

Beyond moonlight and magnolias

By Laura Beach



The Museum of Early Southern Decorative Arts moves forward and looks westward

“When I met Frank Horton and saw the Museum of Early Southern Decorative Arts in 1976, I put down the Confederate flag and picked up a chair leg. How much better to see the South through its art, to understand its identity through its achievements rather than through the sacrifice of war. Here was an integrated statement about the South, its beginnings and expansion, its ethnic and historical richness.”

Dale L. Couch

Fig. 1. Detail of the press in Fig. 10.

Fig. 2. MESDA showcases its recent work on the decorative arts of interior North Carolina in its reinstalled Piedmont Room. The paint-decorated yellow pine blanket chest of 1800–1820 is attributed to Henry Anthony (d. 1833) or Jacob Anthony (d. 1862) and is from Alamance County. Above the Chatham County hickory and oak armchair of c. 1780–1800 is an ink and watercolor on paper fraktur (birth record) for Sarah Zimmerman (b. 1777) of Rowan County by the Ehre Vater Artist. On loan to MESDA from Mr. and Mrs. Arthur Spaugb, it dates to 1790–1795. The walnut, cherry, yellow pine, and poplar cupboard of 1820–1825 is by John Swisegood (1796–1874). Above the hearth, which now displays decorated North Carolina stoneware, is an 1836 long rifle by John Eagle (b. 1813) that descended in the Craig family of Rowan County. The room's woodwork is from Guilford County and dates to 1766.



and, in particular, were from the collection of Ralph P. Hanes (1898–1973),” says Daniel K. Ackermann, who was named associate curator of the MESDA collection in 2007. A textiles executive who began collecting in the 1920s, Hanes was the first of his set to combine traditional American connoisseurship with the decorative arts of the southern backcountry.²

Hanes influenced other Winston-Salem collectors, among them Frank Horton and his mother, Theodosia Taliaferro (1891–1971). Their initial gift of several hundred documented examples of southern decorative arts, interiors, and an operating endowment formed the basis of MESDA, which they founded in 1965. The collection has since grown to roughly twenty-five hundred artifacts.

MESDA initially displayed its collections in a chronological progression of sixteen period rooms arranged in colonial revival-inspired domestic settings and four galleries. MESDA officially limited its scope to work made prior to 1820 in Maryland, the District of Columbia, Virginia, the Carolinas, Georgia, Kentucky, and Tennessee. In practice, the museum emphasized high-style objects made by urban craftsmen in Baltimore, Charleston, Williamsburg, and other coastal style centers.

Horton’s most innovative and, arguably, most influential contribution to the study of American decorative arts is MESDA’s documentary and field research programs, which since 1972 have identified nearly twenty thousand objects and eighty thousand artists and artisans working in 127 different trades in the early South. In its first decade, MESDA researchers scoured records and field investigators combed the countryside in search of objects with documented histories in southern families, creating a descriptive and photographic record of their finds.

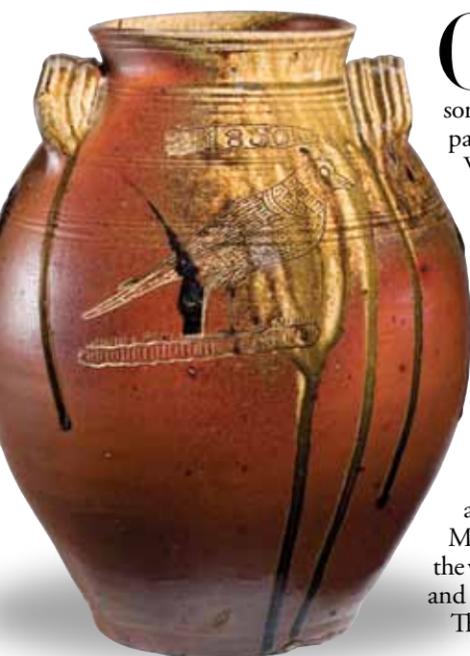
“We would have lost so much in the way of regional history and artifacts had MESDA not undertaken this project when it did,” observes Maryland dealer Milly McGehee, MESDA’s first field representative. The survey’s empirical approach resulted in a race-blind, class-blind, gender-neutral archive that remains the cornerstone of decorative arts studies throughout the South and a model for field research elsewhere.³ “All that cumulative information has really changed southerners’ perceptions of themselves and the world’s perception of the South,” says Virginia antiques dealer Sumpter Priddy III.

