

ARMCHAIR, 1880–83
 Sypher & Co. (1867–1908)
 New York City
 Mahogany; pine slip seat. 41 x 29¾ x
 24 x 17 (seat height)
 Bequest of Commander William Davis
 Miller. 59.253

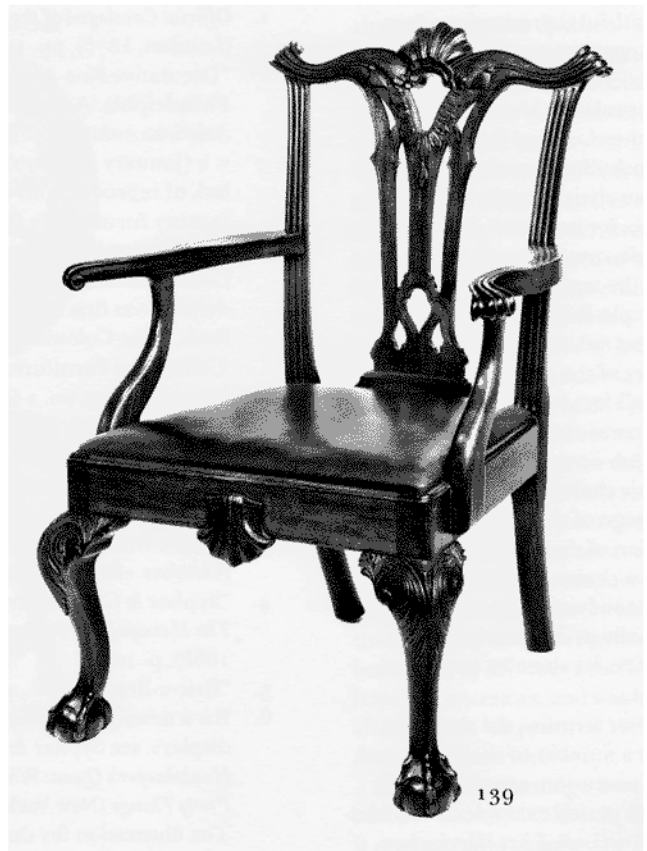
Provenance:
 Purchased from Sypher & Co. by Dr.
 Thomas Mawney Potter (1814–1890),
 Kingston, Rhode Island; to his sister,
 Mary E. Potter (d. 1901); to her nephew,
 James Brown Mason Potter Jr. (d. 1916);
 from whom it was acquired by the donor

Condition:
 The slip seat was reupholstered in
 leather shortly before coming to the
 Museum.

Although American furniture manufac-
 turers appear to have missed a unique
 opportunity to make faithful copies of
 Queen Anne, Chippendale, Hepple-
 white, and Sheraton furniture for display
 at the 1876 Centennial Exhibition in
 Philadelphia, their English counterparts
 did not. According to the *Official Cata-
 logue of the British Section*, James Shoolbred
 & Co. of London displayed “four suites
 of furniture in the Jacobean and Queen
 Anne styles,” while Wright & Mansfield,
 also of London, displayed “Cabinet Fur-
 niture of the 18th century.”¹ A writer for
The American Architect and Building News
 of January 13, 1877, particularly praised
 the latter firm for showing “what could
 be done in this way [of 18th-century
 reproduction furniture] by people with
 good understanding.”² Such an observa-
 tion, however, did not fall on deaf ears,
 judging from the American-made fac-
 similes of 18th-century furniture that
 began to appear shortly thereafter, of
 which this Chippendale armchair by
 Sypher & Co. of New York City is an early
 example.

As the pioneer dealers in bric-a-brac
 in New York City, Sypher & Co. could
 trace their origins back to 1840.³ With
 the increasing demand for “old furni-
 ture” in the wake of the 1876 Centennial,
 the firm established a four-story struc-
 ture “where a large force of hands,
 averaging one hundred,” were employed
 to respond to the need.⁴ On the subject
 of reproductions, the head of the firm,
 Obadiah Sypher, was most forthright:

My strict principle is to sell goods for
 what they are, copies if they are copies,
 originals when I am lucky enough to
 find any. But good, faithful, honest
 copies are of such worth in the market



that they do not need being presented,
 and passed for what they are not.⁵

And in order to assist his clients in
 bridging the gap between the commer-
 cial showroom and the interiors of their
 own homes, Sypher came up with the
 then novel idea of arranging a series of
 room displays in the basement gallery of
 his new building at 860 Broadway in
 1884. The Colonial Revival interior
 depicted in an 1882 advertisement may
 throw light on their appearance (fig. a).
 In it, Martha Washington is portrayed
 seated in front of an “Adams” fireplace
 in a Chippendale armchair similar to the
 RISD example.⁶

