

## Jacqueline Kennedy's White House Restoration

**Topic:** White House history

**Grade level:** 5-8

**Subject Areas:** History, English Language Arts

**Time Required:** 1-2 class periods

### Essential Question

What symbols of democracy can you find in the White House and what do they signify?

### Goal

Introduce students to the origins of common symbols which represent the United States and its values.

### Objectives

- Learn about ancient symbols and ornamental and architectural elements and identify some symbols of American democracy in the White House.
- Design a piece of furniture for the White House using ancient symbols.

### Connections to Curriculum (Standards)

National History Standards

Standard 4: How democratic values came to be, and how they have been exemplified by people, events and symbols.

Common Core Standards:

[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.5.1.b](#)

Follow agreed-upon rules for discussions and carry out assigned roles.

[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.5.1.c](#)

Pose and respond to specific questions by making comments that contribute to the discussion and elaborate on the remarks of others.

[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.5.4](#)

Report on a topic or text or present an opinion, sequencing ideas logically and using appropriate facts and relevant, descriptive details to support main ideas or themes; speak clearly at an understandable pace.

[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.5.5](#)

Include multimedia components (e.g., graphics, sound) and visual displays in presentations when appropriate to enhance the development of main ideas or themes

[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.7.2](#)

Analyze the main ideas and supporting details presented in diverse media and formats (e.g., visually, quantitatively, orally) and explain how the ideas clarify a topic, text, or issue under study.

## **Historical Background and Context**

When First Lady Jacqueline Kennedy was eleven years old she toured the White House during a family trip to Washington, DC. In 1961, she told Life magazine, “From the outside I remember the feeling of the place. But inside all I remember is shuffling through. There wasn’t even a booklet you could buy.” As first lady, Jacqueline Kennedy reinvigorated the rich history of the White House. She researched its residents, searched for furniture and antiques that had become buried in storage, and made a wish list of items that had belonged to previous presidents which she hoped would be donated to the “White House Restoration Project.” Mrs. Kennedy spearheaded the planning and execution as a hands-on manager. She could often be seen digging through boxes and cataloging her finds. As the Fine Arts Committee’s appeal letter to potential donors stated, with the success of the Project, the White House would become “a mecca for sightseers, a place where distinguished guests are entertained, [and] will be all our founding fathers hoped it would be.”

As a student of history, like her husband, Mrs. Kennedy understood and valued the many changes to the White House that had transpired since the cornerstone was laid in 1792. Designed by Irish-American architect James Hoban in the late eighteenth century, the White House features elements of later periods. For example, after the British burned the White House during the War of 1812, it became President James Monroe’s task to refurnish the house with “articles of the best kind, and on the best terms,” as he put it. Having served as US Minister to France under George Washington, President Monroe possessed a particular fondness for France and French style. Monroe’s refurnishing of the White House coincided with the popularity of “French Empire Style,” named for French Emperor Napoleon Bonaparte (1804-1814), which featured expensive silk upholstery and ancient Greek, Roman, and Egyptian motifs. Napoleon promoted the success of French military victories, including his Egyptian campaign, by equating his power with that of Egyptian pharaohs, Roman emperors, and Greek gods. A close look at the furnishings in the White House State Rooms reveals ancient symbols as well. However, in the context of the White House, they refer to the classical origins of the United States government: Greek democracy and the Roman Republic.

The Blue Room is an example of President Monroe’s interest in French style and of the treasure hunt that was part of the restoration project. Through her research, Mrs. Kennedy learned that in 1817 President Monroe purchased a thirty-eight piece set of chairs and sofas from French cabinetmaker Pierre-Antoine Bellangé. While searching through the White House, she found a table in a storage room and a bust of George Washington in the men’s restroom, both of which had been in President Monroe’s Blue Room. Mrs. Kennedy brought them upstairs and placed them in the room as they appeared in an old engraving. After the discovery of the table was made public, one of the original chairs was donated to the project and Charles Francis Adams, a descendant of John Adams and a member of Mrs. Kennedy’s acquisitions committee, paid for the reproduction of thirteen chairs.

In the White House, the president and first lady receive heads of state and host dinners in the state rooms. The Red and Green Room are “parlors” or living rooms with comfortable chairs and fireplaces. The Blue Room and the State Dining Room are used for hosting dinners for heads of state from other countries. While Mrs. Kennedy used French furniture in the Blue Room to restore the room to President Monroe’s taste, in the Red Room she used American-made

furniture with a French influence. Many of the Red Room pieces were made by Charles Honoré Lannuier, a French emigrant who settled in New York in 1803. He was one of the first furniture makers to use the “American Empire” style. Like “French Empire,” his furniture incorporated decorative elements inspired by the architecture and furnishings of ancient Egypt, Greece, and Rome.

