

Furniture Styles

[Ancient Furniture](#)
[Medieval Furniture](#)
[European Furniture](#)
[English](#)
[Timeline](#)
[Tudor](#)
[Elizabethan](#)
[Jacobean](#)
[Commonwealth](#)
[Restoration](#)
[William & Mary](#)
[Queen Anne](#)
[Early Georgian](#)
[Mid Georgian](#)
[Late Georgian](#)
[Regency](#)
[Early Victorian](#)
[Late Victorian](#)
[Edwardian](#)
[Country](#)
[Colonial](#)
[Designers](#)
[Grinling Gibbons](#)
[Gerrit Jensen](#)
[Daniel Marot](#)
[William Kent](#)
[Thomas Johnson](#)
[Thomas Chippendale](#)
[William Chambers](#)
[Robert Adam](#)
[George Hepplewhite](#)
[Thomas Sheraton](#)
[Thomas Hope](#)
[George Seddon](#)
[William Morris](#)
[Ernest Gimson](#)
[English Clockmakers](#)
[Pattern Books](#)
[English Decorating](#)
[English Homes](#)
[Woods](#)
[Resources](#)
[American Furniture](#)
[Asian Furniture](#)
[Contact](#)

Ads by Google

[Dining Furniture](#)
[Furniture Online](#)
[Rustic Furniture](#)
[Wooden Furniture](#)
[Oak Furniture](#)

Furniture Styles

[Furniture](#) > [European](#) > [English](#) > [Designers](#) > [Thomas Sheraton](#)

Thomas Sheraton

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Ad Choices

1751 - 1806

Of all the English craftsmen and masters of design and applied art, Thomas Sheraton was one of the most interesting in terms of character. His passing, at the beginning of the nineteenth century, marked the end of the Golden Age of English cabinet-making. He was the last, but by no means the least, of the creators of English styles. His fame as a cabinet-maker and furniture designer ranks next to that of **Thomas Chippendale**, and those who believe that he was Chippendale's superior, that he never had an equal in his particular field, are able to support their contentions with sound argument. Thomas Sheraton was a genius, if there ever was one.

Thomas Sheraton and **George Hepplewhite** were contemporaries in London; but in the development of style, Sheraton followed Hepplewhite. Hepplewhite's designs were the first to achieve popularity; **Sheraton furniture** designs were the last to give way before the invasion of poor taste.

Early Life

Sheraton was born in humble circumstances at Stockton-on-Tees in 1751, three years before Chippendale published his "**Director**" He was a country lad who somehow managed to pick up a fair but unbalanced education. He never received adequate specialized training. He taught himself drawing and geometry, and was probably apprenticed to some local cabinet-maker. In early life he referred to himself as a mechanic, with small advantages of academic education.

Little is known of his work until he went to London about 1790, when he was nearly forty years old. He was just a poor journeyman cabinet-maker and Baptist preacher. All his life religion played an important part in his affairs. He was, in short, a strange blend of mechanic, inventor, artist, mystic, and religious controversialist. His parents had been Church of England people, but he became a zealous Baptist, preaching occasionally in Baptist chapels, and issuing pamphlets on religious topics.

Cabinet Maker

In London he opened a shop in Soho. He was not a good business man, and he never achieved the commercial success of Chippendale or Hepplewhite. In fact, his output was very small. He is supposed to have made and sold some furniture of his own and to have executed orders for the **Adam brothers**. But it is doubtful if he ever executed many of his most cherished designs, and it is probable that most of the furniture attributed to him was built by others after the drawings in his books.

Design Books

After 1793 he practically gave up the cabinet-making business and became a designer and a publisher of books. It is upon these that his fame chiefly rests, though there is evidence to prove that he was himself a workman of rare gifts.

