During the second quarter of the eighteenth century, the bold turnings, attenuated proportions, and dynamic surfaces of the Early Baroque, or William and Mary, style were subdued in favor of gracefully curved outlines, classical proportions, and restrained surface ornamentation. This new style, variously called Late Baroque, Early Georgian, or Queen Anne, was a blend of several influences, including Baroque, classical, and Asian.

Boston was the leading colonial city in the early eighteenth century and the first to implement aspects of the new style. “Crooked” or S-curved chair backs, which conformed to the shape of the sitter’s spine, first appeared there in the 1720s. This feature was borrowed from Asian designs and reflected a growing concern for comfort in the period. By the 1730s, Boston makers had developed a standard chair form with a vase-shaped splat and S-curved cabriole legs (46.192.2). With their rounded outlines, chairs of this type represented a dramatic departure from the stiff, straight chair backs of the preceding eras.

Boston makers produced thousands of Queen Anne-style chairs for export and sold them to other colonies as part of the inter-coastal trade. In Philadelphia, craftsmen responded to competition from Boston imports by developing distinctive seating forms with more elaborately curved lines (62.171.21). Revealing the Late Baroque
emphasis on negative space, the solid splat and the flanking stiles were carefully
designed so as to produce a gracefully curved void between them.

Case furniture in the Late Baroque style became more architectural, with
proportions and ornament derived from Renaissance precedents. New translations
of Andrea Palladio’s *Four Books of Architecture* (1570) provided craftsmen with
formulas for determining proper proportions while offering a range of classically
inspired ornament. By the 1730s, Boston makers were incorporating cabriole legs
and broken-scroll pediments into high chests of drawers (10.125.62). This standard
Boston form was adapted and refined elsewhere in the colonies. In Newport, Rhode
Island, cabinetmakers integrated distinctive scrolls and scalloped shells into the
skirts of high chests and dressing tables. Whereas Boston cabriole legs were
somewhat stiff and vertical, Newport makers favored more curvilinear legs that

One notable exception to the subdued ornamentation of Queen Anne-style furniture
is japanning, a technique developed in the West to imitate Asian lacquerwork. In
Boston and New York, Late Baroque forms were painted with fantastical scenes of
the Far East known as “chinoiserie” (10.125.58). Although this form of decoration
originated during the William and Mary period, it remained popular through the
1750s.

Intercoastal trade brought fine Virginia and Pennsylvania black walnut within reach
of craftsmen throughout New England and the Middle Atlantic, and it was the most
popular wood in the Queen Anne period (1730–60). Walnut was often stained to
resemble imported Caribbean mahogany, which became the wood of choice during
the subsequent Chippendale, or Rococo, era (1755–90).

The publication of Thomas Chippendale’s *The Gentleman and Cabinet-Maker’s
Director* (1754) reflected the growing influence of the French Rococo style, which
found expression in America in overlays of playful, naturalistic carving (2007.302a-c).
Chippendale did not invent the richly carved style that now bears his name; rather, he codified the reigning fashion in England for creative blends of Gothic,
Asian, and French Rococo designs.

Chairs in the Chippendale style became more rectilinear, with square seat frames,
straight stiles, and outward-flaring “ears” at the top corners. Claw-and-ball feet with
sharply articulated talons replaced the smooth contours of pad and slipper feet.
Back splats, formerly solid and unornamented, came to be pierced and intricately
carved with foliage and interlaced patterns (57.158.1).

In case furniture, the Chippendale style was an extension of the Queen Anne: in
Philadelphia, for example, traditional Baroque forms such as the high chest of
drawers were updated with carved Rococo ornament (18.110.6). In New England,
where the influence of immigrant craftsmen was minimal, cabinetmakers relied
primarily on shaped facades rather than on ornamental carving to impart visual
interest (10.125.81a; 2001.644).

Leisure activities became more commonplace in the late colonial period, a result of
greater prosperity and the widespread pursuit of refinement. To satisfy demand,
cabinetmakers produced specialized furniture forms such as tables for playing cards and taking tea. These pieces increasingly took on bold three-dimensional shapes and often rested on leaf-carved cabriole legs ending in claw feet (25.115.31; 67.114.1).

By the 1750s, Philadelphia had surpassed Boston as the largest colonial city. Immigrant artisans trained in the latest European fashions created lavish interiors and furnishings for the Georgian-style homes of Philadelphia's mercantile elite (Powel Room, 18.87.1–4). New York also benefited from a surge in immigration in the years preceding the Revolution. Artisans there catered to the Loyalist sympathies of their patrons by closely following English forms, such as the five-legged card table, and the chest-on-chest (47.35; 64.249.3). By contrast, the most original American furniture was made in Newport, Rhode Island, where native-born cabinetmakers held sway. Led by members of the Townsend and Goddard families, Newport cabinetmakers developed a distinctive local style epitomized by block-and-shell case pieces that have no known parallel in European furniture or contemporary furniture books (15.21.2).

The transition from Queen Anne to Chippendale furniture in the colonies was neither immediate nor universal. Outside the major cities, the change was gradual and, at times, imperceptible. Late Baroque forms remained extremely popular, and gracefully curved pieces with restrained surface ornament continued to be produced well after the Revolution. Nevertheless, by the 1780s, the sweeping curves of the late Baroque and the exuberant ornament of the Rococo were giving way to a renewed interest in classical precedents, which found expression in the delicate, rectilinear forms of the Neoclassical, or Federal, style.

Nicholas C. Vincent
The American Wing, The Metropolitan Museum of Art
December 2009
Early American Furniture Styles Hand-Carved American Furniture That Never Came Close To A Chisel. Early American Furniture Styles
American Furniture, 1620–1730 The Seventeenth-Century And William.