

The Fabrics of Colonial Life

American Art
1700-1800

Textiles from home and abroad

The earliest American textiles were called *homespun* because they were produced in colonial houses. Patriotism sometimes dictated a preference for homespun fabric over imported fabric. George Washington was a distinguished advocate of homespun industry; in fact, he proudly wore a homespun suit to his first presidential inauguration. His residence at Mount Vernon had its own weaving house, where hired and enslaved artisans supplied the household and many neighboring families with fabric.

Cotton, linen, and wool were the most important clothing materials used in the colonies. Although many colonists produced textiles, it was very costly and often not economically advantageous to do so. Ultimately thousands—sometimes millions—of yards of fabric were imported to the colonies each year, except for the period around the Revolutionary War. When the war was underway, the American colonists became almost entirely dependent on their own resources due to blocked overseas trade. During this time, appeals were made throughout the land for fabric to make uniforms for soldiers, who suffered most from a shortage of good quality clothes.

Charles Willson Peale's portrait of George Washington shows the general in a uniform that mimics a then-fashionable suit comprised of a long coat, waistcoat (a type of vest), and pants. Washington's rank as commander-in-chief of the Continental army is indicated by the blue silk sash he wears. Because silk making was only at an experimental stage in the colonies at this time, the sash undoubtedly was imported.



Charles Willson Peale (American, 1741–1827). *George Washington at the Battle of Princeton*, about 1779. Oil on canvas; 51 9/16 x 47 7/8 in. Membership Income Fund 1917.946

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Fashions for all ages

During the colonial era, very young boys and girls both wore linen dresses with full-length skirts. However, when a boy was between 4 and 8 years old, he was “breeched,” which meant he began wearing knee-length breeches (a type of pants). This was an important event in his life, and it symbolized growing up. Because children of this age were regarded to be developmentally similar to adults, they were dressed in smaller replicas of their parents’ clothing. In Joseph Badger’s portrait of the young Jeremiah Belknap, the boy seems to possess maturity beyond his years due to his clothing and bearing.

Perhaps one of the most striking aspects of Anna Dummer Powell’s portrait by John Singleton Copley is the sitter’s somber and modest attire. She is dressed in an unadorned black gown accented with a white cap and a kerchief discreetly covering her shoulders and bust. Powell had been a widow for more than eight years at the time of her portrait, and her dark and simple clothing was considered suitable for a woman in mourning.



Joseph Badger (American, 1708–1765).
Portrait of Jeremiah Belknap, about 1758.
Oil on canvas; 42 1/8 x 33 1/16 in. Gift of
the John Huntington Art and Polytechnic
Trust 1919.1016



John Singleton Copley (American, 1738–1815).
Portrait of Anna Dummer Powell, 1764. Oil
on canvas; 49 7/8 x 39 5/8 in. Gift of Ellery
Sedgwick Jr. in memory of Mabel Cabot
Sedgwick 1980.202

Colonial Furniture and Fabrics

American Art
1700–1800

Textiles imported from England were among the most expensive things in colonial homes, but when made into luxuries like bed curtains, they were invaluable for keeping drafts at bay. The earliest colonial houses consisted of a few small rooms, in part because it made them easier to heat. There were rarely any closets to store clothing, blankets, and linen before the 1800s. Storage chests with locks were therefore very important pieces of furniture. Traditionally accessible through lift tops, chests eventually had drawers added for extra storage space below.

Often made as personalized keepsakes, quilts and homemade textiles were kept safe in locked cabinets made at the time of a wedding. These dowry chests represented the material goods that a bride brought to a marriage, reminding a couple of home and family. The initials *AA* on the chest (at the upper right) probably refer to the name of the young woman for whom it was commissioned.

Colonial craftsmen kept aware of changing fashions in European furnishing and interior design through prints and books, particularly *The Gentleman and Cabinet Maker's Director* (1754) by English cabinetmaker and designer Thomas Chippendale. This side chair (on the back) is an American-made piece based on Chippendale's designs. **(CONTINUED ON BACK)**



top: *Chest*, 1700s. American, Massachusetts, perhaps Salem. Oak and pine; 30 1/2 x 45 3/8 x 21 1/8 in. Purchase from the J. H. Wade Fund 1984.161



bottom: *Chest*, about 1690–1720. American, Massachusetts, Connecticut River Valley. Oak; 38 1/8 x 48 3/8 x 18 5/8 in. Gift of the John Huntington Art and Polytechnic Trust 1915.569

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(CONTINUED FROM FRONT) Rich, red damask fabrics, like the one reproduced on this chair to the right, are based on textiles from China and India. The play of shiny and dull surface weave, as well as the curving floral pattern, continue the chair's decorative themes of opposing curves and scrolls—a common motif of mid-1700s Rococo design.

In the decades following the Revolutionary War, many Americans experienced more prosperous times. Tall sets of drawers were more popular than open-lid chests, which had doubled as seating in earlier times. Chest-on-chests stored an abundance of household linens and clothing. Early Americans may have displayed these proudly in their best bedroom, where most of their best textiles would also be used, and where colonial homeowners often formally entertained guests.



Side Chair, about 1770. American, Philadelphia. Mahogany; 38 3/16 x 23 5/8 x 22 3/8 in. Leonard C. Hanna Jr. Fund 1985.58



Chest-on-chest, about 1800. American, Rhode Island, Providence. Mahogany; 92 9/16 x 42 3/4 x 24 1/2 in. Gift of Moselle Taylor Meals 1976.170