



Great Chair, 1670-1690
Thomas Dennis (1638-1706)

Great Chair, 1670-1690

Ipswich, MA

Oak

Gift of Robert Brookhouse, 1821

108886



HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Colonial society was governed by an overarching belief in “natural” hierarchy. There was an order of things where man was at the top of a chain of the visible world. In government, the king was highest, and in religion, God. Therefore, it is not surprising that households likewise followed a strict hierarchy, where a male head of household presided, then the wife, then older, then younger, children. Great chairs were owned and used by men who were the heads of households. They would also use the best plate, flatware, and drinking vessels, and they would receive the best (or perhaps the only) cut of meat at mealtime. The great chair was a symbol of power and authority within the family.

For Nathaniel Hawthorne, looking back at colonial Salem, the Great Chair was a symbol of that society. The following excerpts are from his story, “Grandfather’s Chair” (1840)

Now, the chair in which Grandfather sat was made of oak, which had grown dark with age, but had been rubbed and polished till it shone as bright as mahogany. It was very large and heavy, and had a back that rose high above Grandfather’s white head. This back was curiously carved in open work, so as to represent flowers, and foliage, and other devices, which the children had often gazed at, but could never understand what they meant...

"Do, Grandfather, talk to us about this chair," she [Clara] repeated.

"Well, child," said Grandfather, patting Clara's cheek, "I can tell you a great many stories of my chair. Perhaps your cousin Laurence would like to hear them too. They would teach him something about the history and distinguished people of his country which he has never read in any of his schoolbooks."

ART HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Thomas Dennis carved this throne-like chair for his own use. The solid, high back and front skirt are richly ornamented with carved leaves, volutes (scroll patterns), and other flowing elements that add a sense of movement to an otherwise rather rigid, square object.

SAMPLE GUIDING QUESTIONS

- Look carefully at the carved areas of this chair. What types of forms or designs do you see?
- Why do you think the person who made and decorated this chair did not choose to carve designs into the seat of the chair?
- Who do you think might have had a chair like this? Why?
- Many homes had a Great Chair, as this was called. Who would have sat in the Great Chair? Why?

SUGGESTED LEARNING ACTIVITIES

- Ask students whether their homes today have different types of chairs for different members of the family. Why are certain chairs designated for certain people? (high chairs for babies or toddlers, for example)
- Read excerpts from Nathaniel Hawthorne’s novel, *The House of Seven Gables* (1851), where he describes this chair; or an excerpt from “Grandfather’s Chair” (1840). Ask students to write a story about a piece of furniture that they associate closely with one of their own family members.