

INTRODUCTION

“It is not the strongest of the species that survives, nor the most intelligent that survives. It is the one that is the most adaptable to change.” Charles Darwin.

This study is a retelling of a story of mistaken identity that has persisted in the annals of decorative arts for almost a century. The subjects are three examples of exceptional curvilinear chairs made out of exotic wood and forged in the great change and cultural upheaval in the first third of the nineteenth century in the United States. The form of these chairs has been assumed to belong to a later generation, but the analysis in the pages that follow attempt to restore their birthright as an earlier transitional step in the evolution of American furniture. These three curvilinear chairs – significantly different in design from earlier nineteenth-century forms – are remarkable as they exemplify how exquisite the curvilinear form could be in its early stages. Despite the fact that these chairs are an important link in furniture history, they have not been fully appreciated by either scholars or connoisseurs.

Although there were many curvilinear chairs produced in the period, this study will focus on three remarkably similar examples: The Metropolitan Museum of Art’s side chair (68.202.1); the Merchant’s House Museum’s twelve side chairs (2002.2012.1-12); and, finally a set of sixteen owned by a descendent of the New York cabinetmaker Duncan Phyfe (Cat. 46 in *An Elegant Assortment: The Furniture of Duncan Phyfe and His Contemporaries, 1800-1840*).¹ It has been suggested this set was

¹ The Metropolitan Museum of Art’s curvilinear side chair (68.202.1) is described on website: “As craftsmen transitioned from the Early to the Late Grecian style (the latter is also referred to as the Grecian Plain Style), they began to incorporate more curvilinear shapes and new

made by Duncan Phyfe for his daughter Eliza Phyfe Vail. This study will demonstrate that these three chair designs (fig. 1, 2, 3) that share their defining serpentine crest rails, saber legs, and vase-shaped splats, are related. Hereafter referred to as the MMA chair, MHM chair and Vail chair, these forms create a platform for exploring an important transitional style that occurred in early nineteenth-century America.

Other chairs produced in the United States at the same time as the MMA, MHM, and Vail chair, include a set of six chairs currently on the market (fig. 4).² These chairs are curvilinear, with the same serpentine crest rails and saber legs; however, they differ from the three chairs of this study and exhibit flattened and abstracted lyre splats, rather than vase-shaped ones. This notable difference highlights the exceptional quality and the many similarities between the three curvilinear chairs of this study. The similarity between these three curvilinear chairs is intriguing and raises questions about the design origin of these chairs. These curvilinear chairs are indeed a departure from the rectilinearity of the preceding Federal style and were likely inspired by the same source, potentially even made by the same craftsman. For example, a comparison between the legs of the MHM and MMA chairs – the designs

motifs. With a scrolled stay rail and an inverted lotus-shaped splat, this design is more abstract than the clearly delineated lyre-back chair attributed to Phyfe (65.188.2). This example is thought to come from Phyfe's shop based on the quality of the workmanship and a close stylistic connection to a set of chairs manufactured for Phyfe's daughter, Eliza Phyfe Vail (1801–1890)." <http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/works-of-art/68.202.1>

² As of September 5, 2010, The Stanley Weiss Collection of Providence, RI, is offering "Six Mahogany Neoclassical Lyre Back Chairs, Phyfe Workshop, c.1825-30." Item sw00152. <http://www.tildenthurber.com/stanleyweiss/pages/items1/sw00152.html>

of both sets are identical –strongly suggest they may have emerged from the same workshop. However, this point is difficult to confirm as many New York cabinetmakers were responding to the rapid evolution of taste, technology, and trade by producing new designs in the late 1820s. The first few years of the nineteenth century witnessed an explosion in growth and development, a shift from the end of the previous century that concluded with the mourning of the first president. In 1812, however, this early phase of American development was hindered by a second great battle against the British, which slowed growth and instigated The Panic of 1819, the nation’s first recession.³

In 1824 the completion of the Erie Canal reestablished the spirit of progress and change in the northeast. This feat of engineering resulted in the opening of the western markets and a subsequent boom in trade. In 1826, the veteran New Yorker John Pintard wrote, “We are rapidly becoming the London of America.”⁴ Furniture production and trade was quickly transformed as lumber was brought east, and inland centers were now accessible through the Erie Canal.⁵ Merchants’ excitement about

³ David S. Reynolds, *Waking Giant, America in the Age of Jackson*, New York: Harper (2003) 30.

⁴ Bayard Still, *Mirror for Gotham, New York as Seen by Contemporaries from Dutch Days to the Present*, New York: New York University Press (1956) 78.

⁵ Catherine Hoover Voorsanger points out that, “once the Erie Canal connected New York to the western states with inexpensive transportation, the city’s primacy as the capital of American commerce and culture was assured. Cabinetmaking (and its allied trades) benefitted from this newly established link the West and from New York’s hegemony in international and domestic trade, manufacturing and finance.” “Gorgeous Articles of Furniture’: Cabinetmaking in the Empire City,” in Catherine Hoover Voorsanger and John

these opportunities is represented in their 1824 gift of a pair of Fletcher & Gardiner silver vases to Governor De Witt Clinton of New York, which literally illustrates the successfully engineered Erie Canal and the resulting trade.⁶ This celebratory phase was not short lived; champagne had barely been replenished from the celebration in Albany of the Erie Canal by the time the citizens of the young nation rejoiced in the visit of General Lafayette in August of 1824. On his American tour, the Revolutionary War hero traveled for thirteen months and explored the progress of the nation with festivals, galas, and events.⁷ According to some accounts, 50,000 people — a third of the population of New York at that time — greeted him on lower Broadway, representing the patriotic sentiment of the period.

New markets, rapid growth in population, improvements in infrastructure, progress in medicine, and shifts in political traditions characterize the zeitgeist of the early nineteenth century. Change was ubiquitous and expected. The concept of the American president changed as well in 1829, when an orphan from Tennessee was elected to the highest office in the land. Andrew Jackson was the first president of the

K. Howat, Eds, *Art and the Empire City: New York, 1825-1861*, New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art (2000) 287.

⁶ Metropolitan Museum of Art, Accession Number 1982.4a, b; 1988.199.

⁷ “Lafayette’s tour was one of four memorable events – three of them planned, the other accidental – that made the mid-1820s a time of jubilee. Beside Lafayette’s visit, there were the laying of the cornerstone of the Bunker Hill Monument, the opening of the Erie Canal, and the passing of Thomas Jefferson and John Adams, who died within hours of each other on July 4th, 1826, the fiftieth anniversary of the nation’s independence. These events had deep roots in the nation’s founding. Each sparked an outpouring of national pride...” Reynolds, 47.

American people; he was not an aristocratic British-educated man.⁸ Change was not only occurring in the abstract; the physical structure of New York was shifting. One visitor stated in 1839, “The whole of New York is rebuilt about once in ten years.”⁹ This was also the period when French political thinker Alexis de Tocqueville described America in a letter:

Picture to yourself, my dear friend, if you can, a society which comprises all the nations of the world – English, French, German: people differing from one another in language, in beliefs, in opinion; in a word, a society possessing no roots, no memories, no prejudices, no routine, no common ideas, no national character, yet with a happiness a hundred time greater than our own.¹⁰

In the decorative arts and in architecture, transformations were occurring as well. As de Tocqueville suggests, the emerging character of nineteenth-century America was a combination of European influences; New York received two thirds of all immigrants. “It was natural that New York received the heaviest impact of incoming foreigners, for the immigrants simply followed the shipping routes already determined by the course of regular commerce.”¹¹ In this global setting of immigrants and prolific domestic and transatlantic trade, shifts in taste and style could occur from multiple influences. Diverse and independent nineteenth-century New York wanted

⁸ In addition to changing the concept of presidency, Jackson transformed the White House itself by installing the north portico, adding walkways to the gardens, planting elms, sycamores and magnolias, as well as bringing running water to the White House. Reynolds, 95-6.

⁹ Still, 80.

¹⁰ Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America, The Complete and Unabridged Volumes I and II, with an Introduction by Joseph Epstein*, Trans. Henry Reeve, Republished New York: Bantam Dell (2002) xxviii.

¹¹ Robert Greenhalgh Albion, *The Rise of the New York Port, 1815-1860*, Hamden, CT: Archon Books (1961) 336.

to represent this national identity in a new design.

By this point, Americans were well versed in interpreting and creating new styles. F. Heinrich aptly represents the increasingly popular Greek revival interior of this period, in his painting of *Mr. and Mrs. Ernest Fiedler at their home on Bond Street* in 1850 (fig. 5). Wendy Cooper notes, “Already Americans had a century and more of experience in borrowing ideas and designs from abroad, and the primary difference at the outset of the nineteenth century ... was the reservoir of images and ideas was virtually limitless.”¹² When the curvilinear chair emerged both in England and in the United States, it represented a dramatic departure from the Greek-inspired klismos chair (fig. 6) that was popular at the turn of the nineteenth century. The structure of this new chair type satisfied the demand for new designs, as it markedly contrasted with the sense of order that dominated the rectilinear designs of Federal and neoclassical furniture. The most visible catalysts of change in furniture design were the newly created architectural interiors which reflected this interest in curvilinearity. This new chair, with its sweeping curves and large, vase-shaped splat, fit well into these interior spaces.

