



Fig. 1 High chest, unidentified cabinetmaker, carving attributed to the school of Nicholas Bernard. Mahogany with yellow poplar, white cedar and brass. H. 87½, W. 44, D. 24¼ in. Philadelphia, Penn., 1755–1765. Courtesy of the Philadelphia Museum of Art; gift of Mrs. Henry Breyer, 1974. This was the appearance of the chest before restoration. In addition to inaccurate finials, several tips of the leaves and C-scrolls were also missing from the appliqués on the two shell drawers.

The Craft of Conservation

Recreating a Philadelphia Cartouche

by Christopher Storb

In the spring of 2007, when a bedroom in Mount Pleasant (built 1762–1765), the historic house in Fairmount Park administered by the Philadelphia Museum of Art, was being reinstalled, curators at the museum were given the opportunity to exhibit objects in the house that would otherwise remain in museum storage. One of the objects selected was the high chest in figure 1. This high chest represents an early stage in the development of the form popular in Philadelphia from the 1750s through 1770s. Though it dates to the decade before Mount Pleasant was built, its two shell drawers, carved knees, and carved finials or “flames,” are comparable in style and degree of ornamentation to the architectural interiors of the house. The carving on the high chest is attributed to the school of Nicholas Bernard (w.1753–d.1789).¹ Based on the number of surviving examples, Bernard and the carvers within his sphere of influence produced an enormous body of work from the late 1740s to the early 1760s.

Since the high chest had not been exhibited for a number of years, it was sent to the conservation department for analysis.² Upon examination it became evident that its three turned and carved finials and center plinth cap were of modern manufacture. When the plinth cap was removed, it revealed a tapered dovetail mortise cut

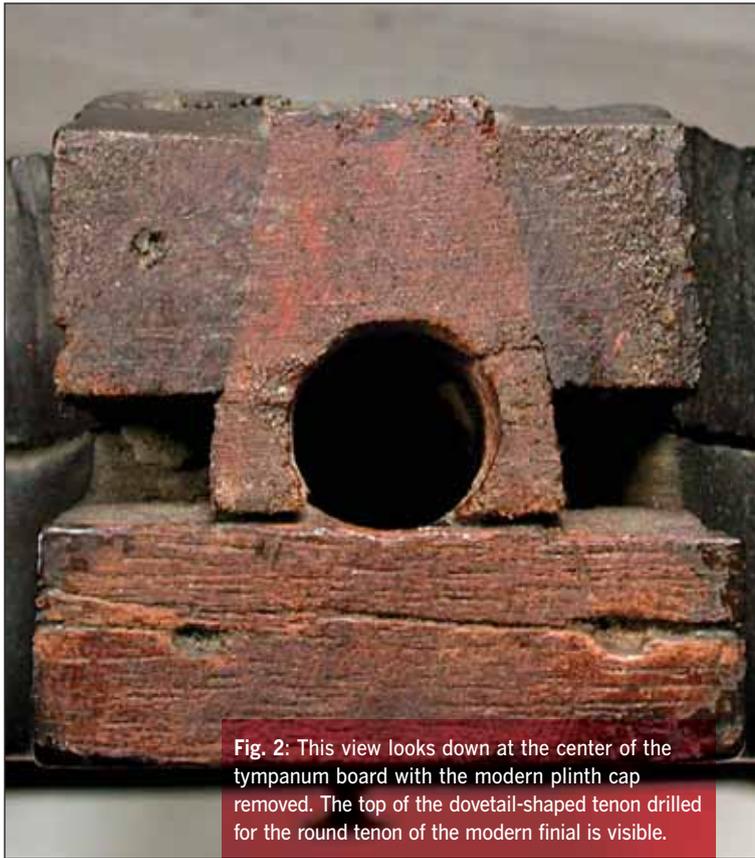


Fig. 2: This view looks down at the center of the tympanum board with the modern plinth cap removed. The top of the dovetail-shaped tenon drilled for the round tenon of the modern finial is visible.

