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## Goddard Bookcase and Desk

RISD Museum

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RE: I'm Rob Emlen. I'm the University Curator at Brown University where I teach in the Department of American Studies. And I also teach courses in Decorative Arts here at the Rhode Island School of Design.

TP: And I'm Tim Philbrick; I'm a furniture designer and maker, a Rhode Island native born and bred. And I've admired this group of mahogany Newport furniture since I was a child. The quality of the design, of the materials, of the craftsmanship: these pieces are the very best that mankind has ever produced.

RE: It's so wonderful to see it here on exhibition; it's visually quite stunning, the essential level is, it catches our eye because it is so good-looking. It's impressive; it's tall; it's magnificent. What I'm admiring is those three bays—they continue from the base up to the top through drawers on the bottom and through a slant-lid desk on the top, and doors above that, divided into concave and convex sections. So it's perfectly balanced.

TP: You also have to imagine it with 18<sup>th</sup> century lighting on it. There's candles lit, the brass is polished, the light is reflecting off the brasses, the light is reflecting off the moldings. There's highlights all over the place. And it would be moving with the flickering—it has this enormous depth to it, like you can see into the wood. But anything that wasn't seen from the front is going to be white pine and chestnut, which were used because they were easily worked and came in wide widths, and cost a fraction of what Caribbean mahogany cost. And the secondary woods were not polished or sanded, even. In terms of the construction, basically it's just a series of boxes. The desk is one box with four drawers in it; the interior of the desk is another box that's slid in from the back; and the upper case is also a box, very ornate but it's just a box.

RE: Not that you would know that from looking at it. Because all you can see...

TP: Yeah, is mahogany.

RE: ...is this rare, imported, elegant, dark, rich wood. But I would guess that half or more of the wood in this case is invisible to us when we stand in front of it like this. This was meant to be shown as a finished, closed, formal presentation. So just as you wouldn't see the inexpensive woods that hold it together, you don't see how boring the inside of the bookcase is, because it would full of the guy's ledger and envelopes and receipts.

TP: Art historians would say that shells are part of this rococo taste—the word rococo is a slang word meaning rocks and shell. Sometimes the designs came over on paper and sometimes they came over in people's minds. And sometimes they came over in physical forms: you'd bring a chair with you from home when you emigrated. But we in the colonies tended to learn about these from Old World sources. It's perfectly consonant with the design principles to have naturalistic forms on there, and we'd see in some places leafage and other flora. But shells do just fine. Particularly in a seafront

community. So these are seen in Philadelphia and they are seen in Boston, but never so nicely carved and so well-assembled and designed as these are here in Newport.

RE: It tells us a lot about merchant culture in 18<sup>th</sup> century Rhode Island, about what the economic and social elite of Rhode Island wanted to show to their public.

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