His first essay in the publishing field was a series of eighty-four designs, not dated, and now very rare, his "Drawing Book", appeared in 1791, in quarto form, with 111 plates. An "Accompaniment" and "Appendix" were published during the following two years. A second edition appeared in parts from 1793 to 1796, with 119 plates, and a third edition in 1802, with 122 plates. In 1803 his "Dictionary" appeared, and in 1804-7 his "**Encyclopaedia**", in 125 parts, of which he lived to publish only thirty. There was also a posthumous volume by him, published in 1812, made up chiefly of plates from the "Dictionary" and "Encyclopaedia", and called "Designs for Household Furniture".

"The Cabinet-Maker and Upholsterer's Drawing Book"

The full title of the third edition of his first book, containing 122 copper plates, is: "The Cabinet-Maker and Upholsterer's Drawing Book. In four parts. By Thomas Sheraton, Cabinet-Maker". The first part deals with mechanical drawing and geometry, and includes an account of the Five Orders of Architecture, with the interesting theory that all were of Hebrew origin. The second part deals with perspective and furniture designing, and the rest of the book is given up to furniture designs with descriptions of them. Among other things, we find here shield-back chairs similar to Hepplewhite's.

The Appendix contains elaborate beds, fine tables, pulpits with spiral stairs and graceful canopies, and clock cases. The text was Sheraton's undoing. It displays his conceit and his tendency to disparage the work of Chippendale and all others. The treatise on drawing and perspective is of limited value. But the designs, though of unequal merit, show the hand of the master. The best of them display perfect proportion and a pleasing symmetry. A few are absurdly ornamental. Many of the chair backs are delightful in grace and delicacy. The book was republished in German in Leipzig in 1794.

"The Cabinet Dictionary"

"The Cabinet Dictionary", which was published in 1802-3 and sold for £1 12 shillings, contained 88 plates with a glossary of terms, a supplementary treatise on drawing, etc. Some of the designs show the tendency toward the bizarre which marred Sheraton's later work.

"The Cabinet-Maker and Artist's Encyclopaedia"

This tendency is even more marked in "The Cabinet-Maker and Artist's Encyclopaedia" which contained about 50 plates, printed in colour. Here we find the fatal Empire tendency. His harmonious marquetry, dainty painting, and lightness of finish have given place to clumsy carving and brass mounts. Some of the chairs are grotesque. Even his charming little work tables have become squat and his sideboards and bookcases cumbersome, and his clever mechanical inventions have become freakish.

"Designs for Household Furniture"

The posthumous volume, made up largely from the plates of the last two books, was entitled "Designs for Household Furniture, exhibiting a variety of Elegant and Useful Patterns in the Cabinet, Chair, and

Upholstery Branches, on eighty-four plates, by the late T. Sheraton".

These books were all published by subscription, and none of them made any money for their author, who wrote: "I can assure the reader though I am thus employed in racking my invention to design fine and pleasing cabinet-work, I can be well content to sit upon a wooden-bottom chair, provided I can but have common food and raiment wherewith to pass through life in peace". A brave spirit, truly, though possibly not an entirely satisfactory husband and father.

Homes

Sheraton appears to have lived in various parts of London. At first in Soho, we find him in 1793 at 41 Davies Street, Berkeley Square, and in 1795 in Soho again, at 106 Wardour Street. The last years of his life were spent at 8 Broad Street, Golden Square.

End

He should have acquired a competency as many of his fellow-craftsmen did, but he died a poor man, his latter days embittered by chagrin at his own ill success and at the better luck of rivals whom he knew to be less competent. Overwhelmed by the wave of bad taste that had at last set in, worn out with overwork and disappointment, in a dingy street, over a poor little shop, there died, on October 22, 1806, the last and one of the greatest of the masters. And with him passed the glory of the Georgian era.

