

the elegant display of artifacts and visual information is sure to engage all.

Boston is rich in museums preserving and interpreting some facet of the city's past. However, only the Commonwealth Museum has succeeded in integrating material culture of common Bostonians into a remarkable story of environmental, social, and economic adaptation across centuries. This exhibit illustrates the value of federal and state historic preservation legislation, such as Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act. The cost of the Big Dig was considerable, but the public and scientific value of Big Dig archeology is priceless.

Steven R. Pendery
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1. An online version of the exhibit is available at <http://www.sec.state.ma.us/mhc/mhcexh/musprv/prvidx.htm>, as well as an exhibit catalog, *Highway to the Past: The Archaeology of Boston's Big Dig* (Boston, MA: Massachusetts Historical Commission, 2001).

Furniture in Maryland Life

Maryland Historical Society, Baltimore, MD.
Curator: Jeannine A. Disviscour; Exhibition team: Erin Kimes, Nancy Davis, Paul Rubenson, Gregory R. Weidman, Charles Mack, Paula J. Bogert, and Lynn Springer Roberts

Permanent exhibit

With a high ceiling, lots of light, and a jumble of fancy tables, chairs, cabinets, and desks arranged on two terraced levels along parallel walls, a first-time visitor could be forgiven for mistaking the Dorothy Wagner Wallis Gallery of the Maryland Historical Society for some sort of furniture shrine. The large rectangular room seems like the perfect setting for a narrowly-focused exhibit on the design nuances of early Republic furniture, which is why it comes as a pleasant surprise to find that

the society's permanent exhibit, *Furniture in Maryland Life*, attempts to address audiences beyond the aficionado. Indeed, rather than seeking a limited goal of portraying changing design or paying homage to famous upper-class Marylanders by placing their household items on display, the exhibit creators remind visitors of the common functions of furniture, past and present, and challenge them to "think about the furniture you use every day."

The exhibit promises to explore the manufacture, design, and function of furniture in Maryland from 1634 to the present. These three themes explicitly order the exhibit. Each major theme has a color designation, and each label carries a block of color, the theme title, and the subsection name in a header at the top to orient the reader. The usage theme is explained along the long north wall, with manufacturing arrayed along the south wall. Furniture design is explained in several freestanding displays in the center of the floor along the main axis of the room. The stories of manufacturing and design both move chronologically from west to east, but the displays in the usage section include artifacts from several time periods.

The exhibit attempts to be inclusive of the entire sweep of Maryland history from the organization of the colony in 1634 to the present day, but the display overwhelmingly focuses on furniture of the late 18th and early 19th centuries. The period before the 1710s is represented only by a laminated reproduction of an estate inventory and a handful of archeological objects. The 20th century also receives relatively scant attention. Even in the exhibit's chronological area of strength, the objects on display largely represent the wealthiest segments of society; though a few objects, such as a barstool with its original deerskin seat (ca. 1830-1860) and a painted chair owned by a manumitted slave provide welcome exceptions. Much of this slant can be attributed to the fact that lower-class households before the 20th century had very little furniture at all, and what they did own tended to

get used up rather than saved and placed in museum collections.

The curators of *Furniture in Maryland Life* work to tell a human story broader than that suggested by their largely upper-class artifacts. Some labels describe the makers of the items on display, from nearly unknown carpenters to successful manufacturers. Visitors learn about the role of German immigrants in Baltimore's furniture trade, Enrico Liberti, a 20th-century maker of Colonial Revival furniture whose workbench and tools are in the exhibit, and even the story of an enslaved man who had made a rush-bottomed chair on display. Other labels help visitors understand how historians interpret the past. For instance, one label explains that attributions are usually based on the proximity of a piece to local manufacturers, and that furniture makers are often known to historians only by the advertisements they placed in local newspapers. Many labels include appropriate visual evidence, such as historic advertisements, pictures from furniture design books, and portraits of owners and makers.

Curators attempted to balance the interests of a general audience with those of furniture enthusiasts, and neither group should be disappointed. Visitors interested in the decorative arts will appreciate the large number of beautiful pieces of furniture, as well as the paintings, silverware, and porcelain items used to augment the displays. Those design features that make Maryland furniture distinctive are described on individual labels. The largest panel in the exhibit, titled "What Makes it Maryland?" summarizes and compares the design elements of Maryland-made furniture dating from the 1760s to the 1860s, using pictures of pieces used elsewhere in the exhibit.

The exhibit text attempts to balance the interests of both audiences. For example, a side chair made in the period 1790-1810 is first described stylistically, as an example of distinctive Baltimore design. The label then relates that Peter Francis Corvaux, "a

free Mulato boy 16 years old," may have worked on the chair because he served as an apprentice to the attributed maker.

Furniture in Maryland is the most recent incarnation of this exhibit. An earlier installment featured a catalog and book, Gregory R. Weidman's *Furniture in Maryland, 1740-1940*, which unfortunately is out of print. The current exhibit has no catalog at this time. *Furniture in Maryland Life* is a worthy addition to the permanent exhibits of the Maryland Historical Society. Despite the chronological unevenness of the collection, the curators succeeded in creating a beautiful exhibit that should appeal to both the general public and specialists interested in furniture design.

Eric Nystrom

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1. Gregory R. Weidman, *Furniture in Maryland, 1740-1940: The Collection of the Maryland Historical Society* (Baltimore: Maryland Historical Society, 1984).

Tales of the Territory: Minnesota 1849-1858

The Minnesota History Center, St. Paul, MN;
Curator: Brian Horrigan

October 1999-March 2007

When Minnesota became a territory in 1849, military officer and acclaimed artist Captain Seth Eastman painted Minnesota's territorial seal. While Eastman's original design has since been altered, his initial watercolor depicts a white male farmer plowing the earth in the foreground, while in the background, an American Indian male on horseback rides full gallop away from the scene. Such was the romantic view of U.S. expansion and Indian removal held by many of Eastman's contemporaries: The "native" naturally and inevitably gives way to "progress." Of course, the portrayal of Indian removal as a vanishing act neatly glossed

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