

H-France Review Vol. 7 (November 2007), No. 128

**Dena Goodman and Kathryn Norberg, Eds.,** *Furnishing the Eighteenth Century: What Furniture Can Tell Us about the French and American Past.* New York and London: Routledge, 2007. x+245 pp. Figures, notes, index. ISBN 0-415-94953-X.

Review by Joan DeJean, University of Pennsylvania.

In eighteenth-century literary studies, the so-called “it” narratives are currently all the rage. In these novels, the main character is a thing — a coin, perhaps, or a garment — but always an animate and often a highly animated object, endowed with the ability to comment on the social mores of the world around it. Since, furthermore, these talking things are also very mobile — they move from hand to hand, from household to household — by the end of their narratives, these objects often provide a broad vision of the society of the day.

In French literature in particular, the protagonist of an “it” book is quite likely to be a piece of furniture: Crébillon’s *Le Sofa* is surely the most visible example of a piece of talking furniture, but it is far from the only one. When, therefore, I saw the subtitle of this volume, *What Furniture Can Tell Us About the European and American Past*, I was immediately excited by the prospect of having found the explicit historical equivalent of an “it” book. The editors’ preface confirms the “contract” offered by that subtitle. They announce their intention of letting furniture “speak” so that it can tell us how it “shaped sociability and identity”: “We place furniture in the social and cultural world it inhabited and helped to define because we are interested in the interactions of people and things that made European and colonial interiors meaningful” (p. 2). Surely, I thought, this was the volume we need in order to situate “it” narratives overtly and fully in the social, economic, and practical context in which they were written and first read. Sofas and tables and desks as well were finally going to tell us their stories — in a new way, that is.

By that, I mean that, while this is a more explicit attempt than its precursors, the volume is of course not the first attempt at writing a cultural and social history of furniture. That process may be said to have been inaugurated already during that golden age for French furniture to which so many articles in this volume pay homage, the eighteenth century: in the wake of the *Encyclopédie*’s glorification of crafts and decorative arts, André-Jacob Roubo published his magnificent *L’Art du Menuisier* (1769-1775). The next great monument in furniture’s history is surely Henry Havard’s truly encyclopedic *Dictionnaire de l’ameublement* (1890), which delivers far, far more than that relatively modest title might seem to indicate. (Havard was such an instinctive collector, literally, that his fat volumes may seem only to assemble factoids; there is, however, a great deal of information on how furniture mattered.) Then, all through the twentieth century, historians of furniture and interior decoration offered more detailed looks at one or another slice of those histories in France and England. Anyone’s list of the most informative such works would include titles by Pierre Verlet, John Whitehead, and Peter Thornton, both *Seventeenth-Century Interior Decoration in England* and, especially, *The Domestic Interior: 1620-1920*. Mine would also include books by Madeleine Jarry, Guillaume Janneau, and Anthony Victoria, older titles that I find offer particularly clear presentations of how furniture was made and made to work.

I offer a bit of bibliographic overview for two reasons. First, *Furnishing the Eighteenth Century* does not include a bibliography; a number of the essays make no reference to standard works such as Havard’s dictionary, which contain information that would have enriched their presentations. Readers new to the history of furniture might well come away without a very clear sense of past work in the field. In

addition, it seems important to note that, *in the hands of all its major practitioners*, this sub-set of the history of private life has from the very start—and it began just as soon as French historians invented what they called “l’histoire de la vie privée” — attempted in various ways to let the objects it chronicles talk to us about how they served their owners’ lives. Thus, for example, while Roubo’s volumes are most striking because of the detailed illustrations and explanations of how to make numerous pieces of furniture new to the eighteenth century and unfamiliar to us today, he also offers many insights into how, where, and by whom these pieces were used.

This said, to date there have been few attempts to make the history of furniture above all a form of cultural and social history, and it’s easy to see why this has been the case. No one writing today can assume a readership familiar with now arcane types of desks, or chairs, or tables. Anyone writing about furniture’s history has to devote, therefore, a great deal of time to setting out very basic facts before any attempt can be made to make the furniture talk in a way that could help give furniture its just due in the story of the eighteenth century.

