



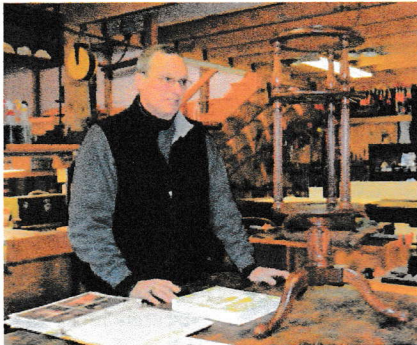
SAPFM Chronicles

AN ORIGINAL, A REPRODUCTION, AND A 3D-PRINTED VERSION

JOHN BORLEY, *Toronto, Ontario, Canada*

You could say Rhodes had been preparing for this commission all his life.

“You can be a great craftsman, but if you don’t have an eye for what it should look like, it doesn’t work,” says Frank Rhodes.



Frank B. Rhodes with his reproduction of the basin stand from the Garbisch Collection.

There are many ways to develop that eye. Being exposed to a great collection of furniture from an early age gave Rhodes a head start, even if he didn’t realize it at the time.

His company, Frank B. Rhodes—Furniture Maker, is located in Chestertown, Maryland. He and two employees work out of a 4000-square-foot shop. Rhodes says sixty percent of their work is repair and restoration. (“It pays the bills.”) He also builds fine furniture of his own design. But his passion is reproducing pieces from the former Garbisch Collection.

Rhodes’ grandparents, Colonel Edgar William and Bernice Chrysler Garbisch, were noted collectors of American antiques and paintings. He estimates they had some 2,600 pieces, mostly “naïve,” or primitive paintings, but some 250 pieces of furniture as well. He would see

the collection when he visited their estate in Cambridge, Maryland.

“The rooms were William and Mary, Federal style, Chippendale, and Queen Anne. I think just being there, being surrounded by beautiful things, is like osmosis. You’re like a sponge. I just soaked it in. I didn’t even know what I was soaking in. Now I have a really good eye for lines. That’s what it takes. This whole business is knowing what it looks like.”

Then in 1979, the Garbisches passed away. Most of the pieces were sold to private collectors or donated to museums.

Fast forward to fall 2013. Rhodes is contacted by *Triple Canopy*, a New York-based art magazine. They’re doing an exhibit for the Whitney Museum of

American Art 2014 Biennial. They want a replica of a basin stand that was in the Garbisch collection. Would he be interested?

Would he? Of course! It would be a chance to reproduce another piece from the collection, see his work in a museum, and work from an original that some sources attribute to John Townsend—though others disagree.

“You can be a great craftsman, but if you don’t have an eye for what it should look like, it doesn’t work”

(See the sidebar article on the next page...Historical Whodunit)

Here’s where it gets funny. Rhodes says, “I knew nothing about the piece.” They said, “Your grandparents once owned it.” That didn’t ring a bell, but Rhodes had taken lots of pictures at his grandparents’ house, and he found one of the stand.

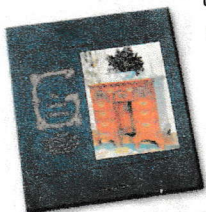
Of course, one picture isn’t much to work from. But the family that bought the piece from the estate later donated it to the **Metropolitan** Museum of Art in New York. So Rhodes arranged to see it.

He spent a whole day there, sketching the piece and “taking tons of pictures.” He said it’s a complicated piece to draw. He would return later to check his turnings. He also visited Winterthur, which has the only other known piece.

The basin stand was basically a place to wash up, in the days before indoor plumbing. There would be a bowl in the top ring, soap dishes in the middle, and a porcelain container for water on the bottom.



STUDIO PHOTOS OF FRANK’S PROJECT COURTESY OF JOHN ANISLEY



Sotheby’s catalog for Garbisch Collection sale, 1980

PHOTO COURTESY OF PATRICIA MEGEE, HECHT COUNTY NEWS, CHESTERTOWN, MARYLAND



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HISTORICAL WHODUNIT

One of the intriguing questions behind this story is whether John Townsend, one of the greatest American craftsmen of the 18th Century, built the two original basin stands.

At first glance, the answer seems to be—maybe. The Sotheby's catalog from the sale of the Garbisch collection in 1980 says "Probably John Townsend." It cites a book by John Downs on furniture from the Winterthur collection. The book says a "virtually identical example" was "probably made by Townsend."

But opinions change over time.

Peter Kenny is the Ruth Bigelow Wriston Curator of American Decorative Arts at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. "What you can say with absolute certainty is that [the Met's piece] came from Newport, Rhode Island," he says. But "It is not attributed to John Townsend. We're not sure who made it."

Brock Jobe, Professor of American Decorative Arts at the Winterthur Museum, says "The information from Downs' book dates back to 1952; there's been so much work done on the Goddards and Townsends since then."

He mentions Goddard because one researcher suggests Winterthur's basin stand might be the work of John Goddard, of the other famous Newport furniture-making family.

But Jobe cites a more recent (1997) book on Winterthur furniture by authors Nancy Evans and Nancy Richards: "Insufficient historical or construction evidence exists to assign the basin stand to either shop with any degree of certainty."