The new form of chair (the MMA, MHM and Vail chair) that emerged is generally called a balloon back chair. Often made of mahogany or rosewood and upholstered in horsehair, the design of this chair quickly spread and remained popular

¹² Wendy A. Cooper, *Classical Taste in America*, New York: The Baltimore Museum of Art and Abbeville Press Publishers (1993) 107.

throughout the Victorian era. The curvilinear back and decorated splat of these chairs leads many to believe that this form is part of the Victorian Rococo Revival. For example, a satinwood, gilded side chair c.1850 (fig. 7) by Holland & Sons was included in Queen Victoria's main furnishing campaign at Osborne House (1845 - 1857).¹³ In addition, the presence of this curvilinear chair in many Victorian illustrations, such as "Sunday afternoon temperance meeting (1877)" (fig. 8), and on trade cards, such as "John B. Bland, Dealer in New and Second-Hand Furniture, (1870)" (fig. 9), add to the evidence of this chair's strong Victorian presence.¹⁴ Contrary to common belief, however, this chair directly succeeded the Federal period and was first produced in New York in the late 1820s, not the 1850s.

It has been difficult for historians to pinpoint the date of emergence of this chair, and today consensus is elusive on defining most aspects of this chair.¹⁵ Scholars and dealers have often misinterpreted the style, leaving a notable gap in the research of this particular object. As this chair was popular in the mid-century, it has often

¹³ Thank you to Michael Hunter, Curator, Osborne House for providing this information.

¹⁴ "Sunday afternoon temperance meeting (1877)" is from *Harper's weekly: A Journal of Civilization*. (New York: Harper's Weekly Co., 1857-1916). Accessed via New York Public Library Digital Gallery, Mid-Manhattan Picture Collection, Catalog Call Number: PC NEW YC-Mis, Digital ID: 805944. The trade card, "John B. Bland, Dealer in New and Second-Hand Furniture, 1870" is from the Bella C. Landauer Collection, Department of Prints, Photographs and Architectural Collections, New York Historical Society, Collection PR 031, Box No. 67-Scrapbooks, Folder No. 1 of 4.

¹⁵ The Metropolitan Museum of Art currently dates its chair circa 1830 in their online Collections Database and in the Central Catalog system. The Merchant's House Museum, which is currently conducting research on their chairs, speculates that they were produced circa 1832-1835, as this correspond with the Tredwell family's move to their new residence on East 4th Street. The Vail chairs are dated 1830 by Nancy McClelland in her publication *Duncan Phyfe and the English Regency, 1795-1830*, and are dated 1825-1830 by Deborah Dendhal Waters, curator of *An Elegant Assortment*.

been presumed the chair first appeared then. Surprisingly, academic texts are unable to clarify this confusion. Most publications defining or utilizing the term “balloon back chair” offer a different perspective on the date and place of origin, and etymology of this form.

The most familiar published reference to this chair form is from the eminent early twentieth-century scholar Nancy McClelland. In 1939, she suggested that it was 1830 when Duncan Phyfe produced a curvilinear chair for his daughter Eliza Phyfe Vail (the Vail chair in this study).¹⁶ This statement, now seventy-one years old, has remained the standard reference point for curators, auctioneers and dealers.¹⁷ This often-repeated date seemingly has not been challenged. Other publications, such as a standard furniture dictionary by Charles Boyce, states that the balloon back chair resembled an aeronautical balloon, and was developed around 1850. Joseph Aronson’s third edition of *The Encyclopedia of Furniture* states the balloon back chair

¹⁶ When dating the Eliza Phyfe Vail chairs rites of passage in the Phyfe family such as marriages and christenings are relevant as in the nineteenth century the acquisition of furniture was often a singular event associated with a marriage or relocation. McClelland dates the chairs to 1830 hypothesizing the chairs were a wedding gift from father to daughter, yet Peter Kenny notes Eliza Vail married in 1825. It believed Eliza moved to New Market, New Jersey in 1832, and the Greek revival house noted in McClelland’s publication was built 1849-50. These chairs would have been appropriate for the interiors of this house. Considering Eliza’s lifespan, as well as the dates of her children’s christening (one in 1829) McClelland’s suggestion that these chairs were indeed a wedding present from 1830 is problematic; 1825 might be a more appropriate date.

¹⁷ For example, the Stanley Weiss Collection dates their curvilinear chairs c. 1825-1830 based on McClelland’s proposed date. An excerpt from the Weiss website states: “ A set of six mahogany neoclassical lyre back Klismos chairs attributed to Phyfe workshop, c. 1825-1830. These chairs are related to documented chairs made in the Duncan Phyfe workshop for his Daughter on the occurrence of her marriage and is illustrated in the Nancy McClelland work, *Duncan Phyfe and the English Regency 1795-1830*, p. 126. plate 109.” See website listed on footnote 2.

was developed by Hepplewhite (1727? – 1786) but chooses to illustrate the definition with chairs from 1850-1870. Helen Comstock's *American Furniture* states, "This typical Victorian fashion is seen in American furniture beginning in the 1840s." Meanwhile, the Oxford English Dictionary lists the first instance of the term 'balloon back' as late as 1866.¹⁸ The Metropolitan Museum of Art's 1970 *19th-Century America: Furniture and Other Decorative Arts*, describes its own balloon-back chair (68.202.1) as "made about 1830 in New York in the style of the French Restauration." Some surveys, even extensive ones such as Judith and Martin Miller's *The Antiques Directory Furniture* or Robert Little's *Chairs: 400 Years of Social and Stylistic Changes* skip over this furniture form entirely despite its popularity among consumers and perpetual presence.

There is also a broad range of brief comments in scholarship about possible design sources for the curvilinear chair. In fact, there is not even a consensus on whether the chair is a revival style or a new form. Some sources cite the cabinetmaker and pattern book publisher George Hepplewhite as an influence, and reference his chairs (fig. 10) as a possible starting point.¹⁹ Other sources nod to the court furniture of Louis XV as inspiration for the balloon back chair and suggest that this chair is a

¹⁸ "balloon back, *n.*" *The Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed. 1989, *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, 4 Apr. 2000 <<http://dictionary.oed.com/cgi/entry/00181778>>.

¹⁹ Thomas Arthur Strange, *English furniture, Decoration, Woodwork and Allied Arts: From the Last Half of the Seventeenth Century to the Early Part of the Nineteenth Century*, ed. Thomas Arthur Strange, New York: Bonanza Books (1950) 260.

revival from the past.²⁰ And at least one scholar believes this chair “is a distinctly Phyfe creation,” negating a revival possibility.²¹ Terminology for this chair also refers to the “Old French Style.”²²

When reviewing the etymology of the term “balloon back,” it appears that an earlier French chair had the same name. This name was likely inspired by the Montgolfier chair (fig. 11), named after the Montgolfier brothers (Joseph and Etienne), who were the first French hot air balloonists. Their public flight, under a balloon of taffeta and India rubber, took place on the evening of August 27, 1783 from the Champs de Mars after their initial flight on June 4.²³ This flight, well attended and celebrated, influenced *menuisiers* such as Jean-Baptiste-Bernard Demay (1759-1798). Having already created chairs for Marie Antoinette, he likely designed the Montgolfier chair featuring a wooden splat shaped as a hot air balloon.²⁴ As a result, later chairs with shapes similar to the hot air balloon were termed balloon back chairs. Yet these French chairs have a crescent crest rail, rather than the serpentine crest rail of the English and American versions.

²⁰ In *Les Ebenistes du XIXe Siecle*, Denise Ledoux-Lebard references the *chaise légère* in the style Louis XV, page 537. This chair, however, does not have a serpentine crest rail, but a crescent crest rail. See image I in figure 37.

²¹ *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin*, New Series, Vol. 33, No. 4, A Bicentennial Treasury: American Masterpieces from the Metropolitan (Winter, 1975-1976), No. 43, 44.

²² Thomas King, *Neo-Classical Furniture Designs: A Reprint of Thomas King's "Modern Style of Cabinet Work Exemplified," 1829*, New York: Dover Publications (1995) 8.

²³ Bernadette Bensaude-Vincent and Christine Blondel, *Science and Spectacle in the European Enlightenment*, Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing (2008) 56.

²⁴ Gordon Campbell, *The Grove Encyclopedia of Decorative Arts, Volume 1*, New York: Oxford University Press (2006) 309.