Frank Horton’s death in 2004 coincided with a period of institutional decline. MESDA cut back on new acquisitions and slowed its research

Fig. 3. New York designer Ralph Harvard enlivened MESDA’s galleries with new cork floors and arresting paint colors. The emerald-hued Catawba Gallery features recent acquisitions from Tennessee, Kentucky, and backcountry Virginia, areas of major interest for MESDA since 2007. The Wythe County, Virginia, paint-decorated blanket chest, center, is made of poplar and dates to 1810–1820. It descended in the Umberger and Tilson families. The cherry desk-and-bookcase behind it is by Isaac Evans (1777–1822), Mason County, Kentucky, 1800–1810. *Boys of the Powell Family*, an oil on canvas portrait by Samuel Moore Shaver (1816–1878), 1850–1860, Knox County, Tennessee, hangs above an East Tennessee walnut and poplar sugar box of 1820–1840. The painting is on loan from Mary Jo Case. The walnut corner cupboard at the right is by a cabinetmaker of Scots-Irish descent and was made between 1790 and 1810 in Knox County, Tennessee. At the far left is a cherry Mason County, Kentucky, sugar desk, 1790–1810, a loan from Andy Anderson.

Fig. 4. Jar by Chester Webster (1779–1882), Randolph County, North Carolina, 1850. Salt-glazed stoneware; height 15 1/8, diameter 8 1/2 inches. Born in Connecticut, Webster moved to North Carolina, where he worked in Randolph County for the Craven family of potters. His work features whimsical incised decorations, such as this bird holding a banner inscribed “1850.”

Fig. 5. Corner cupboard made by Christopher Slusher (1757–1845), probably for Anna Maria Weddle (1751–1835), Floyd County, Virginia, 1800–1810. Walnut and yellow pine; height 91 7/8, width 52 1/2 inches. Robert Leath recently identified cabinetmaker Christopher Slusher, who was born in Pennsylvania and migrated down the Great Wagon Road through Maryland to Floyd County. The inlay decoration exemplifies the best of German craftsmanship in the Virginia backcountry. A related example is in the Yale University Art Gallery.



Curator of decorative arts at the Georgia Museum of Art in Athens, Dale Couch is part of the thirty-five-member advisory board that is helping to revitalize MESDA, part of Old Salem Museums and Gardens in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. Moving away sharply from traditional period-room displays, MESDA is reinstalling its galleries, expanding its collections, and re-vamping its influential research and publishing programs—all in time for its fiftieth anniversary in 2015.

The most dramatic changes are to MESDA’s collections. In 2007 the institution moved its dateline forward to 1861 and began closing gaps in its holdings. Many of its fifty-plus purchases since then are from the southern backcountry, which MESDA defines as Tennessee, Kentucky, and the western regions of Maryland, Virginia, North and South Carolina, and Georgia.

The initiative is led by Ragan Folan, Old

Salem’s president and CEO since February 2012, and Robert A. Leath, a native North Carolinian plucked from Colonial Williamsburg in 2006 to be Old Salem’s vice president of collections and research and chief curator.

Pride propelled the southern decorative arts movement, whose start is often associated with the 1931 publication of *Southern Antiques* by Paul H. Burroughs. The first Colonial Williamsburg Antiques Forum in 1949 drew attention to the paucity of scholarship on southern decorative arts and is said to have spurred the pivotal exhibition *Furniture of the Old South: 1640–1820* at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts three years later. The show included thirteen objects from Winston-Salem collections, chosen by Helen Comstock of *The Magazine Antiques* and Frank L. Horton (1918–2004), a local antiques dealer turned museum professional who supervised Old Salem’s restoration between 1950 and 1972.¹

“What interests me is how many pieces in the 1952 show came from Winston-Salem collections



