



# VCU

Virginia Commonwealth University  
VCU Scholars Compass

---

Pattern Research Project

Dept. of Interior Design

---

2020

## Pattern Research Project: Emblems of Colonialism - Lift-Top Chest

Emily Adams

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarscompass.vcu.edu/prp>



Part of the [Interior Design Commons](#)

© The Author

---

Downloaded from

<https://scholarscompass.vcu.edu/prp/40>

This Book is brought to you for free and open access by the Dept. of Interior Design at VCU Scholars Compass. It has been accepted for inclusion in Pattern Research Project by an authorized administrator of VCU Scholars Compass. For more information, please contact [libcompass@vcu.edu](mailto:libcompass@vcu.edu).



Lift-Top Chest



pattern research project - emblems of colonialism

IDES 651+521

# stylized foliage and the history of the chest in Colonial America



Emily Adams

# table of contents

pattern ID and introduction	3
keyword diagram / timeline	4
place + time	5
people + culture	6
craft - tools + materials / interior use	7
pattern design - imagery, color, texture	8
pattern analysis - organization, proportion	9
motif analysis	10
realizations and reflections	11
works cited	12

# seventeenth-century stylized foliage



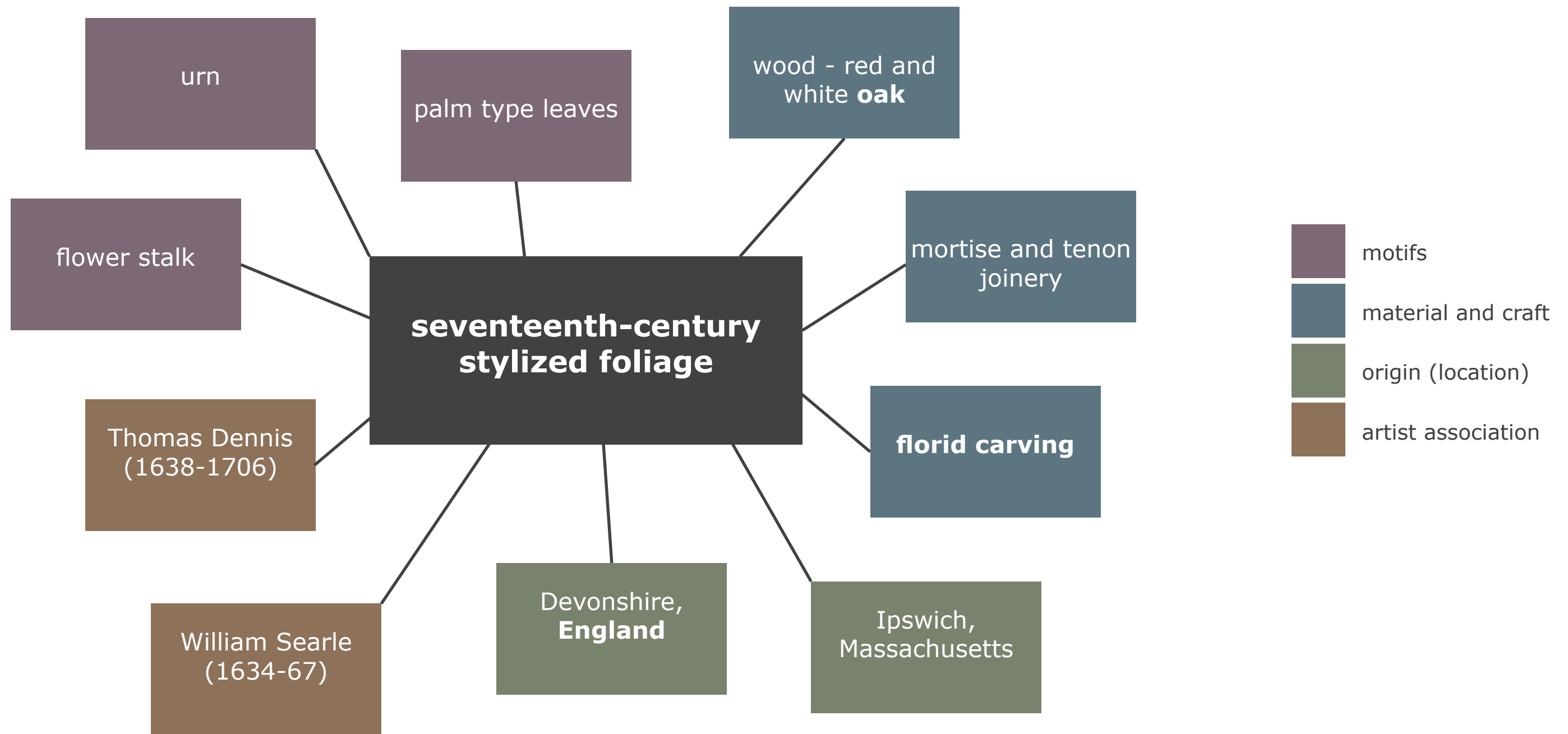
Chest, Possibly William Searle<sup>1</sup>

