Pots and Pans History: Relating Manuscripts and Printed Sources to the Study of Domestic Art Objects

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A HAPPY result of the disruption of the traditional academic structure brought on by the information avalanche of the 20th century is that new intellectual disciplines have developed. One such discipline now coming into its own is what has been called pots and pans history. The study of domestic architecture and objects is hardly new; since the 18th century it has been fashionable to collect and enshrine the antiquities of former cultures. Archeology and art history have long held respected seats in universities. But now, for the first time, the study of our own domestic culture is beginning to find acceptance in university curricula. Although the study of the domestic arts is relatively new for universities, research and publishing in the field, by amateur historians, dilettantes, and museum curators, have gone on for well over a century. Through these efforts a method of sorts has evolved and a considerable literature has accumulated. On an amateur level, few fields of study have a wider audience. This is attested by the popularity of such publications as *Antiques, American Heritage, Connoisseur, Yankee,* and *Spinning Wheel;* by the crowds that annually patronize Colonial Williamsburg, Winterthur Museum, Mystic Seaport, Sturbridge, Cooperstown, Shelburne, Deerfield, Greenfield, and many other restored villages, historic houses, and museums; and by the growing memberships in historical societies and collectors' associations, not to mention the needlework and garden clubs with special antiquarian study groups.

Much previous pots and pans history—in the areas of both publication and restoration—has been lamentably lacking in scholarly accuracy, a situation that can hardly be avoided where so many concerned have been self-taught amateurs. Recently, however, a desirable trend has begun toward better scholarship, mostly through the efforts of a growing body of trained professionals who take

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pleasure and pride in producing polished, carefully documented work.

Dilettantes still make up the largest group active in the study of domestic history. In singling out the dilettante or amateur I do not wish to be interpreted as disparaging those who participate for the fun of it; nor do I mean categorically to condemn all work by amateurs. Everyone in the field is an amateur to a degree. To divest the field of amateur efforts would be to deprive it of much of its best work, of its vitality, and of an important source of revenue; for we are concerned with one of the few areas of study that has been financed almost entirely by public enterprise with little government intervention.

The ultimate value of studying the development of our culture lies in educating the tastes and values of the public. Through sustained public interest we have a readymade audience for the work of trained cultural historians. Were we to discourage amateur participation we should alienate our public and thus lose a readily available opportunity of accomplishing the most important end of cultural study. What we may hope for is that the scholarly efforts of trained professionals will be of such quality as to set new examples of excellence for amateurs. With these standards before him, perhaps the amateur will learn that it is as entertaining to be historically accurate as to create artificial folklore.

In speaking of professional pots and pans historians I mean the salaried staff members of museums, historical societies, and historic houses and parks. The backgrounds, duties, and activities of these professions are infinite, and the quality of their work is equally variable. The most common form of "training" received is a liberal arts degree, sometimes an M.A., followed by a period of apprenticeship. During the past decade several university-museum cooperative programs have commenced to give M.A. degrees in cultural history or American studies, and eventually doctorates will be given. At present, however, those with doctorates have received them in art history, history, anthropology, or some other closely related discipline.

Disparity in the backgrounds and purposes of those studying domestic art objects has retarded the development of a research methodology to compare with that of archeology, for example. If improved scholarship is to come about, however, more attention must be given to this aspect of scholarship. In fact, before it can evolve from a mere field of study into a true scholarly discipline, professional standards must be set up and accepted on many levels.

With no clearly defined professional guidelines to serve as a basis for discussion, I shall undertake to discuss some research approaches that have been used successfully by cultural historians (as I shall hereafter dignify the pots and pans people.) Subsequently, I shall discuss some needs of cultural historians that can best be met by archivists and librarians. The purpose of the essay is to explain to archivists and librarians what this new breed of historian is trying to do and why, with the ultimate intention of bringing about increased understanding and cooperation between the custodians of and the commentators on our documentary heritage.

