

ANTIQUES & COLLECTIBLES

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A Quiet Beauty

The art of John and Thomas Seymour lies in its understatement.

BY CATHERINE RIEDEL



Above: Dressing chest, built and hand carved by Thomas Seymour, c. 1810; mahogany with bird's-eye maple veneer. Left: Tambour secretary by John and Thomas Seymour, c. 1794-1810; mahogany with inlay.

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AMERICANS ARE A LOUD BUNCH. WE TALK BIG. We act out. We don't truly embrace the "less is more" mentality. Our heroes are risk takers, and we value action over restraint, boldness over subtlety. I suppose it's inevitable that a country spawned from revolution would embrace boisterous ideals, but I fear that in doing so, we miss a lot.

So often, you discover the true essence of something in its quietest details, its subtle refinements. For it's the refinement of an action, an object, or a person that lifts it above the fray, transforming the ordinary into extraordinary.

Luckily, some Americans have understood this.

Take, for example, John and Thomas Seymour, father-and-son furniture makers in Boston, who created some of the finest examples of American Federal decor ever made. In woodcraft circles, John Seymour is an icon. But he didn't achieve that status through radical revolution. He simply refined technique to near perfection, creating a style that was at once so restrained and so influential that it set the standard for American furniture for generations.

In Axminster, England, John Seymour was an independent artisan who made cabinetry and furniture for the church and wealthy landowners. It was his association with the latter group that most influ-

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enced Seymour, helping him to develop his keen sense of style: attention to detail, use of the finest materials, and a highly tuned neoclassical aesthetic.

With prospects in England bleak, Seymour immigrated to the United States in 1784 with his wife and six children, first settling in Portland, Maine, then Boston in 1793. After much struggle, Seymour found a clientele wealthy enough to afford his level of craftsmanship. Desks, sideboards, sewing tables, chests, and dressers were among his best works. He spared no expense, decorating pieces with exotic inlays and veneers, such as rosewood and mahogany. Carvings were delicate—not overly ornate—and his work maintained a restrained and elegant profile that was distinctly Bostonian.

By 1800, Thomas Seymour had come of age as his father's apprentice, establishing his own style, just slightly more erudite. Founding the Boston Furniture Warehouse in 1804, he introduced new forms, such as chairs with scrolled arm supports and fancy lyre-based tables. Boston's upper classes were smitten, but success was ultimately fleeting.

The War of 1812 once again stirred anti-British feeling and destroyed the Seymours' once-thriving business. John died a pauper in the Boston almshouse, while Thomas retired to Lunenburg in central Massachusetts, living out his days in relative obscurity. In the end, there was no fanfare to their demise; no pomp, no circumstance.

Nowadays, it's rare to see a Seymour piece at an auction house or gallery. (A decade ago, an inlaid demilune card table made by John Seymour sold for \$541,500.) If you do, it won't be the biggest, flashiest piece in the room. It won't shout its charms from a distance. You'll need to get in close and examine it with a quiet, careful eye. With a profile so understated, a surface so calm and inviting, you'll be tempted to run your fingertips across it, to stroke its bony inlay and perfect carving. But think better of it—show a little restraint. 🍷

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