

The 1772 Philadelphia Furniture Price Book



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In 1772, a group of Philadelphia craftsmen published "Prices of Cabinet and Chair Work", a thirty-six-page book listing the furniture forms they made along with suggested retail prices and the rates master furniture makers should pay journeymen for particular items. While some standardisation of prices within the craft had occurred in both Europe and America prior to 1772, the Philadelphia publication is the first furniture price book known to have been printed. This single surviving copy, now in the collection of the Philadelphia Museum of Art, contains fifty-six headings for furniture forms, including desks, bookcases, high chests, chairs, sofas, beds, clothes presses, and numerous tables for specialised uses. Listed below each heading are choices for variations in the design and styling, with three columns to the right giving, respectively, the price to be charged for each option in mahogany or walnut as the primary wood and the amount that should be paid to the journeymen who produced the components. In her introductory essay, Alexandra Alevizatos Kirtley explains how this seemingly simple book of lists provides an extraordinary view into the world of furniture making in Philadelphia in the latter part of the eighteenth century. By quantifying what was valued in design and style, based on the extra amount the patron

was willing to pay for embellishments, the 1772 Philadelphia price book unveils the "art and mystery" of Philadelphia furniture making. In her guide to the price book, Kirtley explains the types of furniture listed and details many of the options available to eighteenth-century patrons of Philadelphia's fine furniture craftsmen.

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