<b>object</b>	<i>lift-top chest</i>
<b>pattern name or description</b>	<i>stylized foliage</i>
<b>location</b>	<i>Ipswich, Massachusetts, United States</i>
<b>date produced</b>	<i>1663-80</i>
<b>item type</b>	<i>furniture</i>
<b>materials / craft</b>	<i>white oak, red oak, carving</i>
<b>culture</b>	<i>American</i>
<b>colonizer</b>	<i>English</i>
<b>pattern motif</b>	<i>stalk of flower, leaves, urn</i>

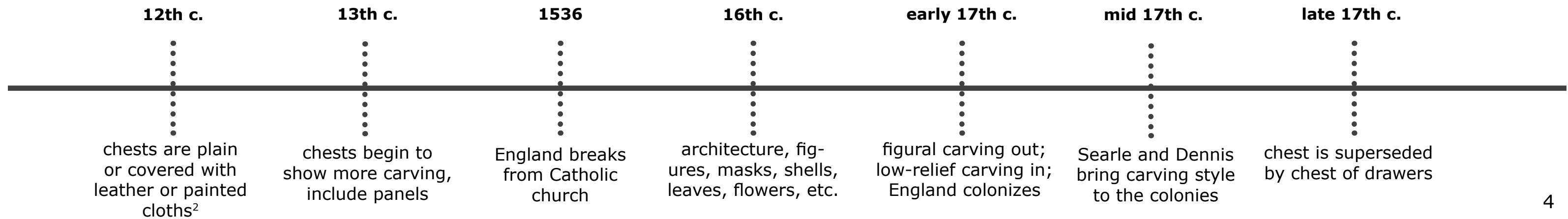


*carving detail, leaf motif*

# keyword diagram

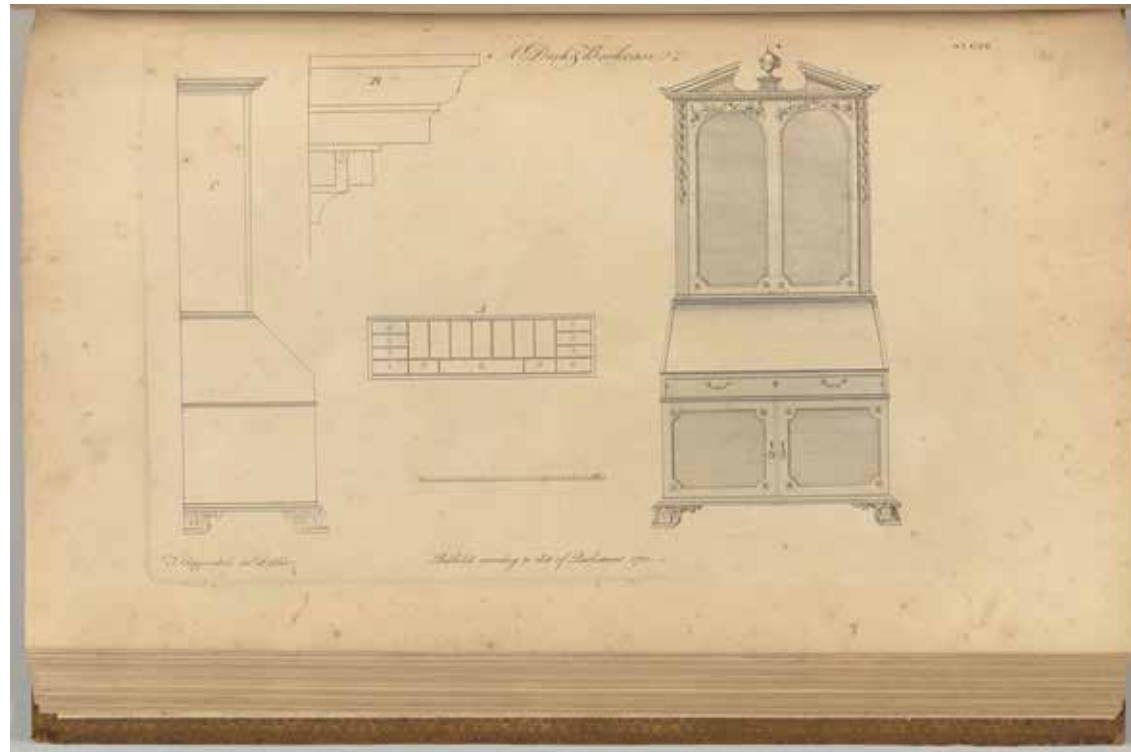


# timeline



# place + time

- colonial chests originate from early 17th century chests from England
