

Traditional Furniture of Atlantic Canada

Commentary: David Orr*

There is little doubt that one of the major changes in the analysis of material history in recent years has come about primarily as a result of the influence of cultural geographers upon the work of historians, art historians, anthropologists, and folklorists. Just as the major concern of history is the arrangement of human actions in series governed by *time*, the major concern of geographers is *space*¹. Spatial relationships of the arrangement of historical forms should benefit from a similar type of interdisciplinary conflation. We now can effectively speak of "roomscales" and discuss the "community of objects" patterned by the functional and formal characteristics of interior spaces; the theme of this conference.² The thorough documentation of the materials presented in the papers described above attempts to isolate the minimal acceptable concepts of the furniture forms to establish a construct of all their variations. All three papers then systematically relate these variations to individuals and "schools."³ The imperative, throughout this process, must be the accurate recording of the furniture forms and their roles as understood by the matrix in which they are discovered.

All three of these papers share a mutual seminal intent, that is, they all have the potential of becoming regionally specific furniture *corpora*. Carefully researched catalogues of such objects are badly needed since we all work under the threat of antique market pressures and the corresponding ripping of traditional objects from their context. All the papers are united by this common peril and by the authors' determination to seek out and record objects which regionally define many idiosyncratic elements of their particular provincial areas.

Another service which these papers appear to share is to remind us of the tenuous position of the art historical term "monument," used so frequently as a qualitative exemplar by which a culture's character and force is measured. Robert Trent and others have correctly argued against the customary view that objects are simply autonomous events with their quality associated by the fulfilment of classic princi-

ples of design and proportion.⁴ Additionally, all three papers seem to argue that urban centres do not constitute the main avenues by which the "diffusion" of forms is achieved. As one comes to grips with the formal and historical problems presented by these papers the spatial relationships suggested by these highly particularistic genres of furniture achieve great significance in understanding and interpreting their meaning.⁵

Architecture may in fact define a culture's *res publica* but it is the interior domestic space which defines its *res privata*. Indeed, understanding the intimate, more complex, private domestic ambience is essential in understanding a community's relationship (and tension) with its public image. The three papers presented can give us important testimony as to the "interior" values of traditional societies and their corresponding spatial concepts. The ritualistic explanation of interiors (for example, the use of furniture in funerals and wakes) and the distinctive regional typologies defined by the furniture itself are also topics which these papers suggest as appropriate for further research.

All this, once again, forms a coda to my earlier encouragement to treat furniture arrangements, if possible, as "archeological" in one sense and, at least, to note their utilization in more traditional interiors. Can one now document Newfoundland outport furniture as it exists in "traditional" matrices? Can the "untimely ripping" of furniture from its ambience be mollified by rigorous fieldwork techniques? These papers respond positively to these issues.

Sheila Stevenson's paper has given us a well-formulated (and regionally specific) county-wide analysis of provincial furniture.⁶ She boldly argues that these pieces are "indicators of the natural, social, intellectual, and economic forces which have shaped Colchester County." The furniture thus becomes a primary sourcebook to be carefully read in its right relationship to other kinds of historic evidence. She calls the furniture "storied connectors to people and conditions." By her oral historical technique she has demonstrated that these objects encapsulate material memory. They are part of interior spaces which must also be examined apart from their intrinsic values. Emerging throughout her paper is the usage of family ownership statistics which become increasingly vital to her discussion.

* It was decided that David Orr's commentary on three papers ("The Record of a County", Sheila Stevenson; "Traditionally Made Furniture of the Newfoundland Outport Home", Walter Peddle; "Folk Influence in Nova Scotia Interiors: The Lunenburg County Example," Thomas Lackey) should be included in the proceedings because neither Stevenson's nor Peddle's paper was to appear in the volume, having been published elsewhere.

The vernacular architecture of the county and the exterior/interior relationships of furniture to architectural plan and form could perhaps create an additional alternative for future study. Although introductory by nature, as indeed all these papers are, there are clear invitations for a more holistic examination of interiors.