Fig. 6. MESDA's newly installed Georgia Gallery features the arts of the Savannah River valley of Georgia and South Carolina. Among the objects pictured are, from the left: an inlaid birch and walnut table by Thomas J. Maxwell (1804–1869) of Elbert County, Georgia; an oil on canvas portrait of Dr. Robert Grant (1762–1843) by Samuel Lovett Waldo (1783–1861), St. Simons Island, Georgia, 1805–1815; a painted corner cupboard of yellow pine from Oglethorpe County, Georgia, 1830–1850, part of the original furnishings of White Oak plantation, built by Augustus Dozier (1807–1902) in the 1840s; and a birch and yellow pine Savannah River valley chest of drawers from Georgia or South Carolina, 1800–1820. Above this last hangs *Mistipee, Yoholo-Micco's Son* by Charles Bird King (1785–1862) of 1825; King painted father and son when they were in Washington, D.C., to finalize a peace treaty between the Creek Indians and the United States. The woodwork is from Warrenton Hall, built in Warrenton, Georgia, c. 1790.



and publications programs. “The institution went through a period of mourning,” says Leath, who spent his first year in Winston-Salem planning MESDA’s exhibition at the 2007 Winter Antiques Show in New York. Later that year, he and his colleagues convened a think tank to chart a new direction for the institution, the results of which are seen here.

“It seemed obvious that MESDA had to move beyond Frank’s original vision. Craftsmen didn’t die out after 1820, they moved west,” says novelist Robert Hicks, an original MESDA advisor and an early advocate for the chronological and geographical expansion of its collections. Born and raised in Florida, Hicks moved to Tennessee in 1974. He lives in an eighteenth-century cabin near Leiper’s Fork and is leading the campaign to reclaim and preserve Franklin, a Civil War battlefield threatened by development.

MESDA’s new focus reflects its view that, away from the coast, traditions of handcraftsmanship survived well into the 1850s, undisrupted until the Civil War. Its expanded scope has revitalized the institution and stimulated a wave of research and collecting that has put MESDA and the southern backcountry at the forefront of American

decorative arts studies over the past several years. Most visibly, MESDA’s groundbreaking exhibition *Art in Clay: Masterworks of North Carolina Earthenware*, organized by Luke Beckerdite, Robert Hunter, and Johanna Brown, will have been seen at five institutions by the time it closes in 2013.

Following the think tank, MESDA’s first major acquisition, in 2008, was a walnut, poplar, and yellow pine corner cupboard made in Knox County, Tennessee (see Fig. 3). Independent scholar Tracey Parks will reveal the identity of its Scots-Irish maker, thought to be the state’s earliest known cabinetmaker, at MESDA’s October conference on American material culture.

Another milestone was MESDA’s purchase of eight examples of Georgia decorative arts—including a corner cupboard from White Oak plantation, a worktable by Thomas J. Maxwell, and a George Abbott watercolor—at Brunk Auctions’ landmark sale of the Florence and William Griffin collection in May 2009. Georgia collectors Linda and David Chesnut subsequently donated the accompanying sideboard from White Oak, the Dozier family plantation in Oglethorpe County.

New objects from the southern backcountry fill



Fig. 7. Detail of a hand-painted wallpaper, 1830–1850. Height 71 3/8 inches. The paper was removed in the 1920s from the Griffin family plantation in Columbia, Georgia, and installed in the Winston-Salem house of Ralph P. and Dewitt Chatham Hanes. It is from a group of hand-painted wallpapers and murals found along the Savannah River in Georgia and South Carolina. MESDA curator Daniel Ackermann has identified the maker as “Van Patton,” a New York-born artist who worked with Dr. John Perkins Barratt (1795–1859) of Abbeville, South Carolina, in the second quarter of the nineteenth century. *Gift of Mrs. Ralph P. Hanes.*

Fig. 8. A fraktur birth record for Maria Margaretha Hausihl (1787–1871) of Newberry County, South Carolina, made by the Ehre Vater Artist, 1787. Ink and watercolor on paper, 15 3/4 by 12 1/2 inches. Only a half-dozen fraktur by artists of German descent have surfaced in western South Carolina. *Collection of Timothy J. Houseal and family, on loan to MESDA.*

the museum’s Piedmont Room and Catawba and Georgia Galleries, along with galleries devoted to ceramics, silver, textiles, and maps. Dedicated Kentucky and Tennessee galleries are in the works. New approaches to interpretation and display accompany the acquisitions. In the past two years, MESDA has revamped thirteen of its thirty galleries.

“We changed the lighting, refreshed the floors and varied the texture and color from room to room,” says Ralph Harvard, a New York designer specializing in historic structures who consulted on the project. Architectural woodwork was restored to its original appearance based on recent findings by Susan L. Buck, a Williamsburg, Virginia, conservator. Natalie Larson, also of Williamsburg, advised on historic textile treatments.