- chests were the most popular and most important type of furniture in the household
- chests often only item brought by settlers to the new world
- many settlers would try to recreate home life as it were in England
- immigrant craftsmen implement similar use of pattern, style and motifs from homeland<sup>3</sup>
- directly imported materials from London, including ornament prints for furniture makers
- **William Searle** and Thomas Dennis are two best documented craftsmen in Colonial America - settled in Ipswich, Massachusetts in 1660s
- distinctive florid carving style derived from the Renaissance<sup>4</sup>



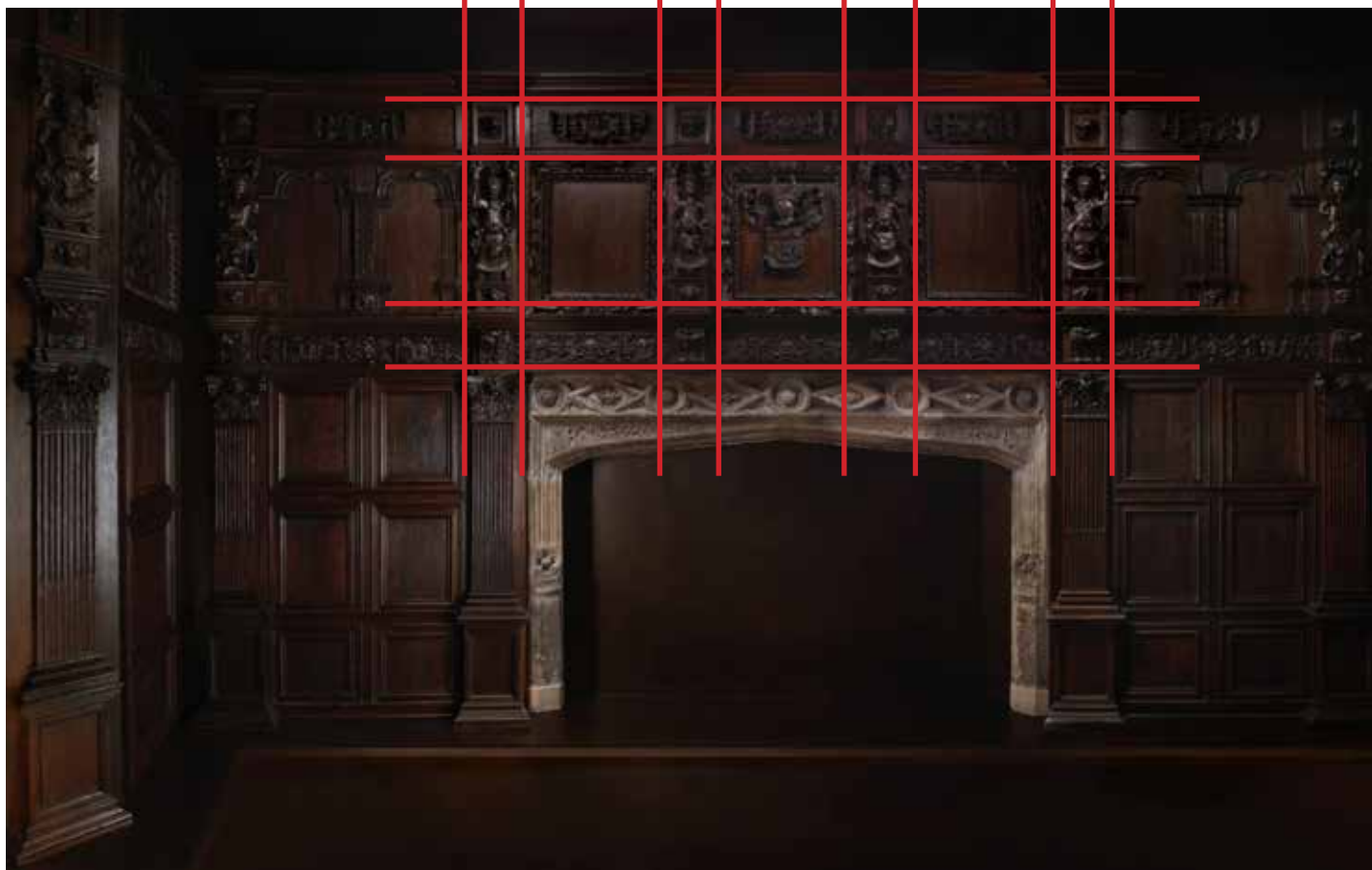
The Gentleman and Cabinet-Maker's Director, 1762<sup>5</sup>



