

The evolution of the CHIMNEY PIECE



There is more to decorative chimney pieces than meets the eye. Will Fisher, owner and creator of Jamb, specialists in fine chimney pieces and fire grates, examines their development

In the words of Isaac Ware (1704-1766): "Chimney pieces... with us no article in a well finished room is so essential. The eye is immediately cast upon it on entering, and the place of sitting down is naturally near it. By this means, it becomes the most eminent thing in the finishing of an apartment." The chimney piece is the focal point that sets the scene of a room, from which everything flows.

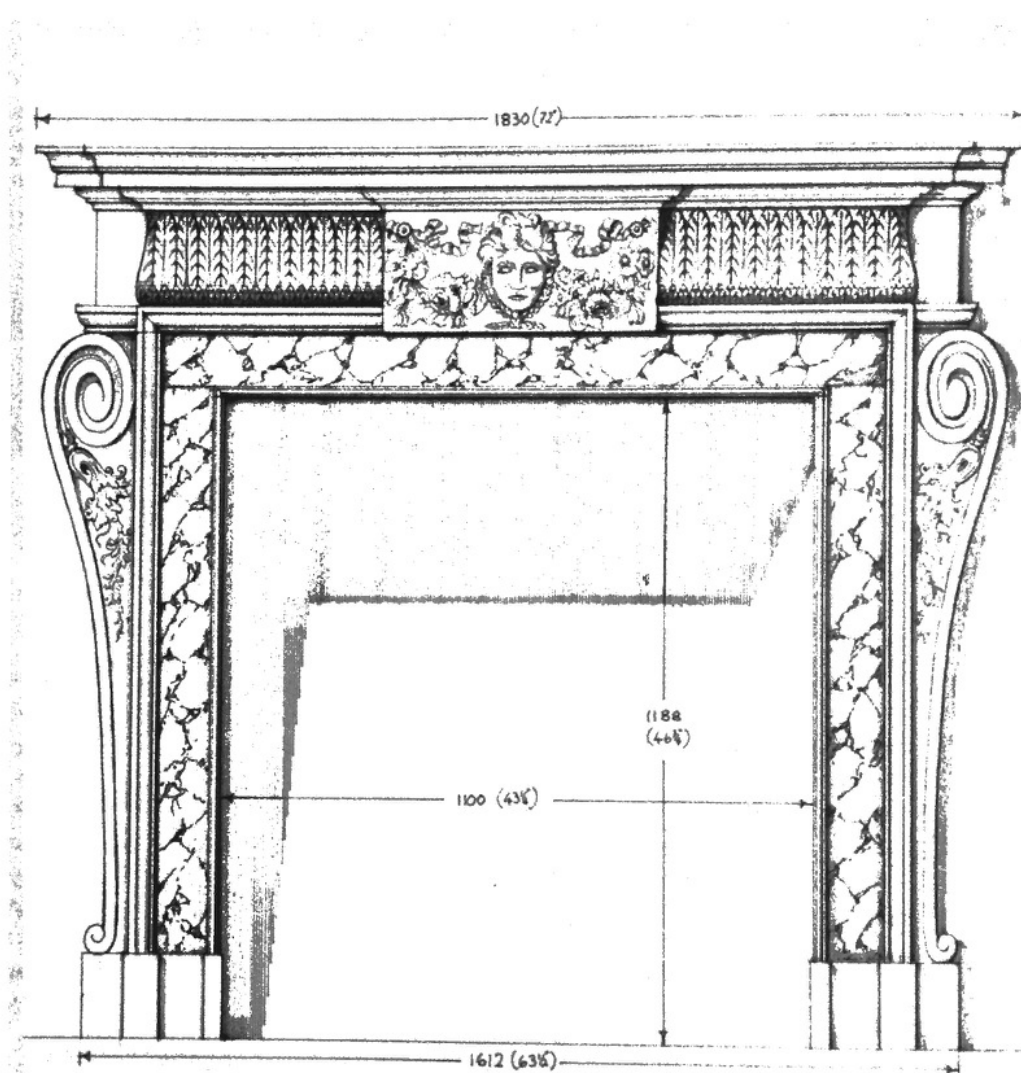
The name of the surround framing a fire opening, now commonly called a fireplace, or mantelpiece in the United States, was, by the eighteenth century, called a chimney piece, and I believe this is still the correct usage.

For centuries, formal rooms of any importance have been provided with chimney pieces and until the invention of central heating would have been uninhabitable in winter without them. They were an important source not only of heat, but also of light. They quickly became the major focal point of a room, with the pre-eminent architects of the day designing them. Wood, stone or marble were favoured construction materials. The wooden ones normally of pine, sometimes with applied carvings of limewood or, in later periods, with stucco or pressed pewter mouldings, these in the eighteenth century were always painted and never

stripped and waxed. Stone chimney pieces were normally of Portland or Bath Stone and often finely sculpted, although more restrained designs were favoured in entrance halls.

The costly marble versions were made from imported marble sourced primarily from Italy and Greece. The frames and bodies being of the finest ivory-tinged statuary marble, which, because of the play of light and shadow, threw the sculpted carvings into relief. These were often inlaid with coloured marbles, the yellows

of Sienna and Giallo being favourites. Also used were multicoloured Jasper, red and violet Breche, and greens from the Verde Antico quarries. The finest sculptors, statuary and masons were employed to carve the mouldings and decorations; many of the best such as Rysbrack, Sir Henry Cheere and the Carter family, were London based. ▶



ABOVE Handbooks of designs have been used for centuries. This drawing is taken from the Chesney's directory of chimney piece designs.



