

# Gifts of Marquetry

## From The Hirschhorn Foundation



**T**he Hirschhorn Foundation has given the Museum of American Folk Art five outstanding examples of American folk marquetry, the first to enter the Museum's permanent collection. Marquetry is an ancient technique of ornamenting furniture or other wood surfaces with an overlay of wood veneers arranged in patterns. Color is achieved by using a variety of woods or by staining. Marquetry reached a high point in Italy in the fifteenth century when it was described as "painting in wood." During the eighteenth century, at Versailles and other royal centers, marquetry furniture was

preferred above all other kinds, and German craftsmen led the field. Their descendants brought the technique to the United States, where it became popular after the start of the Industrial Revolution. The Hirschhorn gifts date from the last two decades of the nineteenth century and the first two of the twentieth, a period that has been dubbed "The Golden Age of American Carpentry."

Marquetry stood in opposition to the new industrial processes of the nineteenth century. Machines did not aid the labor-intensive process; the marqueteer used only a saw and glue to achieve his stunning results. Patience was another necessary ingredient. This craft represented a cot-



Photography by David Stansbury

# to the Museum of American Folk Art

By Richard Mühlberger

tage industry of the past. Because marquetry making required great expanses of free time in which to fit the many hours of labor needed to finish a piece, the cost exceeded what anyone could pay for it. As a result, when the art was young in Europe, only monks could afford to practice it, and so marquetry became the property of the Church. Later, and for similar economic reasons, it fell under the luxurious auspices of the royals who could afford to commission artisans. In America, marquetry was rare even in cosmopolitan centers where there was great wealth, and so those who made it always had to have means of support other than the selling of their fancy woodwork; they

lived off the land or the sea, worked as cabinetmakers, or had other ordinary jobs. Marquetry appealed to them in part because it was not cost-effective. What better gift for someone special than something that could never be afforded? Indeed, it was a gift that exceeded the modest financial means of the giver himself. He could afford to make the gift, but not to purchase it from another craftsman.

Recently, five gifts have come to the Museum of American Folk Art through the generosity of The Hirschhorn Foundation. They are an elegant sideboard, two symbolic plaques, a unique tall clock, and an exceptionally exuberant cabinet.



**SIDEBOARD WITH THREE  
DRAWERS OVER TWO  
CABINETS**  
Maker unidentified  
Northwestern Vermont  
1900–1915  
Parquetry  
55¼ × 50¾ × 22¼"

#### **Sideboard with Three Drawers over Two Cabinets**

This sideboard comes from northern Vermont, from a camp called Isle La Motte, after the largest island in Lake Champlain. Since 1882, the island had been linked to the nearby city of Burlington by a bridge and causeways, making it easily accessible. There were hunting, fishing, and recreational camps on the island and all along the shores of Lake Champlain, many of them catering to a substantial middle-class clientele. To assure an authentic atmosphere, it was a usual practice for camps to commission local craftsmen to fabricate furniture for their lodges and guest rooms.

