

ANTIQUE COLLECTING

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SILVER NUTMEG GRATERS
WILLIAM IV AND VICTORIAN SIDEBOARDS 1830-1900
BEILBY ENAMELLED GLASS
THE FREDERICK PARKER COLLECTION OF CHAIRS
18TH CENTURY CHINESE ARMORIAL PORCELAIN

THE FREDERICK PARKER COLLECTION

by Christopher Claxton Stevens and Luke Honey

Not far from the glittering skyscrapers of the City of London can be found a remarkable museum, demonstrating the development of the British chair from the 17th century to the present day. The gallery's East End location is most appropriate as it was here in 1869 that Frederick Parker first established his chair-making business. In 1942, this became the classic English furniture brand, Parker Knoll.

The focus of the pre-Parker Knoll business was on reproduction furniture of the highest quality so, until his death in 1927, Frederick Parker purchased over 300 antique chairs (as well as woodcarvings and textiles). These formed a study collection for his craftsmen to copy, whether to reproduce in their entirety or to use for details in their own designs.

As a former upholsterer in ship furniture, Frederick Parker enjoyed a close association with the steam ship company, Cunard. Chairs in the Hepplewhite style were manufactured for the *Aquitania*, with the liner's Palladian lounge being hailed as 'one of the most elegant rooms afloat'. The great



Figure 1. Frederick Parker (1845-1927).

British ocean liners of the period tended to decorate their salons in the style of the traditional English country house and Frederick Parker's reproduction furniture was in high demand. Parker chairs could be found on the *Lanconia*, *Tuscania*, *Franconia*, *Aurania* and the *Albania*. Other interesting commissions of the period included a throne for the Abyssinian Emperor Haile Selassie; a finely carved Gothic Revival reredos for All Saints Church, High Wycombe; furniture and upholstery for Sir Edwin Lutyens' Viceroy's House in New Delhi and the Farthingale chairs made for guests at the coronation of George VI. Until 1930, the Parkers also dealt in antiques. By the Second World War the firm (now based in High Wycombe) offered no less than 5,600 repeatable

upholstery models, as well as 2,500 cabinet pieces.

As a collector, Frederick Parker was not especially worried about condition; many of the chairs were purchased in a damaged state and were skilfully reconstructed in the correct style of the period, or as it was thought to be at the time (figure 3). But this was the point: the collection was –

and still is – used as a working resource.

From the considerable archive that exists, a good deal of information as to the origin, prices paid and dates of purchase of many of the chairs has been gleaned. Some were bought as authentic pieces and are now recognised to be fakes, but most were well chosen and many are of a high quality,



Figure 2. The gallery at London Metropolitan University housing the Frederick Parker Collection.



Figure 3. A finely carved George III mahogany armchair, c.1745, with a theme of eagles' heads and the rare feature of pierced talons on the claw and ball feet. When purchased, the cresting had been replaced with an inappropriate design. This was altered by Parkers to the present perfectly authentic one before the chair was reproduced in the 1930s.

showing Frederick Parker's skill and judgment. Although some chairs have seen unfortunate attempts at restoration over the years, others survive in their original, unrestored state with 18th century painted surfaces or upholstery (figure 4).

The Frederick Parker Collection now comprises about 180 chairs, and includes a further collection of woodcarvings. When a new management at Parker Knoll decided to dispose of the Collection, the Trustees of the Foundation were able to select the best and most representative examples before the remainder were sold at auction in September 1998. Then, a specially designed gallery for the chairs was established at the London Metropolitan University (the old London College of Furniture) in 2003, where nearly all the chairs are on display and form a valuable teaching resource for students – the Trustees did not want them to stagnate on dusty shelves. Instead, a policy of increasing the Collection by adding interesting examples was initiated, particularly of the 19th century (where material was rather thin) and of key pieces from the 20th and 21st centuries. As well as later Parker Knoll chairs, designs by Robin Day, Ernest Race, Tom Dixon, Ron Arad and others are now represented.

We are left with a unique resource providing not only a record of one of the great furniture-making firms of the 20th century, but also a group of historic chairs which offers, amongst other things, a valuable insight into changing fashions in collecting and attitudes to authenticity and conservation. The Collection is accessible for close



Figure 4. A George III painted beech anthemion back armchair, c.1780. Apart from its unfortunate 20th century upholstery, this chair retains its original bright orange, cream and black 'Etruscan' style decoration and is a great rarity. It was in the Collection before 1915 and is stamped with the craftsman's initials TW.

study by individuals or groups by appointment. The chairs can also be found fully catalogued on the Visual Arts Database website (www.vads.ac.uk), and there are several printed publications available for purchase.

Visiting The Frederick Parker Collection

Visitors are welcome to view the collection on weekdays and admission is free of charge. As the Sir John Cass Department of Art, Media and Design use the gallery for teaching purposes, an appointment to view the Collection is essential. The gallery is located at the London Metropolitan University, 42-47 Commercial Road, London E1 1LA. Please contact Dr. John Cross, telephone 0207 320 2883, email j.cross@londonmet.ac.uk

The Frederick Parker Annual Lectures and Dinner

A dinner (including two lectures on furniture and art historical themes) is held annually to raise funds for the Frederick Parker Foundation. For more information, please write to The Chairman, The Frederick Parker Foundation, Forge House, Penn Street, Buckinghamshire, HP7 0PX.

Books, illustrated brochure and postcards are available to purchase. See www.frederick-parker-foundation.org for further information.

Christopher Claxton Stevens is a consultant in antique and contemporary furniture and a former director of Norman Adams Ltd. Luke Honey is the great great grandson of Frederick Parker and an antiques and fine art specialist and auction consultant. They are both Trustees of the Frederick Parker Collection.

