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Section: [Antiques](#) > [Printer-Friendly Version](#)

A Designing Gentleman

Bard College Mounts Show on Legacy of Thomas Hope

By ALEX TAYLOR, Special to the Sun | July 16, 2008

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THE LATE 18TH CENTURY AND EARLY 19TH CENTURY WAS AN ACTIVE ERA FOR ENGLISH collectors of art, furniture, and objects. Men such as architect Sir John Soane — who filled his London townhouse to the roof with curiosities — led the way. But one collector of the period, Thomas Hope (1769-1831), can also claim to have designed his own furniture for popular consumption.



National Portrait Gallery, London

YOUNG TURK Sir William Beechey's portrait of Englishman Thomas Hope (1798) dressed as a Turkish sailor is included in the Bard Graduate Center's exhibit devoted to Hope's legacy.

The dual sides of Hope's achievement — as a collector and a designer — will be on display at the Bard Graduate Center's exhibit "Thomas Hope: Regency Designer," which starts tomorrow.

The exhibit, which originated at London's Victoria and Albert Museum, is the first to examine Hope's role as an initiator of the Regency style of English decorative arts. With 140 objects running the gamut from Ancient Egyptian and Greco-Roman antiquities to examples of Neo-Classical painting to Hope's own furniture, "Thomas Hope: Regency Designer" is also the first time Hope's collection has been shown en masse since its dispersal at auction in 1917.

London art consultant Philip Hewat-Jaboor, who co-curated the exhibit with Cambridge art historian David Watkin, spent six years organizing the exhibition. And it was no small endeavor: The catalog contains more than 500 pages, and the show relies on loans from major institutions including the British Museum, the Huntington, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Victoria and Albert Museum, and the National Portrait Gallery in London.

"Hope designed furniture with a kind of missionary zeal to improve what he considered the less refined taste and craftsmanship of London as compared to Paris," Mr. Hewat-Jaboor said. "He was out to educate."

Hope was born to extreme wealth, and after leaving his Amsterdam home in 1787, he spent the next 10 years traveling through Europe, North Africa, and Asia — all the while acquiring his remarkable collection. Included in the exhibition are a number of Hope's own watercolors that he painted while traveling. There is also a portrait of a young Hope dressed as a Turkish sailor, a dagger tucked in his

sash, by Sir William Beechey, circa 1798.

That young man would become an adamant collector of Greek and Roman sculpture, examples of which are also on view. One standout is a languid marble torso of Pothos, the Greek personification of desire (from approximately the first century before the common era) now in the collection of the National Museum of Ancient Art in Lisbon.

"Hope thought that ancient Greece was the apogee of civilization," Mr. Hewat-Jaboor said.

After settling in London in 1799, Hope opened his Duchess Street mansion — designed by Robert Adam — to the public in an effort to show his collection. In 1807, he went one step further and published a comprehensive set of drawings detailing the interior of his home and its furnishings.

How important was his book? "Household Furniture and Interior Decoration" includes the first use of the term "interior decoration" in English. His designs were so popular (and copied) that they inspired a host of Hope-style imitators, which has caused headaches for art historians and curators ever since.

One spectacular part of the exhibition is a set of furniture from Hope's Egyptian room. A mix of Egyptian revival and French Empire styles, the Egyptian room is one of the classic examples of the Regency style, which mixed antiquity with what was then contemporary design. A pair of Hope-designed bronze and gilded beech armchairs, dating to 1802, are a must-see highlight of the show: The intricate carvings and the contrast of black-on-gold give the pair an alluring dazzle.

"These things are an accumulation of influences rather than 'I took this from that person,'" Mr. Hewat-Jaboor said. "Hope has turned it into something that's peculiarly his own."

The chairman of the London antiques firm H. Blairman & Sons, Martin Levy, said that Hope's pieces are "very, very few and far between." Mr. Levy, who has sold Hope furniture in the past and contributed the exhibition's catalog, remembers finding an unattributed Hope mahogany table.

"It turned up in a small auction," Mr. Levy said. "It was not cataloged, and just sat there on the table with the name of the house it came from — which was exciting because I recognized it as a very Hope-like design." He added: "Then I looked in 'Household Furniture' and there it was."

Now in the collection of the Victoria and Albert Museum, the table will be on view at the Bard gallery.

July 17-November 16 (18 W. 86th St., between Central Park West and Columbus Avenue, 212-501-3000).