

Guy Bernard Reichmann

Family Valuables: Pier Table

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Curator: Maya Frenkel Tene

The pier table, inspired by the neo-classical style of the late Georgian era in England (1760–1815), addresses themes of intergenerational wealth, class, and their relationship to violence and trauma. These objects are often passed down through affluent upper-class families and the gentry, sometimes long after the family has lost its status, title, and wealth, serving as a testament to an enduring, unbroken chain of a once-glorious pedigree. What is hidden—or fades with time from these objects—is the exploitation, deprivation, and violence involved in their creation, acquisition, accumulation, and transmission.

In keeping with the style developed during the late Georgian era as a reaction against the opulent designs of the Baroque and Rococo periods, these families' wealth and power are not displayed through excessive ornamentation and decor that obscures the object's functionality. On the contrary, the more restrained the design, the more power it conveys. The upper class acts with precision, avoiding hyperbole and exaggerated expressions—its exploitation, deprivation, and violence are not hidden by opulent decor but are embedded within the structure itself. The design is functional and restrained, masking the violence these families inflicted on their own people, community, and others.

The table, made of wood and polymeric cement—a blend of natural, traditional materials with industrial, modern ones—symbolizes the naturalization of societal hierarchical structures. The table features two children at the front, pointing handguns at each other, and two women—mothers—at the back, mourning or crying, stretching their bony arms toward the children, touching the backs of their heads. This gesture is ambiguous—are they comforting their children, or are they trying to prevent them from killing or being killed?

Although the figures may appear ornamental at first glance, they do not merely decorate or cover the legs of the table; they are integral to its construction. The side rails, the support strips, are the outstretched arms of the mothers, providing support both metaphorically (ornamental) and literally (functional). The bulky, oversized shape of the mother-legs evokes the maternal body, carrying at their center what appears to be an abstraction of a human body or a rifle bullet. The children, smaller than their mothers, distort the shape of the pier table, making it almost unusable due to the steep angle of the tabletop.

Traditionally, and especially in art history, the figure of the lamenting woman symbolizes human suffering. Whether as a mother (Mary), a wife (Andromache), or a sister (Antigone), these figures are left only with their loss. Although often clairvoyant, and frequently the only ones to articulate the dreadful fate to come, they must ultimately surrender to the tasks undertaken by the men in their lives, and they are left with only sorrow and mourning. Children, on the other hand, universally represent hope and continuity, as well as purity and naivety. This is reflected in depictions of angels as children in early modern art, baby Jesus, Moses as an infant, and children dancing and playing—usually in their “birthday suits,” uncorrupted by society. They are both the heirs of their fathers and a promise of a better, more peaceful future.

But here, the women do not face the future and its outcomes. Instead, they avert their gaze—one looking downward, the other sideways. Their function as both legs and side rails serves to maintain this collapsing structure. The children, no longer infants but young kids, have moved from “make-believe” to “making war.” Time passes, and the promise of a brighter

future slips away into a steep decline. The unconventional structure of the table conveys a sense of the absence of authority and rationality—of the order needed to design and plan useful furniture—traditionally linked to masculinity, and in this case, to the father, symbolic or literal.

A family, although an independent unit, is also a model for society. The polysemic word “father” has many related meanings that refer to authority, order, and origin, and it is therefore used metaphorically to indicate rationality, discipline, structure, and, of course, power. From the biblical father, through the Roman paterfamilias, to the forefathers, and up to Lacan’s concept of the father’s function—they are considered the epitome of social order. Traditionally, they are biological males and are therefore bound to societal norms and expectations, such as service, protection, education, and livelihood. By these standards, they are expected to ensure the continuation of the family and, by extension, societal order.

But where is the father? Where is the one who traditionally provides the family with its values and valuables? The one who gives the family its name? The one who is supposed to represent rationality in this irrational piece of furniture? The father is present, as this is his property to own and pass on. He is present in his absence. This pier table symbolizes, from top to bottom—with its steep decline and impossibility—the result of an order designed by and for men, and this is what the father will bequeath, leaving those who were deprived of the power to shape society with the burden of carrying it forward.

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