OLD ENGLISH BRASSES: BY JAMES THOMSON

To round out and complete any architectural or cabinetmaking work, it is essential that visible metal work such as drawer handles, lockplates, etc., should accord with the style in which the article of woodwork is made. When representing some historic period it is the height of folly to fit to a piece of furniture metal trimmings out of harmony with it. Colonial furniture is to be met with to which brasses of an altogether different period, if not character, have been at some time added. The Chippendale handle but ill accords with the more refined work of Hepplewhite and Sheraton, yet in many a modern instance the connection is observable.

A quarter of a century ago there was difficulty in getting cabinet metal trimmings of good design. The makers of outside door trimmings imagined that the "usual thing" which was of no particular style would adequately serve architectural purposes, which it in numberless cases most assuredly did not. In this exigency a well known Connecticut firm of lock makers sprang into the breach and began making a line of door hardware that was most artistic as regards design and beautifully executed. Such work of course was costly, but the time had arrived when people of taste with the means of gratifying their desires were willing to pay the price. Ten or twelve dollars for a single finger plate for an outside door seems a large price to pay, but all such hardware besides being beautifully cast, is hand chased and clean and sharp as a piece of jewelry.

There must have been a time in this country when cabinet metal trimmings were common enough, for on old Colonial pieces we rarely meet with handles and lockplates other than good. The beautiful elliptical handles of infinite variety to be met with...
London Victoria and Albert Museum. From the illustrated, descriptive catalogue we learn that the development of the present immense brass-foundry trade in Birmingham had inception somewhere between the years 1689 and 1702. The manufacture of stamped goods as distinguished from articles that were cast was begun in 1769. A local brass founder at a later period improved the methods and adapted them to the manufacture of handles, escutcheons, etc. It is quite plain from these facts that Hepplewhite was quick to grasp the opportunity presented, whereby appropriate handles and the like could be obtained at moderate cost to grace his case work. The Hepplewhite elliptic-shaped handles are always to be found of chaste design and beautifully executed.

on old Hepplewhite and Sheraton furniture must have been imported from England, and moreover, must have been especially designed for the products of the respective men. Be that as it may, there came a time when the fine and desirable brasses went out of fashion, and ugly wooden pulls of the rustic order of architecture became the rage. In Civil War times, and for many years thereafter, a tremendous business was done in producing the grape and vine-leaf atrocities.

The drawings which illustrate this article are of old cabinet metal hardware from a variety of sources. The seventeenth century examples are well adapted for case work designed on simple lines. The chest lockplates in all probability were fashioned in iron, but all other pieces were cast in brass.

The brass hinges of the year 1777 are representative of a collection of old English pattern books at present in the
The men who made the steel dies from which such brasses were struck must have been men of taste. They did their work well.

The substantial qualities of these eighteenth century hinges are apparent from the sketches. Compare them with the flimsy "stamped from sheet metal" affairs that often do duty today. Present-day castings may frequently have a fair face, but the outlines are so rough as to set one's teeth on edge at appraisal of them. The beveled edge in the eighteenth century examples carries implication of prismatic quality not otherwise attainable. Careful filing is needed so that the miters shall be true. All this attention to detail tends to richness of effect.

Up to a comparatively recent time cabinet doors were made flush with the pilaster. This explains the reason for the double hinge plate in these old-time examples; one plate being accorded the door, the other the pilaster. A hinge thus became a very symmetrical and decorative feature. The French designers of the Louis XIV and XV period changed all this, deeming the hinge plate but a relict of a ruder age. Chippendale, Hepplewhite, Sheraton and compeers followed suit, and not until the time of the Eastlake craze in the seventies of the last century were brass hinge plates again to be seen on English furniture. The fashion lasted but a decade.

The late Jacobean style has a multiplicity of miters, but little carving. When made in ebonized oak and trimmed with handles and lockplates of oxidized silver the effect is particularly fine. A satisfactory greenish black can be imparted to oak by an application of a solution of copperas. Silver mounts most admirably round out such a scheme. In old European buildings the
such things finds a wealth of brass in even escutcheons and handle plates. “There is some very rich brass-work in the frames of the old banner screens, made of beautiful needle-work panels, over which so much time must have been spent. A remarkably fine banner holder in the Victoria and Albert Museum is typical of many others. We have only to look round the house and imagine how it looked a century ago to discover that the collectable objects of copper and brass, even when domestic utensils and curios have been removed, included many other objects besides those referred to which may be secured among the old shops and builders’ odds and ends.

“It may at times be necessary to polish parts of curios which have been subjected to rough wear and are, therefore, badly scratched. A very fine file will remove scratches; fine emery will then make the surface quite smooth, after which it can be polished with rotten stone and oil, some adding a little turpentine.”

Oaken woodwork is frequently to be found of a greenish black. Rain water from copper and iron gutters and conduits, operating through the centuries, is doubtless responsible for the black effect.

W. BURGESS, in his recent book “Chats on Old Copper and Brass,” makes the following note: “The metal work of the interior, such as lock plates, hinges, and door knobs, was frequently of brass, and very ornate some of these quaint old fittings are. Perhaps the most interesting are those which were much used on the more portable sideboards, corner cupboards and chests. It would appear that the extravagance in design reached its height when Chippendale’s influence extended to the metal ornaments on the furniture, as well as to the scroll-work and carving of the woodwork. Some of this metal work gives evidence of Chinese influence, or as it was then called, Chinese taste, shown in the landscapes, palanquins, and Chinese trees and flowers, even in English metal work. The collector of