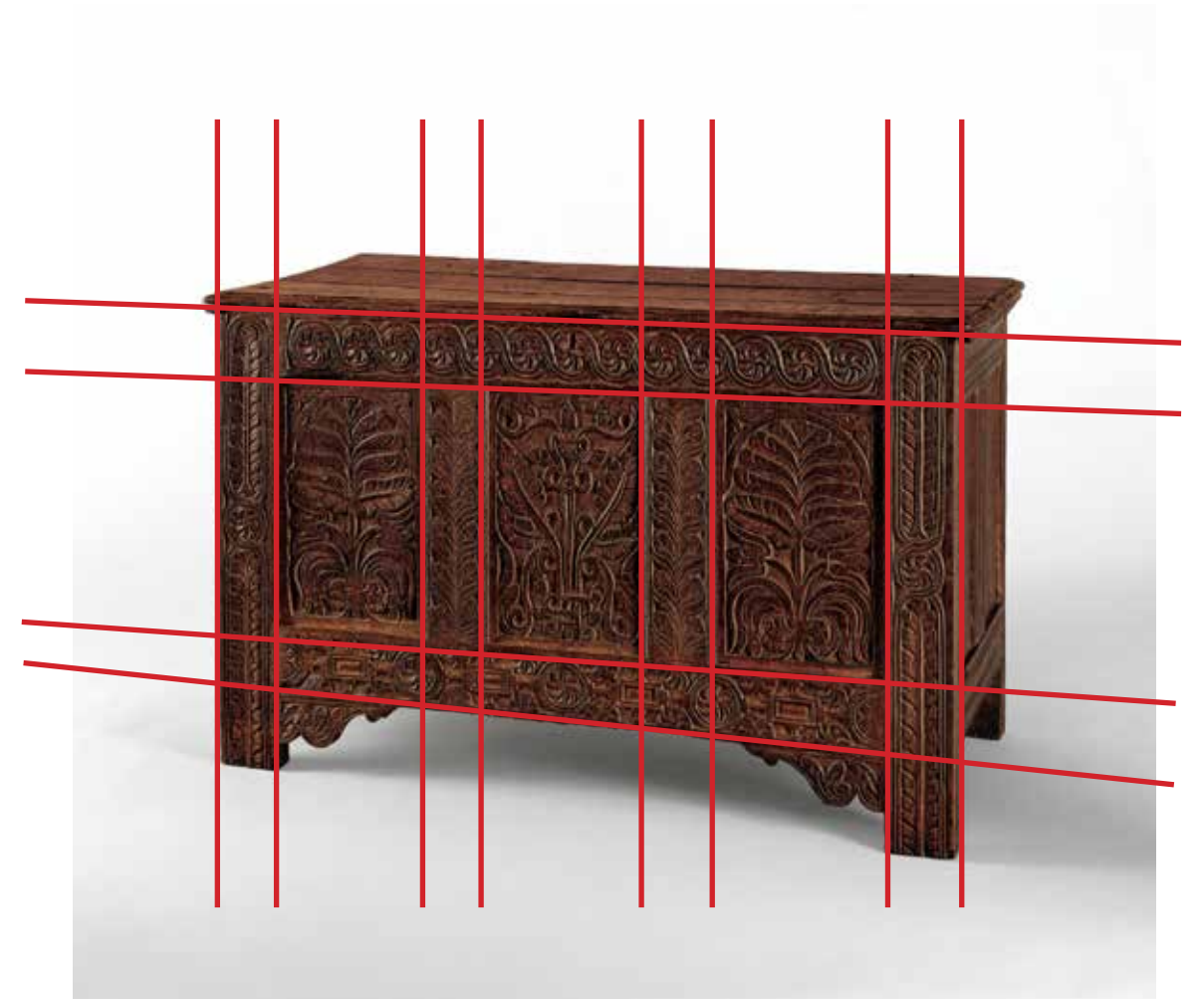
Massachusetts Bay Colony: Map<sup>6</sup>

# people + culture

- England estranged itself from Italy + Catholic Europe in 1536
- interior design in England did not take shape directly from Italian Renaissance
- Renaissance features came to England second hand through objects, books, + artists from the Netherlands<sup>7</sup>
- Renaissance artists were free to experiment with degree of ornament, stylization, and motif language
- how does the built interior influence built objects?



