

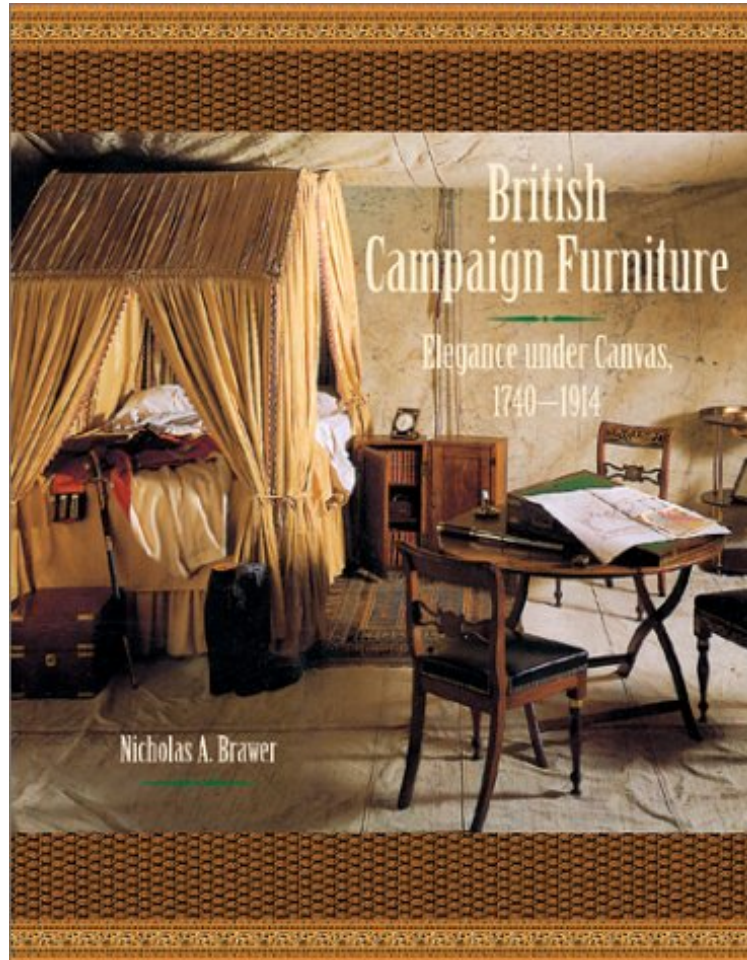
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British Campaign Furniture: Elegance Under Canvas, 1740-1914

