George Hepplewhite Biography

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Biography

George Hepplewhite (died 1786) was an English furniture designer whose name has become synonymous with grace and elegance. His work was instrumental in disseminating the neoclassic style of Robert Adam.

Little is known of George Hepplewhite's life. He was an apprentice with the firm of Gillow in Lancaster and then moved to London, where by 1760 he was established in Redcross Street, St. Giles', Cripplegate. He died in 1786, and his widow, Alice, carried on the business as A. Hepplewhite and Company. It seems likely that the firm existed by supplying designs for cabinetmakers rather than by manufacturing furniture, for not a single piece of furniture is authenticated by a bill or other document as having come from his workshop.

Two years after Hepplewhite's death his widow published *The Cabinet-Maker and Upholsterer's Guide,* a folio volume of 300 designs that was the largest book of its sort to appear since Thomas Chippendale's *Director* (1754). The immediate success of Hepplewhite's work resulted in a second edition in 1789, and a third edition in 1794.

The Adam spirit in furniture may be said to have found its chief fulfillment in Hepplewhite designs. His oval-, wheel-, and shield-back chairs, bookcases with vase-shaped door glazing and urn-capped pediments, beds with delicately carved or painted posts and cornices, and bowfront commodes are among the most beautiful in the history of furniture. Hepplewhite was much influenced by Chippendale, especially in his designs for sideboard-tables with accompanying urns and pedestals and in the simpler types of domestic furniture such as chests of drawers, bookcases, and wardrobes. Hepplewhite never used human or animal figures in his designs, or sphinxes or military trophies, as did Adam and Thomas Sheraton; Hepplewhite's decorative motifs consisted chiefly of stylized foliage, urns, and vases and occasionally of ornaments in the Louis XVI manner, such as ribbon entwining a fluted chair leg. Several designs for chairs and stools with curved legs in the Louis XV manner reflect the revival of interest in the rococo from about 1770 to 1790.

Sheraton, whose *Drawing Book* (1791) seems to have been produced in emulation of Hepplewhite's work, refers in his preface to the "outmoded character" of some of his rival's designs, particularly for chairs. The third edition of Hepplewhite's book included some 20 designs for chairs in the new square-back manner introduced by Sheraton, but they lack the exquisite grace of Hepplewhite's earlier oval-and shield-back designs.