The following obituary notice, which appeared in the Gentleman's Magazine, shows what faint praise was bestowed upon him even then:

In Broad Street, Soho, after a few days' illness of a phrenitis, aged 55, Mr. Thomas Sheraton, a native of Stock-ton-on-Tees, and for many years a journeyman cabinet-maker, but who, since the year 1793, has supported himself, a wife, and children, by his exertions as an author. In 1793 he published a work in two volumes, 4to, intitled "The Cabinet-Maker and Upholsterer's Drawing Book" to which is prefixed a numerous list of subscribers, including almost all the principal cabinet-makers in town and country. Since that time he has published 30 volumes in folio, of a work to be completed in 125 numbers, intitled "The Cabinet-Maker and Artist's Encyclopaedia", of which he sold nearly a thousand copies. In order to increase the number of subscribers to this work, he had lately visited Ireland, where he obtained the sanction of the Lord Lieutenant, the Marchioness of Donegal, and other distinguished persons. He was a very honest, well-disposed man, of an acute and enterprising disposition; but, like many other self-taught authors, showed the want of a regular education in his writings. He has left his family, it is feared, in distressed circumstances.

Sheraton's Legacy

Sheraton lived in an age when the aristocracy bought lavishly of luxuries, but made little of obscure genius. Hence, his style became popular while the man remained unappreciated. His fame is chiefly posthumous.

With centuries intervening to clarify our estimate of his contribution to the development of English style, we are forced to rank him well up with Chippendale and Hepplewhite, if indeed he was not the superior of either of them. If not so versatile as Chippendale, he was truer to his artistic ideals. Chippendale and Hepplewhite were both good workmen, but Sheraton was a poet in line and colour, with all of a poet's shortcomings. His talent was as fine, his workrate as unflagging as Chippendale's, but he was less able to conform to the popular demands.

He was more versatile than Hepplewhite, who, with all his talent, had serious limitations. His many-sidedness was less successful than Hepplewhite's directness; he paid the penalty of his own versatility; he made more mistakes than Hepplewhite, but he achieved higher points of perfection. His genius was less sane and balanced than that of Chippendale and Hepplewhite, but he possessed greater ease of technique, more grace of execution, a higher ideal of beauty, a finer feeling for perfection of line and proportion. His work was uneven, to be sure, but no finer things were ever designed outside of France than Sheraton's best.

He was a deep student of his art, and he wrote with some elegance of diction. But as a writer he was verbose and pedantic. He became known as a poor, eccentric pamphleteer. His books owed their modest success to the designs they contained, not to his writings, for they show a tart character and a self-assertive and ungenerous spirit. Nevertheless, they exhibit a broader outlook on art than those of his rivals.

As a man, Sheraton possessed many faults, which account in large measure for his lack of material success. He was too much of a poet to be a good merchant. He was narrow, bigoted, self-centred, assertive, jealous of the success of others, sharp of tongue, of an intensely artistic temperament. He was incapable of catering to the taste of the wealthy. But he was big in his artistic ideals. He gave his best to the world. He brooked no sham. His work shows his honesty, refinement, knowledge of his art, and an unparalleled sense of beauty. He was a skilled draughtsman and mathematician, a man of culture with strong doctrinal proclivities, an ascetic in his mode of living. He was the most remarkable figure, in terms of personality, in the history of English furniture.

In America the influence of Sheraton lasted rather longer than in England, for American styles were not complicated by the Egyptian fad. And America had, in **Duncan Phyfe**, the New York cabinet-maker, a worthy successor who kept the Classic tradition alive for yet a little while. If Phyfe had lived and done his work in England, he would deserve an honourable place among the creators of English styles. To a thorough appreciation of the delicacy and refinement of the Adam and Sheraton styles he added a native originality in ornament and an unsurpassed feeling for curve and proportion. But even Phyfe succumbed at last to the popular demand for the heavier Empire forms.

With the decline of Sheraton's best period, incomparable as it was, there passed the glory of English style. The English furniture of the late eighteenth century was rivalled by that of France alone; none better has ever been designed or fashioned. It is the irony of the history of art that this Golden Age owed its death partly to the fall of its greatest master.

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