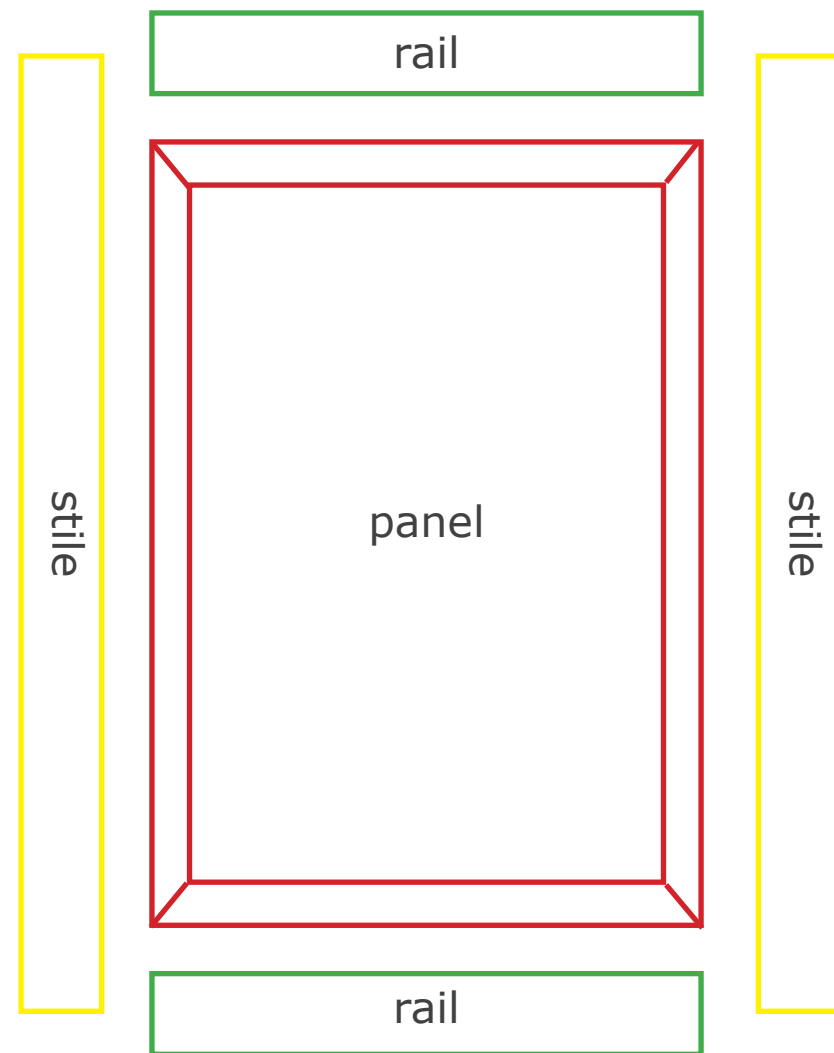
Paneling (oak) from a house on the Hall Quay, Great Yarmouth, Norfolk, ca. 1600<sup>8</sup>





# craft - tools + material

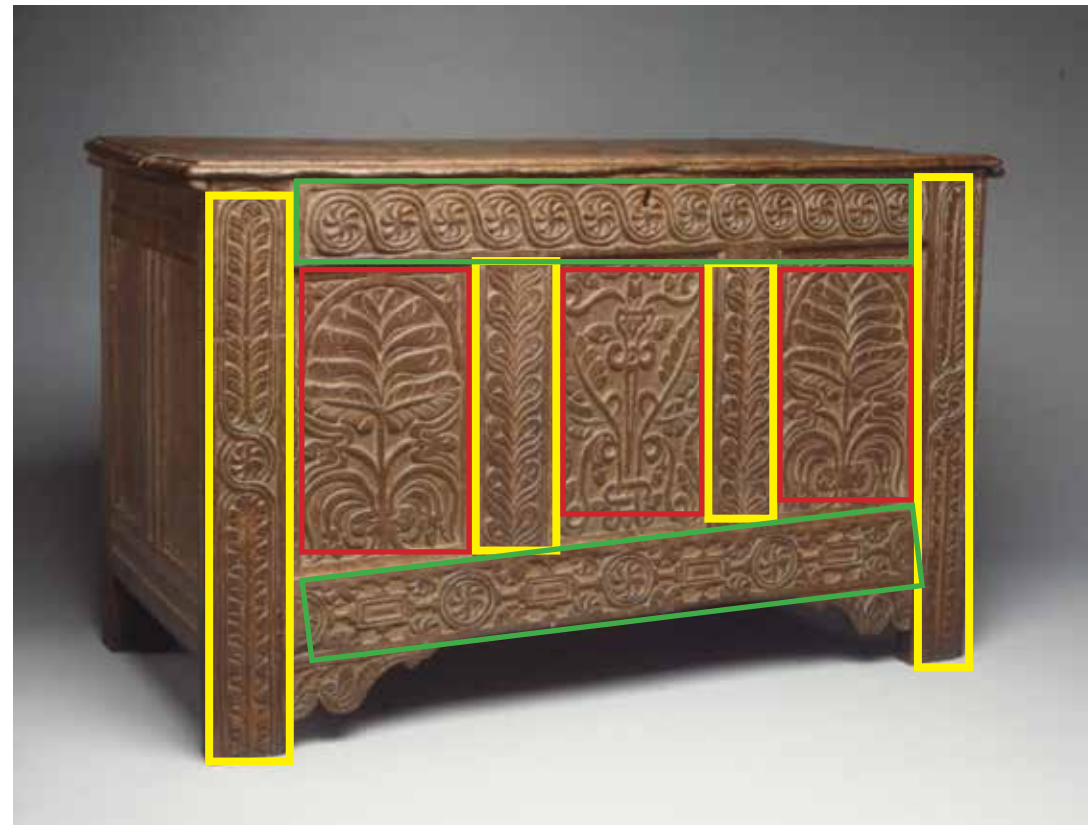
- constructed with stiles and rails, mortised and tenoned, held in place with square wooden pegs wedged into round holes
- panels are fitted into the constructed frame
- mortise and tenon - "joined" chest
- joiner - craftsman
- considered to be well-made furniture, contrasting with board chests<sup>9</sup>
- primary carving tool - likely the chisel<sup>10</sup>