Unlike most historical disciplines, where research is predominantly an academic concern, object studies are usually carried on under nonacademic auspices; the motivations vary as greatly as the people who undertake them. Even discounting amateur efforts in the form of personal family accumulations, family histories, genealogies, and local histories, there remain to be considered preservationists connected with architectural and historic site projects, museum curators, collectors and dealers, compilers of local and regional histories, professional writers and publishers, and the small but influential academic circle.

Whatever purpose may prompt it, an object study is like any other historical essay in that it must begin with a well-phrased question. In the process of answering this primary question a number of other questions are raised. Obviously, not every question raised can be answered for every piece of work undertaken; those singled out for greater emphasis are chosen on the basis of how critically they affect the researcher's purpose. A competent historian realizes that he must consider as many questions as are directly applicable to his work without indulging in so many diverting searches for peripheral evidence that his work may not come to timely fruition.

The most basic type of object study is that which begins and ends with objects. Research by museum curators, collectors, and dealers usually falls within this category. Access to the objects, competence in knowing what to look for, and a few basic secondary works are the essential prerequisites. The questions to be answered are relatively straightforward: What is the object? Is it authentic? Who made it? Where and when was it made? What is it made of? Does it embody any unusual features in design, material, or manufacture? Is it typical or atypical of its kind? What is its quality relative to others of its kind?

Even the most object-oriented curators and collectors, however, recognize the need for some substantiation from documentary

sources. Recent developments in the study of American art objects have demonstrated the danger of stressing the theory that an object that looks good must be good because there can have been little advantage in anyone's going to the trouble of making a copy. After it was shown, for example, that for perfectly valid reasons excellent copies of Duncan Phyfe furniture were produced in the late 19th century, certain pieces of furniture formerly thought to have been the work of Phyfe are now recognized as copies. Because almost every type of object ever collected is known to have been copied for one reason or another, objects with documented authenticity are increasingly valued.

Since the 1920's it has been common to "attribute" the workmanship of American furniture to particular cabinetmakers on the basis of style, detail, materials, and other physical characteristics. Ornately carved Victorian furniture was once attributed to the workshop of the New York cabinetmaker John Henry Belter. The discovery of a tiny drawing in the notebook of a late-19th-century cabinetmaker showed the way in which another cabinetmaker named Baudouine infringed on Belter's patent. These and like findings have taught connoisseurs to be extremely cautious in attributing furniture to a particular craftsman without some form of reliable documentation.

In light of the time required to attain expertise in evaluating objects, it is unfortunate that so little of the knowledge of curators and important collectors and dealers ever reaches print. Of the studies published, few progress beyond some form of catalog or report of the physical aspects of a type of object, perhaps accompanied by case histories of particular objects and a digest of information from previous related studies. True, the primary concern of both curators and collectors is for the preservation and description of objects. A third concern, however, deserves considerably more attention than its receives—intelligent interpretation of the object, either through display or publication. While none but stubbornly tenacious adherents to the philosophy of "art for art's sake" would contend that an object can speak entirely for itself, we have hardly begun to make effective use of our art resources for educational purposes.

The types of studies discussed thus far more properly belong to the province of the art historian than to that of the cultural historian. The cultural historian, who specializes in artifacts of artistic merit, is essentially different from the art historian in that he is more concerned with cause and effect than with the history and

evolution of art forms. He therefore raises different questions and hopes to reach different answers. In general, the cultural historian is concerned with three areas of interest: the art objects or artifacts themselves, the individuals who produced them, and the individuals who purchased them.

Interpretive studies of objects commonly take the form of a publication or academic thesis, though they may also prepare the way for museum installations, filmstrips, or other educational projects. Besides the fundamental questions listed above, a researcher undertaking an interpretive study may have questions about the *object:* How was it used? What does its use tell us about the persons who used it? What was its original relative cost?

About the *artist* or craftsman he may ask: Where and when did he work? How was he trained? What tools and materials were available to him? To what degree was he an original designer? What were the sources of his designs and of his inspiration? To what degree was he motivated by creative desires rather than by economic ends? How successful was he in each of these areas? What was his rate of output? Was his product purchased only locally or had he a wider market? Had he any influence on other craftsmen? What was his relative position in the society in which he worked?

