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REPORT

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On Friday, October 3, 2014, I examined a Boston bombé slant-lid desk with four drawers. This report summarizes my opinions regarding the desk and its condition.

The desk has characteristic bombé swelling on the sides and the front façade. (The drawer fronts are straight across the horizontal dimension.) The desk stands on four claw-and-ball feet. The desk interior is stepped, and the bottom tier of interior drawers has a “broken ogee” front profile. The exterior drawer brasses are replacements; their design replicates those on other bombé case pieces, notably a Boston serpentine front bombé chest of four drawers at the Chicago Art Institute (acc. no. 1979.499).

The bombé desk is made of mahogany with white pine secondary woods. The mahogany is all of fine quality, but the wood used in the desk interior is especially notable: all of the drawer fronts are made of striped mahogany, a rare and attractive grain configuration. The maker oriented all of the interior drawer front boards so that stripes run vertically. Normally, the grain of the central prospect door runs in the direction of its long dimension, but it does not in this instance, so that all of the striping is coordinated. The stripe in the grain is readily visible on the inside surfaces of the drawer fronts. Bead moldings on the case are cut from strips of wood added to the inner surfaces of the case sides. The beading that continues across the drawer dividers was cut from the solid stock. The large drawers sides also have paired beads cut into the top edges. Such decorative moldings on drawer sides are common in New England, particularly in Massachusetts. Some of the beads on these drawers have worn down or away.

Construction of the bombé is of the type in which the insides of the side boards of the case are scooped out, or contoured, to match the outsides. Bombé sides of earlier case pieces are typically left straight on the inside, resulting in the case being very heavy and the drawers being smaller. These drawers have drawer sides made of thick boards that have been contoured on the outside and left in plane on the inside surfaces. As with other visually successful Boston and Salem case pieces, the bombé curve starts with the second long drawer from the top. The case sides are made of two boards glued edge to edge. At some time, natural shrinkage and inevitable expansion and contraction of these boards caused by humidity changes

opened this glue joint near the bottom (where the ends of the boards were fixed to the base and could not move). These seams have been stabilized at some time.

The large ball-and-claw feet are of characteristic Boston shape, as are the knee brackets flanking them. All of the feet appear to be in good order. Some retightening of glue blocks has occurred, including the addition of new screws in one flat board. The proper left front ball appears to be not as tall as the others, but this difference may have been introduced at the time of fabrication. Significantly, the pronounced grain pattern on the front faces of each front foot is the mirror opposite of the other, indicating that both feet were cut from the same mahogany log.

Miscellaneous condition notes:

The top board of the desk has been repaired at the lid lock location. The desk lid has replaced hinges. The drawer back of the center bottom drawer in the interior is a replacement. Evidence of unrelated wear and what appears to be a hinge fill on the underside of the drawer blade below the top drawer indicates that this part is a restoration using old mahogany taken from another source. Other minor repairs to the drawer blades are also evident. Evidence exists in many places of a much darker finish below the present, more recent finish.

Comments:

All indications point to Boston manufacture of this desk. More specific attribution to an individual seems unwarranted in light of the great variety of construction details across surviving bombé furniture and the overall paucity of historical documentation. At least three Boston makers are known—Benjamin Frothingham, John Cogswell, and George Bright—and others likely made this furniture, too. The Salem school of bombé furniture differs significantly in decorative details, notably in the base.

This desk was likely made between about 1780, when the Revolution was winding down in Boston (Cogswell dated his chest on chest 1782), and about 1795, when newer designs were beginning to replace what had been current.

The proper left long drawer along the bottom of the fitted interior has the name “Edward” written in ink in what appears to be 18th century script on the outside of backboard. Regrettably, provenance and related supportive evidence does not exist making identification of this individual impossible, given all of the Edwards in the greater Boston area at this time.