American Fancy, Exuberance in the Arts, 1790-1840

July 17 - October 24, 2004

The Peabody Essex Museum pays tribute to one of the most spirited and vibrant periods in American art with American Fancy, Exuberance in the Arts, 1790-1840. This traveling exhibition, organized by the Milwaukee Art Museum and the Chipstone Foundation, opens July 17 and runs through October 24, 2004 at the Peabody Essex Museum. It is guest curated by Sumpter T. Priddy III, who spent 25 years studying the Fancy style. (right: Vase - Earthenware and Enameled Vase, 1790-1800, unidentified artist, England. Courtesy Elbert H. Parsons, Jr. Photo by Gavin Ashworth.)

American Fancy: Exuberance in the Arts brings together more than 200 works of art from the nation's leading private collections and museums, including the Peabody Essex Museum.

"The Peabody Essex Museum is pleased to present American Fancy as a groundbreaking exhibition that explores one of the most fertile periods in the evolution of American art and design," says Lynda Roscoe Hartigan, PEM's chief curator.

Today the word "fancy" is typically used to refer to things that are highly ornate or expensive. Two centuries ago, however, most Americans used the word to describe Fancy furnishings and decorative arts with exciting patterns and bright colors. The style flourished between 1790 and 1840, a time when the nation was imbued with a growing sense of progress and modernity.

The fancy aesthetic was fueled by a fascination with the senses and with the effect of emotions on memory. "The fancy must be warm, to retain the print of those images it hath received from outward objects," the English writer Joseph Addison observed in 1714 (as quoted by Sumpter Priddy in Antiques, May 2004). This new way of seeing, understanding, and responding to the surrounding world formed the basis of a more visually driven culture and intellectual environment.

Advances in science, and the spread of democracy, commerce and industry, helped shape Fancy as an artistic style. Improved transportation networks extended its appeal into all parts of the nation. Fancy, once reserved for the affluent, became the first truly widespread American style in the arts. Its bold designs, abstracted forms, and colorful surfaces have a spontaneity and freshness that has made Fancy works favorites with American art and design collectors to the present day. (right: Jug - Earthenware Jug, England. Rickard Collection, photo, Gavin Ashworth.)

Fancy and the kaleidoscope

The kaleidoscope had a powerful influence during the Fancy period. More than a design tool and a fun toy, the kaleidoscope was known for its Greek meaning, "beautiful image viewer." The device inspired novel designs and expanded the boundaries of creative expression. The Boston Kaleidoscope and Literary Rambler referred to it as a source of varied ideas. The kaleidoscope's array of colors and tumbling geometric patterns influenced painting, furniture, textiles, quilts, ceramics, glass and metalware in Europe and America. Though the first kaleidoscopes were made from solid brass and mahogany, inexpensive versions made of tinware and cardboard were soon available on the mass market.

Fancy in the marketplace

Americans flocked to specialized Fancy stores, which offered an unparalleled selection of useful and decorative
objects. They could visit the Fancy Dry Goods Store to purchase a coverlet or wallpaper, then go to the Fancy Milliners to buy a hat before stopping at the Fancy Baker's or Grocer's. Manufacturers and retailers exploited the consumer's fascination with Fancy objects and used the term "fancy" as a catch phrase in advertisements. Coinciding with the advent of the industrial revolution, this rich commercial environment was just as important as the domestic sphere in defining the world of popular Fancy.

*American Fancy: Exuberance in the Arts* reveals the period's remarkably broad appeal and its sophisticated origins. Fancy was as much a world view as it was a style. Artists and intellectuals believed that the five senses fed the imagination in myriad ways, and fancy goods reflected this belief. *American Fancy* mirrors the youthful optimism of the new nation, and contributes to our understanding of one of the most lively and dynamic periods in American art and design.

*American Fancy* is accompanied by Sumpter T. Priddy's lavishly illustrated book, published by the Chipstone Foundation of Milwaukee, Wisconsin. The exhibition also features interactive components such as kaleidoscopes, and two media stations with touch screens showing different Fancy-inspired painting techniques -- wood graining, marbleizing, and smoke grain painting, to name a few. The Museum gift shop will operate a satellite store during the exhibition that will offer Fancy-like goods for sale. (right: Chest - *Chest over Drawers*, 1825-1840, New England. Collection of the American Folk Art Museum, New York. Photo, Gavin Ashworth.)

Sumpter T. Priddy will give an illustrated lecture on *American Fancy* on Saturday, July 17 at 2 p.m. For more information, see the attached calendar of related events.

*A note about the American Decorative Art Collection at Peabody Essex Museum*

The Peabody Essex Museum has a long and rich history of collecting American Decorative Art. One of the most extensive collections of its kind, the museum's holdings represent more than 300 years of American art and culture and more than 65,000 works -- from furniture, paintings, glass and ceramics, to needlework, folk art, and costumes. The museum has two galleries devoted specifically to American Decorative Art, totaling 7,000 square feet, and featuring thematic highlights represented by historical and contemporary works. (right: Fosses - *Sylvanus C. Foss and Mary Jane Foss*, Joseph H. Davis, probably Strafford, New Hampshire, 1836. Collection of the American Folk Art Museum, New York. Photo, c. 2000 John Bigelow Taylor, New York.)

*Organization and tour*

*American Fancy* is organized by the Milwaukee Art Museum in collaboration with the Chipstone Foundation. *American Fancy: Exuberance in the Arts, 1790-1840* is guest curated by Sumpter T. Priddy. A scholar and antiques dealer, Priddy lives in Alexandria, Virginia. The project, including the exhibition and the accompanying publication, is the result of his 25-year study of Fancy. After its closing at the Peabody Essex Museum on Oct. 24, the exhibition will travel to the Maryland Historical Society, December 3, 2004 - March 20, 2005.

*Related events*

**Spectacular 'Scopes**

- Family Art Workshop
- Saturday, July 17, 2 pm
- Ages seven and up with accompanying adult
- Free with museum admission
- Idea Studios

The invention of the kaleidoscope inspired the creation of many textiles, furniture, and glass works on view in the exhibition *American Fancy*. Explore some of these objects, then design and build a kaleidoscope that produces changing patterns of unexpected beauty. *The Lowell Institute makes this program possible.*
Columbia’s Musick presents a program inspired by *American Fancy*. Celebrate the musical diversity of the early nineteenth century with chamber music, dance suites, love songs, and popular tunes of the time. The ensemble features Richard Spicer on harpsichord, tenor Thomas Gregg, soprano Holly Loring, flutist Peter H. Bloom, and bassoonist Judy Bedford. *The Lowell Institute makes this program possible.*

**Sumpter T. Priddy III**

Illustrated Lecture
Sunday, July 18, 3 pm