Under certain circumstances a *patron* of artists and artisans may be the special object of interest to a cultural historian, as in the study of a historic house, but usually the patron receives more attention than he might otherwise deserve because there is more documentation about the purchaser of an object than about its maker or makers. From this documentation inferences may be drawn about the object and maker. In addition, the historian may wish to consider what part the object played in the life of its purchaser: whether it was a necessity or a luxury, whether it was common or uncommon in houses of the time and region, whether the purchaser had any influence in the design and production of the object, and whether its quality and design were suited to the other furnishings in the home.

Ingenuity and patience are the first two keys to success in unlocking the treasures of manuscripts and printed source materials; the third is knowing where to look. Certain sources are so generally useful as to constitute the historian's basic fund of information. Archivists and librarians, as the keepers of these sources, would only be bored by a dull listing of what is already familiar to them.

They may benefit, however, from an example of a recent study in which several kinds of source materials were used to good effect.

The study began when the Joseph Downs Manuscript Collection at Winterthur Museum acquired a particularly fine example of a 19th-century engraved trade label. If authentic, the superb condition and fine paper set it apart as unusual, perhaps unique. The plate from which the impression was taken was unquestionably authentic; but certain information necessary to satisfactory cataloging must be supplied. The engraving is signed "Young & Delleker, sc."; and the person whom it advertises is "Thomas Fletcher, No. 188 Chesnut Street, Philadelphia." The label is uncommonly specific about Fletcher's occupation; he was "Manufacturer of Silver Plate & Jewellery, and Importers of Clocks, Watches, & Fancy Goods." The date is lacking.

Following routine procedure for suppling dates, the researcher went to the Philadelphia directories. Here some puzzling discrepancies appeared: Although Young and Delleker are not listed as partners, individual listings make a date of about 1820 seem probable; yet Thomas Fletcher's address is first given as 188 Chestnut Street in the directory for 1839.

Reexamination of the label brought out some previously unnoticed details. Depicted on it is a large vase, supposedly made of silver and elaborately ornamented. At first glance, the form and design of the vase are so unlike anything commonly seen in museum collections or illustrated in modern publications that one might assume it to be only an imaginary design except that the words "F. & G. Fecit." can clearly be seen along the base in the engraving. Beneath the vase's base and framed by its supporting paw feet, the label is inscribed "Presented by the Citizens of Philada. to Capn. Isaac Hull." Obviously, the engraving represents a piece that was actually made.

Reference works on American silver are discouragingly vague about Thomas Fletcher, but they do generally record what is shown by the Philadelphia directories: that he was in partnership with Sidney Gardiner at various addresses from 1812 until 1825 or thereabouts and that he subsequently appears by himself until the directories for 1837–39, when he was in partnership with one Bennett. Thereafter he is again alone until 1849. A Thomas Fletcher, prothonotary of the district court, is listed for 1852 and 1854.

The problem of dating the label had not been satisfactorily resolved when a variant example became available, along with some Fletcher letters and bills. This variant explained part of the diffi-

culties and created others. It was not actually a label but was rather an advertisement, which luckily happened to be printed on the reverse of a title-page removed from a rare trade directory, *The United States Directory*, compiled and published in Philadelphia by Joshua Shaw. In this advertisement, the name of the firm is given as Fletcher and Gardiner and the address is 130 Chestnut, but the date is again lacking. The date 1822 can be supplied, however, from Shaw's *United States Directory*, a copy of which is at Winterthur.

Upon comparing the advertisement with the label, the researcher concluded that the original plate had been engraved, probably for Shaw about 1822, and that it was altered for Thomas Fletcher sometime between 1838 and 1849. It was also decided that Thomas Fletcher would bear further investigation.