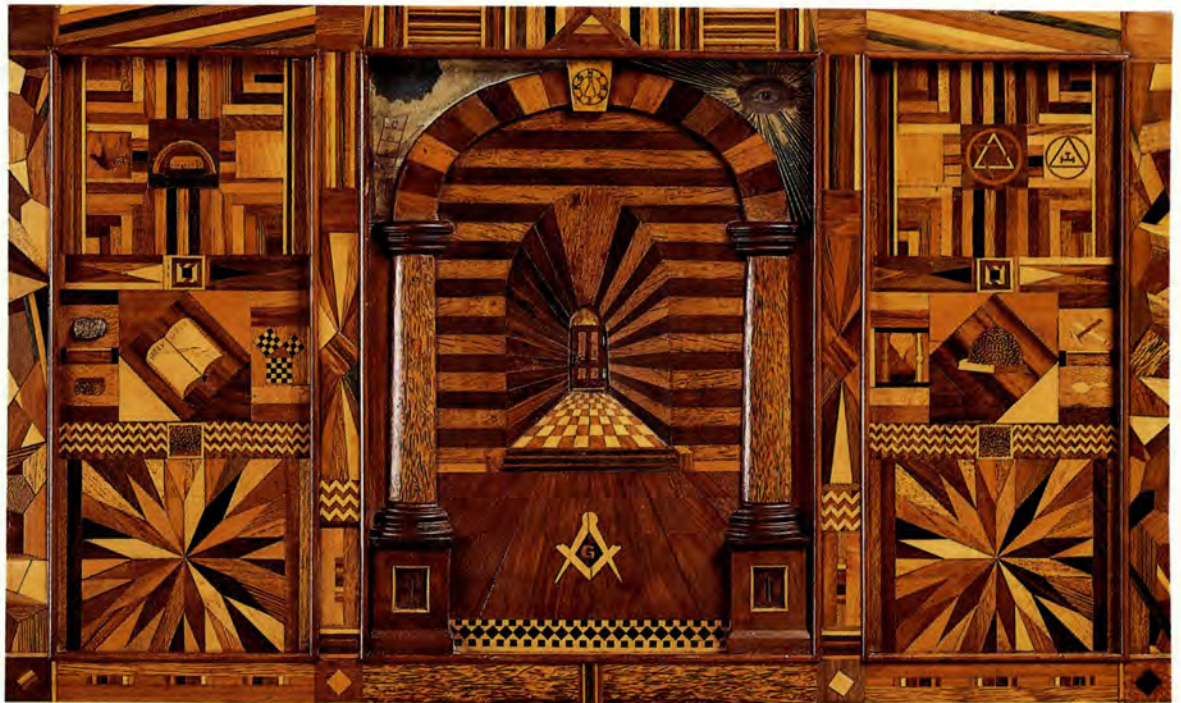
The Isle La Motte sideboard is distinguished by its rounded and peaked backboard, radiating rhomboids on drawers and cabinet doors, the overall openness of its ornamental design, and the blond pigmentation of its woods. The maker's name has not yet been uncovered, but the piece is similar to Canadian parquetry (a form of marquetry using only straight lines) of the same period, which is around 1915.

#### **Masonic Plaque in the Form of a Master's Chart**

The year 1899 is written on the back of this expertly crafted marquetry piece; a calendar is also glued there. Printed on the calendar is "J.M. Forbush & Co.," the name of an insurance agency that was in business in Natick, Massachusetts, near Boston, from about 1882 to some time after 1905. James M. Forbush, who worked for the Internal Revenue Service before he became an insurance agent, was listed in the 1890 Natick directory as vice president of the Natick Five Cents Savings Bank. A mason, he entered Natick's Meridian Lodge in 1871, but withdrew in 1894. It is not definitely known that he was the maker of the plaque, but his is the only name associated with it.

Freemasonry began in the Middle Ages when the builders of cathedrals formed secret societies. By the early seventeenth century, they were opened to men not in the building trades who were taught the secret signs and legends of masonry, and took part in initiations and other gatherings. To this day, Masonry emphasizes the education of

**MASONIC PLAQUE IN THE  
FORM OF A MASTER'S CHART**  
 Maker unidentified  
 Probably Natick,  
 Massachusetts  
 1899  
 Marquetry, parquetry, printed  
 and painted paper  
 18¾ × 31⅝ × 19/16"



its members and uses symbols and rituals to impart the humanistic ideals of the fraternal order. Large paintings called Master's charts illustrated the esoteric symbolism of the organization to neophytes. By the end of the nineteenth century, lithography made it possible to produce and distribute these charts to lodges across the country. The Natick marquetry plaque was inspired by a Master's chart, but it is not of the type that would be used in a lodge. Instead, it probably was hung in a place of honor in the home of a Freemason as a sign of prestige and pride.