Due to seemingly unreliable scholarly information and references within the field of decorative arts, a closer examination of this new chair form along with its more precise design source and its emergence in the United States will be the focus of this study. While it is frequently stated that the chair first appeared on the market in the 1850s and was referred to as “balloon back,” this thesis will trace the time period during which the chair became available to consumers and confirm that it emerged in England about 1822 and then later in the United States. To avoid confusion, this study will simply refer to the chair as curvilinear. Three examples of the chair in the United States and one example in England will be studied to demonstrate that this transitional chair, is an English style rather than a French one. Daybooks and furniture patterns books including sketches of this chair, which document the date of emergence of the chair, will be included. For example, Simon Jervis’s important 1968 exhibition catalogue *High Victorian Furniture* provides a roadmap for understanding the transmission of styles.²⁵

With respect to the three examples of American curvilinear chairs included in this study, this work will represent the first detailed collection of the visual comparisons of the three chairs, the precise measurements, and illustrations of the templates of the chair legs. The set of chairs at the Merchant’s House Museum

²⁵ Simon Jervis clearly observed the phenomenon of the evolution of styles, but does not explicitly state that designs run their course and new designs had the desire to please the consumer and designer.

(originally owned by Seabury Tredwell, 1780-1865) has never been closely studied.²⁶

In addition to presenting new research on physical examinations of these chairs, this study will critically review and question various existing scholarship and incorporate new research.

The goal of this thesis is to place the curvilinear chair in its correct historical context, at the end of the Neoclassical period. This will be accomplished by plotting the early emergence of the prototype of this chair within the transition between the Neoclassical and Rococo periods. The existing scholarship is defined by indifferent attitudes towards intermediary forms, and a clear distinction has not been established between the various versions of these chairs. Unfolding research on why the curvilinear chair is overlooked points to the omission of the form in mainstream pattern books. Records reveal this type of chair was made by highly skilled cabinetmakers (both English and American) for sophisticated clients. And the large number of these chairs preserved in museum collections also suggests that the chair was well received by consumers. As an object of material culture this chair represents a new moment in consumer demand between two distinct periods - the end of the

²⁶ It should be noted that this thesis topic resulted from the author's 2009 summer internship at the Merchant's House Museum researching whether an attribution of Duncan Phyfe as maker on set of curvilinear chairs in the collection was possible. This specific internship was created as the museum wished to determine to the best of their ability whether or not the chairs could be attributed to Phyfe. Over the course of the author's research, the need for new research on this design as well as the limited amount of research conducted on this chair form became evident. Other dissertations had been written on the Merchant's House Museum, such as James Aulton Nonemaker's 1958 thesis for Columbia University entitled *The New York Town House, 1815-1840* and Lewis Sharp's 1968 thesis *The Old Merchant's House: An 1831/32 New York Row House*, but these studies were concerned with architectural history rather than the decorative arts.

orderly Federal period and the beginning of a new, robust curvilinear style that would eventually become the Victorian Rococo Revival.

Extant Curvilinear Chairs, the first chapter, will begin with an English example of the curvilinear chair form followed by a close review of three selected American curvilinear chairs. An analysis of the form of the chairs and aspects of their construction will be included. The second chapter, *Pattern Books*, discusses designs as well as the importance of the dated Gillows day books in determining the emergence of this chair. The third chapter, *Longevity and Success*, uses an assemblage of ten images to illustrate how this transitional chair became a starting point for a long lineage of successful designs. This chair experienced impressive longevity in the market, from its emergence in the 1820s through its peak in the mid-to-late nineteenth century through a second revival and then a redesign in the twenty-first century. Only recently has the impressive ability of this chair to adapt been recognized.

The thesis concludes by placing these curvilinear chairs in the larger history of design by recounting the cycles of art history between orderly rectilinearity and natural or organic curvilinearity. Chairs have long been the fascination of scholars and their forms speak volumes on social history, politics of the time, as well as the role of tastemakers on society. These American curvilinear chairs, which don't fit comfortably in the Neoclassical or Rococo Revival, are a transitional form that

satisfied artistic impulses and consumer desires but did not proceed to attract the attention of the majority of scholars or collectors.

CHAPTER ONE: EXTANT CURVILINEAR CHAIRS

*In architecture and the applied arts form and function are partners. Where the function is simple and constant, as with teapots or chairs, it can be factored out. The remaining variable is style, bespeaking cultural values and attitudes in it and in its variations across time, space, class, and so forth.*²⁷
Jules David Prown.

Extant curvilinear chairs in various collections are social artifacts. These chairs, as objects, illustrate details such as production standards in workshops and materials available to craftsmen. Of great interest to decorative art historians is the study of how the diffusion of new design objects represents changing tastes. What design sources were affecting craftsmen and patrons that caused changes in production, as seen in this new form of the curvilinear chair? How did consumers respond to the new products?

These chairs have been studied purely from a design perspective, but historical context, such as details of the owner's social hierarchy and access to goods, as well as patterns of information on the makers, can further illustrate how change took place in the nineteenth century. In the case of the known curvilinear chairs in three specific American collections, similarities in the chairs' construction and decoration suggest that each of these chairs was inspired by the same source. As today, in the nineteenth century the latest styles were rare and expensive and only available to the elite. These objects reflected cosmopolitanism and access. After a short period of time, these objects lost the luster of innovation as the new designs spread through lower strata of

²⁷ Jules David Prown, "Mind in Matter: An Introduction to Culture Theory and Method," *Winterthur Portfolio Vol 17. No. 1* (Spring, 1982) 14.

society and became more common. In terms of the curvilinear chairs, it is interesting that social status of the three owners of the American curvilinear chairs is quite similar.

A review of the popular period chairs before the emergence of these curvilinear chairs will be included to showcase the novelty of the elements of these chairs that mark them as a transitional design. Next, these curvilinear chairs will be compared to each other and to known curvilinear chairs outside the United States to understand similarities and differences and precisely how these chairs represent the shift of styles. The last section of analysis will be a physical examination of the chairs to determine how this new style was carried out in the United States.

AN EMERGING DESIGN

The new form of the curvilinear chairs, which emerged in New York in the early part of the nineteenth century, reveal that the American decorative arts field was ready for change. The strong rectilinearity of neoclassicism of the first two decades had run its course. Styles evolve, mature and fade, and by the 1820s in New York there was momentum for a shift from the status quo. Yet as changes don't happen over night, this transitional style would use the favorite material of neoclassicism (mahogany) and design vocabulary (urns).

Almost one hundred years before the appearance of the curvilinear chair, the

furniture firm of Gillows & Co. was created by Robert Gillow (1704–1772) in 1730 in Lancaster, England. The firm, which was inherited by sons Richard and Robert and was maintained as a family business, has many extant documents that highlight the operations of the workshop in both the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. These documents, which only recently have been the focus of scholars (Lindsay Boynton, Susan Stuart, Judith Dunn and others), are crucial as they contain dated sketches that highlight the emergence of new designs.²⁸ They are also a valuable resource in understanding the range of furniture produced by a single firm.

From a twentieth-century perspective, Gillows may have been the best-kept secret of nineteenth century cabinetmaking. As Judith Dunn points out, “If Gillows is less of a household name than Chippendale, Sheraton or Hepplewhite, it is because the firm kept its pattern books, the Estimate Sketch Books, a closely guarded secret, for craftsmen and customers only.”²⁹ With this system, Gillows was successful with multiple offices and a prolific output. These hitherto unpublished daybooks, which

²⁸ According to Allison Kenney, Archivist at City of Westminster Archives Centre, Accession 344 (which contains the main series of estimate sketch books plus accounts) was purchased from Waring & Gillow on or about 8 Dec 1966 for £5,000. Accession 735 (3 colour pattern books) purchased from Paul Crinke on or about 14 Nov 1974 for £7,500. Accession 2221 (accounts, photos) donation from Lancashire Record Office via V&A Archive of Art & Design on 3 Mar 2000. Accession 2233 (accounts, warehouse ledgers, staff records etc) donation from Lancashire Record Office via V&A Archive of Art & Design on 19 Jun 2000. According to the Watson Library Catalog, MMA, which holds microfilm from materials held by the Westminster City Libraries, City of Westminster Archives Centre, the Gillows & Co. records are: Accounts, 1729-1897 (partly indexed); order books and estimate books, 1758-1825; estimate sketch books, 1784-1897, (partly indexed); memorandum books and packing books, 1741-1836, 1883-1895 (partly indexed); drawing books and pattern books, 1775-1886; letter books, 1746-1842 (partly indexed).

