
Women’s Painted Furniture 1790-1830 pays tribute to one of the lesser-known "ornamental accomplishments" taught to American schoolgirls. As an artist and skilled researcher, author Betsy Krieg Salm chose "women's painted furniture" as the defining term for the many delicately painted wooden boxes, tables, face screens and other small accessories made by young women in New England.

Although there is an abundance of scholarship on needlework created by students during this period, Salm successfully shifts the focus to painted objects. Anyone familiar with the literature of early American decorative arts will be familiar with questions raised by the author, such as what objects were being made and for what purpose? What materials and techniques were used, and what patterns were available? Salm carefully addresses these issues and more. Anyone wishing to learn the tricks of conducting early American decorative arts research would do well to follow Salm’s lead. Using period newspaper advertisements, periodicals, art instruction manuals, and secondary sources, the chapters address sources of common motifs, the academic environment, and the production of these pieces in relation to school curricula. The final chapter answers questions raised by the previous sections: why did it all matter? What meaning did these objects have to their creators and what, if any, to their communities? Salm notes that Sarah Pierce, founder of the Litchfield Academy (1792-1833), believed that the art provided the girls with "quiet but elevated spheres." Such a peaceful description makes it seem a shame that schoolgirl arts faded from the classroom in favor of the "solid branches" of education.

The book is hardbound in a pleasing quarto format. Nearly every page is illustrated. Most of the object images are of pieces from private collections, presenting potential obstacles for researchers wanting to know more, though resources listed in the bibliography and appendixes provide guidance for further research. Perhaps because of the glossy and age-darkened varnishes that coat the objects, crisp photography may have been tricky to achieve, and as a result details of the painted designs sometimes appear to be out of focus.

Reflected in the author's tone is a strong fondness for the genre as well as a desire for the individual expressions of the young women to be known. Although prior scholarship on women's painted furniture is found sporadically in more general contemporary sources, Women’s Painted Furniture is an engaging and comprehensive resource which would be of interest to contemporary craftspeople and art historians alike. Recommended for both public and academic libraries.

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