



I was standing in front of the most beautiful cabinet and asked myself the question, 'What is the meaning of all this carve work? What is the message that the cabinetmaker wanted to convey?' This began a search for sources of information which one could find simple meanings to aid in the understanding of the symbols and allegories that was once so widely used.

Traditional symbols form a universal language which is becoming more mysterious as we move further away from the thought patterns of those who produced it. Originally, these symbols - typically, familiar objects standing for something abstract, such as an idea, quality, emotion, value, aspiration, belief, hope or fear - were anything but mysterious. Their in-

tentention was to provide an instantly recognizable representation, or mental picture, of a concept.

One must also take into consideration that signs and symbols often overlap each other but have different purposes and therefore we must make a clear distinction between them. Signs represents or provide information. Whereas symbols resembles or give ordinary things a larger dimension or deeper meaning, often a spiritual one.

Symbols do not have fixed meanings, some are positive and some negative, it depends on the changes in culture, different societies and context. Attitude also played an important role in the way the cabinetmaker or the designer throughout history has expressed himself through

his works. The artist per se is partly responsible in displaying societal attitude as to what was going on during the period through his or her design.

Many symbols are based on ancient myths of powerful gods controlling wind and weather at the four main directions - north, south, east and west. The four seasons themselves represented a cosmic order based on the number four. In many traditions the repeating cycle of spring, summer, autumn and winter symbolized a pattern of birth, growth, decline and death which made sense of the human cycle. There are also the four elements - earth, air, fire and water- being the basis of order and harmony. This led to the number four acquiring extraordinary symbolic power

## SIGNS AND SYMBOLS OF CARVED FURNITURE





The Lion is commonly used in heraldry either carved or on brass plaques on furniture also the carved representation of a lion's head is used on furniture or a furry paw at the end of a furniture leg. The lion is known as the "king of the beasts," and always a favorite animal symbol of honor, courage, royalty, strength and leadership. The lion appeared in early Greek and Roman furniture, and found in French, English, and Italian Renaissance designs.

The tree of life is a symbol of immortality and eternal life. With its branches reaching into the sky, and roots deep in the earth, it dwells in three worlds- a link between heaven, the earth, and the underworld, uniting above and below. It is both a feminine symbol, bearing sustenance,



and stood more widely for totality, stability and universal power.

Symbolism is full of puzzles and symbolists often disagree, differences of interpretation do not make the symbols less valid but they do mean that some knowledge of their cultural origins is needed.

The Acanthus is a plant of the Mediterranean, whose stylized leaves form the characteristic decoration on most furniture. It is used on the capitals of Corinthian pillars as friezes or end of arm rests of chairs. The symbolism and meaning associated with the Acanthus is that of enduring life and immortality. The acanthus are also used as a funerary motif to symbolize the prickly journey

of life to death, and then the ultimate triumph of succeeding to the afterlife. The Roman writer Vitruvius (circa 75 BC - circa 15 BC) related that the Corinthian order had been invented by Callimachus, a Greek architect and sculptor who was inspired by the sight of a votive basket that had been left on the grave of a young girl. A few of her toys were in it, and a square tile had been placed over the basket, to protect them from the weather. An acanthus plant had grown through the woven basket, mixing its spiny, deeply cut leaves with the weave of the basket. It was told that graveyard keepers saw the acanthus as a weed and tried to exterminate it but it kept on growing back and there for the belief of immortality.

and a masculine, visibly phallic symbol- another union. The tree of life never died. Humanity was cut off from the tree because they chose the other and could not have both.

Pomegranate is a fruit that was used mostly to decorate furniture on side panels or formed part of the main carved work. It is normally carved in a 'ripe' open form, it was an attribute to the Greek goddess Proserpina for her periodical return to earth in the spring. In Christian art it is hope in immortality and of resurrection. It is also a symbol of fertility because of its many seeds.

There are just tons - think and you'll come up with even more!! Hope this jumpstarts your curiosity!