²⁹ Judith Dunn, “Gillows of Lancaster: Two Centuries of English Furniture,” *New England Antiques Journal*, November 2008, <http://www.antiquesjournal.com/Pages04/Monthly_pages/nov08/gillows.html>

include precise dates, names of patrons, and sketches of furniture forms record a curvilinear chair (fig. 12). This illustration is a Rosetta Stone for the story of furniture design in the early nineteenth century. Furthermore, it is likely that this particular Gillows sketch of the curvilinear chair is the first record of this chair form. One could argue that the unavailability of these documents contributed to the difficulty scholars have had in accurately dating the curvilinear chair form.³⁰

In 1822, Gillows produced a set of sixteen mahogany dining chairs (fig. 13) and a matching child's chair for the Earl of Manvers according to the documents for the commission.³¹ These chairs, recently included in an auction catalog are extant. As would occur later in America, in England these chairs reveal a considerable break from the klismos and Regency forms that Gillows produced. While klismos chairs and Regency chairs have a rectangular top rail, The Earl of Manvers chairs have a serpentine crest rail with a stay rail decorated at the terminals. These Manvers chairs have twisting side rails that gradually curve to the center creating a waist; the klismos chair rails are oblong. As Stuart points out, "Gillow & Co.'s partners were amongst the first cabinetmakers to revive antique styles, including Grecian, Rococo and

³⁰ Lindsay Boynton published one volume of the planned two volumes of *Gillows Furniture Designs 1760-1800* in 1996 but his untimely death at age 61 did not allow this book to include his twenty-five years of research. The Independent's obituary on Lindsay Boynton states only in 1996 was Boynton able to publish the first of two volumes, *Gillow: Gillow Furniture Designs 1760-1800*. "Accessed August 30, 2010: <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/people/obituary-lindsay-boynton-1322178.html>. Christopher Gilbert reviews the publication in *The Burlington Magazine*, Vol. 138, No. 1119 (Jun., 1996), 413.

³¹ Sotheby's (Thoresby Hall Sale 31 May – 2 June 1989, lot 33). See also plate GG12, Stewart, Volume 2, 368.

Elizabethan, and a few bobbin-turned chairs were made. By the mid 1830s the firm had so many chair styles that they formed a separate chair and seat furniture sketch book.³² The 1822 set of chairs has a range of characteristics that reveal a sea change from chairs made throughout the first two decades of the nineteenth century such as the klismos chair. Clearly this chair represents a major change in the acceptance of the curvilinear form.³³

Not long after the introduction of Gillow's curvilinear chair in the 1820s, other extant documents reveal that the chair form was spreading through the country. In Bristol, Richard Stoate produced a pattern book in 1833 (fig. 14, 14a) that includes variations of chair backs, all with serpentine crest rails, but with a range of splat options. Included on the single page, these sketches suggest that Stoate was simply copying a trend and offering a number of options to his consumer. Little information remains on the furniture produced by this English craftsman located in the southwest.

What caused this shift in furniture design from rectilinear to curvilinear? Why did the Earl of Manvers commission chairs quite unlike the klismos? These Manvers chairs have many characteristics that point to a break from the early nineteenth

³² Susan Stuart, *Gillows of Lancaster and London 1730-1840*, Vol 1, London: Antique Collectors' Club, Ltd. (2008) 137.

³³ Richard Stoate is listed as an agent in Bristol on page 452 in Kelly's *Directory of Somersetshire*. The title page of this directory states: "Kelly's Handbook to the Gilded, Landed, and Official Class." This directory contains about twenty thousand names and was published March 24, 1833.

standard form of the light but rigid geometric order of neoclassical forms. These chairs with their new curvilinear silhouettes made for nobility, publicize a profound transformation in taste. Illustrating an element of Prown's quotation, the chairs, limited by their function, but ably expressing the style of the time, reveal an obvious break from an earlier style. This new design not only had a notable impact on furniture history but is also an artifact of material culture, representing a shift in taste.

American consumers, as the Earl of Manvers, were ready for a change of their own, for a number of different reasons. Immigrant craftsmen were influencing taste and culture by producing new forms.³⁴ Separately, conspicuous consumption and displays of wealth were becoming increasingly prevalent in socially stratified New York. Interesting to note that the Tredwell's (owners of the MHM chairs) likely acquired these chairs in 1835, precisely when they moved to the newly fashionable Bond Street area.³⁵

THE TREDWELL FAMILY

The history of the Tredwell family, as well as an account of the collection of the Merchant's House Museum, sheds light on the history of this set of twelve chairs. Seabury Tredwell (1780-1865), the "merchant" of the museum's moniker, sold

³⁴ Between 1820 and 1850 the US population increased from 9.6 million to 23.2 million. Reynolds, 181.

³⁵ It is possible that the Tredwells had acquired the chairs earlier and brought them to the new house.

The rise of the Bond Street area is noted in: Edwin G. Burrows and Mike Wallace, *Gotham: A History of New York to 1898* (New York: Oxford University Press): 1999, 458.

hardware at the junction of Pearl Street and the East River in New York. When he retired around 1835 he moved his residence and family of seven children from Dey Street in lower Manhattan to the newly fashionable Bond Street area (the house was completed in 1832). His new row house at 29 East 4th Street has a double parlor, with the front parlor facing the street and a dining room positioned at the back of the house. This double parlor maintains the Greek revival interiors of the period. For Tredwell, with a wife of some social standing, a number of unmarried daughters, and dabbling in venture capitalism during his retirement from importing, an impressive parlor was a necessity. While there is no documentation to date the arrival of the chairs into the house, circumstances and logic are important. As Seabury Tredwell spent most of his working life on Pearl Street as an importer and exporter he must have been well-aware of the wares coming through the harbor as well the other men working in that area. The Rode's Directory of New York of 1841-1842 lists only thirty cabinetmakers working in the city.³⁶ As Duncan Phyfe's workshop was located on Fulton Street not far from Tredwell's business on Pearl Street, it is possible Tredwell passed by the Phyfe workshop on a daily basis.³⁷ In addition to the proximity of Tredwell's and Phyfe's businesses, it is also possible that Tredwell and Phyfe were acquainted through business transactions. Phyfe's prolific workshop required large amounts of wood and hardware; Tredwell may have sold Phyfe drawer

³⁶ A copy of the second edition of The Rode's Directory is in the collection of the New York Historical Society. The directory does not explicitly state whether these thirty cabinetmakers are master cabinetmakers who operate their own business. If this is the case, it can be assumed there were additional cabinetmakers at work.

³⁷ For an illustration of the exterior of Phyfe's workshop, see: *The Shop and Warehouse of Duncan Phyfe, 168-172 Fulton Street, New York City*, a watercolor, black ink, and gouache on white laid paper, in the the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, (22.28.1)

pulls, hinges and other hardware needed for case furniture. It is also possible that Tredwell, with his direct connections to goods in lower Manhattan, purchased the twelve chairs directly from Phyfe's workshops for his new residence.³⁸

When Tredwell died in 1865 his spinster daughters remained in the house for the rest of their lives. Gertrude Tredwell (1840-1933), the eighth child and the only one to be born on East 4th Street died in 1933. Without great inheritance and little income it is believed she lived sparingly. The property as well as the furniture is believed to be virtually unchanged from the nineteenth to the twentieth century when Tredwell's wife's great-nephew established The Merchant's House Museum in 1933. "The importance of the Merchant's House has been recognized by numerous landmark designations. In 1936, the Historic American Buildings Survey documented it; in 1964, it was designated as a National Historic Landmark and is one of only 2,000 in the country. On October 14, 1965, the Merchant's House was designated as one of the first 20 New York City Landmarks; on December 22, 1981, it was designated as a New York City interior landmark; and it is listed on the National Register of Historic Places."³⁹

Still in operation today, the museum is New York's only intact family home from the nineteenth century with a founding collection thought to have remain

³⁸ As noted by Michael Brown in his master's thesis on Duncan Phyfe, occasionally nineteenth-century New York cabinetmakers offered warehouse sales to clear out stock. Michael Kevin Brown, "Duncan Phyfe," (Master's Thesis, University of Delaware, 1978).

³⁹ New York Architecture Images, *The Merchant's House Museum*: <http://www.nyc-architecture.com/LES/LES017.htm> (May, 2010).

unchanged. While there is no firm documentation proving these curvilinear chairs were purchased in 1835, there is also no documentation of anything purchased after 1835. The similarity between the MHM chairs and the MMA and Vail chairs suggest they are from the 1830s. Furthermore, the Tredwell family's position as upper middle class in 1835 required them to maintain fashionable interiors deeming these sets of chairs as a social tool displaying conspicuous consumption.

In the first third of the nineteenth century, domestic spaces were beginning to take on a new importance. As published on the first page of *The Magazine of Domestic Economy* in 1836, “we are born at home, we live at home, and we must die at home, so that the comfort and economy of the home are of more deep, heart-felt, and personal interest to us, than the public affairs of all the nations in the world.”⁴⁰

Given that the Earl of Manvers chairs were created in 1822 in England, and with the robust transatlantic trade at the time, the three versions of the American chairs theoretically could have been produced as early as 1823.⁴¹ This revelation is a

⁴⁰ *The Magazine of Domestic Economy*, London: Orr and Smith, Pasternoster Row (1836 Volume The First) 1.

