



Fully adjustable saw-tooth shelf system with hand-turned and fluted columns and mahogany faced hoop pine shelves



Reproduction George III breakfront mahogany bookcase



Hand-carved corbels featuring leaf and scrolls

English Gothic Furniture

WHILE browsing through an antique book, I found myself smiling at the statement that 'English Gothic furniture is unique in its vigorous invention and humorous inconsequence'; for it is quite true. At the time of the Gothic revival, few pieces of genuine medieval furniture actually existed. The items made by revivalists only barely resembled the few pieces of rude furniture that survived since the Middle Ages. The designers of 'Gothic' furniture invented a style which is unique and delightful, but of little actual connection with genuine medieval furniture.

English Gothic furniture, as most understand the term, is named after the English Gothic architecture from which it received inspiration. Rarely, when speaking of Gothic furniture, do people mean the simple forms of authentic medieval furniture.

Before 1800, most Gothic furniture pieces were simply standard productions of the time, having minimal incorporation of Gothic features. However, the 19th century saw an increase in the demand for Gothic furniture, and so, the inventiveness of the designers flowed with considerable integration of Gothic architectural features. Such features include the pointed arch shapes, crochets, column clusters, leaf mouldings, ballflowers and even wheel window forms.

The 19th century also saw heightened interest and attention to historicism and quasi-scholarship. So, in addition to Gothic, other styles, including Jacobean, Elizabethan and Francois I gained in popularity. The expansion of the furniture industry at this time was attributable to the expanding market of middle classes, many of which used such novelty in their decor.

Understandably, the war with France also contributed towards the English turning away in tastes from neo-classicism and Continental styles. Ownership of Gothic, rather than French furniture, was felt by many to be a display of patriotism. It was

not unusual for many of the houses to have at least one or two rooms decorated in the Gothic style, even though the general style did not accord. After the restoration of the monarchy, Gothic furniture even became briefly popular in France.

Many pattern books (which had a similar role to today's home decorating magazines) had various items of Gothic furniture in them. Some of the examples were of simpler design such as those typical of the pre-1800 period. Others were incredibly ornate and intricate, heavily mimicking the grandeur of Gothic architecture.

Gothic furniture soon gained the status of being 'appropriate' for the more masculine rooms, such as the hall, the library, perhaps the dining room and the occasional bedroom. The boudoir and the drawing room, however, usually retained the frivolity and lightness of the French styles.

In England, Windsor Castle – along with a large number of other houses – was fitted with Gothic interiors. Sir Jeffry Wyattville decorated many of the rooms in the castle in the Gothic style during the alteration phase that he supervised for George IV. Much of the furniture that he designed was in fine characteristic Gothic style.

Augustus W N Pugin was one of the last romantic Gothic revivalists. He exhibited in the Great Exhibition of 1851, but his most famous work is that which he did on the interior of the new Houses of Parliament, London in the 1840s and 1850s.

Tastes in Gothicism began to shift from the early romantic revivalists to that of the solemn, correct, 'churchy' revivalists like Waterhouse and Scott. By the middle of the century the taste for Gothic was superseded by the fashion for more historic styles, which were believed to be closer to their antecedents. The only exception to this trend in

furniture was in the field of ecclesiastical and church furnishing. The design and manufacture of this highly ornate Gothic furniture has been continued right through to the 20th century.

It has to be admitted that certain awkwardness results from the attempt of applying architecture of buildings to the architecture of domestic furniture. For instance, it is not unusual to find cupboards that appear like choir screens, and chests, which look, like tombs. The most engaging productions in the Gothic style are perhaps those which least apply the characteristic features. A lot of provincial furniture used Gothicism sparingly to heighten and enliven furniture which otherwise would be dull. For some, the grandeur and charm innately held by Gothic furniture is attributable to our association of it to our fantasies of knights, fair maidens, court and medieval legends. Some see it as a strong icon of the Christian religion and values they hold dear.

Recently, we designed and manufactured a George III breakfront mahogany bookcase for one of our clients' library (who we shall call John and Pamela). They live in one of the original Spring Hill houses and their library was in desperate need of a feature bookcase. A suitable one, in terms of both size and aesthetics, could not be found in their wanderings through antique shops. Being an original home, the room of course has rather high ceilings. The remainder of the room is practically unfurnished, so this bookcase also has the role of setting the tone for the room.

Since John and Pamela already had antiques, it was felt that a custom bookcase, custom manufactured, using the traditional authentic methods would be quite appropriate. However, neither John nor Pamela had any definite ideas on how they'd like the bookcase to be. So we designed it in an understated Gothic style to complement the classical, elegant tone of the rest of their home.

The mahogany timber we used, had been part of a shipment imported from England in the 1970s. This bookcase seemed an appropriate excuse to take the timber out of storage. The mahogany grain, full of character, was displayed to maximum advantage in the external panels.

Three matching, flame mahogany, veneered panels were used in the lower section to provide an impressive background behind the pointed arch mahogany headings. We used A-grade pine to maximise strength in the carcass, the solid timber back panels, and in the fully adjustable solid timber shelving system.

The hand turned and fluted columns are each bound by beautifully carved leafy corbels to provide additional flair. All of the mahogany beading was hand shaped. The resultant sharp angles necessitated hand rather than machine glass bevelling. All the English brass fittings were antiqued prior to fitting, and we only used the traditional black steel slot head screws.

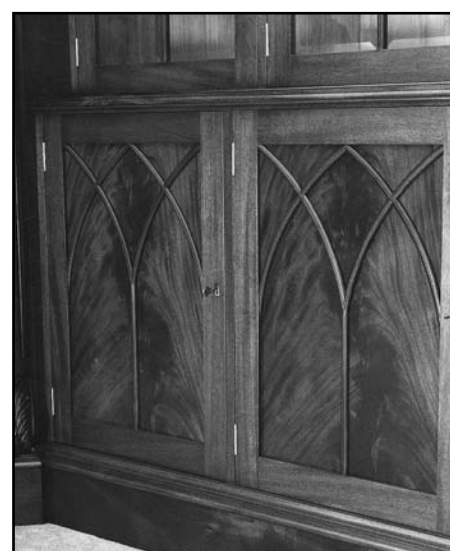
The hand trench polishing using pure shellac was



Gothic arched mahogany barred doors and hand-bevelled glass



Brass plate of authenticity



Flame mahogany veneered centre panels

done after considerable grain filling and only limited staining. The natural colour of the timber spoke for itself. We decided on the degree of shine because we wanted to ensure the appearance of a well-maintained antique. We then finished off the antiquing process using a high quality furniture wax.

In total, over 400 hours were required to complete and install the bookcase. This Gothic piece will be a pride and joy for John and Pamela, and will eventually become an heirloom for their children and their children's children. Quite a legacy, wouldn't you agree? ■

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