construction diagram

# interior use

- principal piece of household furniture
- receptacle for valuables such as clothing, money, plates
- additionally functions as seat, table, bed
- used in church to store sacred vessels, vestments, records
- would be on display in main living area<sup>11</sup>



1 1/4" steel firmer chisel in octagonal wood handle, 1758-69<sup>12</sup>

# pattern design - imagery, color, texture



oak chest made in England ca. 1650<sup>13</sup>

## similarities:

- use of oak as primary building material
- three panel frame construction
- mortise and tenon joinery
- stylized leaf pattern
- circular pattern

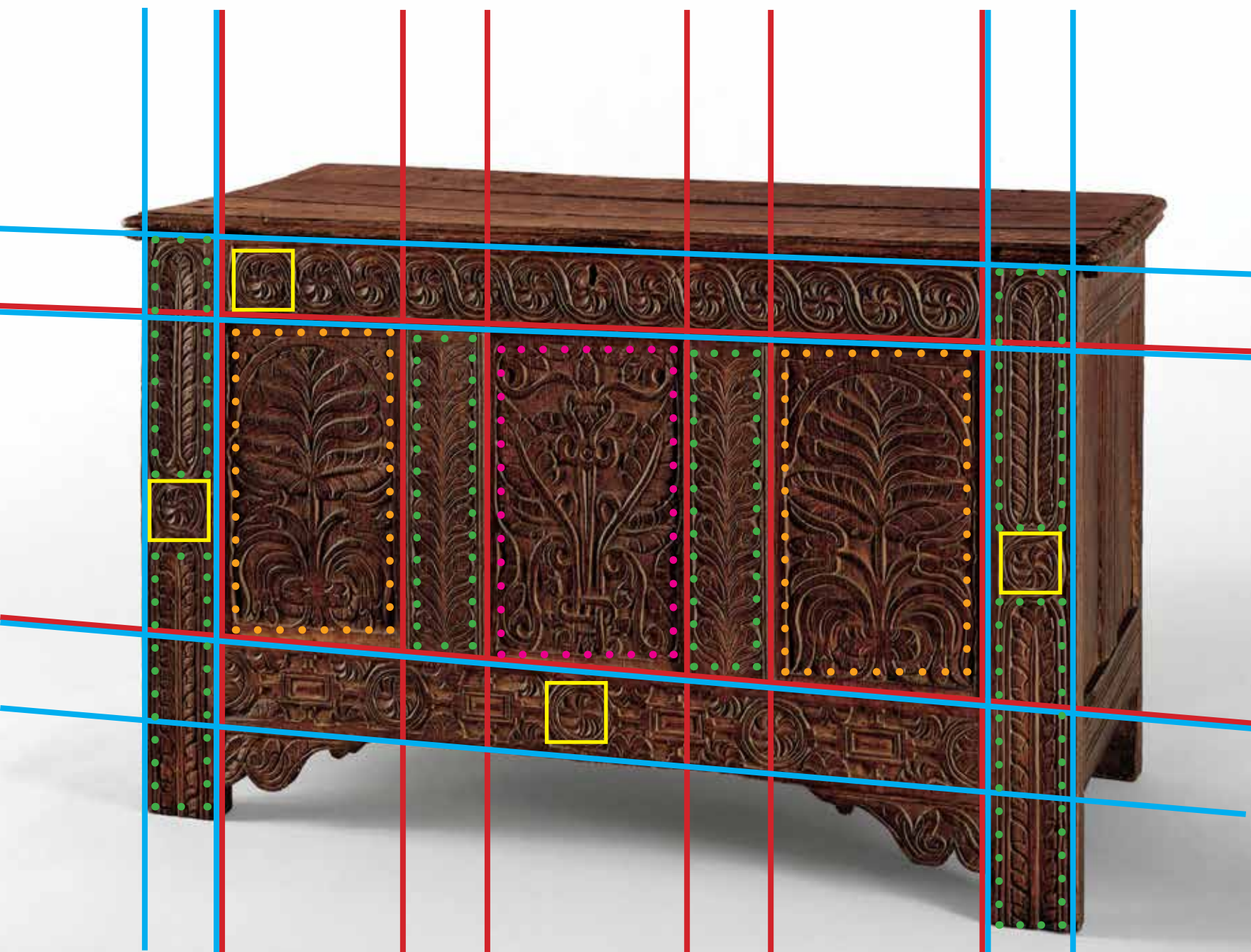


oak chest made in Massachusetts ca. 1663-80<sup>1</sup>

## differences:

- colonial chest becomes more naturalistic in style
- greater degree of surface ornamentation
- still low-relief, but seeing more definition and dimensionality
- added carved brackets at the base

# pattern analysis - organization, proportion



composition



circular motif