⁴¹ The MMA chair, which has been dated circa 1830 by the museum since its acquisition in 1968 from a New York dealer, is marked underneath on the back seat rail in black ink or pencil: “Property of / Joseph Bloomfield / 1820”. One possibility as the owner of this chair is Bloomfield, whose portrait was painted by Charles Peale, was a Major in the Revolutionary War, the Governor of New Jersey for eleven years, a United States Congressman, and a lifelong abolitionist. This faded inscription mark (in Roman lettering, not script) must have been applied to the single chair by a later dealer in order to increase the value of the chair by creating a provenance to a well-known owner as the date of 1820 is implausible. First, 1820 is too early a date for this chair, and second, this Bloomfield died in 1823. It is unlikely he would have been purchasing furniture in the last few years of his life. Additional chairs from the original set with this identifying mark have not yet surfaced. A search for additional

dramatic shift from the previous belief that these chairs were mid-century and French inspired. The similarity between the Earl of Manvers and the American curvilinear chairs is clear, while the similarity between the curvilinear chairs and those that preceded them is minimal. In fact, the design source of the three curvilinear chairs may well be narrowed to Gillows.

REVIEW OF THE PREDECESSORS TO THE CURVILINEAR CHAIR

A range of neoclassical chairs was fashionable in early nineteenth-century America as a result of the popularity of this style in England and France following the excavations at Pompeii and Herculaneum in the mid to late eighteenth century. In America, as in Europe, a range of furniture forms directly and indirectly connected to antiquity proliferated. For example, Benjamin Henry Latrobe (1764–1820)’s klismos chair (MMA 1994.189, fig. 15) is a form considered to be the most archaeologically correct chair of the period. Furniture designers interpreted the excavated Greek designs of vases and other motifs and incorporated these into a new furniture form; no actual klismos chair is known. The resulting chair, a Greek easy chair, was exceedingly popular as it was aesthetically light and elegant, and physically its curved receding back was comfortable.⁴² “By the end of the second decade, the vogue for these fancy painted furniture had been fully embraced by American chair makers.

inscribed objects marked “Property of Joseph Bloomfield” has uncovered only a bible. (A catalog in the University of Michigan’s library, published by Edward Morrill & Son in 1940 includes this citation on the bible marked “Property of Joseph Bloomfield).

⁴² Campbell, 216.

Easily assembled and cheaply transported, these affordable chairs were part of many middle- and upper-class households from Maine to New Orleans.”⁴³ Further evidence of the popularity of the klismos chair is revealed in the portraiture of the period (fig. 16).

Chairs that were hybrids of classical features and contemporary designs were also popular in the early nineteenth century. A side chair with a curule base and single cross in the back, such as MMA’s side chair (60.4.4) is dated 1791–1818. Other early American side chairs were imitations of neoclassical designs by both French and English designers, such as Robert Adam (1728-1792). In New York, Baltimore, Philadelphia, Boston, and other urban centers, this furniture was the norm. A vase-back chair (fig. 17, MMA 62.16) dated 1794–99 and attributed to Salem’s Samuel McIntire (1757-1811) is an enriched version of plate 2 from George Hepplewhite’s “Cabinet-Maker and Upholsterer’s Guide” (London, 1788).⁴⁴ This is just one example of many close copies of English designed chairs produced in the United States.

Early nineteenth-century chair making is generally defined not by the curvilinear chair but by the klismos chairs such as the lyre-back chair with hairy paw legs (MMA 65.188.2, fig. 18) or the ogee cross-back side chair (Yale University Art Gallery, Mabel Brady Garvan Collection 1930.2007, fig. 19). The lyre and cross-back

⁴³ Cooper, 53.

⁴⁴ Works of Art, American Decorative Arts: Side Chair:
http://www.metmuseum.org/works_of_art/collection_database/american_decorative_arts/side_chair_samuel_mcintire/objectview.aspx?page=1&sort=6&sortdir=asc&keyword=chair&fp=1&dd1=1&dd2=0&vw=1&collID=1&OID=10001719&vT=1&hi=0&cov=0

chairs are not commonly associated with being the direct predecessors of the curvilinear chair, due to the visible differences between these designs and the curvilinear chair. Yet as the lyre back chair was popular from 1790-1820, and the curvilinear chair was popular from 1820s onwards, these two chair types then are consecutive on the timeline of chair history.

Often produced in sets of eight, twelve or sixteen, each of these chair types would be used in parlors and dining rooms. Today we have only a vague sense of the numbers of curvilinear chairs produced. Often included in inventories and wills, many American museums have been able to obtain either single chairs or sets and, thanks to room-by-room period inventories, can recreate the arrangement of these chairs as they would have been placed in a large room.

COMPARISON OF EXTANT AMERICAN CURVILINEAR CHAIRS

When reviewing the early examples of the curvilinear chairs in American collections, a close comparison of the forms of the three chairs from the top down reveal subtle design influences. A photographic triptych of the three chairs (fig. 20) shows that the silhouettes of the serpentine crest rails of each chair are almost identical.⁴⁵ The crest rails on all three chairs have the same narrow shoulders, and all

⁴⁵ The black and white photograph of the MHM's chair, not a modern studio-lit image, but taken in 1972 by an unknown photographer, reveals how the chairs appear in an undiffused lighted setting such as gas lit parlors for which they were originally designed. Certain facets

three of the crest rails widen in the center as they come to meet at the trough of the curve, creating a visual representation of torque. Also, each of these chairs has the same sophisticated attenuated stiles that twist laterally as they rotate upwards, creating a waist for the back of the chair. At the same point between the seat and the crest of each of these chairs, the stiles are tapered.

Also strikingly similar are the shapes and widths of the chairs legs as well as the forms of the knees just below the seat rail.⁴⁶ The shape of the legs on all three chairs is virtually identical. The cabriolet, or saber, legs, featured in all three chairs, encompass an “S” curve in the overall shape of the front leg and a “C” curve in the back leg. All three chairs also have a small delicate knee below the seat frame. Similar to the klismos chairs, these three chairs have an exaggerated rake to the back leg, a trend that continues through the nineteenth century and can be seen in later Phyfe chairs such as the side chair of the Foote suite at The Metropolitan Museum of Art. The similarity in the crest rail, overall shape of the back, and shape of the legs, all point to the likelihood that the craftsmen producing all or some of these chairs were looking at the same design source. The American curvilinear chairs’ similarities illustrate a narrowly interpreted design that contrasts with the wide range of types

and curves of the chair naturally catch light while other curves are caught in shadows thereby highlighting the overall form of the chair.

⁴⁶ Interestingly, the back legs of The MHM’s chairs have varying widths suggesting that different craftsmen manufactured the back right and the back left legs of this set of chairs. Measurements of the width of the two back chair legs on a single differ by 3/4 inch on at least four of the twelve chairs highlighting the likelihood of the large scale of the workshop in which these chairs were produced. Credit is due to Caroline Drabik, Merchants House Museum, for closely studying the chair forms with the author.

produced in the Gillows workshop. The Gillows' design variations indicate an experimental approach to a new design concept, while the American chairs' similarities suggest conservative embellishments of a single design source.

In fact, the silhouettes of chair legs (fig. 21) are quite similar. Templates of the MMA legs and those of the MHM chairs reveal that they are indeed identical (fig. 22 and fig. 23).⁴⁷ A close comparison of both front "S" curved legs and the back "C" legs reveal that every curve, every shape in both legs is the same. These legs of the MMA and MHM chairs, then, were created from the same template.⁴⁸ The discovery that there is no difference between the legs of the MMA and MHM chair reveals additional aspects of the practice and scope of the workshop(s) producing the curvilinear chairs in New York. Cabinetmakers were utilizing the same template for different sets of chairs, likely for efficiency of production. The challenge is to determine which chairs are derivative of other designs; it is not always apparent due to the regularity with which craftsmen would reuse templates.

In the overall construction of the MHM and MMA chairs, as with the leg templates, there are great similarities.⁴⁹ Photographs of the chairs without slipseats reveal identical construction (fig. 24, 25). There are no corner or medial braces, rather

⁴⁷ Thank you to Peter Kenny for the suggestion of and assistance in creating these leg templates.

⁴⁸ Craftsmen could also steal designs from one another by making templates from completed chairs. Thus, the fact that these chairs legs are identical is not conclusive evidence the chairs were made in the same shop.

