

talent | wood carver



Carving an American Style



During the 1920s and 1930s, “McIntire Mania” swept the country as Americans rediscovered the work of Samuel McIntire (1757–1811), a wood carver and architect who influenced much of what we consider New England design today. The details he carved on buildings and furniture—American eagles, sheaves of wheat, portraits of George Washington, classical urns—became symbols of an emerging nation.

To celebrate the 250th anniversary of McIntire’s birth, the Peabody Essex Museum in Salem, Mass., is showcasing his work in an exhibit, *Samuel McIntire: Carving an American Style*, with special events and more than 200 objects spanning an exceptional career.

A native of Salem, McIntire foremost was a carpenter, says the

A new exhibit celebrates the carver and architect who transformed his hometown into one of the most beautiful cities in America

exhibit’s curator, Dean T. Lahikainen, the museum’s Carolyn and Peter Lynch Curator of American Decorative Art. His father was a housewright who trained his three sons to take over the family business. But alone among the three, Samuel’s innate artistic ability was soon recognized by Salem’s preeminent merchant, Elias Hasket Derby, who became Samuel’s patron. Over the next twenty-five years, he commissioned elegant furniture, ship figureheads, and homes that are still among the finest in this beautiful, seafaring city.

But McIntire was not a furniture maker. He earned his living primarily as a carver who collaborated with local cabinetmakers on mahogany chairs, chests, tables, fireplace screens and sofas unrivaled in New England. He also carved portrait busts and sculpture, including an American eagle for the U.S. Customs House in Salem.

“McIntire was a craftsman, not an artist,” says Lahikainen. “He never signed a single piece of work. His technical ability was phenomenal and he rose above his humble station in life to a position of great respect.” When he died, Rev. William Bentley, a well-known chronicler of the period, credited him with all improvements in Salem for the past thirty years.

It was an extraordinary time in America, Lahikainen observes, when the

country was caught up in The Age of Enlightenment and the concept of self-determination on which this nation was founded. “McIntire seized the notion that with hard work anyone could succeed and proved that it was true.” ■

Above: Sign for U.S. Custom House, 1805, carved by Samuel McIntire, painted pine. Photograph by Dennis Helmar. | Left: Portrait of Samuel McIntire, by Benjamin Blyth (1746-1811), Samuel McIntire, © 1786, pastel on paper, Peabody Essex Museum. Photograph by Jeffrey Dikes.

Samuel McIntire: Carving an American Style

From October 13, 2007 through February 24, 2008, this exhibit focuses on how McIntire influenced design during the Federal period and his role in transforming Salem into the handsome seaside community it remains today. More than 200 objects, including 134 works by McIntire or members of the family, are included.

PEABODY ESSEX MUSEUM

The museum is located at 137 Essex Street, in Salem, Mass., and is open daily from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Admission is \$13 adults; \$11 seniors; \$9 students; free for ages 16 and under for and Salem, residents. Call 978 745-9500, ext. 3145 for directions. www.pem.org.

WRITTEN BY JANET MENDELSON