

Pleasing to the Eye: The Decorative Arts of North Carolina



I'm Fred Olds,
founder of this museum.
Find a few of my
favorite things—and see
if you can answer
my questions!

Fred's Finds

A George Washington Statue

Plaster cast made by F. W. Ruckstuhl, 1910. Cast from the original marble model sculpted by Antonio Canova.

B Samplers

Linen samplers sewn with silk thread by various girls, 1797–1850.

C Thomas Day Sideboard

Grecian-style sideboard with shelves and drawers for tablecloths and cups, plates, and silverware. Made by Thomas Day for Richmond family, Milton, Caswell County, 1840–1855.

D Gangway Gate

Gate from the warship USS *North Carolina*. Carved from black walnut, 1836.

E Rooster-and-Hen Pottery Jug Set

Pottery made by Pamela Owens, Jugtown Pottery, Seagrove, Moore County, 1993.

F Wooden Pedestal

Pedestal made from oak and brass, 1890–1900.

G Decorative Boxes

Boxes with popular designs of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

H Dodge Tea Service

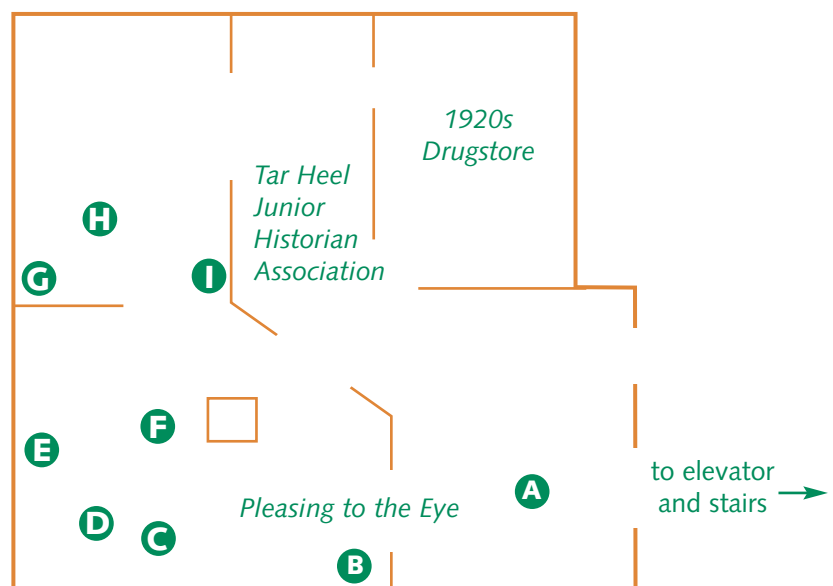
Tea service made by the William Waldo Dodge Jr. shop, Asheville, Buncombe County, 1929–1930.

I Hicks Painting

Quilting Party, painted by Mary Lyde Hicks Williams, Faison, Duplin County, 1900.

NORTH CAROLINA MUSEUM OF HISTORY

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Information & Questions →

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A Washington Statue

Why is he wearing a skirt?

Why is our first president wearing clothes from ancient Rome? From statues to buildings to furniture, designs from ancient Rome and Greece were popular in the early 1800s. Many Americans also believed that their new country brought back the best ideas of these earlier civilizations.

After a fire destroyed the State Capitol and the original statue in 1831, Italy gave this plaster replica to the State of North Carolina. Eventually it was replaced with the marble copy now displayed in the Capitol.

? *Look for a piece of the original statue's base nearby. Can you find sculptor Antonio Canova's signature on it?*

B Samplers

What did you do in school today?

These are “fabric report cards.” In the 1700s and 1800s, families who could afford it made sure their daughters could read, play a musical instrument, and sew—among other skills believed to make them good wives. Girls practiced sewing by making “samplers,” stitching linen cloth with brightly colored threads. Families often framed and displayed their daughters’ work.

? *How old was Susanah Thompson when she completed her sampler?*

C Thomas Day Sideboard

A story in wood

One of the state’s best craftsmen in the early 1800s was Thomas Day, a free black man from Caswell County. His customers included a state governor and many churches and schools. Day prospered, owning a lot of property, including slaves who worked in his shop at Milton.

His work helps us learn about nineteenth-century decorative arts. Day’s personal story shows how a free African American thrived, within restrictions, in North Carolina before the Civil War.

? *Why do you think Thomas Day put mirrors on this sideboard?*

D Gangway Gate

All aboard!

Ships in the 1800s often featured decorative carving. This wooden gangway gate was onboard the USS *North Carolina*, an early warship. The carving features the state seal of North Carolina surrounded by tobacco, cotton, corn, oak leaves, and pine needles, with a sun rising over an American flag, eagle, and shield.

In 1915 a scout observation biplane was thrown into the air from the deck of the *North Carolina*—the first time a plane was launched off a ship under way. This paved the way for the use of aircraft on battleships and cruisers.

? *What is a “gangway”?*

An opening in the railing of a ship where people can board.

E Rooster-and-Hen Jug Set

Old MacDonald had some chickens . . .

Most early settlers in North Carolina raised their own chickens. Potters often created clever kitchen items using common farm animals, like chickens and ducks, for their inspiration. Jugtown Pottery in Seagrove, N.C., has used the chicken design for many years. The shop created chicken salt-and-pepper shakers, and would often add a small drawing of a yellow chicken on its orange pie plates.

? *Can you find other chickens or ducks among the pottery?*

F Wooden Pedestal

“Wood” you use a pedestal?

Beautiful pedestals like this one helped owners show off their belongings. The pedestal may have held a nice plant, or it might have displayed a statue or perhaps a special framed picture. This oak-and-brass pedestal was used in the North Carolina Governor’s Mansion. It features richly carved foliage and is decorated with lions’ heads.

? *If this pedestal were in your home, what would you put on it?*

G Decorative Boxes

What’s in the box?

These boxes were created to be both pretty and practical. Craftsmen made small boxes like these for people who could afford to buy then-rare and expensive goods, like nutmeg, as well as special containers to store them in. Most boxes were crafted from silver and decorated with symbols and gemstones that held special meanings and uses for their owners.

? *Do you own a fancy box? What do you keep in it?*

H Dodge Tea Service

Tea for two?

William Waldo Dodge Jr. started working with silver while recovering from World War I wounds at Oteen Veterans Hospital near Asheville, N.C. In 1924 he opened a silver shop nearby and later moved it to Biltmore Forest Estates. Dodge formed his pieces by repeatedly tapping the surface of the silver with a light hammer for shaping.

? *Look closely at the Dodge pieces. Can you see the marks of the hammer?*

I Hicks Painting

Quilting Party

The quilt frame in this painting is suspended from the ceiling with rope or twine. When the ladies finished quilting, they could raise the quilt up toward the ceiling, where it remained out of the way until they were ready to work on it again.

The artist was Mary Lyde Hicks Williams, from Faison, N.C. She grew up there on the family plantation where most of the tenant farmers were former slaves. These individuals would appear in twenty-eight paintings by Williams in which she depicted African American rural life during the late 1800s.

? *How would you describe the women in this painting? What do you think they are talking about?*