

MARYLAND PERIOD ROOM



Barely a village of twenty-five dwellings in the 1750s, by 1820 Baltimore had grown to become a major port and manufacturing town equal to those of Philadelphia, New York and Boston. The lifestyle of its affluent citizens is exhibited in this classical parlor of the 1830s.

The most visually striking feature of the room is the scenic wallpaper. Although most scenic wallpapers are block printed, this example is hand painted. Made in Paris, this paper graphically depicts one of the many uprisings in that city during the 1830s. Scenic papers were expensive and only the very wealthy could afford them. The design of the blue and gold silk window valences hanging from classical gilt arrows was taken from early nineteenth century pattern books.

During the first half of the nineteenth century, entertaining often centered on music recitals, popular pastimes for both men and women. Music was seen as a “means of improving your taste, and giving refinement and delicacy to your emotions.” Women were particularly encouraged to play a variety of instruments like the pianoforte and the harp. Playing these instruments was thought to instill morality and virtue—qualities that were admired in women. Many fashionable women had their likenesses painted in the act of playing a musical instrument.

The object against the wall with its lid up revealing glasses (and looking like a wet bar!) is actually a Grand harmonicon. Harmonicons were popular in genteel circles at least since the eighteenth century, when composers like Mozart and Beethoven composed music for it. Examples of this music can be seen on the music stand. Favorites of the period included tunes such as “Blue Bells of Scotland,” and “Yellow Hair’d Laddie.” The harmonicon exhibited here was made by Francis H. Smithy of Baltimore sometime in the 1830s. The glasses are housed in a particularly fashionable late neoclassical case featuring highly figured mahogany veneers supported upon a plinth

base with scrolled feet. The harmonicon was an expensive instrument. An “elegantly finished” example like this one could cost as much as \$73.00.

David Shoemaker of Mt. Holly, New Jersey made the monumental tall case clock exhibited in this room in the early nineteenth century. The finial is in the form of a classical fire bird, or Phoenix, representing rebirth and eternal life.

Baltimore painted or “fancy” furniture became a unique contribution to American decorative arts. From 1800 to 1840 this Maryland city was a leading cabinetmaking center. The forms and decorative elements of early Baltimore painted furniture followed examples perpetuated by English pattern books like Thomas Sheraton’s *The Cabinet-Maker and Upholsterer’s Drawing-Book* and George Hepplewhite’s *The Cabinet-Maker and Upholsterer’s Guide*. Designers were influenced by the classical motifs discovered through archaeological excavations of domestic interiors found in Pompeii and Herculaneum.

The two fancy painted side chairs flanking the card table illustrate the adaptation of the antique Greco-Roman form called the “klismos” chair. These are characterized by a raked stiles and rear legs and gently curved crest rails. Both chairs have caned seats and are painted black with gilt décor done in freehand and stencil. The chair featuring gilt décor of a helmet, sheathed sword, acanthus and anthemion leafage descended in the Key family and was made in Baltimore between 1820 and 1830. The second chair whose crest rail is decorated with a cornucopia has been repainted and was made in either Baltimore or Philadelphia. The painted card table was also made in Baltimore between 1825 and 1830 and is attributed to the workshop of Hugh and John Finlay. The Finlays operated a shop at various addresses during the early nineteenth century and are perhaps the most famous painted furniture makers from Baltimore. The popularity of Baltimore painted furniture is evidenced in many household inventories. For instance, *1 Doz Green & Red chairs, 2 Green & red settees, 2 Green and gold pier tables, 2 Green & gold card tables, and 2 Green and gold lamp stands*, were listed among the furnishings for the front parlor of Charles Ridgely, a former governor of Maryland.

Another striking object is the mahogany desk and bookcase made in either Baltimore or Philadelphia sometime between 1795 and 1810. Its rather plain architectonic form in the popular “neat and plain” style relies upon the highly figures paneled doors of the upper and lower cases for visual appeal. It is supported upon splayed or French feet in the neoclassical taste. The upper case was used to store books while the lower case features a sliding desk above a compartment consisting of trays used to store textiles.