

Choosing Brass Hardware for Period Furniture

When reproducing American furniture, the right choice of brasses makes all the difference

BY WALTER RAYNES



Photos: Zachary Gaulkin, except where noted

Reproductions can capture original details. This hand-carved die and the Hepplewhite-style backplate made from it by Horton Brasses show the level of detail possible in brass reproduction hardware.

Let's suppose you're about to build a piece of traditional American furniture—something like that chest of drawers you saw in a museum. You probably will spend some time finding the right boards and figuring out how to reproduce the joinery faithfully. But have you forgotten something? Ah, yes, the hardware. If you think that picking the hardware is as simple as opening a mail-order catalog, you may want to think again.

Brass hardware, especially visible and decorative items like drawer pulls and escutcheons, has a tremendous effect on the look of period furniture. When these pieces were built originally, hardware selection was not left to chance any more than decisions on joinery or veneers. The best pieces of period furniture were designed so that all the details worked together.

In a great many pieces of Federal style furniture, for example, geometric shapes and inlays have their counterpart in the brass ovals used for the drawer pulls. In more ornate pieces, like some Chippendale highboys, the hardware style is completely different. There, you may find the rococo flourishes of the brasses mirrored in the woodworking itself.

Before opening the hardware catalogs and placing your order, examine

several original hardware examples carefully. Look at all the different elements and you will probably notice the integration of proportion, decoration and hardware. The chart on p. 90 illustrates relationships between furniture styles and hardware for some of the most recognizable periods of traditional American furniture.

Taking the time to look at the subtle details of pieces from these periods will help guide you in your search for the right hardware for your reproduction furniture. Knowing something about how the hardware is made also is a benefit, since manufacturing methods often determine how authentic a reproduction looks. Brass hardware today is available in many styles and is made in different ways. And, of course, the better reproductions will cost more, perhaps twice as much as their standard-quality equivalents.

HOW PERIOD REPRODUCTIONS ARE MADE

Most brass hardware today is die-cast, stamped or cut from large sheets. Some of it may even be made from brass-plated steel or brass-plated zinc alloys. Modern manufacturing methods involve little handwork, and therefore can churn out large quantities of identical and relatively inexpensive

pieces. Most early brass hardware, however, was anything but uniform, and if price is no object, you usually can find reproduction hardware that is made exactly as it was originally.

Before 1750, most brass hardware was cast in sand molds. To sand-cast a part, a pattern of the part is pressed into a sand mold. The pattern is removed, and molten brass is poured into the mold, cooling in the shape of the pattern. Sand-casting is still practiced today, and is generally considered the best process for hardware on reproductions of that era because of the subtle but noticeable differences it imparts to the hardware. For example, the backplates of cast drawer pulls, escutcheons and rosettes were filed by hand to produce a beveled edge. Much of this early hardware was "chased," a process in which decoration is hammered into the brass by hand. Also, slight surface imperfections and undulations resulting from the casting process are apparent, even at a distance. The same is true for other cast parts, such as the bails, or handles, on drawer pulls. Many of the cheaper reproductions, by comparison, appear absolutely flat and uniform, lacking the subtle variations of sand-cast parts.

The availability of thin sheet brass after 1750 allowed decoration to be stamped into the metal by machine. This new technology led, during the Federal era in the late 1700s, to oval backplates often stamped with intricate designs. The Hepplewhite style ovals show incredible detail. Efforts to



"Chasing" brass by hand makes each piece unique. The decoration in these William and Mary and Queen Anne backplates was made by hand in a process called "chasing." By hammering the brass with engraved punches, chasing can produce a variety of patterns, and each piece will differ subtly from its mates.

recreate these designs have led to some high-quality dies. Some of the less expensive reproductions, however, have been simplified for ease of production (although the process remains basically the same). If a reproduction oval lacks the detail or crispness of an original, the hardware will look out of place.

One difficulty in searching for period brasses is that not all, and certainly not the best, of period styles are made these days. Many of the items available in the traditional style are adaptations

of originals or poor imitations. Some are reproductions of reproductions, resulting in a loss of original detail.

CHOOSING THE RIGHT STYLE






In addition to manufacturing methods, style and form are important considerations in choosing decorative brasses. Modern furniture styles are often notable for their lack of visible hardware, and woodworkers with contemporary leanings often use touch latches or sculpted wood pulls to achieve a clean look. But with traditional furniture, at least in my experience, hardware serves an aesthetic as well as a functional role, as part of an overall design.

For example, some Chippendale brasses were large and flamboyant, in keeping with the boldness of the rococo style of the time. Drawer pulls in particular were meant to be seen, and



Casting reproduces irregularities found in original hardware. This sand-cast Chippendale drawer pull (at right) made by Ball and Ball is thicker than the stamped version (at left). The beveled edges were filed by hand.

