Garden and Library.

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