The elaborate rites and ceremonies of Freemasonry utilize the tools of the stonemason—the plumb, level, square, compass, chisel, and mallet, in particular—within a symbolic setting that reenacts the building of King Solomon's Temple and the death and resurrection of its master builder, Hiram. Tools are pictured in the right panel of the plaque along with a beehive, a symbol of industry and regeneration, and an hourglass. The plaque's central tableau represents Solomon's Temple by the arch and two

columns. Rituals were enacted on a checkered carpet, seen receding to a door that opens and closes on a small drawing of two men. Gazing down on this is the "All-seeing Eye," an emblem of the Master Mason.

A piece of stone was introduced to the left middle panel, a reference to "rough ashlar." Directly below it is its corresponding "perfect ashlar." The symbol on the other side of the open Bible demonstrates the 47th problem of Euclid, that the square of the hypotenuse of a right triangle equals the sum of the squares of the other two sides. The numbers of checks across each square demonstrate this lesson in geometry and are a reminder that the Grand Architect of the Universe made the world according to plans. The letter *G*, with the familiar Masonic symbol of the compass and square, is another reference to geometry. These, and the other symbols shown in the plaque, have various levels of meaning, for Masonic culture embraced not only everyday men but also those drawn from mystical circles.



**CENOTAPH TO  
THREE MARTYRED  
PRESIDENTS**  
Maker unidentified  
United States  
After 1901  
Parquetry, inlay, and  
photographic images  
printed on paper  
38 × 31¼ × 1¾"

The outer frame of the plaque is a demonstration of the marquetry maker's independent vision. None of the motifs are derived from either traditional or contemporaneous frames, nor do they relate to Masonic symbolism. The side uprights resemble Crazy Quilt patterns, but the primary design source seems to be the maker's stock of handsome woods and his creative workmanship.

**Cenotaph to Three Martyred Presidents**

This plaque commemorates the deaths of Abraham Lincoln, James A. Garfield, and William McKinley. A unique, jagged outer frame resembles aureoles that surround the bodies of saints in religious art. Considerably more down-to-earth are the American flags at the peak of the frame and the many inlaid block letters that accompany the printed images of these three American presidents. Above them is written, "OUR THREE MARTYRED PRESIDENTS," and below each picture, in crowded columns, are the presidents' names (Garfield spelled without an *e*), dates of their births, dates when they were shot, and the dates of their deaths. The plaque uses only three kinds of wood, consistent with its simplicity and straightforwardness.

McKinley was a popular president, and his death in 1901 brought about an unusually great outpouring of grief. Since Lincoln, presidents were being slain at the rate of about one every twenty years. Monuments across the land to McKinley's memory were more elaborate than those commemorating former national figures. Their erection seems to have been motivated as much by a desire to end the assassinations as to express sorrow at a president's passing. Although this cenotaph is not dated, it appears to be a rural expression of anguish from the period soon after McKinley's death. Needlework memorials of deaths form a strong tradition in American folk art. This is the only known memorial by a marquetry maker.

**Tiered Tall Clock**

This imitation brick tall clock makes another kind of comment on mortality. It refers to earlier designs of grandfather clocks in the scrollwork of its bonnet, but otherwise is entirely unconventional. American tall case clocks, known as grandfather clocks, were first made in Pennsylvania and Massachusetts around 1695, following the familiar form of English models of 1658 and later. They were produced in

**TIERED TALL CLOCK**  
Maker unidentified  
United States  
c. 1880  
Parquetry, marquetry,  
and jigsaw-cut openwork  
91 × 25¾ × 14¾"  
(including pinnacles)



quantity during the eighteenth century and ceased to be made by about 1840. The form was revised around the time of the Centennial.

This “brick” clock dates from around 1890. The entire case is covered in wood parquetry that imitates bricks and the cement joints between them. This fabrication may have been an act of eccentricity on the part of the woodworker, but it may also have been intended to enhance the symbolism—he might have wished to link bricks with the notion of time and its passing, illustrated in figures on the front and sides of the stacked case.

