

REPORT
January 5, 2022

On December 20, 2021, Graham Arader asked me for my written opinion on the identity and authenticity of an English neoclassical side chair, furniture inventory number 26.

Side chair

England, 1785-1800
Mahogany; beech
37 x 21-1/2 x 20-3/4

The mahogany side chair has a molded serpentine crest with a high rise in the center. The crest curves at the ends to transition into the molded rear stiles. The crest and stiles enclose a splat that features a stylized palmetto of nine fronds within a circle, all raised on a three-part plinth. This splat design is among London neoclassical expressions of the 1780s derived from the work of Robert Adam. The design was rarely, if ever, used in America, although some Rhode Island chairs employed a related design with a kalys in place of the palmettos in a circle or oval over five uprights.

This particular chair has beech seat rails, an indicator of its English origin. (The beech rear rail has mahogany veneer on the outside back.) The Philadelphia-style front corner blocks presently installed are not original. The chair may have been made originally without corner blocks. The undecorated square-tapered front legs join the rear legs with H stretchers. The medial brace is not attached with a half-dovetail, a change in chair construction that occurred in several—but not all—chairs at the end of the eighteenth century.

Both front corners of the seat frame (being the tops of the front legs) have split. The front rail joint has loosened where it tenons into the split mortise on the left side. Right-angle braces are now screwed into the side rails and rear stiles to reinforce those joints. Screw holes on undersides of the front and side rails next to the front legs identify the one-time presence of a reinforcing brace of some kind.