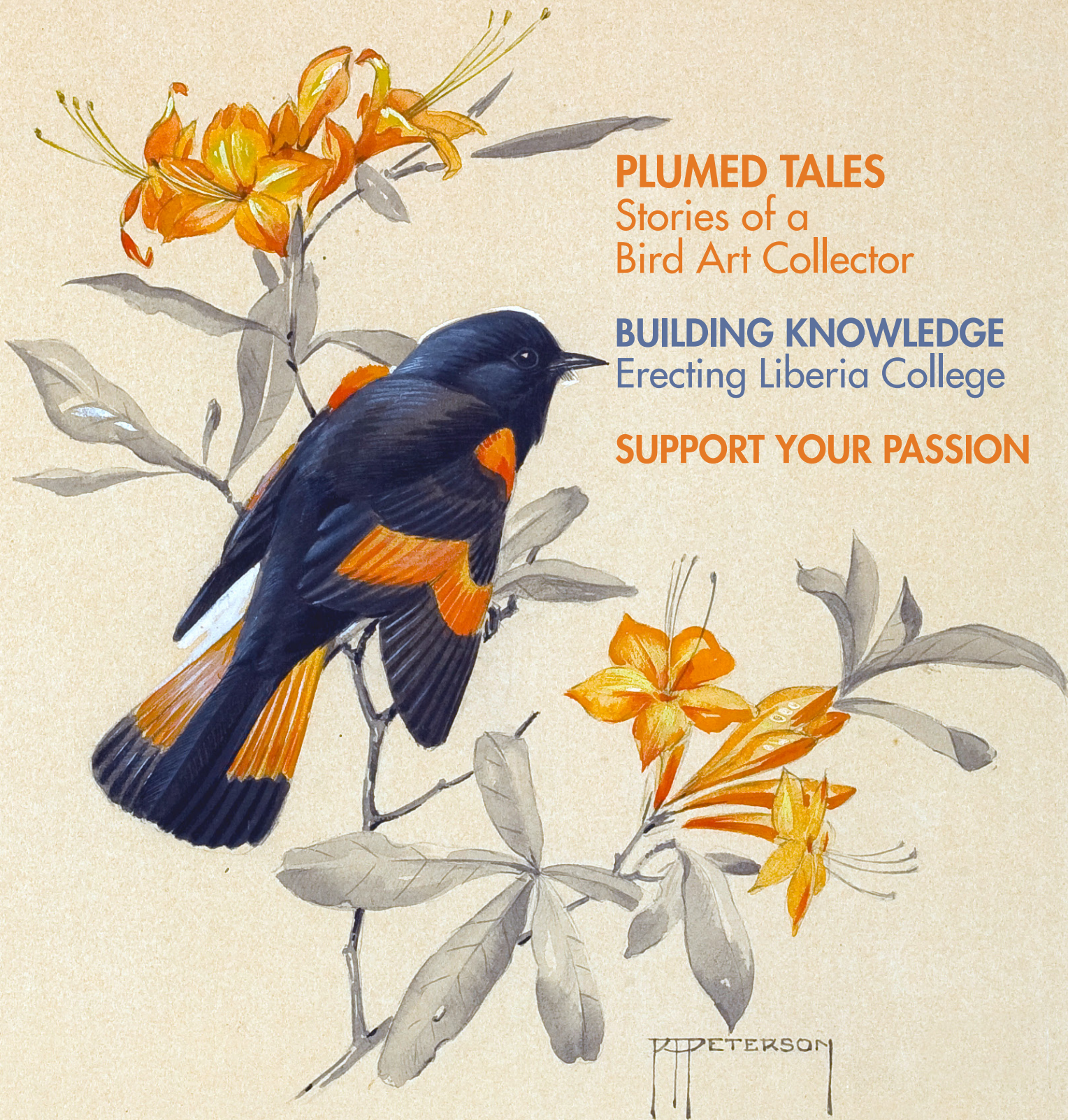


HISTORIC NEW ENGLAND



PLUMED TALES
Stories of a
Bird Art Collector

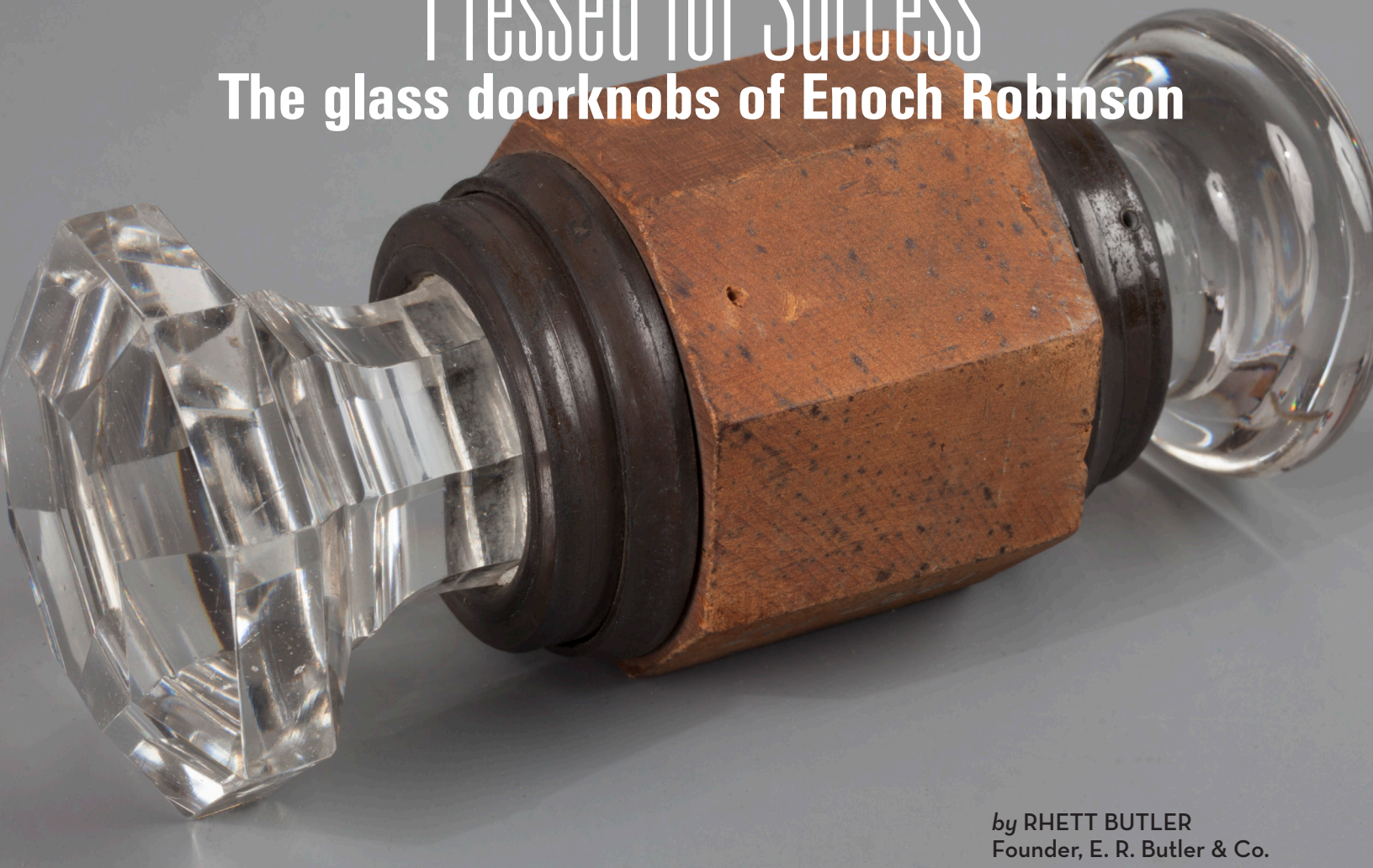
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The glass doorknobs of Enoch Robinson



by RHETT BUTLER
Founder, E. R. Butler & Co.

The model submitted for US Patent 65, filed October 20, 1836, described as “Ferrule Knob for Doors, &c.” and signed by Enoch Robinson, Francis Draper, and Joseph H. Lord.

The listing in *Historic New England’s* collections database was startling: it indicated that there was a group of pressed glass doorknobs that included an actual patent model from the hands of Boston-born machinist and inventor Enoch Robinson (1801-1888), a pioneer of the glass industry in the United States.

It had taken me several years to confirm Robinson’s leading role in the development of pressed glass, as the history of glass manufacturing is dominated by names like Bakewell Glass of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and Deming Jarves and the Boston and Sandwich Glass Com-

pany in Massachusetts. Finding this particular doorknob in *Historic New England’s* collection was remarkable. Signed by the inventors—Robinson, Draper, Lord—it had never been identified as a patent model. Dated 1836, it is an artifact of the transformation of the United States from an agrarian British territory to a rapidly industrializing society.

This model and others in the group are part of a small collection of glass doorknobs that the Smithsonian Institution donated to *Historic New England* in 1927. Pressed glass objects such as door and cabinet knobs were products of cutting-edge technology that dev-