What MESDA used to call its period rooms are now galleries. In one striking change, a James City County, Virginia, court cupboard made between 1650 and 1660—one of only two known southern examples of the form—has been placed on a pedestal in the center of Criss Cross, a gallery devoted to MESDA’s unsurpassed collection of seventeenth-century southern furniture (Fig. 11). The updated display allows visitors to study construction details in the round.

MESDA now treats architectural woodwork as the largest objects in these displays, rather than as backdrops for domestic vignettes. “There are two reasons why this is brilliant,” says Couch. “With very few exceptions, you cannot use the best quality objects to convey historical truths about daily life. People were leaving MESDA with the idea





Fig. 9. Based on analysis by Susan L. Buck, a conservator of painted surfaces, the woodwork in the Pocomoke Room has been restored to its original color. It dates from 1700–1725 and is from the Powell house in Somerset County, Maryland. The gallery has been reinstalled with eighteenth-century objects from the Chesapeake region of Maryland, Virginia, and North Carolina. The eastern Maryland gateleg table, center, is primarily walnut and dates to 1740–1760. Flanking it are (left) an armchair from Pasquotank County, North Carolina, c. 1710–1740, and (right) a maple armchair of 1720–1740 that descended in the Goldsborough family of Talbot County, Maryland. Under the window is a Norfolk, Virginia, walnut dressing table of 1745–1760. The Tubal Furnace in Spotsylvania County, Virginia, cast the iron fireback in 1725, probably for Mann Page (1691–1730) of Rosewell plantation in Gloucester County, Virginia.

that this is how people lived rather than with the more accurate notion that this is the best that people produced. The second is that when you restrict objects to their functional use in a display you prevent the accumulation of like objects for comparison. To perceive objects and artifacts is by nature a comparative endeavor,” she says.

MESDA’s updated interpretation is embracing difficult issues that are central to southern history, foremost among them race and ethnicity. In February, it introduced a forty-five-minute tour exploring objects created by African American craftsmen, including North Carolina cabinetmaker Thomas Day, South Carolina potter David Drake, and Maryland painter Joshua Johnson.

Wake Forest University history professor Anthony Parent is helping MESDA reinterpret its Edenton, North Carolina, rooms. Parent recently discovered that Harriet Jacobs, author of the 1861 autobiography *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, resided in the house from which the parlor’s woodwork is drawn. Her searing account of her experience there is a story that MESDA plans to share with visitors.

Conscious that its archives—much of it housed in battered metal file cabinets in the basement of the Frank L. Horton Museum Center—are not easily accessed, MESDA entered a partnership in



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Fig. 10. Press, Tennessee, 1830–1840. Cherry, cherry veneer, and poplar; height 91, width 41 ½, depth 20 inches. Unique to Tennessee, this form, often called a Jackson press, is distinguished by drawers overhanging a pair of doors. This example descended in the Trobaugh family of Jefferson County. *Partial gift of Mary Jo Case.*

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Fig. 11. MESDA’s new interpretative strategies are on display in the Criss Cross Gallery, which presents selections from its unsurpassed holdings of seventeenth-century southern furniture. The gift of Frank L. Horton, the oak, yellow pine and walnut court cupboard, one of only two known examples, is now displayed on a pedestal and in the round so that visitors may inspect construction details. It is from James City County, Virginia, c. 1650–1660, and descended in the family of Mary Peirse Hill Bushrod (1613–1661). In the hearth, a walnut blanket chest of 1690–1720 from Chowan County, North Carolina, replaces a vignette with cookware. At right, furniture from the Tidewater region of Virginia includes a walnut clothespress, c. 1680–1700, and an armchair of c. 1690–1720 made of cherry, hickory and/or white oak. The architectural woodwork is from Tidewater Virginia and dates to c. 1690.

Fig. 12. Detail of a surveyor’s compass made by Jonathan Simpson (1797–1863), Bardstown, Kentucky, 1819. Brass, steel, silver, glass, wood, iron; length 14 ¾, width 6 ⅝ inches. This beautifully engraved compass was originally owned by James Kerr McGoodwin (1793–1875).