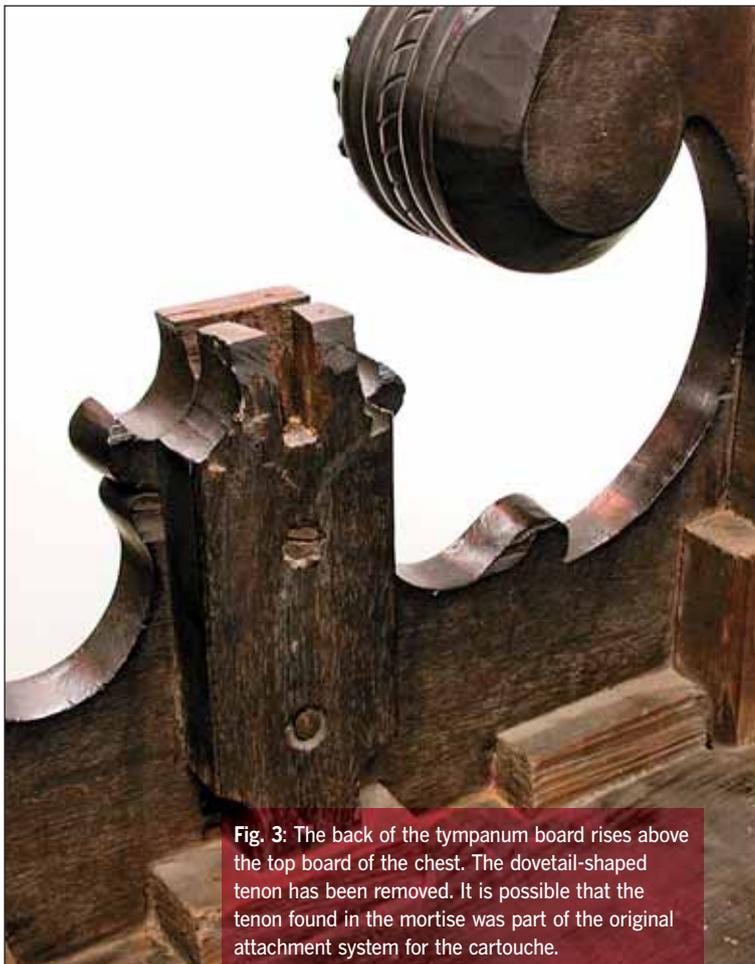


Fig. 3: The back of the tympanum board rises above the top board of the chest. The dovetail-shaped tenon has been removed. It is possible that the tenon found in the mortise was part of the original attachment system for the cartouche.

into the tympanum board and a support block in the middle of the tympanum that together served as the center plinth. The mortise was filled with a corresponding mahogany tenon, with a round hole drilled through it to accommodate one of the modern finials. With the knowledge that a sliding dovetail was a common period means to attach cartouches to chests—and that all of the nearly twenty surviving cartouches found on chest-on-chests and high chests with carving attributed to the Bernard School have this form of attachment—it was clear that instead of there originally being three finials, the cornice ornamentation had instead consisted of two finials and a central cartouche.

A survey of the surviving cartouches from high chests associated with the Bernard School shows a consistency of design and dimensions, demonstrating the repeated use of a single pattern. This may have been a means of handling a large demand for carvers' work, a disinterest in creating a new design with every commission, or a combination of the two joined with a clientele that accepted this practice. While similar in overall form, the details among the cartouches vary, and since the design is asymmetrical, the pattern was often flipped to produce a mirror image.³

The museum's curatorial and conservation staff were in agreement that the loss of the original cartouche (as well as the two flanking urn-and-flame finials and the tips of the drawer appliqué) fundamentally changed the intent of the maker and were detrimental to a viewer's appreciation of the aesthetics and symbolic content of the high chest. The missing elements also placed the chest out of context in relation to related objects from the Bernard School. Understanding that the Bernard School maintained a standardized approach to cartouche and finial design—and that the center ornament played a crucial part in the resolution of the chest's decoration, starting at the knees and proceeding through the two shell drawers to the scroll mouldings with their carved floral rosettes framing the cartouche—the museum resolved to restore the missing carved elements. With a large photographic record of related examples and the loan of an original Bernard School cartouche, the carving commenced.

Conservators strive to make their work reversible, to respect the integrity of the object, minimize any harm that might be caused by the introduction of incompatible materials, and to leave options open to changing ideas about the technical and aesthetic decisions made during a treatment. There is often some degree of compromise with regard to complete or easy reversibility when dealing with lost, damaged, or disintegrating materials. The restored ornaments on the high chest meet the full definition of reversibility by their easy method of attachment: the finials and cartouche with round and dovetail-shaped tenons that fit snugly into similarly shaped mortises, and drawer elements applied with organic glue. The museum is confident that the restoration presents viewers with an accurate representation of the original appearance of the high chest but that options for different interpretations or forms of display in the future can be easily addressed. The remainder of this article discusses the carving of the new cartouche.

carving the cartouche



Fig. 4: An original cartouche attributed to the school of Nicholas Bernard was loaned from a private Philadelphia collection. A pattern made from the cartouche was transferred to a mahogany block two inches thick; the blank was sawn to conform to the outline of the original. Carvers continually draw reference points and mark high spots to be left un-carved as work proceeds; any detailed rendering on the blank would be useless as it would be cut away as soon as carving began.



Fig. 5: Not until the major forms of the cartouche are established and the three-dimensional modeling is well along are the piercings drilled and their final shapes cut.