Brick is a very durable building material, as children and adults alike are reminded in the story “The Three Little Pigs,” a tale that was current in the nineteenth century. In this story, only the brick house withstood the Big Bad Wolf’s huffing and puffing. The parquetry bricks are combined with large inlaid cutouts of Father Time, a warrior goddess with an hourglass on her shield, a dancing figure, and a running child who is probably Father Time’s helper. The combination contrasts fleeting time with permanence.

The clock was built in five sections: a base, three cabinets, and a clock crowned by scrollwork inlaid into a dark background so that it appears to be openwork. The clock is “crowned” with four turned-wood pinnacles at the very top.

### **Statue of Liberty Cabinet**

This elaborate cabinet with mirror combines marquetry, carved and painted wood, and applied jigsaw cutouts so intricate that they might be called wood filigree. Tidus Albrech is the maker’s name as it appears on an old hand-lettered label with a photograph of the cabinet. Because the printing on the label is not related to German script, we might surmise that it was written by someone other than Albrech. This could explain what is likely an aberrant spelling, based on phonetics, of the name Titus with a *d* used in place of a *t* (there is no Tidus in German). We might then assume that the last name was also misspelled, and should be Albrecht.

The cabinet consists of a carved and painted base and a two-door storage area with two drawers above it. The upper section, set back above the drawers, consists of a mirror with an arched top. Cutout figures, spindles, balls, and dangling carved-wood pendants support and frame the mirror, giving this unusual piece of furniture an air of celebration. Indeed, the pictorial elements of the piece are all symbolically connected to the topmost cutout—the Statue of Liberty—and an American eagle executed in marquetry on the top surface of the cabinet.

The base, which extends beyond the front and back of the cabinet, features three-dimensional, realistically painted carvings of undulating leaves and clusters of berries. Four snakes are part of the composition, their heads emerging from the leaves. The only other carved parts of the cabinet are the drawer pulls, which are shaped to look like oak leaves and acorns; they are unpainted.

The sides of the cabinet are masked with cutouts of dancing women, while each cabinet door shows a design that features a mandolin and birds cut from sheets of light-colored wood. Each dancing woman balances on one foot, her arms and hands held high, very much like dancing bacchantes from wall paintings in Herculaneum, the Roman resort town that was destroyed, with Pompeii, by the eruption of Mt. Vesuvius in A.D. 79. In the early nineteenth century, there was great interest in the art that was excavated from these rich communities. Roman architecture, furniture, and fashion were regarded by many as appropriate models for the new American Republic. The dancing bacchantes were first engraved in 1757 and were much copied after about 1770. Though the cabinet dates from the end of the nineteenth century and not from the period when neoclassical designs were most popular, these motifs were everywhere to be seen and copied.

In the hands of Titus Albrecht, anatomical, facial, and costume details of the bacchantes were simplified, for he was interested primarily in being able to saw the overall profile out of wood in a single piece. The few details he gave to the face, body, and costume were burned into the wood in narrow lines.

The mandolin panels, in contrast, are not classical in origin. The eight-string instrument, an early eighteenth-



century version of the lute, was popular mainly in southern Italy, near the legendary home of the bacchantes. The mandolins are shown with vines, flowers, and flying birds and butterflies, all of which symbolize the joy of life.

Foot-powered jigsaws, which had been in use in America since the mid-1830s, experienced great advances by the early 1870s, when the Trump Brothers' "Fleetwood" scroll saw competed with the Singer sewing machine for pride of place in the American home. The jigsaw cutouts used throughout this cabinet seem to have celebrated the latest technology, while the marquetry emblem of the American eagle on the cabinet top depended on traditional techniques. The eagle, surrounded by a field of diamonds and stars, follows a familiar, traditional format. Its wings are outspread, its head is turned to one side, and it grasps an American flag, an olive branch, and three arrows. It is the only design on the cabinet that covers a horizontal plane; all the others fill vertical spaces.

The upper portion of the cabinet is as perfectly symmetrical as the lower part. There are four pairs of identical figures, cut by a jigsaw from thin slabs of wood. In each case, one cutout is flipped over so that the pairs are presented as mirror images. There is a woman in a classical gown, standing on tiptoe to reach the branch of a tree, a nude fairy, a trumpeting woman in classical garb, and a howling dog—a humorous insertion.

