

W. Gay Reading

# From Lowboys to Tallboys: The English Chest of Drawers



*Fine walnut English chest-on-stand. Circa 1700.*

Since the Middle Ages, the chest of drawers has served as one of the most useful articles of furniture in the Western world. It evolved from the medieval coffer and armoire that were the principal articles of home furnishing in that era. With the addition of drawers, this example of case construction demonstrates how refinement in lifestyle leads to the development of new forms of furniture.

Most styles of English chests-of-drawers—all of which vary in scale—have remained in production from the time they were first introduced. The early 18th- through early 19th-century pieces illustrated, all of which are available at the long-established, museum-like Wakefield-Scarce Galleries in Shelbyville, range in size from the tall chest-

on-chest and chest-on-stand models to the small dressing chest style so at home today by beds and behind couches. There are "tallboys" and "lowboys" in the furniture world as well as on the basketball court. The chest-on-chest, popularly called a "tallboy," is the most recent chest of drawer style to be devised; the chest-on-stand is the earliest. A commode in this context is a chest of drawers in the French fashion, which became popular in affluent English circles in the 18th century. The serpentine-fronted case is a simpler, more English-style form of commode.

With its numerous component parts, the chest of drawers lends itself to accommodating more than one function. Slides that can be pulled out of the case complement the drawers by providing ample surface space on which to write or brush clothes. Whole desk components sometimes extend from behind a drop-down sham drawer front; the so-called "butler's desk," which could more properly be called a "stand-up" desk, serves as a common example. Toward the middle of the 18th century, the insertion of a fitted secretaire drawer in the case was designed to provide an alternative to the existing slant-front desk with drawers. Some such drawers reveal a simple, moveable writing surface when they are opened, and the depth and configuration of drawers aren't always as they appear. The top surface of "dressing chests," for example, lift to reveal a fitted dressing table; the tops of other dressers lift to expose a washbasin.

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Such pieces can be adapted for more modern functions, such as to serve as bars or as spaces in which to house a computer. Antique campaign chests or portable military chests of drawers were originally designed to furnish the quarters of gentlemen of style and to serve as functional furniture that could be used near battlefields.

Unexpected or unpleasing proportions may indicate that a single chest was at one time part of a larger piece. Prospective purchasers of chests of drawers should look especially closely at a chest's proportions and at the placement of its moldings. The presence of three small drawers in the top of a single chest indicates that the chest is actually the top section of a chest-on-chest or chest-on-stand to which a new base has been added. Lower sections might have undergone a similar transformation. Chests with their original feet, brackets, or bases intact command premium prices. However, some repair has been made to the bottom of most pieces, and pieces to which expected repairs have been made often remain highly desirable. Seventeenth- and early 18th-century chests usually originally had bun feet, the evidence of which may be found beneath a chest's bottom drawer in the event that the original feet have been replaced. Drawers are often lined with paper that can conceal alterations, particularly in the hardware, but it is important to remember that sensitively replaced hardware does not necessarily lessen a chest of drawers

value. A buyer must always hope that the seller of an antique will be forthright and fair in correlating a chest's

cost with its condition.

Empty English chests frequently contain intriguing information. The secondary or hidden wood used in forming the case of a piece is generally oak if the chest is "high-style" and pine if the chest is its country cousin. When considering a chest's drawers, a buyer should look for the characteristically small English dovetails. Veneer applied over solid oak drawer fronts probably indicates that veneer was applied to the original oak at a later date. Until the last quarter of the 18th century, the grain of drawer bottoms generally ran parallel with the drawers' sides. Single-board drawer bottoms are most common in Victorian pieces. Due to the expected shrinkage of separate, thin boards, tape has often been glued over separations in drawer bottoms.

A particular note concerning the care of chests is to refrain from moving them by picking them up by the projecting edges of the top. It is better to partially open a drawer and raise the case by making direct contact with the carcass. It's also important to beware of sliding a chest of drawers that may have fragile feet due to wear and contact with often-damp floors. Chest of drawer owners also should avoid over-loading drawers and should make every effort to keep drawer slides in good shape. Chests are usually made for hard use, and proper care will be rewarded with continued years of beauty and use that can be derived from such an antique. **K**



*Top: Late George III mahogany chest-on-chest. Circa 1790. Above: Serpentine Georgian chest in mahogany with graduated drawers and writing slide beneath top. Circa 1760.*