## **Materials**

- White House Restoration Slideshow and Answer Key (also available in the downloadable document).
- Paper, markers, scissors, tissue paper, ribbon, and other art materials
- Magnifying glasses (optional)

## **Handouts**

- Glossary of symbols
- Set of five images of furniture from the Red Room
- Handout for designing a new piece of furniture for the Red Room.

## **Procedure**

1. Define “French Empire Style” for students. This architectural and decorative style was named for Emperor Napoleon in the early 1800s and incorporated Egyptian, Greek, and Roman symbols. After the 1820s, French furniture makers who immigrated to the United States began producing “American Empire” furniture. This style was characterized by exaggerated plant and animal forms and architectural elements from ancient times.
2. Present and review the glossary of symbols with students.
3. Share the White House Restoration Slideshow with students. Please note: the first thirteen slides are for the classroom lesson. Following the classroom slides you will find an answer key with the symbols locations marked. Teachers are encouraged to use the key for their own reference and/or to reveal the answers to students after the group work.
4. Have students look at the chair that President James Monroe purchased for the White House and Mrs. Kennedy received as a donation from Catherine Bohlen from Villanova, Pennsylvania. As a class, use the glossary to identify the symbols represented in the chair.
5. Divide students into groups of five. Give each group a set of color copies of five pieces of furniture from the Red Room in the White House. Optional: Give each group a magnifying glass to examine the photographs in detail.
6. Ask students to work together to identify and circle the ancient symbols and forms represented in the furniture design. Challenge students to circle as many symbols as they

can in five minutes. Using the glossary, ask them to record the meaning of each symbol on their color copies.

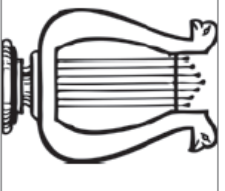
7. Using the provided handout, ask students to work in groups, in pairs or on their own to design a piece of furniture for the Red Room using the symbols they've identified. For example: "We found a lyre in our table design, so we drew a lamp with a lyre for the base." "We found claw feet in our table design so we drew a chair with claw feet." Encourage them to be as creative with their designs.
8. Optional: Have students create a digital slideshow of their designs or posters for a classroom display, and explain their choices.

### **Assessment**

Track how many symbols each group was able to identify in five minutes. Note whether students recorded the meaning of the symbols in the margins color copies. When assessing the designs, consider to what degree students were able to use creativity to integrate the ancient forms into the pieces of furniture.

## Glossary of Symbols

### Ancient Symbols



**Lyre:** Stringed instrument, similar to a small harp, commonly used in ancient Greece and later periods.

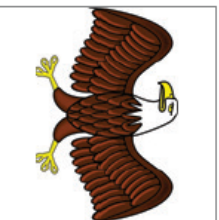


**Dolphin:** Symbol of love, curiosity, and vivaciousness in ancient Greece.



**Laurel wreath:** Symbol of victory, power, and eternity. In Egypt, a wreath was placed on the head of the deceased to

symbolize victory over death in the afterlife and in Greece to crown Olympic champions.



**Eagle:** Symbol of power and strength in ancient Rome.

### Ancient Symbols



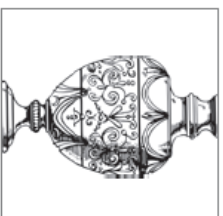
**Arrows:** Ancient symbol of war.



**Olive branch:** Ancient symbol of peace.

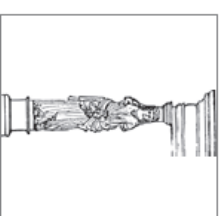


**Swan:** Ancient symbol of beauty and parental care and protection.



**Urn:** Ancient symbol of mortality. Used for funerary purposes in ancient Greece and Rome.

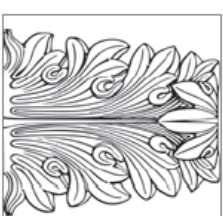
### Ancient Ornamental and Architectural Forms



**Caryatid:** A sculpted female figure serving as an architectural support taking the place of a column or a pillar supporting an entablature on her head. An entablature is a horizontal, continuous lintel on a classical building supported by columns or a wall. Commonly found in Greek architecture such as the Parthenon.



**Animal paw:** This element is usually found at the base of the furniture leg. Common in ancient Egypt and Rome.



**Acanthus leaf:** Mediterranean plant with jagged leaves. It was first used by the Greeks in the 5th century BC on temple roof ornaments, wall friezes, and the capital of the Corinthian column.