Stars are incorporated into the designs, and more stars appear at the very top of the piece. There, a halo of them springs from a triangular foliate design that rises from the center of the cabinet like a Tree of Life. This circle of stars sets off a cutout figure of the Statue of Liberty. Under her feet is a crescent moon with a star in its center. The overall image is not unlike the description penned by St. John the Divine in Chapter 12 of the Book of Revelation: "a woman clothed with the sun," with the moon under her feet and twelve stars at her head. The moon and star is also

**Detail of  
STATUE OF LIBERTY CABINET**  
Marquetry is limited to the top surface of the cabinet, where an American eagle is shown against a field of diamonds and stars. The eagle is depicted as in the official design for the Great Seal of the nation since 1782: Its wings are outspread and it clutches an American flag, three arrows, and an olive branch.

**Detail of  
STATUE OF LIBERTY CABINET**  
The dancing bacchante, a  
figure borrowed from an  
ancient source, is symboli-  
cally linked to the Statue of  
Liberty at the top of the cabi-  
net. The dancer celebrates  
the dedication of the  
monument.



a symbol of Islam, but here it is likely the symbol of the Eastern Star, the women's branch of Masonry—Albrecht may have made the cabinet for a woman who belonged to this auxiliary.

The Statue of Liberty was dedicated in 1886, but her image was well known a dozen years or more before then through fund-raising efforts. The French pledged to give the statue to the United States, and the people of America took on the responsibility for the monumental base on which it would stand. In 1871, the sculptor Frédéric-Auguste Bartholdi brought a model of the work and a completed arm of Liberty to America and toured them across the nation as a way to generate interest in the colossus. By the early 1880s, six- and twelve-inch replicas of the statue were sold to raise construction funds. Eventually, 121,000 Americans contributed to the Franco-American friendship project.

The classical costumes worn by the six women who grace the cabinet seem to have been selected as a complement to Lady Liberty's costume, which is derived from ancient images of Athena, the ancient Greek goddess of wisdom and the arts. Snakes were sacred to Athena, so the presence of four of them in the base of the cabinet may be part of a larger iconography scheme revolving around Lady Liberty. Early on, the statue was known as "Liberty Enlightening the World," making her the Athena of the New World.

The dancing girls also have an interesting classical pedigree. They are bacchantes, revelers devoted to Bacchus, the god of the grape. Their association with Bacchus, however, was lost the day they were copied from the walls of a villa in Herculaneum, engraved, and incorporated into textiles and other forms of ornamentation. Titus Albrecht, like others who were familiar with the

design, no doubt saw them as classical dancers, joyously celebrating life or one of its special occasions. This perception of the dancing girls is more important than their actual symbolism, just as the Athena connection to the Statue of Liberty is secondary to the clear celebratory nature of the cabinet itself. Under the watchful eyes of the fairies, it combines the American eagle and the Statue of Liberty with mandolins, birds, dancers, and musicians in a paean to patriotism. Titus Albrecht went even further than that. With his filigree and dangles, he caused the cabinet itself to dance in celebration of Freedom.

These wood objects were gifted before. Each one was enjoyed and carefully cared for. But this giving is the greatest one. These extraordinary examples of folk carpentry, through the Museum of American Folk Art's stewardship, now belong to everyone. ★

*Richard Mühlberger has written thirteen books in the last five years, eleven of them in collaboration with The Metropolitan Museum of Art. He is curator of "Masterpieces in Wood: American Folk Marquetry from The Hirschhorn Foundation," on view at the Museum of American Folk Art from October 3, 1998, to January 10, 1999, and the author of the accompanying exhibition catalog.*

**STATUE OF LIBERTY CABINET**  
Titus Albrecht (or Titus  
Albrecht)  
Vicinity of St. Louis, Missouri  
c. 1886–1890  
Marquetry, carved and  
painted wood, and jigsaw  
wood cutouts  
77¾ × 30¾ × 21¼"

