

REPORT
January 3, 2022

On December 20, 2021, Graham Arader asked me for my written opinion on the identity and authenticity of a Philadelphia side chair, furniture inventory number 28.

Side chair

Philadelphia, 1755-70

“III” chiseled into the top of the front seat rail rabbet; slip seat is marked “IV”.

Walnut; white cedar corner blocks, hard pine slip seat

41-1/2 x 22-3/4 x 20-3/4

This side chair has an interlacing strapwork splat with two carved volutes and a serpentine crest with a large asymmetrical shell or foliate composition in the center and rolled-back ears with prominent massings in the center and volutes carved into the tops and bottoms of the rolls. A thin “scratch-bead” (made with a tool that scratches the wood surface to form the bead) outlines the chair back. This back design was among the most popular in Philadelphia in the early years of the Chippendale style period. The chair stands on cabriole legs ending in claw-and-ball feet with shells on the knees and rounded “stump” rear legs.

Several other chairs very much like this one survive and represent different sets. However, the splat pattern or template for this chair matches that of one of those many other chairs—a slightly different side chair, now at Winterthur (acc. no. 1959.1287). The common (i.e., identical) splat design argues that those two sets of chairs were made in the same shop, literally from the same template, perhaps years apart. The Winterthur chair is visual more complex. Differences include foliate-carved knees and knee brackets, a carved shell applied to the front rail, and fluted rear stiles. All of these features represent enhancements that were within the capabilities of most furniture makers. None of the individual enrichments were the province of particular shops, although the marketplace sometimes assigns makers on the basis of these features. Carving can also be a problematic means of identification: Carvers likely worked for different shops, and much carved work simply defies identification. The crest rail shell, shell on the knee, and modeling of the claw-and-ball feet are too general to express individual hands.

Of interest, the volutes carved into each of these splats have an extra coil or rotation, a minor carver’s idiosyncrasy that reinforces the template-based relationship between this chair and the one at Winterthur. The additional coil exists in these chairs to the near exclusion of all other

Philadelphia Chippendale chairs. Moreover, it represents a simple observation that requires no special experience.

The front corner block on the left side is a replacement. The slip seat appears to be from the same set as the chair. The wood, visually identified as walnut, has characteristics of mahogany, such as places with parenchyma and ray-flecks.