⁴⁹ Unfortunately, the Vail chairs were not examined by the author due to their being in a private collection.

a system of construction held together by the tension of the corner joins.⁵⁰ The fact that the MHM and MMA chair construction technique does not include braces distinguishes them from the medial braces in other extant chairs of the period included in Mary Ann Appicella's *Scottish Cabinetmakers* (fig. 27). Appicella points out that,

Scottish furniture is often said to be 'overbuilt,' and in the case of a saber leg chair, a form inherently unstable, a medial brace is a more elegant structural alternative to cross stretchers which cannot be used on saber leg models. As Scottish chairs of this type were often somewhat wider than English-made examples, medial braces rather than corner braces was a more logical method of strengthening the chair.⁵¹

The construction models used by Scottish and Scottish immigrant craftsmen included in this recent publication are used in the New World as well. The lack of corner braces in the MHM and MMA chairs suggest that these chairs were made by either the same craftsman or by craftsman trained in the same manner.

Another similarity between these chairs is that each of the three reveal a fine veneer panel inset into the front of the seat (fig. 3, fig. 28 and 29). This attractive detail highlights the quality of wood incorporated into the chairs and marks the chairs as elite market pieces. The MHM's inset panel is crotch mahogany; and, the MMA's less figured inset panel is rosewood. These panels signify a new detail that was not in

⁵⁰ Other curvilinear chairs that are loosely attributed to Phye, such as those for sale at Woldman & Woldman, show corner braces (fig. 26). Yet this attribution is quite problematic. Thank you to Murray Woldman for sending these images to the author.

⁵¹ Mary Ann Appicella, *Scottish Cabinetmaking in Federal New York*, Hanover: University Press of New England (2007) 140.

use in earlier nineteenth century chairs such as the double-cross banister back chair (1805-1815) possible by Phyfe (Taft Museum collection, 1932.32). The earlier chairs have reeding along the seat rail, a common practice by Phyfe and other New York makers at the time. These inset panels, which do not appear on English curvilinear chairs, may be a distinctly American characteristic.

Lastly, a table of measurements shows yet another similarity –in chair size:

<i>Name</i>	<i>Height</i>	<i>Width</i>	<i>Depth</i>
MMA	32 3/4	17 5/16	18 3/16
MHM	33	17 1/2	16
VAIL	32 3/8	17	17 1/16

The heights and widths of the three chairs are virtually identical, especially considering potential variations due to different individuals measuring each chair (the author measured the MMA and MHM chairs, and relied on published measurements of the Vail chairs). A careful review of the three chair types also reveals a number of differences. The most significant difference is the treatment of the splat. There is a range of treatments from carved decoration to smooth veneer.

The MHM's chair has a realistic depiction of a vase for the splat, while the other two chairs are abstracted representation of a vase. The splats on the MMA chair and the Phyfe chair have elaborate decorative treatment on an otherwise unembellished chair. The Phyfe chair has an extremely elongated splat that features both piercing and carving. The piercing runs parallel to the outline of the splat and highlights the shape. The MMA chair, with a higher mid rail, has a less elongated

splat and features piercing and carving on both the splat as well as the stay rail. The veneer on the splat of the MHM chair is likely a result of improved technology in machine saws: by the 1820s veneers could be secured by craftsmen directly from the lumberyard. This contributed to an increase in use of the popular crotch mahogany veneer.⁵²

When comparing the MHM's splat to the MMA's splat, the MMA splat appears to represent an abstracted vase with the rim of the vase transformed into petals. The splat has been described as an "inverted lotus" and the carving as "Egyptian."⁵³ Yet, Egyptianizing designs tended to be more literal than this example in the early nineteenth century.⁵⁴ While a review of a range of Egyptian motifs does indeed reveal a similar inverted lotus, the stay rail, described once as Egyptian, can actually be seen as rendered architectonic. The carved decoration found at the join of the side rail is actually an Ionic capital. A comparison of an image of the chair and an image of an Ionic capital confirms this, connecting this chair to motifs of ancient Greece.

The most significant structural difference in the three chairs is found in the MHM chair. The presence of the graduated seat rail seen on the MHM's chair (fig.

⁵² Celia Otto Jackson, *American Furniture of the Nineteenth Century*, New York: Viking Press (1965) 45, 76.

⁵³ *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin*, New Series, Vol. 33, No. 4, A Bicentennial Treasury: American Masterpieces from the Metropolitan (Winter, 1975-1976), No. 43, 44.

⁵⁴ Thank you to Dr Yekaterina Barbash, Ph.D., Assistant Curator, Arts of Ancient Egypt, Brooklyn Museum for her analysis and insight on the design sources for this chair.

30) differs from the rectangular join between the seat rail and the back on the MMA chair (fig. 31) and the Vail chair. The additional connection between back and side on the MHM chair is similar in appearance to the *en gondole* chair. This reinforcement holds the slip seat firmly in place, but more importantly it provides additional support and strength for the join between the seat rail and back. The significant rake in the back leg of the chair contributes to stress on the frame when weight is placed on the chair. Some later chairs without this reinforcing feature have stress fractures or evidence of repairs at the join. The presence of this advanced feature raises the question of whether or not the MHM chair is indeed a later chair. The cabinetmaker must have been aware of the recurring problem of strain and as a preventive measure added this graduated seat rail. Given that the MHM chair and the MMA chair have identical legs but different seat rails, perhaps the evolution of the graduated seat rail in the MHM chair occurred somewhat later in the same workshop as the MMA chair.

All three examples of these American curvilinear chairs are quite unlike the lyre-backed and cross-backed chairs. These curvilinear chairs have backs that appear to frame the human form by mimicking the corseted torso of a woman rather than the back of the klismos chair that creates a rectangular frame to support the body. The curvilinear form is indeed more closely related to the real world and evokes nature in its curves. As a result, these chairs are inviting and less abstract and intellectual. The form of these new chairs is both visually inviting and comfortable, and certainly appears more comfortable than the rigid-backed lyre chair.

The construction of these curvilinear chairs is likely more challenging for the artisan to produce as the attenuated sides and uniquely curved crest rails have to be shaped by hand, rather than produced by templates as is the case for the lyre-backed chair. Only the more successful cabinetmakers possessed the combination of required skills, privileged access to mahogany, and knowledge of the latest designs and styles to produce these chairs. Other curvilinear chairs are flat and inharmoniously proportioned. An example of such a lesser chair is the aforementioned set of six mahogany chairs at auction in the summer of 2009 (fig. 4). These chairs demonstrate forward thinking by the craftsmen, incorporating the serpentine crest rail and saber legs; however, they don't exhibit harmonious proportions.⁵⁵

This furniture form, which challenged the status quo, is expressive, sophisticated, and appropriate for many settings. Perhaps for the daughter of a gentleman cabinetmaker, or a wealthy merchant retiring in the most fashionable part of New York, these curvilinear chairs reflect a shift of taste of a well-to-do consumer who is keeping up with the time and new trends. New York in the 1820s and 1830s was a dynamic urban center, and this furniture form matched the dynamic scene with its new design of flowing forms, curves, and rotating edges. These transitional chairs demonstrate how a new design is incorporated stylistically as well as culturally.

The chairs also reveal that both designers and consumers of domestic

⁵⁵ These chairs are dated 1825-1830 by the dealer.

furnishings were looking for something fresh. The Gillows orders of domestic furnishings by a nobleman likely enhanced their respective cultural capital and became visual clues of consumption among the English gentry. For the American consumers, these designs accentuated a choice to fashion themselves on a cosmopolitan model. As nineteenth-century interiors were the stage for complex social activities, these chairs were part of an important set of furnishings that would reflect the social position of the owner.

CHAPTER TWO: PATTERN BOOKS

"From the mid-seventeenth century to the mid-nineteenth century, pattern books served to record, inspire and promote architectural designs and applied ornament of every description. The products of varied circumstances, some were commissioned by printers to booksellers for stock, others initiated by tradesmen to promote their talents and to create demand."⁵⁶

Christopher P. Monkhouse and Thomas S. Michie

"During the first thirty years of the nineteenth century, the influences on furniture of Europe and the United States were many and varied. The countries of Europe were all succumbing to the influences of the classic cultures of Greece and Rome; and consequently, transmitting it to the United States through furniture for export, design and price books, and immigrant craftsmen."⁵⁷

Diana Clifton Monroe.

The range of influences affecting design and style in the decorative arts is broad and pattern books have always played a significant role. The quotations above highlight at least two functions of pattern books. The first quotation identifies pattern books as early transmitters of the *avant-garde*, and the second shows that these pattern books were a tool used daily by craftsmen and a reference point for patrons in quest of the latest styles.⁵⁸ Monroe clarifies that pattern books were not the sole influences for the emergence of new styles in the United States. Considering that

⁵⁶ Christopher P. Monkhouse and Thomas S. Michie, *Furniture in Print, Pattern Books from the Redwood Library*, Providence: Museum of Art, Rhode Island School of Design (1989) 3.