eloped about a decade after the War of 1812 ended. The inscribed names on the knobs document when this technology eclipsed the expensive, labor-intensive production method of using mold-blown and hand-cut glass forms that had been created by premier manufacturers like New England Glass Company. The first “finished” article exported from America, pressed glass helped make the United States a major exporter of manufactured goods, and the glass press machine revolutionized glass manufacturing around the world.

Clear glass knobs offered a glistening object of curiosity and won-



TOP Engraved “Francis Draper, E. Cambridge, Mass.,” this doorknob may have served as a model for Draper’s US Patent 1,784, dated December 10, 1840. **ABOVE: LEFT** Robinson, Draper, and Lord signed this “Socket Knob for Door, Commode, &c.” model for US Patent 98, filed September 2, 1836. **RIGHT** Robinson crafted this glass doorknob using a Benjamin Franklin cameo modeled and signed by Christian Gobrecht (1785-1844), who served as the third chief engraver of the United States Mint 1840-44.

der at a time when most knobs were made of wood, cast iron, or imported English brass. Mold-blown and hand-cut glass knobs were laborious to make and could be afforded only by the wealthy. Robinson’s glass press, a machine that efficiently pressed molten glass into molds patterned with designs, transformed the industry. Ten years before Robinson, Draper, and Lord’s 1836 patent, Robinson and Henry Whitney of New England Glass filed for a patent on their glass press: US Patent 4,553X for “Making Glass Knobs for Doors.” Recognized as the earliest surviving patent for pressed glass, it establishes Robinson as the creator of this revolutionary process.