border definition



leaf motif



paired leaves



flower and urn (focal motif)

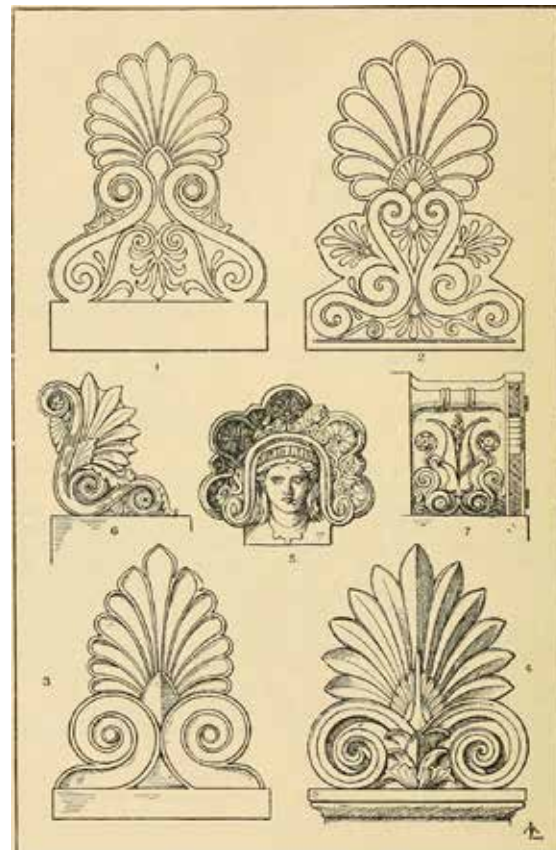
# motif analysis



Paneling from Marmion, the Fitzhugh Family House, Tidewater, Virginia<sup>14</sup>

## the urn:

- use of stylized classical motifs reflects adaptation to changing styles
- urn represents the departed spirit resting with God
- however, urn has been dissociated from its classical mythology for reasons unclear<sup>15</sup>
- what is the urn motif's significance in antiquity?
- what are the factors underlying the urn motif's survival as a form in colonial America, regardless of its seeming lack of cultural significance?



Palmette<sup>16</sup>

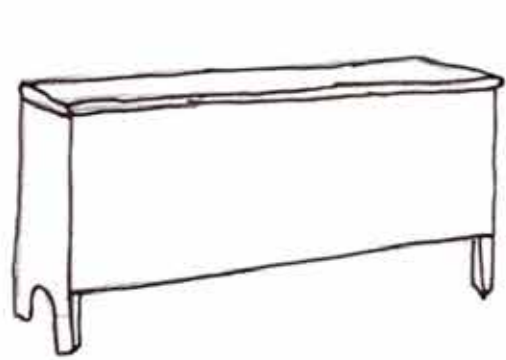
## the palm leaf/palmette:

- significant in ancient Egypt
- roots in Greek mythology
- symbol of Nike, the winged goddess of victory<sup>16</sup>
- what are the factors underlying the palm leaf motif's survival as a form in colonial America, regardless of its seeming lack of cultural significance?