⁵⁷ Diana Clifton Monroe, "An Historical Study of French Empire, English Regency, and American Federal and Greek Revival Furniture," (master's thesis, Ohio University, 1968) 109-110.

⁵⁸ The Gideon Saint pattern book in the Prints and Drawings Collection at the Metropolitan Museum of Art is a fascinating example of an eighteenth-century craftsman collecting illustrations of decorative motifs. With handcut tabs on the pages it is likely Saint referred to the collection frequently with his patrons in order to select a pleasing design. Aspects of this practice likely continued into the early nineteenth century. See Morrison H. Heckscher, "Gideon Saint: An Eighteenth-Century Carver and His Scrapbook," *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin*, v. 27, no. 6 (February, 1969), New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art (1969).

Gillows did not distribute their pattern books, this fact is relevant in understanding how this particular design spread across the Atlantic.

Other sources of influence were immigrant craftsmen and importation of European furniture. Having worked in the cultural center of Europe, they brought with them knowledge of the latest styles to the United States. Frequently cabinetmakers, silversmiths, and other artisans would highlight their European training in their printed newspaper advertisements. A well-known example of a craftsman immigrant is New York's Charles-Honoré Lannuier; he trained in Paris and came to the United States as a 24-year old, and was propelled to success in the early nineteenth century by having "established a distinctive New York style of cabinetmaking that incorporated contemporary European design. Americans throughout the young nation considered their work to be the pinnacle of taste and sophistication."⁵⁹ Meanwhile Phyfe, who apprenticed in New York, produced fashionable products which quickly spread throughout other states as many contemporary accounts, inventory records, and extant furniture reveal. Even after Phyfe had lived in New York for many years, he was still introducing new styles inspired by the latest trends in European design.⁶⁰ These were not concepts he brought with him from Scotland, but rather styles that he developed based on

⁵⁹ Peter M. Kenny and Matthew Thurlow, "Duncan Phyfe (1768–1854) and Charles-Honoré Lannuier (1779–1819)," in *Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History*, New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000–, http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/phla/hd_phla.htm (October 2004).

⁶⁰ McClelland classifies Phyfe's work into three periods: 1795-1820 (well designed, restrained and simple); 1820-1830 (Greek Revival); 1830-1847, Early Victorian. McClelland, 172-3.

inspiration from emerging European forms, likely by maintaining a network in and connection to Europe or by hiring immigrant craftsmen. Phyfe's later body of work, in which he produced this curvilinear chair, may have been conducted by immigrant craftsmen hired for his large workshop; he would have had the freedom to employ these workers as New York was free of the rigid European guild system.

It is well known that the proliferation of English pattern books in the nineteenth century influenced many American cabinetmakers. Direct copies and combinations of furniture forms from various plates in furniture pattern books are found in urban areas as well as remote rural areas. Most books included a range of styles and variations on furniture forms to satisfy a wide demand, yet the curvilinear chair is a rarity.⁶¹ The virtual omission of the curvilinear chair is so notable that if there were no knowledge of the extant furniture, there would be almost no trace of these forms. How was the design of this chair transmitted to the United States if not recorded in pattern books? The analysis earlier in this study points to a probable English source, but a review of other possible influences is necessary.

While early nineteenth-century England was still enjoying the harmonious neoclassical designs of Adam, early nineteenth-century France (and soon the rest of Europe) was inspired by Dominique Vivant, Baron de Denon's numerous sketches.

⁶¹ Thank you to Peter Kenny for point out that a number of curvilinear chairs are included in Thomas King's *Cabinetmakers Sketch Book of 1835* and in Edward Joy's *Pictorial Dictionary of British 19th Century Furniture Design* (216, 217). These chairs are curvilinear but have features that do not directly correspond with the chairs of this study.

Denon's drawings of the monuments of ancient art were collected when he accompanied Napoleon's expedition to Egypt. His two volumes published in 1802, entitled *Voyage dans la basse et la haute Egypte (Journey in Lower and Upper Egypt)*, established Denon's reputation both as an archaeologist and as an artist and subsequently sparked the Egyptian Revival in architecture and decorative arts. As with other French court designers such as Napoleon's Percier and Fontaine, Denon's publication influenced French and cosmopolitan design significantly, and the repercussions of both the original publications and resulting designs can still be viewed in objects and prints today. With the Egyptian Revival movement, classical sculpted forms (anthemion, animal-paw feet, cornucopia, and dolphin), gilt mounts, and ranges of wood were included on furniture forms. The splat of the MMA chair has been called "Egyptian" yet a review of these drawings show the Egyptian Revival is not an appropriate literal source for this curvilinear chair.

Another lesser-known French influence is the publication of Pierre de La Mésangère (1761-1831) entitled *Collection des Meubles et Objets de Goût (Collection of Furniture and Objects of Taste)*. This magazine, published in Paris from 1802-1831, consists of numerous color plates of furniture offering a range of designs. This publication has long been important for scholars as it is consistently referenced as an influential design source. It is indeed possible to suggest that *Collection des Meubles et Objets de Goût* could be an influence on the curvilinear, seemingly prototypical French Rococo Revival, chair.

Joan Woodside focuses her 1986 dissertation, *French Influence in American Furniture as Seen Through the Engraved Designs of Pierre de La Mésangère Collection des Meubles et Objets de Goût Published from 1802-1835*, on the issue of clarifying what furniture designs this publication influenced. She writes, “Scholarly publications dealing with the subject of furniture usually mention La Mésangère’s *Collection des Meubles* as a possible source of inspiration ... {but} unfortunately, most of the references to La Mésangère’s collection remain dutiful citations of his work, passed on from author to author with only a rare explanation of what the collection entails...”⁶² Following Woodside’s example of critical scholarship, a close review of the 248 colored printed plates was conducted in an attempt to locate a possible French influence on this curvilinear chair.⁶³ Of the plates from *Collection des Meubles et Objets de Goût* the most complete set in the United States as it only lacks 33 plates, and the reprinted plates published by Paul Cornu (1881-1914) in *Meubles et objets de gout 1796-1830: 678 documents tirés des journaux de modes et de la "collection" de La Mésangère*, reveal not one illustration that is similar to the curvilinear chair.⁶⁴ The absence of the curvilinear chair from the majority of extant plates of French furniture published by La Mésangère confirms the likelihood that this chair was not being produced in early nineteenth-century France.

⁶² Joan Woodside, “French Influence in American Furniture as Seen Through the Engraved Designs of Pierre de La Mésangère Collection des Meubles et Objets de Goût Published from 1802-1835,” (PhD diss., The University of Chicago, 1986) 1.

⁶³ The 248 plates are in the Prints and Drawing Collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

⁶⁴ Thank you to Rachel Cassiman, Librarian, the Rare Book Division of Parsons School of Design’s Gimbel Library, for making the Le Cornu publication available.

Included in Woodside's dissertation is another concept relevant to this study: Anglicized French designs. Although there is clearly no evidence of direct French influence on the Gillows firm or on American cabinetmakers of this curvilinear chair – nor is this chair included in any early nineteenth-century English or French publications – the possibility of an indirect influence arises, especially as this chair is connected to the French Montgolfier chair by name. One could postulate that this curvilinear chair could be an English form that has been derived in the early nineteenth century from an older French design, and then transformed to fit English tastes in a period of transitional designs, which could suggest a connection between the design of the curvilinear chairs in England to French Rococo court furniture. However, although the conclusion of a French connection may seem logical to reach, a review of the Gillows sketchbooks reveals that the emergence of the curvilinear form actually appears to be a continuation of their earlier works, and not derived from outside influences.

The Gillows order books tell a compelling story of the progression of furniture over time, culminating in the production of the Earl of Manvers chairs in 1822. Gillow's Estimate Sketch Books of 1803-1815, 1815-1822 document the evolution of styles in the first quarter of the nineteenth century. Reviewing these drawings in chronological order reveal shifts in design. Order Books reveal that Gillows was producing the klismos style chair in 1805 (fig. 32).⁶⁵ By 1808, the Gillows firm is

⁶⁵ These order books are on microform reels 47 and 48 housed at the Watson Library of the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

transforming the archaeologically correct klismos chair into a hybrid chair with a turned crest rail and a large rectangular splat (fig. 33).⁶⁶ In 1821 Gillows is experimenting with forms such as the armchair based on a barrel shape (fig. 34). By October 1823, Gillows is including the curvilinear chair in the sketchbooks (fig. 35). Similar to the Earl of Manvers chair, this sketch shows a chair with carved decoration along the crest rail, a carved stay rail with a linear splat, and turned front legs and saber back legs. This chair is different from the Earl of Manvers chair only in that it does not include a splat. By 1827 Gillows is still producing this curvilinear chair (fig. 36). This version is similar to the American curvilinear chair, such as the MMA, MHM, and Vail chairs, but closer to their earlier Earl of Manvers chair.