NEOCLASSICAL FLAVOURS

1760 – 1790

In 1758, a young Scot, Robert Adam, returned from Italy after a four-year stay guided by the French architectural designer Clérissieu and the inventive Italian designer GB Piranesi, both pioneers of the neoclassical taste. He brought with him a style based on ideas taken from excavations at Herculaneum and elsewhere. In his own words the style was “light mouldings ... gracefully formed and arranged with propriety and skill”. Characteristic of his work are spidery scrolls and oval bas reliefs of male and female heads, which on a chimney piece indicate the celebration of a marriage. The style caught on, and chimney pieces became more colourful. To fulfil demand, new methods of manufacture were introduced: from Italy scagliola inlay enjoyed a revival – a plaster and crushed-marble mix. Experiments were made on painting copper panels, which were added to pine and gesso chimney pieces. Josiah Wedgwood also put his porcelain panels into chimney pieces.

Chimney pieces and decorative details were also devised by the enterprising ‘Mrs’ Eleanor Coade, whose workshops at the site of Waterloo Station made a very tough imitation stone.

Illustrated design books abounded, so village carpenters could turn out simple pine chimney pieces as fashionable as that of a Londoner.



EARLY REGENCY/LA GRECQUE ELEMENTS

1760 – 1830

In the very late eighteenth century and early nineteenth century Regency period, the intricate elegance of Adam’s neoclassical movement went out of fashion to be replaced by a new ‘a la Grecque’ style championed by the Great Doric order. The Greek column was not as tall as the Roman and there were no original Greek chimney pieces any more than there were Roman ones, but it was felt that a plain chimney piece would be appropriate to the Doric order and these became noticeably lower, with both jamb and frieze becoming narrow with restrained decoration, the centre tablets almost disappearing. The champions of the day, Soane, Dance and Holland, simplified designs and, having torn up the rule book, one sees designs that are startlingly modern even today. ►

ABOVE LEFT This fire surround was inspired by the chimney piece in the entrance hall of Kenwood House, north London. The original was designed by the Adam brothers and was carved by George Burns. Entrance Hall, Heritage Collection, £7,800, Acquisitions

ABOVE RIGHT Displaying strong architectural form, this white marble chimney piece is taken after a design by Sir John Soane, who himself drew inspiration from the work of Inigo Jones. The original antique chimney featured at the Bank of England. Lincoln carved marble chimney piece, £6,500, Jamb



Hand-carved Gothic-style motifs in limestone are prominent. Winchester, £5,100. Acquisitions

GOTHIC/EARLY 20TH CENTURY EVOCATIONS

During the Victorian period, chimney-piece designers lost sight of classical traditions and pieces became heavier, with the fire opening which had been rectangular, becoming arched with heavy cast-iron interiors. The Gothic medievalism movement inspired by Anthony Salvin and William Burges came to the fore, many with impressive 'fifteenth-century' hoods. However, Victorian design lacked a universally accepted standard of perceived correct taste, such as had guided Georgian architects.

The early twentieth century saw the development of the homespun styles of William Morris and the Art Nouveau movement. In the hands of Charles Rennie Mackintosh, these had a cold elegance, albeit with sinuous lines, however the propitiations of some of the chimney pieces are curious: a very large example could have a minute opening with shelves up to the ceiling, and they were often placed in corners. There was also revival of the Adam style, and some very good 'eighteenth-century' chimney pieces were made using traditional tools and carving methods.



Original and rare, this Rococo chimney piece was probably designed by Sir Henry Cheere, £135,000, seen with matching accessories, Westland.

FIRE GRATES AND BASKETS

When the earliest chimneys were constructed, the hearth was provided with andirons, sometimes called dogs, to support the wood. Basket grates were only introduced upon the introduction of coal.

By the early eighteenth century, the free-standing basket was backed by a cast-iron fire plate, or fire back, which rested on wrought-iron struts, with sides of cast iron and a grid through which loose ash fell. Decoration was confined to the front, and was composed of three fire bars and a fretted apron with cheeks ending in ornamental legs.

From around 1750 the ornamental embellishments became more elaborate, often embodying Gothic, Rococo and Chinoiserie styles, following the prevailing taste of the times. ■

FURTHER EXPLORATION

Chimney pieces abound in a great array of forms today. For inspiration, consider the following resources

Architectural Heritage Bespoke chimney pieces in various styles. Tel 01386 584 414; architectural-heritage.co.uk

English Fireplaces Offers a full range of hand-carved marble, limestone and sandstone fireplaces.

Tel 01730 887 336; englishfireplaces.co.uk

HW Poulter & Son Seventy-year-old family business specialising in English and French chimney pieces from the 18th and 19th centuries, as well as accessories from similar periods.

Tel 020 8749 4557; hwpoulterandson.co.uk

Martin Moore Stone Suppliers of natural stone fireplaces.

Tel 01372 478 955; martinmoorestone.com

Marble Hill Fireplaces Offers a large and comprehensive selection of fireplaces, including antique chimney pieces and accessories. Tel 020 8892 1488; marblehill.co.uk

Nostalgia Antique Fireplaces Specialists in reclaimed chimney pieces, many antique dating from 1550 to 1920.

Tel 0161 477 7706; nostalgia-uk.com

Stovax Selection of classic and contemporary chimney pieces. Outlets countrywide; stovax.com

Templestone Wide selection of period-style chimney pieces made from cast, reconstituted stone. Bespoke options available.

Tel 01963 350242; templestone.co.uk