While photographs are often the only guide available for this type of restoration, they cannot match a three-dimensional object as a guide; use of an original borrowed cartouche (left) facilitated the quick and efficient blocking of the main masses. There was no attempt to exactly copy the loaned cartouche. Instead, the design was based on a combination of features borrowed from several original examples.



Fig. 9: The completed high chest. The cartouche, new urn-and-flame finials, and the restored tips of the appliques on the drawers were colored and finished to match the complex multilayered surface on the chest. Photography by Graydon Wood.

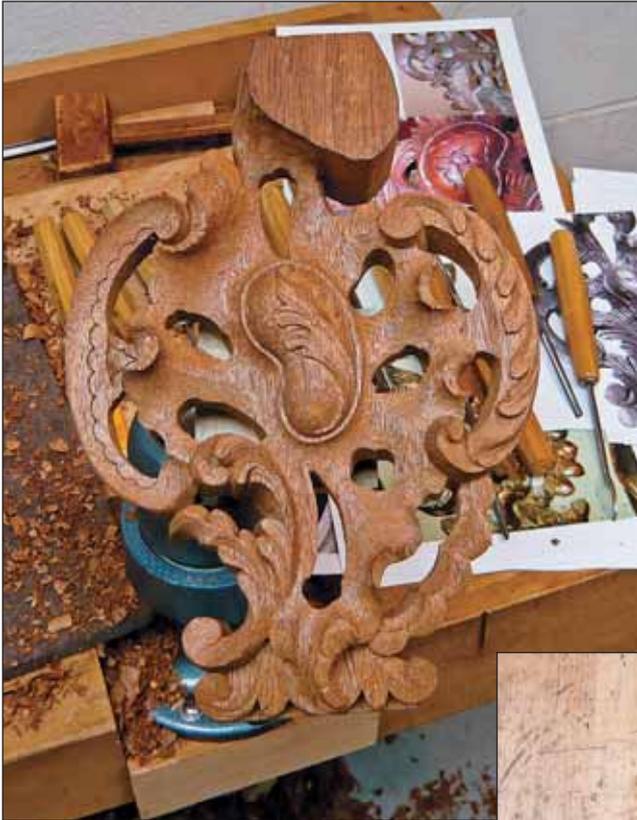


Fig.6: The new cartouche is now completely laid out and most of the surface has been modeled. Leaves on the right C-scroll and center cabochon have been finished with fine veining lines following the flow of the leaves. An un-carved platform has been left at the top of the tympanum where a two-inch-deep lamination will be attached from which the forward projecting frond will be carved. The blank for the frond will be partially carved, glued in place, and then the carving will be completed. If applied earlier in the process, the block would restrict tool movement when carving the body of the cartouche.

BELOW, LEFT:

Fig. 7: Carvers working in eighteenth-century Philadelphia relied on their gouges and chisels to produce the final surfaces of cartouches, finials, drawer and tympanum appliques, and relief carved shells, volutes, leaves, and ruffles. Controlled cuts were made with sharp carving tools to produce lustrous, burnished surfaces, whose subtle facets reflect light in a way that enhances a naturalistic effect. This method of working does not rely on files, rasps, or abrasives, which produce a completely undesired, smooth appearance.



FAR RIGHT:

Fig. 8: The final stage in carving the cartouche is back-cutting. Once the front carving is complete, the cartouche is turned over and a gouge is used to make fast, sure cuts to remove material and lighten the appearance of the various elements when viewed from the front. Cartouches on eighteenth-century Philadelphia chests and clock cases are not fully "in the round" sculptures. Though this cartouche is nearly four inches deep and is pierced through, it is actually a deep relief carving with the back not intended to be viewed. The block with tapered dovetail tenon, which will fit into the mortise in the tympanum and secure the cartouche in place, is screwed into the lower back of the cartouche.

Unless otherwise noted, all photography by the author.

Christopher Storb is conservator for furniture and woodwork at the Philadelphia Museum of Art. He performed the treatment on the high chest, including carving the restored cartouche and finials. The conservation, curatorial, and education departments of the Philadelphia Museum of Art collaborated on the installation of the drawing room and a bedroom at Mount Pleasant, Fairmount Park, Philadelphia.

1. Luke Beckerdite and Alan Miller, "A Table's Tale: Craft, Art, and Opportunity in Eighteenth Century Philadelphia" in *American Furniture*, ed. Luke Beckerdite (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England for the Chipstone Foundation, 2004).
2. The high chest was advertised for sale in *The Magazine Antiques* (July 1945) by C. W. Lyon, Inc. It had been on loan to the Philadelphia Museum of Art for thirteen years prior to that. The high chest was purchased from Lyon in 1945 and bequeathed to the museum in 1974.
3. The most recently discovered high chest with carving attributed to Nicholas Bernard, including its original cartouche, was sold at Christie's, New York, lot 31, September 25, 2008. The author has examined and measured over a dozen of the surviving cartouches.