On the basis of the label attached to
 the inside of the rear seat rail of the RISD
 chair, with Sypher’s address given as 739
 Broadway, it can be dated between 1880
 and 1883 (fig. b). A Roman numeral IV
 scored on the inside of the seat rail and
 underside of the slip seat suggests it was
 originally part of a larger set when pur-
 chased by Thomas Mawney Potter from
 Sypher & Co., at either their New York
 address, or their recently opened shop
 in the Casino on Bellevue Avenue in
 Newport. As the chair was destined for
 Potter’s Kingston, Rhode Island, home,
 which already contained several 18th-
 century Chippendale chairs, including a
 pair now at RISD (cat. 112), he would

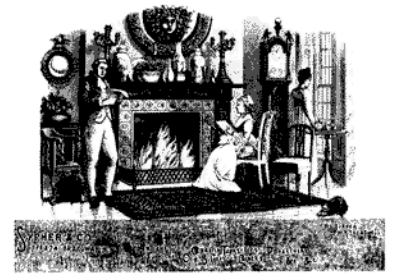


Fig. 139a
 Advertisement from *Art Exhibit of Fashion*,
 Parker & Tilton, pubs., 1882. (Private
 collection)

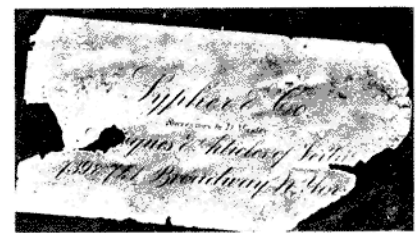


Fig. 139b
 Cabinetmaker’s label on inside of rear
 seat rail.

probably have been more rigorous in his quest for faithful reproductions than most of his contemporaries, and this would explain why the Sypher chair particularly appealed to him.⁷

Unlike other Colonial Revival reproductions, including some by Sypher & Co., the RISD chair is totally indebted to Philadelphia for its overall design and its individual decorative motifs.⁸ Such features as the scrolled ears and armrests, the triple-fluted stiles, the shell on the front seat rail, the acanthus carving on the knees of the cabriole legs, the claw-and-ball feet, and the rear stump legs are all consistent with those found on actual 18th-century Philadelphia Chippendale chairs. This is also the case with the design of the back, except that it is a conflation of three distinct types of Philadelphia chairs: the floating rope-and-tassel motif would never have been used originally in conjunction with a ruffled orifice, let alone an interlaced Gothic splat.

Upon closer scrutiny, the chair also reveals that a number of shortcuts were taken in its execution, especially when compared to period examples in the Metropolitan Museum of Art (Heckscher 1985, p. 109), the Philadelphia Art Museum (Kirk 1972, p. 79), and Chipstone (Rodriguez Roque 1984, p. 137). To begin with, the carving of the ruffled orifice is flat and mechanical, while the incised lines on the reticulated splat are too sharp and deep, bringing to mind similar incised decoration found on "Eastlake" furniture of the same date. The triple flutes on the stiles do not stop just above and below the point of contact with the arms, but are continuous. The tonguelike arm supports have been replaced by ones with a simplified cyma curve. The shoe which accommodates the bottom of the splat has not been cut out to form a narrow rectangular slot, but rather treated as a narrow channel running from end to end. The flat arches have been eliminated from the skirt of the seat rail. And finally, the side rails have not been tenoned all the way through the stiles. But in spite of these shortcomings, the period proportions and the consistent use of Philadelphia Chippendale details have produced a chair which is remarkable for its historical correctness, particularly given the vacuum which existed only a few years before at the time of the Centennial Exhibition.

CPM

1. *Official Catalogue of the British Section* (London, 1876), pp. 156–57.
2. "Decorative Fine-Art Work at Philadelphia: American Furniture," *American Architect and Building News*, v. 2 (January 13, 1877), p. 12. The lack of reproductions of 18th-century furniture in the displays of American manufacturers at the Centennial Exhibition in Philadelphia was first noted by Rodris Roth, "The Colonial Revival and 'Centennial Furniture,'" *The Art Quarterly*, v. 27, no. 1 (1964), pp. 57–81. Also see Rodris Roth, "Pieces of History, Relic Furniture of the Nineteenth Century," *Antiques*, v. 101 (May 1972), pp. 874–78.
3. "Bric-a-Brac," *The Curio*, v. 1, no. 2 (October 1887), p. 192.
4. "Sypher & Co.," *Illustrated New York: The Metropolis of To-Day* (New York, 1888), p. 102.
5. "Bric-a-Brac," *op. cit.*, p. 193.
6. For a description of Sypher's room displays, see Sypher & Co., pub., *The Housekeeper's Quest: Where to Find Pretty Things* (New York, 1885), p. 20. The illustration for the Sypher & Co. advertisement appears in Parker & Tilton, pubs., *Art Exhibit of Fashion*, v. 10 (1882), n.p.
7. Miller 1935, p. 45.
8. A Sypher & Co. kneehole desk combining decorative elements from Boston, New York and Philadelphia is illustrated in Parke-Bernet sale 2277 (April 24–25, 1964), p. 59, lot 306.