

REPORT
August 15, 2022

On August 1, 2022, Graham Arader asked me for my written opinion on the identity and authenticity of a walnut Philadelphia dressing table, furniture inventory number 338. This report summarizes my observations and opinions.

Dressing table

Philadelphia, 1735-55

Walnut; white cedar drawer bottoms and case back board, oak drawer sides, hard pine back of full-width drawer

29-1/2 x 36-1/2 x 23-1/2

Philadelphia-area dressing tables (popularly called lowboys) with cabriole legs ending in trifid feet were made over many decades, from the introductory years of the Queen Anne style in the 1730s until after the Revolutionary War. Earlier examples, as this one, had shallow middle drawers in the lower tier and a corresponding skirt that rose high in the center. In later dressing tables, the three small drawers were of equal height. Despite the longevity of the many design characteristics, this dressing table embodies one feature that argues persuasively for an early time of manufacture in the long spectrum of popularity. All of the drawer bottoms are nailed directly to the undersides of the drawer sides. This technique was the dominant means of fastening drawer bottoms in William and Mary-styled furniture of the early decades of the 18th century. In the middle decades of the 18th century, it was replaced by drawer bottoms that slid into place in channels cut into the sides of the drawer sides, a technique that eliminated nails along the bottom side edges. Those nail heads gradually scraped depressions in the drawer openings of the case as the drawers were opened and closed repeatedly.

Among other features in this table, the drawer sides and backs are made of oak, and white cedar occurs as drawer bottoms and the case back. Both of these woods used in these ways indicate a likely place of origin in Philadelphia, rather than in a surrounding community. The profile of the front skirt, which sometimes suggests informative relationships with other case furniture, has no direct ties to other Philadelphia regional furniture groups. The end sections including the prominent cusps are widespread, but the center, composed of opposed ogee or S-shaped curves, is not. Instead, center profiles almost always have a half-round hollow. Yet another feature lies in the ways the dovetails in the drawers were made. The dove “tails” (which are cut into the board that slides over the “pins”) extend a considerable distance behind the drawer backs.

Almost all such dovetails are cut flush with the drawer back. This anomaly likely represents a particular worker's habit—one that may have changed to conform with general practices.

Given the interpretation of this dressing table as an early example, the carved legs become ever more interesting. They can be compared favorably with similar legs on furniture with late features, a comparison that emphasizes how enduring this particular design was. Specifically, the deep contours on eight side of the middle toe, the deep depressions carved up the ankle, and the spurred shape of the knee brackets are all decorative features used in the Philadelphia region for more than sixty years or two full generations.

The brasses are replacements in or near the original holes. Had they been original, they would have been helpful in establishing the time of manufacture. The three-board top is notched in the front corners, a treatment that appears to be original rather than a later embellishment, and moldings fill the angle between the case and the top. The individual boards in the two-board case sides have shrunk with age leaving a gap of almost 1/8-inch, significantly greater than the spaces between the top boards. One wonders whether the maker did not let the walnut season adequately.