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By A Customer

Collapsible or 'campaign' furniture has been standard issue for people on the move for centuries. Armies in ancient Greece and Rome relied on folding chairs, cots and the like as they advanced from battlefield to battlefield. In the Middle Ages, furniture that handily collapsed was among the important domestic possessions of peripatetic aristocrats, who carted their chairs, tables and beds from castle to castle and disguised crude carpentry with costly silk hangings and tapestries. But according to *British Campaign Furniture, Elegance Under Canvas, 1740-1914*, it wasn't until the late 18th century that campaign furniture became a sophisticated accoutrement almost entirely of the British empire, outfitting the homes of Anglos abroad. A cultural constant, often found in paintings of conquering heroes, campaign furniture was hip, too. As elegantly explained by author Nicholas A. Brawer--an independent curator formerly with Sotheby's New York and the Victoria Albert Museum in London--the craze for campaign furniture was fueled as much by its practicality as by its owners' desire to preserve their national image. Challenged to set up thoroughly British encampments in distant colonial outposts, soldiers and memsahibs set sail for India and points beyond with entire households of furniture--most of it cunningly designed to be disassembled and packed tightly into trunks and boxes. When Mary Bolton and Captain Benjamin Simner, an officer in the Duke of Wellington's Regiment, arrived in Madras in 1865, the first thing the newlyweds did was to unpack two crates, each measuring about three feet square, and out tumbled an entire living and dining room: a dining table, four dining chairs, a settee, a sideboard and an easy chair. Ingenious but also luxurious. The suite, a wedding gift, was made of hand-carved walnut upholstered in button-tufted brocade. Dozens of now-obscure firms like John Jacques, Morgan Sanders and John Ward dominated the campaign furniture industry; the Simners' suite was made by Ross Co., a Dublin concern. Such was the demand by aristocratic soldiers, travelers and diplomats that high-profile cabinetmakers produced their share of campaign furniture as well. Thomas Sheraton designed camp beds for cavalry officers and other collapsible furniture, as did Thomas Chippendale, A. Hepplewhite Co. and Ince Mayhew--all of whom, Brawer notes, 'furiously competed for commissions' from outward-bound Britons. Practical and stylish, campaign furniture allowed designers and inventors to pack as much furniture into as small a space as possible. Chairs, tables and a sofa could be packed into the lower half of a chiffonier. Canopy beds were conjured out of nothing more than a few metal rods and tightly rolled curtains dripping with fringe. Once its deftly turned legs and leaves were stored away in a secret compartment, a 10-foot mahogany dining table could be reduced to the size of a small area rug. And at the Crystal Palace exhibition in 1851, Benjamin Taylor offered a line of campaign furniture with cork-fiber cushions that doubled as life preservers. Several items depicted in Brawer's book will be seen in 'Britain's Portable Empire: Campaign Furniture from the 18th and 19th Centuries,' an exhibition curated by Brawer opening in July at the Katonah Museum of Art in Katonah, New York. Fascinating, erudite--and spiced with often comical excerpts from expatriates' letters home--*British Campaign Furniture* is a delightful glimpse into one of design history's oddest yet most compelling detours.

The first-ever book on the suites of travelling furniture used by British soldiers over one-and-a-half centuries. For the travelling British soldier, campaign furniture - chairs, desks, and other items, brought the comfort and civility of home to life under canvas. Made to be carried on the march and assembled on site, campaign furniture reached an aesthetic apex in 18th- and 19th-century England.

.com "The first axiom for camp is... do not make yourself uncomfortable for want of things to which you are accustomed," advised *The Complete Indian Housekeeper and Cook* in 1890 to high-born Brits living in India, most of which England had by that point colonized through a succession of wars, or military "campaigns," throughout the 18th and 19th centuries. This impeccably curated, insightfully narrated, and richly illustrated volume proves that the homesick subjects of the Raj took such advice deeply to heart. It showcases nearly 200 years of furniture designed expressly to approximate all the refinement of a proper British household inside the canvas tents of ranking officers afar, but also to break down and fold up fast for easy, compact transport (hence campaign furniture's other appellation, "knock-down" furniture). Masterfully put together by independent curator Brawer, previously a researcher in the Indian and Southeast Asian departments of London's venerable Victoria and Albert Museum, this handsome volume succeeds on two levels: it amply highlights the stylistic elegance and technical ingenuity of this kind of furniture--a bureau that becomes a bed when its drawers are removed; a lady's bidet that folds into a leather case; or a dining table seating 20 that fits inside a 10-inch-deep box--while putting it (often quite wryly) in the historical context of an expatriate society that sought to re-create Britain wherever it went and had little or no interest in adapting to or learning about the customs or designs of the people it conquered (and essentially enslaved). Throughout, Brawer includes excerpts from a fascinating array of letters, journals, and other documents of the period, and an excellent pictorial directory of the furniture's craftsmen and manufacturers helps make this impressive tome invaluable for collectors, design historians, Anglophiles, and Merchant-Ivory set designers alike. --Timothy Murphy

About the Author

Nicholas A. Brawer earned his Master's degree in art history from the Courtauld Institute in London. Currently an independent curator, he has held research positions at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London and the British and Commonwealth Museum in Bristol. He has written on decorative arts and architecture for *Antiques* magazine.

This is his first book. Jerome Phillips is an antique dealer, and an authority on British military furniture. He lives in Oxfordshire.