Shortly after the discovery of a listing for two boxes of Fletcher papers in the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, serendipity blessed the research by unexpectedly bringing forth a brochure prepared for the Naval Historical Foundation in which is illustrated a photograph of the piece of silver depicted by Young and Delleker. Much silver of the early Republic is of large proportions but thinly worked. The piece that dominates a corner of the Naval Historical Foundation Museum is not of such flimsy stuff. Twenty-eight inches high and 22 inches across the handles, it may well be the largest single piece of silver made in America before 1850. Its weight has not been learned, but it is surely among the heaviest American pieces known. Though it could not be called the most beautiful piece of American silver or even the most beautiful product of its manufacturers, it is beyond question an impressive and historically important piece of American silver. Below are listed many of the facts relating to it, along with the documentary sources from which they were gleaned.

Fletcher and Gardiner made the piece for a group of Philadelphia merchants to be presented to Capt. Isaac Hull, commander of the *Constitution* during her victory over the *Guerrière* on August 19, 1812. (Manuscript subscription list dated September 3, 1812, from the miscellaneous collections of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania; newspaper, *Aurora General Advertiser*, September 7, 1812.) The design seems to be based upon a design by Charles Percier and P. F. L. Fontaine, French designers, for a piece of silver executed about 1806 by M. Guillaume Biennais for the Empress Josephine. (Percier and Fontaine, *Recueil de Decorations Intérieurs*, Paris, 1812; Henri Bouilhet, *L'Orfèvrerie Française*, Paris, 1910.)

The design is by no means a direct copy from the French; it uses

symbols that are appropriate throughout to Hull's victory. All documentation uncovered points to Fletcher as the designer. At least one signed drawing by him exists—a design for a sword at the Maryland Historical Society—and a number of unsigned ones are at the society and in the print collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. Fletcher is stated to have designed the famous Clinton vases made by Fletcher and Gardiner in 1824–25 and now owned by the New York Chamber of Commerce. (Broadside, "Description of the Vases" [New York? 1825?], from a copy in the Winterthur Library.)

The piece cost at least $1,500 and probably more than $2,000 of the $3,000 collected by subscription for "splendid pieces of plate" for Hull and Lieutenant Morris. The Hull piece is unusual in having the name of the engraver as well as the names of Fletcher and Gardiner engraved on it. It was the first of eight pieces believed to have been commissioned from Fletcher and Gardiner for presentation to heroes of the War of 1812. In all, 24 references to presentation silver have been found. The names of other silversmiths are associated with seven of these, and the remaining nine are unlocated and not attributed. Fifteen items of War of 1812 presentation silver are now found in 13 collections throughout the Eastern United States. They could never have been identified so quickly as they were without good descriptions from 19th-century sources. (Found in newspapers; a magazine, *Niles' Weekly Register*, Baltimore; Bowen, *The Naval Monument,* Boston, 1816; and Benson J. Lossing, *The Pictorial Field-Book of the War of 1812*, New York, 1868.)

Of the other Fletcher and Gardiner productions of this period, none is so large as the Hull vase. While all are apparently unique, some have certain similar design features. None of the pieces by other makers compares in size or originality of design with the Hull piece, nor is any so early. In the absence of any earlier documented examples, this vase may represent the earliest attempt by an American to produce a piece of silver in the fully developed French Empire style.

We now know that Fletcher spent his youth in Massachusetts, while Gardiner was from Long Island (there are good 19th-century genealogies for both the Fletcher and Gardiner families). They apparently met in Boston, perhaps during their apprenticeship years. (They are listed in Boston directories for 1809 and 1810, when both were in their early twenties.) Upon moving to Philadelphia in 1811, they made a splashing big start in Philadelphia in

1811 (advertisement in the *Aurora*, December 19, 1811), but they probably did not own property until they moved to 130 Chestnut in 1817. We know the evaluation of the property (Philadelphia County tax ledgers), we have a description of it (fire insurance survey, Philadelphia Contributionship), and the front of it is shown in a lithograph (M. E. D. Brown, "The Gold & Silver Artificers of Phila. in Civic Procession, 22d Feby. 1832," copy at the Historical Society of Pennsylvania).