The great range of designs included in the day books reveal that Gillows was an extraordinarily innovative firm. As such, the firm Gillow and Co. played a major role in influencing furniture design. This was achieved not by producing widely distributed pattern books but by producing furniture that was copied and exported. This fact, exemplified in the American curvilinear chairs of this study, is a refreshing new perspective in the decorative arts field where pattern books are continually referenced as the impetus of change. Extant furniture and documentation have dated the emergence of this transitional design in England through the Gillows sketchbook and in the United States through a collection of historical facts.

⁶⁶ Gillows may have been influenced by the workshops of London. The 1802 and 1807 *Chairmakers and Carvers Book of Prices* includes plates (P13, fig. 6) of a chair with a turned crest rail. Thank you to Peter Kenny for this reference.

CHAPTER THREE LONGEVITY AND SUCCESS

An assemblage of ten images (fig. 37) of the curvilinear chair, starting with the Gillows chair of 1822 and ending with the Wien chair of 2009, highlights the relevance of the curvilinear chair from the early nineteenth to the twenty-first century. The variations of the form included here show the adaptability of the chair to satisfy consumer demands and remain in step with fashionable materials of the changing seasons. This collection of images, impressive in its range and in its undisputable similarity of form, can almost stand alone as an argument for why these chairs do not deserve their position of neglect. When this chair was produced by Gillows, the vocabulary of Regency furniture was still paramount, such as the use of mahogany and the motif of the urn. As the chair evolved in the mid-nineteenth century, characteristics of the Rococo Revival, such as robust vegetal forms and dark woods, reflected the tastes prevalent in the period. When technology advanced, such as the mass manufacturing and bending of wood as seen in the bow-back Windsor chairs of the 1790s-1810s as well as the Thonet chairs, the curvilinear silhouette became even more widespread.

A review of the ten chairs in this assemblage shows how each version was an iteration of artistic impulses, providing a historical perspective on preferred materials. Both the Gillows chair (A) and the MHM chair (B) reveal a preference for smooth wooden surfaces. This can be observed even more clearly in the MHM chair than the Gillows chair, as even the legs of the MHM are smooth and not turned. The chair at

the Aiken Rhett house in Charleston (C) includes a carved vegetal form on the crest rail as well as use of dark woods. By 1845, Charles Baudouine added an upholstered back to the curvilinear chair (D) form while maintaining carved vegetal decoration on the crest rail. Notable is his selection of this chair for furnishings for President Polk's State dining room at the White House.⁶⁷ Next, possibly a J. and J. W. Meeks (E, MMA 69.258.9) chair from 1850 is an example of full blown Rococo Revival with elaborate carved decoration on the back of the chair and an asymmetrical mid rail.⁶⁸ Other chairs (F) from 1850, such as those produced for Queen Victoria's Osborne house show a preference for warm, reddish woods and simple carving. An early Thonet chair (H), shown at London's World's Fair of 1851, employs the technology of bending wood while maintaining the familiar design of a serpentine crest rail. A side chair (I) of 1870 at Chateau-sur-Mer is from Newport, an area known for mimicking European taste, often a decade later. This chair has a less accentuated waist than seen on most other curvilinear chair forms. And finally, over a century later, the Wien chair, designed by the Italian firm Calligaris is introduced in 2008 (H).⁶⁹ This chair, similar in silhouette to the Gillows chair, has a curved back and side rails, a notable similarity between the two chairs is the position of the stay rail. Made of polished aluminum and polycarbonate, the Wien chair is a continuation of

⁶⁷ Betty C. Monkman, *The White House: Its Historic Furnishings and First Families*, Washington, D.C.: White House Historical Association; New York: Abbeville Press (2000) 96-105.

⁶⁸ It is likely the Meeks chair is based in no. 94 (*chaise de fantaisie*) of Desire Guilmar's *Le Garde-meuble, ancien et moderne*, livraison 35, no. 194 (Paris, 1844). Smithsonian Institution Libraries, Cooper-Hewitt, National Design Museum, New York. Voorsanger, fig, 248, 304.

⁶⁹ The Italian design firm Calligaris introduced the Wien chair in January 2009. It was in the design process from 2007-2008. <http://International.calligaris.it/>

early nineteenth-century curvilinear form in twenty-first century materials. This series of images, a collection of variations of the same chair form, reveals the relevance of this chair in the nineteenth and twentieth century. It has been adapted by designers multiple times, and continues to be produced today.

CONCLUSION

Art historical scholarship tends to focus on iconic forms that are clearly representative of a specific design movement; for instance, museums and collectors have primarily focused on two aesthetics of the nineteenth century: pure neoclassical forms and the full blown Rococo Revival. Transitional designs are neglected, regarded as lesser aesthetic objects. However, it is forgotten that the transition from the Neoclassical to the Rococo Revival occurred over the course of only one generation, and it is likely that the same individual may have owned Neoclassical forms, transitional forms, and Rococo Revival forms, made in the same workshops.⁷⁰ This study has identified the curvilinear chair as a transitional design that is deserving of reconsideration in modern scholarship. The absence of meaningful collectors of this curvilinear chair from the twentieth century onward has resulted in the assumption that these chairs did not satisfy consumer demands for decorative art objects contemporaneously. However, this thesis proposes that these curvilinear chairs were in fact very desirable when they became available in the early nineteenth century, as evidenced by their inclusion in the furnishing plans of Seabury Tredwell and Eliza Phyfe Vail.⁷¹ These chairs must be repositioned in the scholarly work of the period, recognized not only for the high regard they received when they first appeared in the 1820s, but also for the longevity of their design success.

⁷⁰ Nancy McClelland recognized this point in her publication *Duncan Phyfe and the English Regency, 1795-1830* when she divided Phyfe's life work into stylistic periods, but her commentary on the last period of Phyfe's career is derisive and reflects the lack of appreciation of the plain style from the twentieth century perspective.

⁷¹ In *Art and the Empire City*, Voorsanger notes that Grecian furniture was in favor in the late 1820s, but she is referring to heavy, architectonic forms that were often decorated with brass and gilding. Voorsanger, 292.

Historians of the decorative arts, architecture and art history tend to find comfort in a linear timeline, which seamlessly illustrates a singular evolution of forms. However, this fails to acknowledge that designs are all in some way derivative and repetitive, drawing inspiration from appealing images and ideas of the past. Perhaps the symbol of a pendulum is a better tool to understand and analyze these forms as their core elements repeatedly emerge in different periods, applied by artists and craftsmen in their interpretations of the zeitgeist.⁷² These curvilinear chairs are simply one part of an impressive cycle in design, following one path of the pendulum in its oscillation from the rectilinear to the curvilinear that has been ongoing for centuries. This path of the pendulum – the transitional style – must be recognized in scholarship as being as important as its nodes; specifically, why would a study of the klismos chair on one end and Belter’s plywood chairs of the Rococo Revival on the other end not include the curvilinear chair in the middle? The danger of ignoring a transitional style is that if the form does not remain transitional and ultimately persists in various ongoing iterations, then the origin of this form could be lost. For example, the assemblage of ten images of the curvilinear chair, starting with Gillow’s 1822 side chair and ending with Calligaris’ Wien chair of 2009 showcase the survival of this curvilinear form.

Originating in Lancaster, England in 1822, spreading to Bristol and New York

⁷² Barry Harwood is credited here for introducing this framework in our discussions of contextualizing the curvilinear chairs in history.

in the 1820s and 1830s, this chair of English origins successfully evolved into a globalized chair in a variety of different forms. This study of the chair has pioneered the following notions: first, that the early nineteenth-century American curvilinear chairs had begun to be made in the 1820s; and second, that they were English inspired, not French, as many scholars believe. The Gillows sketch book and the extant set of Earl of Manvers chairs provide the evidence confirming this curvilinear chair is indeed from an English furniture form.⁷³ Moreover, this chair also must be recognized for its participation in the widespread appeal that new designs enjoyed in the early nineteenth century, which was a period of globalization of trends and styles. It was likely that a singular design source was responsible for initiating this new form in New York, a form that manifested itself in at least three distinct sets of curvilinear chairs that are remarkably similar. In addition to being an important prototype, the lasting influence of this chair form is impressive. It emerges as an inspiration to modernist designers such as Michael Thonet and re-emerges in Calligaris' remarkable adaptations of the Wien chair in the twenty-first century. The curvilinear chairs deserve to have their position plotted on the map of design history. The early products were very well received by consumers when they were introduced, the mid-century examples were appreciated enough to find their way into the White House and Osborne House, and their familiar silhouette is echoed in a variety of chair designs throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

⁷³ The Gillows day book are dated by day, month, and year.

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