



English Regency Wrought Iron Garden Furniture

by Maggie Lidz

In June 1941, *American Collector*, a pre-eminent monthly publication of the time, described H. F. du Pont's collection of antique English wrought iron garden furniture as among the finest in the United States. Of the seven chairs and benches illustrating the article, five belonged to du Pont, who owned a wide range of antique wrought-iron garden seats reflective of the Regency style dominant in England between the 1790s and the 1840s.¹ In his garden, now Winterthur Museum and Country Estate, were armchairs, two-, three-, and four-person settees, and variously sized convex-curve benches that fit partially around tree trunks. As the museum evaluates this collection, a central question is the same one that confronts the private collector of antique wrought iron garden furniture: how old is it?

The answer is not always clear. Winterthur's curator emeritus Donald Fennimore, author of *Iron at Winterthur* (2004), cautions that since the same techniques were used for centuries, dating well-made wrought iron is a challenge. Charles Hummel, retired deputy director of Winterthur, adds that careful observation helps: "Thickness and variation of the iron sometimes gives you a clue about whether an object is a reproduction or a hand wrought original." The traditional technique for making wrought iron involved heating charcoal and iron ore together to form pig iron. Blacksmiths could then either hammer this into iron bars or, more often, use iron bars produced by forges. By the twentieth century, the rods were stronger and had fewer imperfections. With antique wrought iron, Hummel cautions, "Look out for perfection."

The collector should make a rigorous physical inspection of a piece, checking for damage and previous repairs. The feet are one of the first places to assess for wear and change since the paw feet preferred by early nineteenth-century blacksmiths tend to smooth away over time. Sometimes the manner of a repair can also help with dating. Regency-era wrought iron furniture was created from strips of iron — plain or decorated, often with reeding (a grooving incised into the metal bars) — that were riveted together into the desired shape. Over time, the iron strips can spring loose and repairs may be made. Layers of paint can also offer information. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, wrought iron garden furniture was painted in grey, blue, green, or white. The fashion for painting it black seems to have begun around 1900.²

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Reflecting pool, Winterthur Museum. Today, Winterthur's grounds contains a mix of antique and reproduction English Regency wrought iron furniture. Photography by Jeannette Lindvig.

PREVIOUS PAGE:

Fig. 1: In 1930, H. F. du Pont paid \$2,000 at auction for this pair of English Regency benches. When joined, they form a 17-foot half-moon. Each has four quadrangle backs with interlaced arches and one sloped arm. Photography courtesy of the Winterthur Archives.

Materials suitable for period garden furniture were limited to wood, stone, and iron.³ Wrought iron had several advantages over stone and wood. It was almost impervious to weather, was light enough to move around at whim, and it was malleable enough to be fashioned in a variety of ways by local craftsmen. From the 1790s to the early 1840s, vast quantities of elegant wrought iron seating were made. As the largest and most innovative producers of iron in the world, Great Britain supplied the lion's share, but continental European countries manufactured it as well. Garden furniture designs, like landscape garden style, passed from one nation to another through books, worldly clients, and savvy craftsmen.⁴ This fluidity seems to have excluded the newly formed United States. Only a very few rare examples of wrought iron garden seats have been documented as having been made or even used in America before the mid-nineteenth century.⁵

But by the 1830s, fashion in Europe had shifted from wrought to cast iron furniture, which embodied everything modern; few pieces of Regency-style wrought iron were made after the 1840s. Cast iron was also relatively cheap, highly transformable, and almost indestructible. Not until the 1920s, when the Jazz Age generation rejected all things Victorian, did the simplicity of Regency-era wrought iron return to vogue. During the 1920s and '30s, shiploads of antique garden furniture were imported from Europe, and sophisticated American homeowners like du Pont placed them in their gardens. Fanciful interpretations and line-for-line reproductions abounded. Deliberate forgeries were also made, encouraged by prices



such as the \$2,000 du Pont paid during the Great Depression for a pair of period benches (Fig. 1).

Given two distinct periods of popularity for English Regency-style iron furniture, it is possible to learn to distinguish them, although caution is advised. While twentieth-century reproductions tend to have a simpler, more abstract form and show less age than those made earlier, it can be challenging to see the difference without side-by-side comparisons.

An exhibition and workshops at Winterthur Museum will present the opportunity to learn more about iron garden furniture. *Lost Gardens of the Brandywine* (March 27 through July 25) will examine gardens in the 1920s and '30s through rare color photography and an assortment of garden objects, from lead sculptures to wrought iron seating. Included will be several early nineteenth-century iron

benches. On October 6, 2010, the museum will hold a noon workshop, "Wrought Iron to Nylon Webbing," at which comparisons of period and reproduction garden furniture will be analyzed. [AWA](#)

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1. F. Newlin Price "Wrought Iron Furniture for English Gardens," *American Collector*, (June 1941): 8–9. In the 1930s, Price, the owner of Ferargil Galleries, bought out the inventory of Karl Freund's Art for the Garden, the source for du Pont's garden furniture.
2. Marian Campbell, *Decorative Ironwork*, (London: Victoria and Albert Publication, 1997), 136.
3. Cast-iron furniture would not become commercially viable until the 1820s. See Georg Himmelheber, *Cast-Iron Furniture and all other forms of Iron Furniture* (London: Philip Wilson Publishers, 1996).
4. See the French trade catalogue *Meubles de jardin en fer creux laminé* (Paris: 1830–?).
5. See Barbara Israel, *Garden Ornament: Three Centuries of American Taste* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1999), 79–80.