Fig. 13. Based on the findings of conservator Susan Buck, the Meherrin Room, which is dedicated to the arts of Charleston, has been repainted a vibrant saffron color. Natalie Larson fashioned new textile treatments, including bright blue festoon curtains. Flanking the mahogany desk-and-bookcase with carving attributed to Henry Burnett (active 1750–1761) are oil on canvas portraits of John Beale (1735–1807) and Mary Ross Beale (d. 1771) by John Wollaston (active 1742–1775), 1765–1767. Above the hearth is Thomas Leitch's 1774 oil on canvas view of Charleston. To the right is a mahogany and cypress side chair, 1740–1755, originally owned by John Blake (1752–1810). The mahogany tea table in the center dates to 1755–1775.



Fig. 14. Elizabeth Paisley Gibson (1785–1846), one of four Gibson family portraits attributed to the Guilford Limner, 1827. Watercolor and ink on paper, 15 ½ by 13 inches. Recent research by Sally Gant of MESDA reveals that the so-called Guilford Limner worked in Kentucky and possibly Virginia and South Carolina as well as in Guilford County, North Carolina. Collection of Alice Fitzgibbon, on loan to MESDA.

2009 with the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill to digitize its databases and make them available through a jointly-sponsored portal specializing in southern decorative arts. Recently relaunched online at mesdajournal.org, the museum's scholarly *Journal of Early Southern Decorative Arts* contains links to every article published since 1975, plus a preview of coming editions.

The centerpiece of MESDA's new initiative for scholars is the Anne P. and Thomas A. Gray Library and MESDA Research Center, which opens in May 2013 in space that formerly housed the Old Salem Toy Museum, whose contents were auctioned in 2010. The Winterthur-trained collector Tom Gray is funding the project, named in part after his mother. "I'm fulfilling Frank's last wish for a research library," says Gray, who is working with the specialist dealers William Reese, Clarence Wolf, Catherine Barnes, and Joseph Rubinfine to assemble a collection of North Carolina books, manuscripts, autographs, and colonial currency

dating from 1590 to 1865. The collection's secondary focus is rare books and manuscripts from Kentucky, Tennessee, Georgia, and South Carolina. Gray's collection will eventually join Old Salem's unrivaled archives on the history of North Carolina Moravians in the new facility.

Since 2007 MESDA has staked out uncharted territory, pursuing new initiatives in collecting, research, interpretation, presentation, and publication that are stimulating the larger fields of American decorative arts and material culture. But where does the study of the South ultimately end?

"Personally, I would take the vision all the way," Robert Hicks says. "It wasn't easy to see beyond Frank Horton's original mission, but MESDA should encompass the entire South up to the Civil War, all the way west to Indian Territory, New Mexico, and Arizona," he adds, fixing his gaze on the frontier, to the place where East meets West and the nation's outline as a whole begins to take shape. "The new goal for southern decorative arts is not to prove that

we made beautiful things. That battle has been won. The goal is to see that southern decorative arts are integrated into the bigger history of American art. We're working on it," Couch adds.

¹ A report on the first Colonial Williamsburg Antiques Forum published in *The Magazine ANTIQUES*, April 1949, noted that several speakers called attention to the "lack of information about craftsmanship in the south" and concluded, "It seems clear that we don't yet know the whole story." Horton's life is chronicled by Penelope Niven in "Frank Horton and The Roads to MESDA," *The Journal of Early Southern Decorative Arts*, vol. 27, no. 1 (Summer 2001), pp. 1–150; and in Luke Beckerdite, "The Life and Legacy of Frank L. Horton: A Personal Recollection," *American Furniture 2006*, pp. 2–27. ² See Daniel Kurt Ackermann, "60 Years Later: Furniture of the Old South," *Old Salem Museum and Gardens Biannual Magazine*, Winter–Spring 2012, pp. 17–21, for a discussion of *Furniture of the Old South: 1640–1820* at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond, January 17 to March 2, 1952, and for insight into the collecting activities and influence of Ralph P. Hanes. ³ Bradford L. Rauschenberg describes the genesis of MESDA's field research program in his introduction to Rauschenberg and John Bivins Jr., *The Furniture of Charleston, 1680–1820* (Museum of Early Southern Decorative Arts, Winston-Salem, N. C., 2003), vol. 1, pp. xxxi–xxxiv.