All of the essays add to our stock of knowledge about furniture’s importance in eighteenth-century life in a number of different ways. The essays by Natacha Coquery and David Jaffee provide very detailed information on the role played by precise merchants in the circulation of upscale objects in precise markets. Ann Smart Martin illuminates the cultural politics of the tea table in colonial America. Kathryn Norberg casts new light on a subject that was first put on the map by Havard: the fact that a number of the great collections of furniture in eighteenth-century Paris were assembled by famous actresses, singers, and dancers. I am a bit troubled by her decision to characterize them as “courtesans”; in some cases at least, I would identify them as actresses, and so forth. Mimi Hellman’s chapter on the appeal of matched sets, or what she calls “a laboriously achieved sameness” (p. 140) for eighteenth-century elite consumers takes what seems on the surface something too evident to merit attention—the proliferation of matching sets (of furniture, of china, and so forth) in the eighteenth century—and shows why it’s important to understand what was then a new practice as much as possible as eighteenth-century consumers did.

Two essays prove that furniture can provide truly global insight into eighteenth-century practices. Carolyn Sargentson provides what seems the definitive account of the locking devices and secret drawers found in many eighteenth-century desks. In addition, she links the proliferation of devices to help protect the secrecy of a desk’s contents to an obsession with back stairs, hidden rooms, and secret entrances that is evident in eighteenth-century French architecture, thereby using furniture to help illuminate the life of the age in an unexpected way. Her essay is a model of how a museum professional with hands-on access to the objects themselves can use this knowledge to make furniture come to life for scholars who will never touch a piece of original furniture. In her hands, the obligatory explanation of how eighteenth-century desks were put together culminates in an often dazzling demonstration of the link between “the way furniture was designed and operated and the way eighteenth-century men and women thought and wrote about secrets,” what she terms “the performance of secrecy in eighteenth-century France” (pp. 230, 232). Finally, Madeleine Dobie’s suggestion that “French economic interests in the Atlantic colonies were transposed into a fascination with things oriental” (and furniture in particular) is both profoundly original and a proposition that makes an enormous amount of sense (p. 14). Dobie’s intuition is one that should be followed up in other domains as well; it could help us make sense of what seems on the surface the almost total invisibility of the practice and products of colonial trade in eighteenth-century French writing, both literary and personal. I found Dobie’s piece particularly exciting because it represents what we most need now: work that will make eighteenth-century furniture talk to us about questions that scholars were not asking when the founding texts of the history of furniture were written.

## LIST OF ESSAYS

**Part One: Mapping Meaning Globally**

Madeleine Dobie, "Orientalism, Colonialism, and Furniture in Eighteenth-Century France"

Chaela Pastore, "Mahogany as Status Symbol: Race and Luxury in Saint Domingue at the End of the Eighteenth Century"

David Porter, "A Wanton Chase in a Foreign Place: Hogarth and the Gendering of Exoticism in the Eighteenth-Century Interior"

**Part Two: Diffusing Furniture, Fashion, Taste**

Natacha Coquery, "Fashion, Business, Diffusion: An Upholsterer's Shop in Eighteenth-Century Paris"

David Jaffee, "Sideboards, Side Chairs, and Globes: Changing Modes of Furnishing Provincial Culture in the Early Republic, 1790-1820"

Kathryn Norberg, "Goddesses of Taste: Courtesans and Their Furniture in Late-Eighteenth-Century Paris"

**Part Three: Making Meaning in the Domestic Interior**

Donna Bohanon, "Color Schemes and Decorative Tastes in the Noble Houses of Old Regime Dauphiné"

Mili Hellman, "The Joy of Sets: The Uses of Seriality in the French Interior"

Mary Salzman, "Decoration and Enlightened Spectatorship"

**Part Four: Forms, Functions, Meanings**

Ann Smart Martin, "Tea Tables Overturned: Rituals of Power and Place in Colonial America"

Dena Goodman, "The Secrétaire and the Integration of the Eighteenth-Century Self"

Carolyn Sargentson, "Looking at Furniture Inside Out: Strategies of Secrecy and Security in Eighteenth-Century French Furniture"

Joan DeJean University of Pennsylvania [jdejean@sas.upenn.edu](mailto:jdejean@sas.upenn.edu)

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ISSN 1553-9172