BRASS HARDWARE FROM 1680 TO 1820

STYLE	COMMON HARDWARE	HOW IT WAS MADE
William and Mary (1680-1730)	 <p>Tear-drop or pear-shaped pulls, backed by rosettes, loosely echo the shapes of turned legs popular during the period. Rosettes in their simplest form were circular; more elaborate rosettes had cast or stamped decoration.</p>	Cast, hand-chased
Queen Anne (1720-1760)	 <p>Bails, or handles, on drawer pulls are used with decorated backplates. Later styles used post-and-nut mountings instead of wire. Bails often adopted the ogee curves found in the legs and moldings of the period.</p>	Cast, hand-chased
Chippendale (1750-1790)	 <p>Brass hardware evolved into more elaborate rococo patterns in keeping with the furniture itself. Toward the end of the period, cast "bat wing" backplates were sometimes replaced by simple button-and-bail pulls.</p>	Cast
Hepplewhite (1790-1810)	 <p>A sharp stylistic shift occurred due to changing manufacturing methods. Oval pulls often had elaborate decoration, such as the eagle motif, a popular symbol reflecting the pride of a new nation. The oval shape of the backplates mirrors the elliptical inlays and other geometric patterns found in the furniture.</p>	Cast and stamped elements
Sheraton (1800-1820)	 <p>Brass knobs, similar in style and decoration to the Hepplewhite period, gained wide popularity. The decoration of the knobs mirrors carved rosettes found in furniture that reflected the designs of Thomas Sheraton.</p>	Cast and stamped elements

Hardware for photos courtesy of Ball and Ball and Horton Brasses.

reflected the ornamentation of the furniture itself. On the other hand, if a particularly clean appearance was desired, such as on the doors and sometimes the drawers of a Hepplewhite sideboard, the only visible hardware might have been an inset escutcheon outlining a keyhole. Such an arrangement was often used so the hardware would not interfere with the panorama of highly figured veneers and inlaid decoration found on such pieces.

Within accepted styles of a given period, though, there is latitude in selecting hardware, depending on what effect you are trying to achieve. Even when building a special piece of period furniture, I don't want to be a slave to the perceived style of the time. I like to make each piece of furniture my own, as long as I can stay within the boundaries of a given period. So a Chippendale piece that was originally made with heavy rococo brasses might

instead get the less elaborate button-and-bail pulls, a style that was used on late Chippendale casework. This more restrained look can be particularly effective if I pick exciting wood for the drawer fronts. Because drawer pulls varied in appearance even in the same era, I don't have to be uncomfortable about choosing a version that complements the piece I'm making. I usually opt for a more restrained look, while remaining faithful to the style.



Reproductions can be expensive. A Ball and Ball employee files a Chippendale escutcheon by hand. This time-consuming process is necessary for a faithful reproduction.

Pouring brass is hard work. Molten brass, heated to 2,100°F, is poured into sand molds at Horton Brasses. The sand molds are destroyed after every pour.



FINISHES FOR BRASS HARDWARE

How hardware should be finished is the subject of debate. It may be highly polished or given a dull, "antique" look—a popular approach. I do not believe, however, that period hardware was anything but bright in appearance when it was new. It was meant to be seen, to turn heads. If you build reproduction furniture and want to show the intent of original makers, then antiqued hardware is the wrong choice.

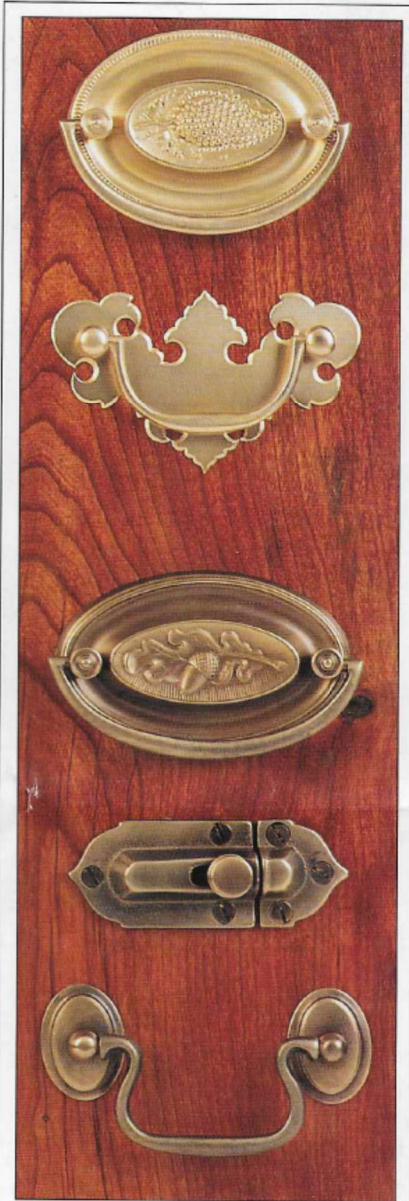
Brass hardware has been coated in different ways over the centuries, to help preserve its luster and to make it look like gold. Conservation examinations have revealed evidence of different types of resin coatings on original brasses that were used to produce these effects. These coatings slowed oxidation and sometimes imparted a reddish-orange tint to the brass.

Some brasses had a coating of actual gold, created by a process called fire-

gilding. Fire-gilding produced a durable, bright finish. It was costly, though, and the method of application—mixing gold powder with liquid mercury, painting it onto the brass and then burning off the mercury—is by today's standards environmentally unsound and downright unhealthy.

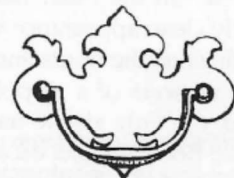
Today, many manufacturers coat their brass hardware with a clear acrylic lacquer. Some period hardware suppliers, however, will lacquer their products only if requested. As a general rule, I do not use lacquer on brasses that will get a lot of use. The coating can chip and, if not refinished, will oxidize and discolor in those spots. On more decorative pieces, which do not get as much wear, a lacquer coating will help maintain the shine. ■

Walter Raynes divides his time between building custom furniture and restoring European and American antiques for private collectors and museums. He lives and works in Baltimore, Md.



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