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Antiques

Wendy Moonan

Little-Known Arbiter Of Regency Taste Was a Man of the World

The name Thomas Hope may not be familiar, but his furniture designs are: American craftsmen have been reinterpreting Hope prototypes — in the neoclassical style known as English Regency — for 200 years. His life and work are examined in an exhibition that opened this week at the Bard Graduate Center in Manhattan.

Thomas Hope (1769-1831), a wealthy Dutchman of Scottish descent, grew up in Amsterdam. During the French Revolution his family, which owned a bank, moved to London to avoid the French occupation of the Netherlands. In 1787 Hope, not yet 20, set off on a 10-year grand tour that encompassed most of Europe and the Near East, including Greece, Turkey, Syria and Egypt.

He toured public and private museums and inspected archaeological sites, made watercolors and detailed drawings of architecture, interiors, furniture and costumes and voraciously collected art and antiquities (including a mummy and an ancient Roman cinerarium).

When he rejoined the family in London, he bought and decorated a large town house in his singular, theatrical, neoclassical style. He commissioned furniture decorated with carved swans, griffins, sphinxes and foliate motifs inspired by ancient Greek, Roman and Egyptian examples. Each room was in a different style (Egyptian, Moorish, Greek) to show off his art collections.

"He was a patron, a collector and a designer," said David Watkin, a professor of architecture history at the University of Cambridge in England, who spent six years organizing the Bard exhibition and its 525-page catalog with Philip Hewat-Jaboor, a London art consultant. (Daniella Ben-Arie, an independent scholar, was an additional curator.)

"Hope was a man of huge wealth who nonetheless designed door-knobs," Professor Watkin added. "He commissioned sculptures by



A portrait of Thomas Hope (1798) by William Beechey.

John Flaxman, Bertel Thorvaldsen and other modern artists. He had a total vision."

In 1807 Hope published "Household Furniture and Interior Decoration," a book of his own designs with outline drawings and exact measurements. It is said that he introduced the phrase "interior decoration" to the English language.

"The book tells you how to do it," Mr. Watkin said. "Hope is a bit like Palladio in the way he intended his book to be a handbook, to instruct and be imitated." The book was so popular it was soon plagiarized, though Hope was self-deprecating about his success.

Frances Collard of the Victoria and Albert Museum in London quotes Hope in the catalog: "If the forms of my furniture were

more agreeable than the generality of those one meets with, it was only owing to my having not servilely imitated but endeavored to make myself master of *The Spirit of the Antique*." Trying to improve the status of design in Britain, Hope used British materials like Coade stone for furniture and local marble for fireplaces. Like his contemporary, the architect John Soane, Hope was one of the first Londoners to open his private house to the public.

"Aware that the ancient Greeks intended art not for private but for public and religious display, Hope created a version of the Greek mouseion, a cult center built for the cultivation and worship of the Muses of the arts and sciences," Mr. Watkin writes in the catalog. It had "the appearance of a sanctuary," he contin-

ues, pointing out the extent to which art took the place of religion during the Enlightenment.

The Bard exhibition, previously shown at the Victoria and Albert Museum, includes portraits of Thomas Hope's family, Hope's architectural watercolors from the grand tour, his drawings, some of his antiquities, contemporary paintings and sculptures as well as examples of his own designs for furniture, vases, light fixtures and tea services.

"People don't know Hope's name, but they are aware of the inspiration," said Robert Israel, a dealer who specializes in English antiques and vintage jewelry. His clients, he said, "appreciate neoclassical Greek style and find it very smart. It's elegant but in tune with a less formal lifestyle."

Melinda Papp, a director of Florian Papp Antiques in New York, which carries Regency antiques, said that Hope's work is slightly bolder than that of other Regency designers. "Hope is seen as less fussy. He used a vocabulary of ancient motifs in a clean, modern way," she said.

Hope was not the first important designer of the British Regency. (Henry Holland, who worked with the prince regent, was.) But Hope has a more devoted following than his peers. Carlton Hobbs, an antiques dealer in Manhattan, said Regency furniture continues to be of great interest to connoisseurs. It's also appealing because it "can lend itself equally well to a loft or a period scheme."

He has a few examples, including a pair of ebonized armchairs and an ebonized table with gilded mounts and a micromosaic top from Italy that once stood in Hope's picture gallery in London. Its end supports are similar to the legs on Roman and Etruscan marble thrones. Gilded classical masks, one male, one female, are attached to the supports.

"We have only ever had two pieces from Thomas Hope's own collection," Mr. Hobbs said. One of them is the ebonized Hope table with the masks, and it is on view at the Bard show until Nov. 16.