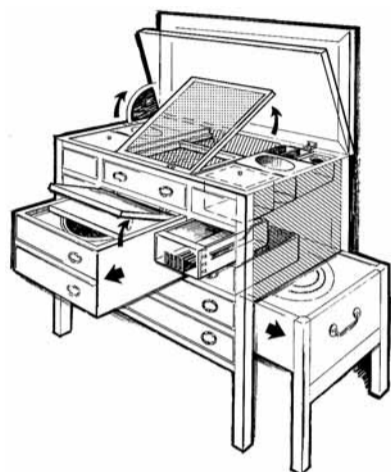
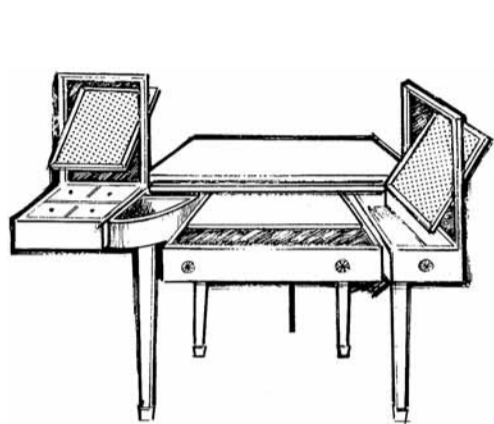
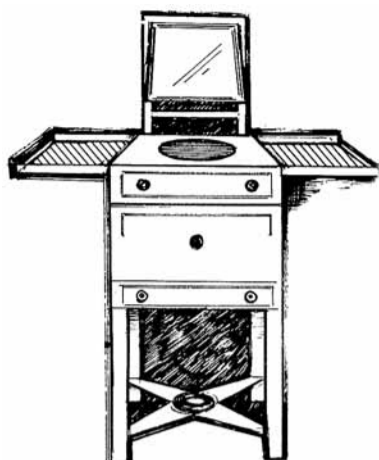


Figure 76—A dressing table; from the 2nd edition of the *Cabinet-Makers' London Book of Prices*, 1793



John Evelyn or perhaps his daughter in satirical verse includes

'... implements,
Of toilet plate, gilt and emboss'd,
And several other things of cost.
The table miroir, one glue pot,
... and boxes more,

For powders, patches, waters store,
In silver flasks, or bottles, cups
Cover'd, or open, to wash chaps.'



The rise and demise of the dressing table

If one is to consider the evolution of the dressing table one has to look at all the components from the aspect of vanity, the development of mirrors and the influences of furniture design.

In May 1660, Samuel Pepys wrote that 'all the world is in a merry mood because of the kings coming.' The restoration of Charles II was a welcome beginning to the decorative furnishings of houses after the austerity of the Cromwell period. With the restoration of the monarchy, foreign influences in furniture design and other fashions found favour in England when it must be admitted native styles were almost non-existent.

Louis XIV of France had inspired in royalist exiles a taste for luxury and the arrival of French and Dutch immigrants in the country further contributed to this state of affairs. After the great fire in London, when over 10,000 houses were destroyed, John Evelyn recorded 'Joiners, cabinetmakers, looking-glass makers et al are now engaged to produce pieces of entirely different character to those existent before.'

The bedchambers made for the Royal Palaces and for state apartments in the houses of the nobility were excessively expensive rich in decoration engaging all forms of artisans and their associates. It had become customary for Royalty to give audience in the bedchamber. Ladies too found it fashionable to hold receptions while in bed. Evelyn, attending Charles II in 1683 recorded 'following him into the Dutchesse of Portsmouth's dressing room within her bedchamber ... filled with rich furniture and many costly trifles.'

At the time, records show that women's dressing rooms housed small tables with

drawers covered with a carpet or a cloth, and that they were sometimes referred to as a 'toilet.' They vary considerably in style; no one kind was yet definitely termed a dressing table. The drawers contained numerous cosmetics used by men and women alike. Painting, rougeing and patching were fashionable. Elaborate sets comprising boxes for combs and brushes, powder and perfumes, etc.

At the end of the 18th century, the dressing table evolved in its own right as piece of furniture exclusively for female consumption.

In the 17th century at the time of the Restoration, the Duke of Buckingham imported the art of making mirror plates into England from Venice when he established a factory at Vauxhall. This was a very interesting and successful exercise because it carried on until the end of the 18th century. The property of reflection was until then gained from polished metal but the use of

tinfoil coated thinly with mercury and then pressed onto glass gave a superior result. The drawback for the workers was the deadly effect of mercury poisoning and many were to die before the problem was realised.

It was not until the 18th century that the swinging mirror was introduced in the Queen Anne reign. These toilet mirrors sat on a chest of drawers and were very popular through the 18th century. When the Industrial Revolution brought prosperity to a growing middle class in the 18th and 19th centuries, a sense of civilised and gentrified life evolved as the middle classes aspired to copy the upper classes in style and substance.

The upper classes followed the trend set by the nobility and it is interesting to search some of the early writings to find that they spent much of their wealth on their houses and furnishings, gradually increasing the variety of furniture in their home to fulfil specialised needs. One of the first responses to wealth was and is the improvement in grooming from both sexes. It is interesting to note that among the first pieces of bedroom furniture, other than the bed and cupboard for clothes, was a writing table with a lift up lid to reveal a mirror and a compartment for brushes, makeup and so on.

So we see the early contest between intellect and vanity, both supposedly of equal merit and strangely joined together. One cannot be sure if these pieces were exclusively for male or female use or shared. At the end of the 18th century, the dressing table evolved in its own right as piece of

furniture exclusively for female consumption.

At the same time, the washstand comes into its own, frequently disguised as a chest of drawers or a cabinet. A footnote to *Sheraton's Cabinet Dictionary*, 1803, explains its function to be 'In order that they may stand in a genteel room without giving offence to the eye.'

There is an interesting dichotomy on a gender basis. Although the 18th century desk/dressing table was generally oriented to the male tastes, by the 19th century all dressing tables related to females. This exclusivity is not complete, for the male has still to brush his hair, wax the moustache and even tug the fetlock, for which he has the mirror attached to the gentlemen's chest to form his dressing chest.

Continuing into the 20th century, dressing tables were at the height of fashion for stylish women. Hollywood movies of the 1920s through to the 1960s frequently (or is that invariably?) featured the dressing table in scenes of romance and luxury. Suddenly, in the last quarter of the 20th century, they seem to fade away. It was not that they became unfashionable they seem to have just disappeared! Perhaps this is a late 20th century aberration and they may swing back into style ■

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