What does attribution mean, anyway? Peter Kenny describes it this way: "If there's a signed or labeled piece, and your piece has a number of features that line up with it, then you can make an attribution with some confidence. However... there are only a couple of these (basin stands) that I know of, and neither of them has any documentation."

So, what to make of all this? One, that research into centuries-old pieces is a tricky business. Twenty or thirty years from now, the conclusions could change again. Two, that maybe it's more important (unless you're a collector) just to appreciate the craftsman, whoever he was, who turned a utilitarian item into a work of art.

Kenny adds "Frank's piece is very beautiful, very close to what it was."

See the other "original" basin at Winterthur here

Rhodes calls the stand a "turning paradise" but also a very complicated project. He did face some challenges and decisions. For example, the top ring was turned out of one piece of wood, and both of the originals were cracked. Rhodes decided to rip his stock in half, rotate one segment about half an inch and then re-glue the pieces. "I think that will help with the strength," he says. The joint is in an area where a bead meets a fillet, so it's not noticeable.

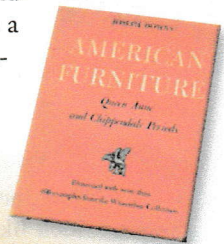
The uprights on the piece meet inside the second level. To join them, he drilled a hole in the end of one and created a round tenon on the other. There's also a threaded segment on the bottom, attached with a lignum vitae nut. The fluting was done with a router jig and chisels. The primary wood is mahogany. The finish is shellac and a wiped-on oil mixture. Rhodes figures he spent about 300 hours on the piece, including the research and drawings.

The piece then went on display at the Whitney Museum, between the original (on loan from the Met) and a 3D-printed plastic polymer version. (*Triple Canopy* says the exhibit asked "how the meaning of artworks shifts as they are commissioned, made, collected, disowned, replicated, photographed, exhibited, and published.")

You could say Rhodes had been preparing for this commission all his life by taking woodworking classes in school and majoring in history in college. While in college he hung out with people who built and restored furniture. And he read old woodworking magazines and books. Eventually, "the suggestion came to me that I should try to build some furniture that my grandparents had. I just started tackling it. I made a lot of mistakes."

Rhodes says he was fortunate to be given access to a couple of "first-class" furniture collections in his area. In one

278 • BASIN STAND
Mahogany
Newport 1760-1775
Probably Made by John Townsend



Basin stands illustrated in Chippendale's *Director* provided a new form for incidental furniture that was eagerly adopted, proof of which fact remains in the plethora of *wig stands* in use today, adapted to other uses.

Their form is stereotyped, but the Newport version here is quite different in the choice of successive fluted pillars and turned balusters and in the five-toed paw feet. Three horn bosses are fixed under the bottle shelf.

The raised panel on the pedestal was likewise used on the kettle stand Figure 288; and double concentric rings outline the soap-cup openings as they outline the slide of the kettle stand.

Height 32"

Diameter 10 3/4"

case, he spent two years copying the entire collection. "I have molds of the feet. I have all kinds of carvings and full-scale drawings. I'm extremely lucky to have all the patterns I have, because that's where it is."



Triple Canopy, Pointing Machines, installation for the 2014 Whitney Biennial, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. Photo by Hannah Whitaker.



SAPFM Chronicles

(continued-3)

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Another secret of his success: his “quick books.” These little black books are filled with highlights of articles from books and magazines, as well as construction notes for projects he’s completed.

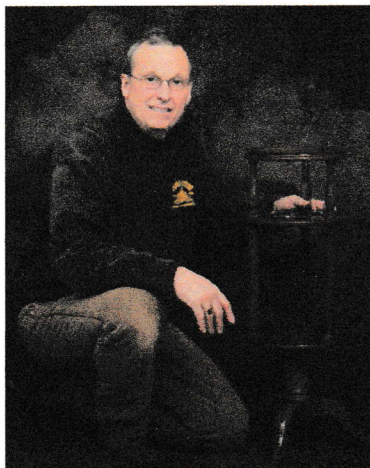
Rhodes also values his membership in SAPFM. “I love reading the articles [in the *Journal*]. And whenever I’ve had any questions, you can reach out to these guys and they’ll talk to you.”

His advice to people just starting to learn period furniture: Start by buying some plans. “You’ve got to have the measurements and the lines in front of you or you’re not going to be able to do it. That’s the key to everything.”

Rhodes recalls a visit he made 25 years ago to a furniture maker who was skilled at construction, but “the lines just weren’t there.” He remembers his disappointment that day.

“The guy was so talented but he just didn’t have the eye.”

See the original basin from the Garbisch collection: visit the [Met Museum here](#).



Frank B Rhodes, Furniture Maker

<http://www.frankbrhodes.com/>

Rhodes calls the stand a “turning paradise,” but also a very complicated project.



Top ring

Comparing the top ring to the original

Parts awaiting assembly

Measurements for the soap dish holder

Using fiddle to hold fluted post for final carving

Dry fitting the parts

Carved five-toe foot with template

Carving the flutes in the base pedestal using a router

FRANK'S "PROCESS" PHOTOS TAKEN BY FRANK RHODES AND DORIS REED