

Lazy Susan Table

Edwards and Thomas Jefferson are rarely mentioned together, unless perhaps to note their divergent religious persuasions. But they shared a love of innovative study furniture. Jefferson's "Cabinet," as it is preserved and presented at Monticello, reflecting his retirement years, features a leather armchair pulled up to a writing desk, under which is an ottoman—apparently Jefferson liked to keep his legs raised when he wrote. Undoubtedly, Jefferson's domicile was much more formal and richly furnished than Edwards's, but there are intriguing parallels. Jefferson (at least late in life) and Edwards did not write exclusively at their desks. And beside Jefferson's writing table is a four-sided, revolving bookstand with side pallets that folded out, on a slant, and one on top that folded up, to hold as many as five volumes.¹ Jefferson invented his tabletop bookstand, and Edwards's lazy Susan table, though larger in scale, was custom-made, doubtless to Edwards's own specifications. In the revolving bookstand, both authors found a similar solution to the problem of how to keep a maximum number of books and manuscripts open before them without having to shift their chairs around.

Constructed on an ornately turned yet sturdy base consisting of a central pillar supported by four angled braces mortised into an equilateral cross base terminating in four bun feet, the tabletop is divided into six canted panels topped by a flat hexagonal surface. The bottom edge of the tabletop has an attached molding so that books can be rested on the six canted panels. The overall appearance is that of a central music stand for a sextet set on the underpinnings of a substantial tea table, two polite furniture forms joined into one. In any event, the result is a rotating rack that could hold Edwards's manuscript folios, quartos, or reference books as needed; moreover, it is sturdy enough to hold heavy tomes and be leaned on or used as a writing surface.

The deep Jacobean turnings of the book table's base contrast sharply with the top's Shaker-like simplicity.² Although the table base's ornate style appears to have predated the style of the top, the base's composition also suggests something that might have been constructed ad hoc: it seems to be composed of joint stool legs, four smaller ones for the braces, four larger ones for the cross, and a slightly larger one for the center post. A late seventeenth-century table might have been so constructed, and thus ready to hand once its top was removed, but such sturdy components (new or recycled) might have also been stocked by a carpenter or cabinetmaker and put to use to fabricate a base adequate for the large rotating top, according to Edwards's specifications. The top reflects what material culture scholars call a vernacular plain style of architecture and furniture design—perhaps a material expression of the rhetorical plain style that distinguished Connecticut Valley preaching—that arose in mid-eighteenth century New England, an aesthetic implemented by growing numbers of artisans moving into rural areas from seacoast cities.³

¹ Kevin J. Hayes, *The Road to Monticello: The Life and Mind of Thomas Jefferson* (New York, 2008), 566.

² The base and top date from two different periods: the central support earlier, the canted panel construction before 1750. Conservator's notes, n.d., Stockbridge Library Association, Stockbridge, Mass. The lazy Susan table is 48.5 inches across at its widest point and 26.5 inches from the floor to the bottom of the canted panels. Because it was painted (probably in the nineteenth century), the types of wood used to construct the piece are unknown. Barbara Allen, curator of the Historical Collection, kindly provided access to the table and allowed detailed photographs.

³ On the stockpiling of premade parts by journeymen, see Robert Blair St. George, *Conversing by Signs: Poetics of Implication in Colonial New England Culture* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1998), 321. On the rise of a "plain style" and the proliferation of a craftsmen class, see Kevin M. Sweeney, "High-Style Vernacular: Lifestyles of the Colonial Elite," in *Of Consuming Interests: The Style of Life in the Eighteenth Century*, ed. Cary Carson, Ronald Hoffman, and Peter J. Albert (Charlottesville, Va., 1994), 1–58, esp. 8–10; David Jaffee, "The Ebenezers Devotion: Pre- and Post-Revolutionary Consumption in Rural Connecticut," *New England Quarterly* 76, no. 2 (June 2003): 239–64, esp. 246, 252.