Robinson came from a long line of machinists. He got his start as an eight-year-old in the cotton factory

where his father worked building machinery, putting cotton through a bale breaker to loosen the tightly matted bales for a dollar and a half a week. Later, when his father made tools and machinery for Norton Mills, a button manufacturer in Attleboro, Massachusetts, Enoch apprenticed with him as a glass cutter, making glass buttons and small glass spangles. He fulfilled an order of spangles for New England Glass and then, hired by Henry Whitney, began working for that firm in 1825.

A restless innovator, Robinson cast about for glass products to experiment with, settling on furniture knobs; these small, simple forms allowed him to try out more cost-effective manufacturing techniques. This led to the historic US Patent 4,553X of 1826 and his machine, which

could make pressed glass knobs for a quarter of the price of blown-glass ones.

Robinson's pressed glass set the standard—as soon as the knobs hit the market companies seeking to emulate the success of New England Glass began copying them. An 1831 court case documented evidence of patent infringement on Robinson and Whitney's invention, with the verdict being so important to the glass industry that Bakewell Glass had representatives in the courtroom waiting to hear the decision. Robinson and Whitney won the case and immediately began negotiating to grant Bakewell rights to use the glass press west of the Allegheny Mountains.

Partnering with machinist Francis Draper of New England Glass and Joseph H. Lord, an agent for the company, Robinson filed a se-

ries of patents starting in 1836 that show his evolution of discovery and technology. In 1837 he and his brother, George Washington Robinson, filed a patent that would become the standard for making glass knobs.

Robinson's work won many commendations, including gold and silver medals at the Third Triennial Exhibition of the Massachusetts Charitable Mechanic Association in 1841. Exhibition committee members stated that they were "unanimous in their opinion that those [knobs], of both high and low cost, are better adapted to the wants of their fellow countrymen, than those from any other manufactory in the world."

Building on his success, Robinson began exploring using blown glass to create medallion doorknobs that portrayed spectacular cameos of notables in American history. The Benjamin Franklin cameo incrusta-

tion glass doorknob in Historic New England's collection was modeled and signed by Christian Gobrecht (1785-1844), the third chief engraver of the United States Mint.

Robinson moved on to work with metal, inventing locks and security systems, windlasses (hoisting equipment), and even perpetual motion machines. *The New York Farmer and Mechanic* proclaimed in an article about America's first National Exhibition of 1846 that Robinson and his work remain "pre-eminent, both for quality and price, in which he cannot be surpassed." His story—and that of American manufacturing—can be found in the pressed glass doorknobs at many historic houses in New England. Octagonal or circular, intricately detailed or with a smooth mushroom shape, each knob serves as a record of Robinson's legacy and early American ingenuity. 🐉

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF A 1927 DONATION BECOMES CLEAR

The day I found information about three glass doorknob patent models in Historic New England's online collection database, it wasn't so much what I didn't find—it was what I couldn't see. There were no photographs of the doorknobs, only the description "Doorknob" for each of the three artifacts. In all three descriptions, the knobs were ascribed to "Robinson, Draper and Lord (Maker)." Knowing that there never was a firm or a maker that did business as "Robinson, Draper and Lord," I became very interested in learning more about these artifacts.

Historic New England kindly fulfilled my request for images of the doorknobs. The photographs showed that the signatures—Enoch Robinson, Francis Draper, and Joseph H. Lord—were inscribed under the knobs. This confirmed a hunch I had about the attribution in the database: signatures such as these would only be required for submission of a model to the United States Patent Office in Washington, D.C. "Robinson, Draper and Lord" existed only as a patentee trio.

These patent models had come to Historic New England as a donation, care of founder William Sumner Appleton.

Appleton had a hunch about the maker of the artifacts, much in the same way that I had concerning the Historic New England database attribution for the doorknobs. In penning an acknowledgment of receipt to the donor, the Smithsonian Institution, Appleton expressed his delight in the gift by mentioning that "we have come across just such door handles as these in the old Robinson house, built perfectly round, in Somerville, Mass., and I notice that Robinson, Draper and Lord were the patentees. Doubtless investigation would show that this is the same Robinson."

Indeed, Appleton was correct in making the connection that Enoch Robinson was the architect of the Round House (1856), which still stands in Somerville. Likewise, my supposition that Historic New England's collection contained a Robinson doorknob patent model was precise.

— Rhett Butler

Rhett Butler is researching a book on the legacy of American architectural hardware manufacturers E. Robinson & Co., Wm Hall & Co., L.S. Hall & Co., John Tein Co., W.C. Vaughan Co., and E.R. Butler & Co., to be published in 2019.