

Hepplewhite Style

Hepplewhite is a neoclassic style characterized by a delicate appearance, tapered legs, and the use of contrasting veneers and inlay. It is named after British designer and cabinetmaker George Hepplewhite whose designs in *The CabinetMaker and Upholsterers Guide* were published posthumously in 1788.

George Hepplewhite – born 1727 (?), died 21 June, 1786) – was a cabinet and chair maker. He was one of the “big three” English furniture makers of the Eighteenth century, along with Thomas Sheraton and Thomas Chippendale. Practically no biographical material exists in relation to Hepplewhite. Some established sources list no birth information; however a “George Hepplewhite” (who may or may not be the same person) was born in 1727 in Ryton Parish, County Durham, England.



The only facts that are known with certainty are that he was apprenticed to Gillow at Lancaster, that he carried on business in the parish of Saint Giles, Cripplegate, and that administration of his estate was granted to his widow Alice on 27 June, 1786.

After his death the business was continued by his widow under the style of A. Hepplewhite & Co. Our only approximate means of identifying his work are *The CabinetMaker and Upholsterer's Guide*, which was first published in 1788, two years after his death, and ten designs in *The Cabinetmaker's London Book of Prices* (1788), issued by the London Society of Cabinet-Makers. No pieces of furniture made by Hepplewhite or his firm are definitely known to exist; but it is exceedingly difficult to earmark any given piece of furniture as being the actual work or design of Hepplewhite, since it is generally recognized that to a very large extent the name represents rather a fashion than a man.



Lightness, delicacy and grace are the distinguishing characteristics of Hepplewhite work. The massiveness of Chippendale had given place to conceptions that, especially in regard to chairs, depended for their effect more upon inlay than upon carving. The utmost ingenuity was lavished upon the chair, and if Hepplewhite was not the originator he appears to have been the most constant and successful user of the shield back. This elegant form was employed by the school in a great variety of designs, and nearly always in a way artistically satisfying.

Where Chippendale, his contemporaries and his immediate successors had used the cabriole and the square leg with a good deal of carving, the Hepplewhite manner preferred a slighter leg, plain, fluted or reeded, tapering to a spade foot. The backs of Hepplewhite chairs were often adorned with galleries and festoons of wheat-ears or pointed fern leaves, and not infrequently with the Prince of Wales's feathers in some more or less decorative form. A large proportion of Hepplewhite furniture is inlaid with the exotic woods which had come into high favour by the third quarter of the Eighteenth century.

Smaller Hepplewhite pieces are much prized by collectors. Among these may be included urn-shaped knifeboxes in mahogany and satinwood, charming in form and decorative in the extreme; inlaid tea-caddies, varying greatly in shape and material, but always appropriate and coquet; delicate little fire-screens with shaped poles; painted worktables, and inlaid stands.

If we were dealing with a less elusive personality it would be just to say that Hepplewhite's work varies from the extreme of elegance and the most delicious simplicity to an unimaginative commonplace, and sometimes to actual ugliness. As it is, this summary may well be applied to the style as a whole: a style which was assuredly not the creation of any one man, but owed much alike of excellence and of defect to a school of cabinet-makers who were under the influence of conflicting tastes and changing ideals. At its best the taste was so fine and so full of distinction, so simple, modest and sufficient, that it amounted to genius. On its lower planes it was clearly influenced by commercialism and the desire to make what tasteless people preferred. Yet this is no more than to say that the Hepplewhite style succumbed sometimes, perhaps very often, to the eternal enemy of all art: the uninspired banality of the average man.

After Hepplewhite's death, his widow, Alice, published a book with about 300 of his designs, *The Cabinet Maker and Upholsterers Guide* in 1789. Two further editions were published in 1789 and 1790. This book influenced cabinet-makers and furniture companies for several generations. The work of these generations, in turn, influenced copies and variations of the original designs through the Nineteenth and Twentieth centuries.

