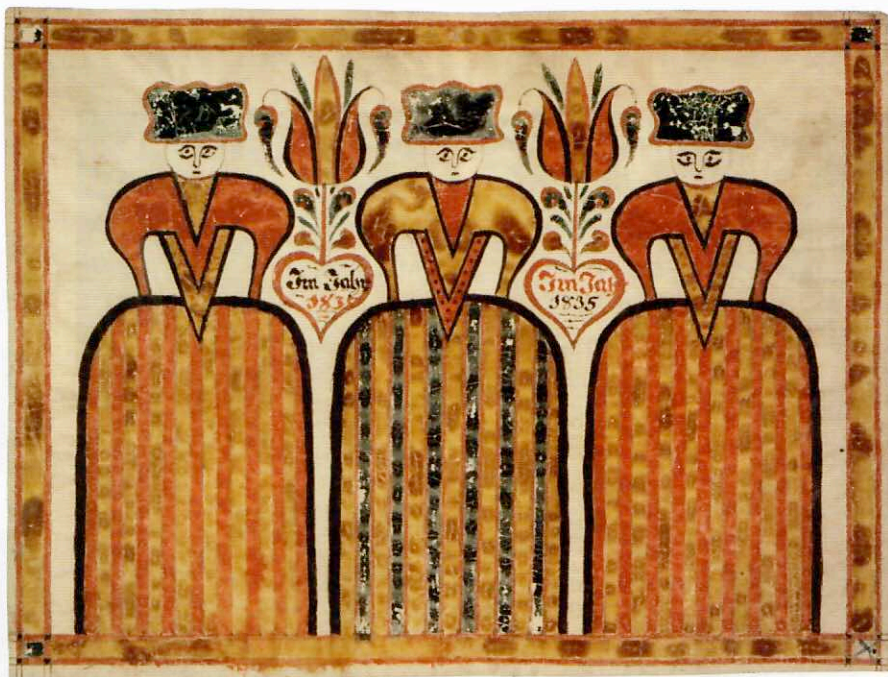


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# books



IN PURSUIT OF HISTORY: A LIFETIME COLLECTING COLONIAL ART AND ARTIFACTS (eds H. Richard Dietrich III and Deborah M. Rebeck; Yale, rrp £40) The Dietrich family arrived in Pennsylvania in the 1750s as part of the great immigrant surge of Moravians, Mennonites and Lutherans from the Rhineland Palatinate. Founded by Quakers in 1680, the colony had seen yeomen farmers and merchants prosper in and around the river port of Philadelphia. Despite religious disapproval of slavery, some of these wealthy settlers sustained its horrors by profitably provisioning plantations in the southern colonies and the West Indies. The wealth of the city of brotherly love was tainted.

Many Pennsylvanians opposed independence from Britain, but trade, agriculture and westward settlement recovered during the Federal period (1783-1820). It was then that most of the artefacts displayed in this volume were created, for example fashionable Rococo and Baroque furniture for city merchants, simpler traditional pieces or painted-pine folk chests for farmers and artisans. The collection of H. Richard Dietrich, seven generations on from his European settler forebears, has fine examples of all three types.

The first piece of furniture he bought – a rare exception to British-inspired designs – was a mahogany bombe desk ('with swelled ends' according to its Salem, Massachusetts, maker). As a social historian of his state, Dietrich was also keen on rural Delaware Valley makers, whose pieces resemble 17th-century colonial work, dark, solid and plebeian. William Savery's jaunty rush-seated maple chair bridges the gap between Chippendale and small-town chippies. The collection's documents include the 1787 probate inventory of this prolific craftsman. Among many other early treasures in paper form is a vivid 1683 letter to England from William Penn, when Philadelphia already had 80 houses and had received 23 shiploads of settlers. Most novel to British readers is the large collection of local Fraktur, a black-letter Germanic calligraphy with broken lettering. Decorated with graceful birds (often facing), flowers and heart shapes, it comprises school alphabets, birth certificates and book plates. This is colourful folk art at its best.

Among such gems as the three exquisite Copleys and Revere's rabble-rousing *Boston Massacre*, two pictures caught my eye for their rarity. The first is a large 1792 overmantel perspective of Norwalk, Connecticut, with detailed renderings of ships, merchants' houses, a fort with huge American flag, and many people, gardening, riding, rowing, scanning and fishing. The painter, Jonathan Budington, was 13. The second is a delicate portrait of Captain Benjamin Smith from Boston. Painted by Spoilum, a native of Canton, it exudes a liveliness similar to a much smaller tea dish and saucer 'showing westerners interacting with the owner of a porcelain shop'. Philadelphia's trade with the Far East was a major benefit of commercial independence from Britain.

This magnificent volume is a fitting memorial to a great Pennsylvanian. His wealth, discrimination, passion for history, love of his state and of the sea enabled him to gather over some 40 years a diverse and fascinating collection ■ ROGER THOMPSON is professor emeritus of early American history at the University of East Anglia

To order *In Pursuit of History* for £36 (plus £4.50 UK p&p), ring the *World of Interiors* Bookshop on 0871 911 1747