

REPORT
September 7, 2022

On July 11, 2022, Graham Arader asked me for my written opinion on the identity and authenticity of a mahogany New York side chair with a diamond splat, furniture inventory number 322. This report summarizes my observations and opinions.

Side chair

New York, 1765-75

Mahogany; hard pine slip seat

38-3/4 x 22-3/4 x 21-3/4

“VIII” is chiseled into the rabbet of the front seat rail.

This classic New York side chair bears a chiseled number “VIII” on the front seat rail, indicating that it was chair number 9 in a set of at least that many chairs, likely totaling ten or twelve. The chair is noteworthy for being nearly identical to a set of eight chairs, probably made in New York City for Philip (1747-1798) and Maria (1749-1830) Van Rensselaer of Albany. They married in 1768, which is a reasonable time of manufacture for their chairs as well as this one. The well-documented Van Rensselaer furnishings from Cherry Hill, the mansion they built in 1786-87 just south of Albany, remained in family ownership until it opened as a house museum in 1964.

The strapwork splat has a prominent diamond worked into the center. This splat design links the chair and its set to more than a dozen other diamond-back sets representing several different New York chairmakers. (Chairmakers in other regions, notably Philadelphia, Boston, and the Hartford, Connecticut, area, made their own versions.) Several of the other New York sets exhibit similarities, such as rear legs that are rounded in the back and flat across the front, that suggest they were made in the same anonymous shop. Yet each set displays distinctive features. For example, the shell-carved knees on this chair are both longer than usual and outlined with stippling. In addition to the Van Rensselaer set (illustrated in John T. Kirk, *American Chairs: Queen Anne and Chippendale* [1972], p. 119, fig. 142), another set with similarly long shells, the same rear legs, but slightly different crest rail carving, is no. 36 in Joseph K. Kindig III, *The Philadelphia Chair, 1685-1785* (1978). Like the Arader chair, the Kindig chair has no known historical provenance.

The crest rail on this chair has a central shell flanked by acanthus sprays that flow out from coiled volutes and direct the eye towards deeply contoured ears. Representative of the New York style of carved ears, the contouring divides the ear down the middle, whereas ears of some other regions, notably Philadelphia, have a prominent ridge down the middle. Other New York chair features evident on this example include the small brackets made of separate pieces of wood underneath the side seat rails where they join the rear stile, and the use of a secondary wood—oak in this case—for the rear rail.

A seldom-noted New York construction feature is present on this chair. The brackets that flank each front leg are made of two pieces of wood, instead of one solid block as common elsewhere in America. The visible, outer part of the bracket, rounded to conform to the modeling of the leg, is a separate piece of wood glued onto another that is in plane with the seat rail and is of similar thickness. That interior piece of wood is tenoned into the leg, a little instance of joinery that has not been encountered in other American chairmaking, nor have European precedents been identified.

The chair has an old (but not original) finish. The bottom rear tip of the right rear leg is repaired. The front bracket on the right front leg is a replacement, and the front of the ball-and-claw foot on the leg has been replaced; the outward toe of the repaired section is worn. Inside the seat frame, the front corner blocks are replacements. The rear corner blocks are original. A pattern of screw holes in the seat rails suggests that at one time custom-made iron braces wrapped around (and preserved) each rear corner block to reinforce the joints. The front of the shoe mortise, where the bottom of the splat inserts, split and has been reglued. The slip seat may be original to the chair. No incised seat number is visible, although it might exist underneath the upholstery.

The center of the splat on this chair displays a minor maker's error: the bottom of four piercings that define the diamond was never sawed out. The many other New York chairs with this splat show diamonds with four open piercings—as this splat was surely intended to have. Such maker's errors occasionally occur and are tangible reminders that the skilled artisans who made this impressive chair and other furniture were only human.