

A Book Review

Art, Furniture, and Genealogy

by Bob Frishman

“Buy the object, not the story.” This classic advice properly cautions antiques buyers against paying for questionable provenance or celebrity associations. Antique furniture, paintings, silver, and everything else should stand on their own aesthetic and historical merits, not on “granny notes,” family lore, or dealer anecdotes.

But at the New England Historic Genealogical Society (NEHGS), with its mission to collect literally millions of family documents, ephemera pieces, and associated objects, the stories are what it’s all about.

The book deserves to be savored front to back.

To acknowledge and celebrate the 175th anniversary in 2020 for America’s founding genealogical institution, this fine hardbound book was published. The appropriate and accomplished author, Gerald W.R. Ward, is a longtime and now emeritus curator of American decorative arts at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Seventy-eight objects were selected to be highlighted and described, each with its own special story, and these are elegantly enhanced by 123 full-color illustrations, most of them by well-known antiques photographer Gavin Ashworth.

Released as the pandemic drew our collective attention elsewhere, the book did not draw the initial praise it deserved. Even though the NEHGS downtown Boston headquarters was closed for more than a year to researchers and visitors, its staff continued to serve online its nearly 300,000 members and millions of virtual users via its associated website (www.americanancestors.org), which boasts 1.4 billion (!) searchable names. Even before the closures, visitation no longer was needed for many genealogy searches since much of the material has been made available online. But many of us still await reopening and in-person mining of huge amounts of materials still not digitized.

Because the institution has focused from day one on genealogical collecting, the art and furniture only recently has been properly cataloged, appreciated, and now awarded a book. Most of these objects came as donations along with family papers, and past administrators admittedly considered them space-eating nuisances. The 1933 donation of the immense Atkinson-Lancaster collection compounded the problem. Space issues became more critical in the 1960s when the society’s expansive Beacon Hill headquarters was taken by eminent domain to enlarge the Massachusetts State House. The society downsized into its current building, which had just one-third the square footage of the former edifice even after five additional floors were added to the original two-story bank structure on Newbury Street.

Over many years, important pieces were deaccessioned, misplaced, and worse. A few happy endings, however, have eased some of that pain of loss. Object number 66 in the book is an elegant circa 1817 Simon Willard tall clock that was sold off to a dealer in 1982. Fortuitously it surfaced again at a Sotheby’s auction in 2017. Thanks to the quick action of president and CEO D. Brenton Simons, whose keen interest in art and furniture is to be applauded, the clock was reacquired with the generous help of an anonymous donor. More good luck saved number 30, a 1750-55 portrait of Ephraim Turner that was stolen in 1982 but two years later was recognized for sale



The front of the book’s dust jacket features object number 53 in the catalog. The ornate frame probably was created by Boston’s most accomplished mid-18th-century woodcarver, John Welch (1711-1789). The center armorial shield is later and is topped by a mythical bicorn, a unicorn cousin.

at an area antiques show and recovered. Reportedly it was being offered for \$90 after its purchase in Boston for \$25 from a man selling art from his car trunk. Most objects, however, seem to have arrived and stayed, including number 51, one of the society’s greatest treasures. This earliest known American heraldic roll, also from 1750-55, is a 1934 gift from the estate of Dr. Harold Bowditch.

One small item is not in the book but got my attention. As part of my research for this review, I studied two articles in *The Magazine Antiques* from more than 40 years ago. NEHGS furniture was highlighted in the May 1978 issue, and artworks were featured in November 1976. On page 993 in the November 1976 issue is a small black-and-white photo of a circa 1790 miniature portrait of the Reverend John Prince of Salem, Massachusetts. This cleric/inventor is of interest to me, so I quickly asked to see the original painting. At first it was reported as “missing,” with a long explanation of how and why many such objects now are in that sad category. However, thanks to the memory and persistence of Sally Benny, curator of digital collections, the small oval painting was found after all, despite its having been miscataloged long ago as a manuscript.

I was able to examine that miniature and many of the treasures from the book during a special tour of the building kindly given to me by Curt DiCamillo, curator of special collections, the first staffer with that title and job. Largely thanks to him, these objects now are correctly cataloged, lavishly described, and acknowledged as important to the society’s holdings and mission. Although not all of the new book’s objects are or will be on public display, many of them are

Family Treasures: 175 Years of Collecting Art and Furniture at the New England Historic Genealogical Society

by Gerald W.R. Ward

New England Historic Genealogical Society, 2020, 176 pages, hardbound, \$59.95.



Curator Curt DiCamillo posed with the plaster study for the statue of Massachusetts Governor John Albion Andrew (1818-1867). This is object number 16 in the book. Thomas Ridgeway Gould (1818-1881), its sculptor, also created the full-size statue at Andrew’s tomb in Hingham, Massachusetts. Andrew, the antislavery 25th governor of the commonwealth, commissioned the first unit of black soldiers—the 54th Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry Regiment—to serve in the Civil War, and he insisted that they be paid the same as whites. Andrew later was elected president of the NEHGS, but he died during his first year in office.

viewable in well-lit locations throughout the building, ready to be admired when the public again may enter.

A key long-term project of DiCamillo is to make these art and furniture collections available online. For the present, only this book, a personal visit, or conversations with him can inform outsiders about what awaits discovery. Had I been seeking Simon Willard clocks via my home computer, I never would have known of the lovely example standing in the luxurious first-floor reception area, nor of countless other treasures of NEHGS that remain unknown to scholars and collectors.

Discussing more objects from the book and summarizing more of its contents is not feasible on this page, nor would that justly represent what awaits the book’s readers. As a diverse objects-centered overview of American life dating from the 17th century, the book deserves to be savored front to back. And the NEHGS in general deserves our credit and support for providing such a horn of plenty for those of us who study the histories of our ancestors, our towns, and our nation.

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