Gifted Artisan and Savvy Businessman

Day was familiar with the furniture of Joseph Meeks & Sons, which likely inspired some of his own furniture.

Detail of Joseph Meeks & Sons Broadside (New York), 1833. Original in the Collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art

The left side and back of this iconic lounge demonstrate Day’s lyrical manipulation of positive and negative spaces, along with curves and scrolls that suggestion motion.

Lounge made by Thomas Day, 1858. Loan and photograph courtesy of the North Carolina Museum of History

S-shaped pillars on each side and a mirrored gallery back with matching whimsical s-scrolls lighten the appearance of this massive sideboard.

Thomas Day sideboard, ca. 1857. Loan and photograph courtesy of the North Carolina Museum of History

Thomas Day’s early furniture reflects a mastery of popular pattern books, a source for many of his classically inspired pieces. By the 1840s, he had developed a more idiosyncratic design aesthetic that distinguished his work from his contemporaries. A savvy businessman, Day crafted Grecian or Late Empire style furniture, as well as French, cottage, and Gothic influenced furniture that reflected current popular trends.

Day understood standard design conventions and principles, and pushed beyond them to develop a distinct vocabulary of three-dimensionality, individualized motifs, and exuberant ornamentation. His signature design elements include positive and negative spaces manipulated in a lyrical way, and expressive serpentine shapes combined with bold curves to convey motion or lighten a massive appearance.

His furniture reflects a complicated life and a struggle between his values and beliefs and a society in which most of the people who looked like him were enslaved by others who looked like his clients. Day shrewdly negotiated complex racial norms and social conventions, and demonstrated remarkable confidence in his business relationships with wealthy white clients.

More than two hundred pieces of furniture, in addition to woodwork and architectural interiors in eighty plus houses, exist as a testament to the exceptional life and legacy of Thomas Day, a gifted artisan and savvy businessman.