Unfortunately, since we have found no account books or shop records, we have no accurate information on the number of their workmen and no clear picture of their rate of output. From the two boxes of papers at the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, from a handful of correspondence at Winterthur, and from known products, we have learned that Fletcher and Gardiner had patrons in such distant places as Charleston, Newport, New York City, New Orleans, Mexico, and the Caribbean; that they preferred to make the best quality silver, jewelry, and swords; and that Fletcher went several times to England and France to buy goods for import and very likely to keep abreast of the fashions.

Gardiner died while in his early forties during a business trip to Mexico in 1827 (Gardiner genealogy; Fletcher Papers, H.S.P.; Probate Court records, Philadelphia City Hall Annex). Fletcher continued in the business for at least 12 years, perhaps until 1849. In 1838 he had a distinguished commission to make a tea service to cost $15,000 for presentation by the Directors of the Second Bank of the United States to Nicholas Biddle. Although, according to Biddle family history, the set was melted down for silver, drawings believed to be for it are at the Metropolitan Museum, and Philip Hone was complimentary about the set in his diary.

Fletcher suffered financial difficulties during 1839 and was involved in at least two lawsuits (District Court Appearance Docket, Philadelphia Municipal Archives), but he managed to retain the Morris House, which he ran as a temperance hotel from about 1838 to at least 1849 (Philadelphia directories).

If never a leading figure in Philadelphia public life, Thomas Fletcher was at least a substantial citizen. In 1814 his shop served as a headquarters for a meeting of young men desiring to form a company of light infantry (*Poulson's American Daily Advertiser*, August 13, 1814), he owned valuable property for many of his years in Philadelphia (Philadelphia tax records), and he was a founder of the Franklin Institute, its first treasurer, and a vice president for all but 2 years from 1828 until 1854. Although he had lived in

New Jersey before his death in 1866 at the age of 79, he was not forgotten by the directors of the Franklin Institute. The minutes for December 19, 1866, state in part: ". . . while we sympathize with his family in their bereavement, we feel assured that as he had filled the characters of parent, friend and citizen for a period rarely allotted to man, in a way honorable to himself, their grief will be solaced by the many memories of his work." The institute has a portrait of Fletcher, thought to be by his son Lewis Veron Fletcher, an artist of middling success.

This barebones sketch, borrowed from a much fuller work soon to be published in *Winterthur Portfolio Three*, has attempted to show how a cultural historian might develop an object study. The study progresses from a single trade label to an important object that it depicts, to a number of other related objects, and through documentation to some knowledge of two previously obscure American craftsmen. Had space permitted, the sketch could have further treated an important era in American history, when patriotism ran high, when fortunes were made and lost, when a conscious effort was made to throw off national dependence on Europe for goods and ideas. The sketch was based on a wide variety of source materials: city directories, newspapers, magazines, a broadside, a lithograph, printed works (as many old as new), collections of family papers, collections of drawings, probate court records, district court records, tax records, fire insurance surveys, and the records of the Franklin Institute. These artifacts and documents are to be found in Philadelphia, Delaware, New York, Boston, Washington, Baltimore, Annapolis, and Charleston.

Lack of time and funds prevented the research from proceeding further. Certain obvious records remain to be examined: New Jersey probate records, customs records for the major ports of the United States between 1809 and 1850, and many, many newspapers. No appreciable search was made in church records, in business records in Massachusetts that might reveal where Fletcher and Gardiner were apprenticed, for the records of organizations to which they might have belonged, or for books they might have owned. Many objects remain to be traced; a clearer picture of the economic structure of the United States at this period is wanted; proof is needed of certain contacts made by Fletcher in England and France. Much, much more could be done, time and funds allowing.

This picture of an object study has been drawn, perhaps in too great detail, to point out the kinds of information needed for cultural studies and the wide variety of places in which they are found.

