

Teachers' Orientation Pages to:
Nineteenth Century Furniture: A Matter of Style

Collection and Exhibit

The objects featured in this online exhibit are (except for one) on physical exhibit in Springfield in the *At Home in the Heartland* exhibit. This Web module emphasizes the artistic and stylistic aspects of the furniture, while *At Home* emphasizes the historical and social aspects.

Four of the five exhibited pieces (chair, étagère, secretary and mantel) are pictured *in situ* at <http://www.museum.state.il.us/exhibits/athome/1850/objects/exhibit.htm>. The parlor is the most formal room of any house. The private rooms (and rooms of those below middle class) would look similar to those in the second picture on this Web page. The piano is on exhibit in another section of At Home: <http://www.museum.state.il.us/exhibits/athome/1800/objects/exhibit.htm>.



The museum collection contains many pieces of furniture, from locally hand-made objects to factory-made expensive pieces from the eastern states. The Victorian age is characterized by very ornate furniture; however, some of the pieces were made by local craftsmen who used commercial or self-designed patterns. Solid walnut and oak were still available on Illinois farms in the late 1800s, so were not considered wood for the rich only. The craftsmen would use veneers instead of solid pieces (as seen in At Home online) of more expensive or more rare woods.

Text

Furniture is another category of objects that has a special vocabulary of its own. There is a popup glossary which often has a thumbnail photo of the object defined. The glossary list prints out for convenient use.

There is also a labeled line drawing or diagram of each piece for students to use with activities or for learning terms. Once the students are familiar with the language of furniture and remember the look of the motifs, they will be able to spot the use of these motifs in modern furniture (and architecture) and appreciate the origin of common designs.

A recent mail-order catalog of a furniture store famous for traditional styles had 119 examples of these classical and traditional motifs on the new pieces for sale today. Why have these designs lasted for over 2000 years, in some cases? Why is gothic style popular again? What impression does furniture give the viewer when it lacks any particular 'style'? How does the design of objects that surround us make us feel? There are many discussions in these six objects.

Interdisciplinary Use

Social Studies and History

The pieces of furniture featured in this module are all nineteenth century pieces – 1825 to 1889. The timeline on the front page helps to place them. It can also help to place the pieces in the lifetime of famous people studied in history, such as Abraham Lincoln. The styles can be compared to those seen in local historic houses in your area. The furniture styles owned by prominent or less prominent people are not just props. They reflect the status, the attitudes, the aspirations, the craftsmanship (in some cases), and the care that the owners felt.

The activity on identification of objects can be used with any object to study social and industrial history. It is fun for students to bring in an object from home and see how much they can learn about the object, owners, and society from it. They can use the WWW to find out background information on manufacture, use, price, and other topics.

Language Arts

Several language arts activities are included. One is to write a first ‘person’ narrative from the point of view of a piece of furniture, taken from *The Story of an Old Piano* written by the daughter-in-law of Helen Gilchrist, the owner of the piano. The second is a description of a piece of furniture using vocabulary-building adjectives that can be as simple or sophisticated as suits your students.

Grade levels of Activities

Younger children can recognize differences among styles and talk about aspects such as size, shape, color, and motif. The mantel is appropriate to use with elementary students because of its pictorial designs of Adam and Eve and fruit and flowers in its many panels. Students could produce a colored drawing of an original design made up of panels of fruit and flowers and/or a scene of a story.

Symbolism could be introduced.

Newspaper and catalog ads (such as those that come in the mail) are good sources for images of furniture sold today. The comparison activity that asks students to find motifs similar to those on the furniture in the module can be used in grades as low as fifth and sixth.

Resources on Furniture Styles

<http://www.vam.ac.uk/Explorer/> This wonderful virtual exhibit of a Swedish arts and Crafts House features comparisons of styles and showing contexts for design in an interactive format. You need to click on “the crypt” to reach the archived virtual exhibits, the on the “Larsson Exhibit” (window will pop up) when you arrive at this Explorer section of the complicated new Victoria & Albert Museum Web site.