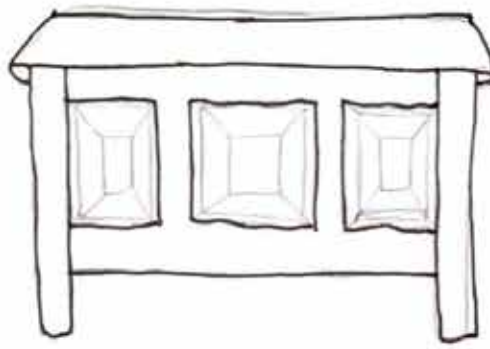
# realizations and reflections

## evolution of the chest

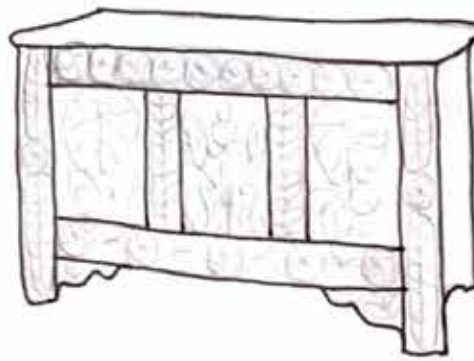
- board chest to joined chest
- steady increase in surface ornamentation
- variety in motif language



13th c.



15th c.



17th c.

## pattern of use

chest goes out of style

- growing wealth in the colonies
- abundance of skilled craftsmen
- permanent residence - no longer a need for transportable belongings (chest)



1663-80<sup>1</sup>



chest of drawers, 1765<sup>18</sup>



high chest of drawers, 1762-65<sup>19</sup>

## motif ambiguity

- motif and pattern language stems from the Renaissance
- Renaissance art included references to classical forms, but was simultaneously a break from the past - cultural movement
- Renaissance artists were more likely to experiment and create unique stylization<sup>15</sup>
- colonial motif language could simply be a stylistic choice, looking to traditions of homeland England
- specific motif depicted could be less significant than the degree of skill in craftsmanship

# works cited

1. Chest, Possibly William Searle. (n.d.). Retrieved November 20, 2020, from <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/1997>
2. Lyon, I. (1891). *The colonial furniture of New England a study of the domestic furniture in use in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries*. Boston: Houghton, Mifflin.
3. Religion and Culture in North America, 1600–1700. (n.d.). Retrieved December 01, 2020, from [https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/recu/hd\\_recu.htm](https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/recu/hd_recu.htm)
4. American Furniture, 1620–1730: The Seventeenth-Century and William and Mary Styles. (n.d.). Retrieved December 01, 2020, from [https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/will/hd\\_will.htm](https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/will/hd_will.htm)
5. The Gentleman and Cabinet-Maker’s Director. (n.d.). Retrieved December 01, 2020, from <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/347526>
6. Otis, J. (n.d.). Massachusetts Bay Colony: Map. Retrieved December 01, 2020, from [https://www.thearda.com/timeline/events/event\\_55.asp](https://www.thearda.com/timeline/events/event_55.asp)
7. Interior Design in England, 1600–1800. (n.d.). Retrieved December 01, 2020, from [https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/ench/hd\\_ench.htm](https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/ench/hd_ench.htm)
8. Paneling from a house on the Hall Quay, Great Yarmouth, Norfolk. (n.d.). Retrieved December 01, 2020, from <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/204568>
9. Lyon, I. (1891). *The colonial furniture of New England a study of the domestic furniture in use in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries*. Boston: Houghton, Mifflin.
10. Hughes, K. C. (2015). *Discovering drayton: Close-looking at classical carving in colonial charleston* (Order No. 1598572). Available from ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global. (1728065269). Retrieved from <http://proxy.library.vcu.edu/login?url=https://www-proquest-com.proxy.library.vcu.edu/docview/1728065269?accountid=14780>
11. Lockwood, L. V. (1921). *Colonial furniture in America*. Scribner, 1913, t.p. 1921.
12. 1¼” steel firmer chisel in octagonal wood handle: Science Museum Group Collection. (n.d.). Retrieved December 01, 2020, from <https://collection.sciencemuseumgroup.org.uk/objects/co8216749/1-steel-firmer-chisel-in-octagonal-wood-handle-chisel>
13. Chest. (2017). Retrieved November 12, 2020, from <http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O130691/chest-unknown/>
14. Paneling from Marmion, the Fitzhugh Family House, Tidewater, Virginia. (n.d.). Retrieved December 01, 2020, from <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/5505?searchField=All>
15. Maddox, J. W. (1993). *The derivation of the urn motif: A first study of the decorative use of urns in European and American architecture*.
16. Palm branch. (2020, October 18). Retrieved December 01, 2020, from [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Palm\\_branch](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Palm_branch)
17. Palmette. (2020, September 06). Retrieved December 01, 2020, from <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Palmette>
18. Chest of drawers. (n.d.). Retrieved December 01, 2020, from <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/2022?searchField=All>
19. High chest of drawers. (n.d.). Retrieved December 01, 2020, from <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/4282?searchField=All>