

## Fashionable Furniture



**VISIT THE BMA** and find *Grecian Couch* in the American Wing. In the same gallery, look for a simpler daybed that was made about 100 years earlier. Which would you rather have in your house?

### *Grecian Couch* Unknown maker, New York

Just imagine! You are a well-to-do gentleman or lady living in New York about 180 years ago and you wish to furnish the parlor of your house with a most elegant couch. The couch should be stylish and up-to-date, something that will express your sophisticated good taste. You engage a master furniture builder and ask him to make a couch that will catch the eye of everyone who walks in your door.

Your new couch might resemble this spectacular *Grecian Couch* with bright coral upholstery and shining gold ornament. During the early 1800s, when Americans were fascinated with everything related to ancient Greece and Rome, people were intrigued with the idea that ancient Greeks and Romans reclined on couches when they attended banquets rather than sitting up straight in chairs. As a result, American furniture makers began to produce fashionable parlor couches that allowed people to recline in the Greek manner while reading a book or enjoying a moment of relaxation.

The artist who built *Grecian Couch* knew that many ancient couches had arms of different heights and a back that stopped with a flourish before reaching the end. He treated his wood in such a way that it resembled expensive ebony, and used gold leaf to stencil the kind of delicate pattern found on Greek vases. He carved cornucopias filled with fruit and foliage in the classical style, coated them with a smooth plaster called gesso, and gilded them so that they shone in candlelight. To finish, he carved wooden feet in the shape of hairy animal paws and painted them so that they appeared to be made of ancient bronze.

#### Challenge for Students

Styles of furniture go in and out of fashion, just like the styles of cars and dresses. Compare *Grecian Couch* with photographs of contemporary couches or daybeds in advertising circulars or online. Draw your own design for a couch or daybed that reflects your view of today's world.

Print the image on page 2 for your students.

*Grecian Couch* (detail). 1815-1825. Unknown maker, New York. Ebonized wood with stenciled, gilt, and painted decoration, carved, gessoed and gilt applied ornament. 33-7/8 x 89-1/2 x 25-1/4 inches. The Baltimore Museum of Art: Gift of Cornelia Machen Geddes, Sacramento, California, BMA 1991.147

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