Historians are not so lazy as some archivists and librarians would like to believe. They, too, have time and financial limitations. Archivists and librarians cannot be expected to give of their time or resources to do research for historians, but they can (and often do) contribute immeasurably to the success of historical research by doing their own work efficiently and conscientiously and by giving unstintingly of their intellectual resources.

There are three areas in particular in which archivists and librarians can contribute to historical efforts by facing up more fully to their own responsibilities. These are the areas of *preservation of documents, description of documents, and evaluation and interpretation of documents*. Sometimes a topsy-turvy sense of values has prevailed in determining what records shall be preserved. Historians have little voice and no recourse in this matter. If any single body of records were to be selected as having the greatest value for cultural historians it would be probate court records, wills, and inventories of estates. In almost every jurisdiction in the Nation these records are being allowed to moulder into dust. On occasion an effort has been made to select valuable records for preservation, but nearly always in terms of political rather than cultural or intellectual history. Customs records and tax records, too, are generally in a disgraceful state. How can we expect to have accurately furnished historical houses or meaningfully presented museum exhibits if the documents needed are allowed to distintegrate?

The recent trend among records repositories toward more and better printed guides and finding aids has been helpful to historians, but not nearly enough is being done and not always quickly enough to let the historian find a record before it is hopelessly lost. Of the manuscripts and records mentioned in the above study, only one group is listed in a published guide in a way that is useful to any but a very experienced researcher. Some records were not accessible; others ought not to have been accessible because of their fragility. Nor is microfilm the answer. Of all the material seen, only a small part is available on film, and that was in such poor condition that it will be lost before the records.

Librarians and archivists complain about the poor preparation of student historians to do their work properly. From whom shall they learn? Few among the hoary old heads in universities are really adept at research in primary sources. The only true experience in working with documents is that gained through handling many many thousands of pieces of paper. Documents are *artifacts* in themselves. The paper, the ink, the handwriting, tell as much

as the words. How is the historian to know whether a record is typical or atypical? Where is the archivist who wants to haul out a hundred examples so that the historian can judge one? Where is the archive or library that has offered a meaty course in evaluating source materials? Where is the archivist or librarian who has attempted to put any of these intangibles into a comprehensive, understandable form for the use of historians?

I challenge you, fellow members of the Society of American Archivists: Come to the aid of history! Help cultural historians to help themselves.

Artificial Collections

7. In the Twentieth Report space was given to a few paragraphs about private archives, one of the many types of records which find their way into record offices. Another category of record very closely allied to these is worthy of mention although it is much less easy to define. For the sake of convenience such accumulations can be termed "artificial collections." The late Sir Hilary Jenkinson's well-known definition of an archive can be brought into play at this point. He described such a document as one "which was drawn up or used in the course of an administrative or executive transaction of which itself formed a part: and subsequently preserved in their own custody for their own information by the person or persons responsible for that transaction and their legitimate successors; and not drawn up in the interest or for the information of posterity."

8. Artificial collections—and with these can be combined compilations and strays—can be said to be the antithesis of this definition. Thus documents which have been collected as a deliberate policy, out of interest or for any other purpose, series of notes or information compiled to meet a need, papers which have strayed from their original context, microfilm or other types of photographic copy and lists of documents can in no real sense be called archives.

9. Nevertheless it is dangerous to assume that papers falling into this category are thereby less valuable or interesting from the historical point of view. Indeed, if the manuscripts of Shakespeare's plays were to turn up in a barn in the Outer Hebrides they would undoubtedly be regarded as "strays" but their value from every aspect would be incalculable. To take a more realistic example, the late Mr. H. E. Palfrey bequeathed to the Record Office a vast accumulation of miscellaneous papers which he had collected as an antiquarian over many years. They fall into almost every branch of this classification—strays, copies, lists and so on. Divorced as they are from their *fonds*, or origins, it is sometimes difficult to fit them into a logical background and they would probably have but little validity in a court of law. But their value to students of the history of the northern parts of this County is impossible to assess.

—*Twenty First Report of the County Archivist* [of Worcester]—*Annual Report for 1964*, p. 2.