Thomas Lackey's discussion reiterates the themes apparent in all these papers. His comment on the area's "essentially homogeneous ethnic and religious population" perhaps suggests that a more detailed ethnographic survey could make more specific this distinctive body of furniture. The furniture generally reflects many American regions where such survivals through time and changing fashion exist. One is reminded both of early German settlements in Piedmont, North Carolina, and the mid-nineteenth century German settlements of both Wisconsin and Michigan.

Walter Peddle's paper best restates the salient points of this commentary⁷: First, the necessity of documenting a highly idiosyncratic group of furniture threatened by imminent removal. Secondly, the problem of antecedent, "inspiration," and innovation created by a highly individualistic genre of furniture design. Thirdly, the complex relationship of interior spatial "grammars" or patterns to exterior ones and the resultant unselfconscious replication of forms. Finally, the scale and luministic values created by the outport house which played an important deterministic role in the manipulation of design options by these furniture craftsmen. What forms filled the design reservoir of the outport furniture craftsman's mind? What roles did furniture play in the outport home? What symbolic usages, if any, were embodied in this furniture? Again, rigorous community by community documentation coupled with ethnographic field-work may give us the answers.

In sum, these three papers present us with the rich opportunity to understand our past better. Interior spaces are of necessity the last thing to yield to the vagaries of fashion and circumstance. They are recreated even after intervals of violent disruption. Each example of regionally distinctive vernacular furniture touches the rest, melding past to present and future, and eventually giving formal arrangements a sense of place.

It is this sense of place that gives these objects their real meaning. Traditional interiors need a new study focused on

the idea of place, a kind of cultural topography. Then, with a patterned study of the inside place we can combine the results with a cultural geographer's discussion of the exterior place. The cultural idea "inside" and "outside," public and private, will then be fully understood at last. The chair on the rug, its relation to wall and window, its form defined intrinsically and symbolically, thus becomes an integral element in the analysis of interior space. Only when its architectural envelope, explicated by its position on the face of land, is discussed in terms of the chair's interior status can our understanding of material history be complete.

NOTES

1. See, for example, Peter O. Wacker, *The Cultural Geography of Eighteenth Century New Jersey* (New Jersey Historical Commission), 6. One of the best examples of a regional survey is James Lemon, *The Best Poor Man's Country: A Geographical Study of Early Southeastern Pennsylvania* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1972); Peter Wacker, *The Musconetcong Valley of New Jersey: A Historical Geography* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1968), is also noteworthy.
2. Bernard L. Herman and David G. Orr, "Pear Valley et al.; An Excursion into the analysis of Southern Vernacular Architecture," *Southern Folklore Quarterly* 39 (1975): 307-25.
3. For an excellent example of this process, see Benno M. Forman, "The Crown and York Chairs of Coastal Connecticut and the Work of the Durands of Milford," *Antiques* CV (1974): 1147-54.
4. See Robert Trent, *Hearts & Crowns* (New Haven: New Haven Colony Historical Society, 1977); see also Dell Upton, "Toward a Performance Theory of Vernacular Architecture: Early Tidewater Virginia as a Case Study," *Folklore Forum* 12 (1979): 173-96.
5. The types of spatial relationships suggested by these three papers have not been previously discussed or defined. As such, they then present tremendous opportunities for further research.
6. Previously published studies are larger in scope. See, for example, Huia G. Ryder, *Antique Furniture by New Brunswick Craftsmen* (Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1965).
7. Walter Peddle has also produced a very informative exhibit on Newfoundland outport furniture at the Newfoundland Museum. Peddle's exhibit embodies a concept of Harold K. Skramstad Jr. which is worth repeating: "To truly explore the ways in which material culture touches and intersects the paths of history and other disciplines, some risks must be taken, and more effective use should be made of a unique form of communication — the exhibition". "Interpreting Material Culture: A View from the Other Side of the Glass", in *Material Culture and the Study of American Life*, ed. I.M.G. Quimby (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1978), 200.