**Red Room Furniture, White House.**



Card table, unknown cabinetmaker, 1825.  
White House Historical Association.

**Red Room Furniture, White House.**



Card table, Charles Honoré Lannuier, 1810-1815.  
White House Historical Association.

**Red Room Furniture, White House.**



Grecian style sofa, unknown New York cabinetmaker, 1810-1825.  
White House Historical Association.



**Red Room Furniture, White House.**



Sofa table, unknown cabinetmaker, 1815-1820.  
White House Historical Association.

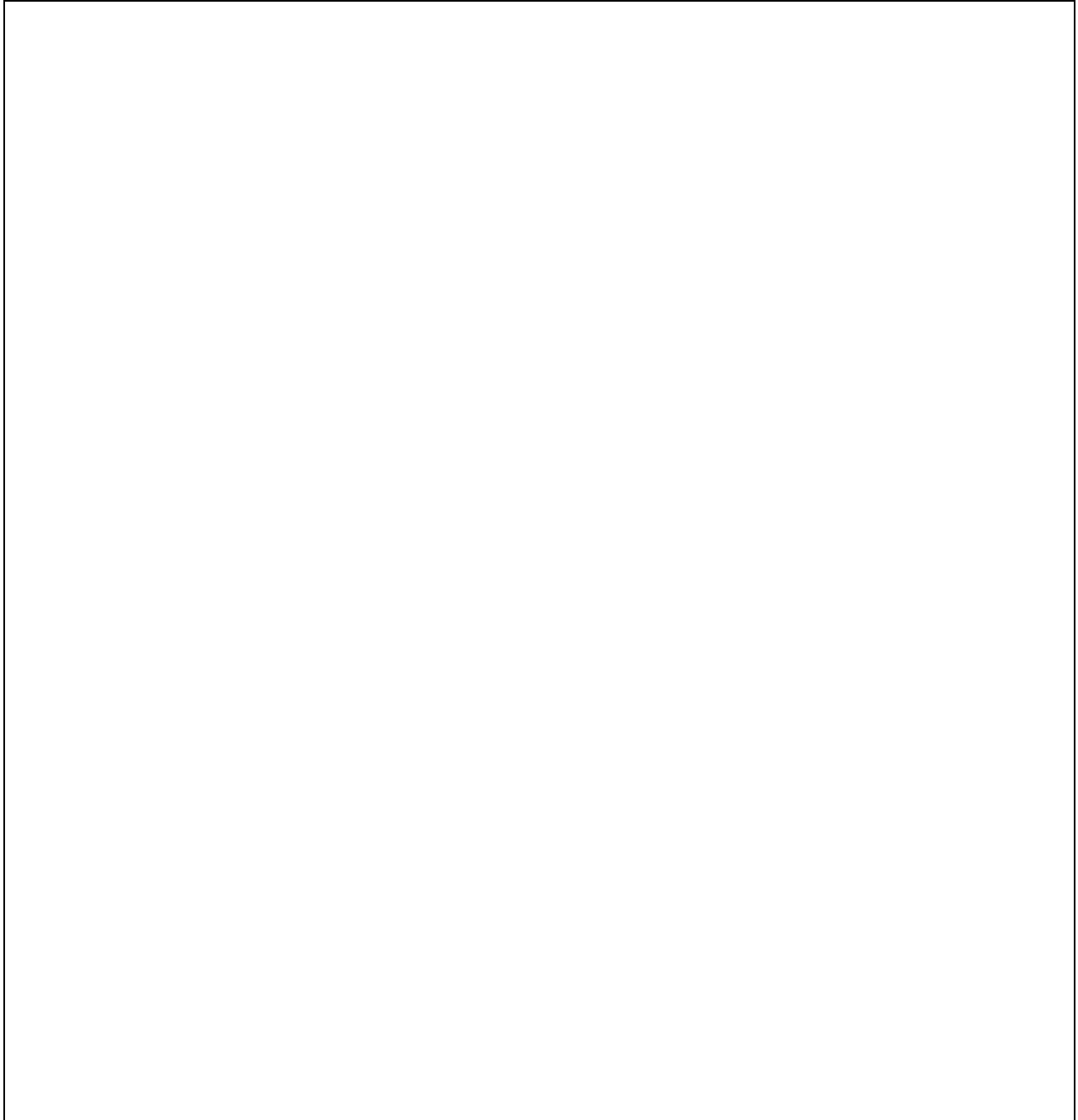
## Red Room Furniture, White House.



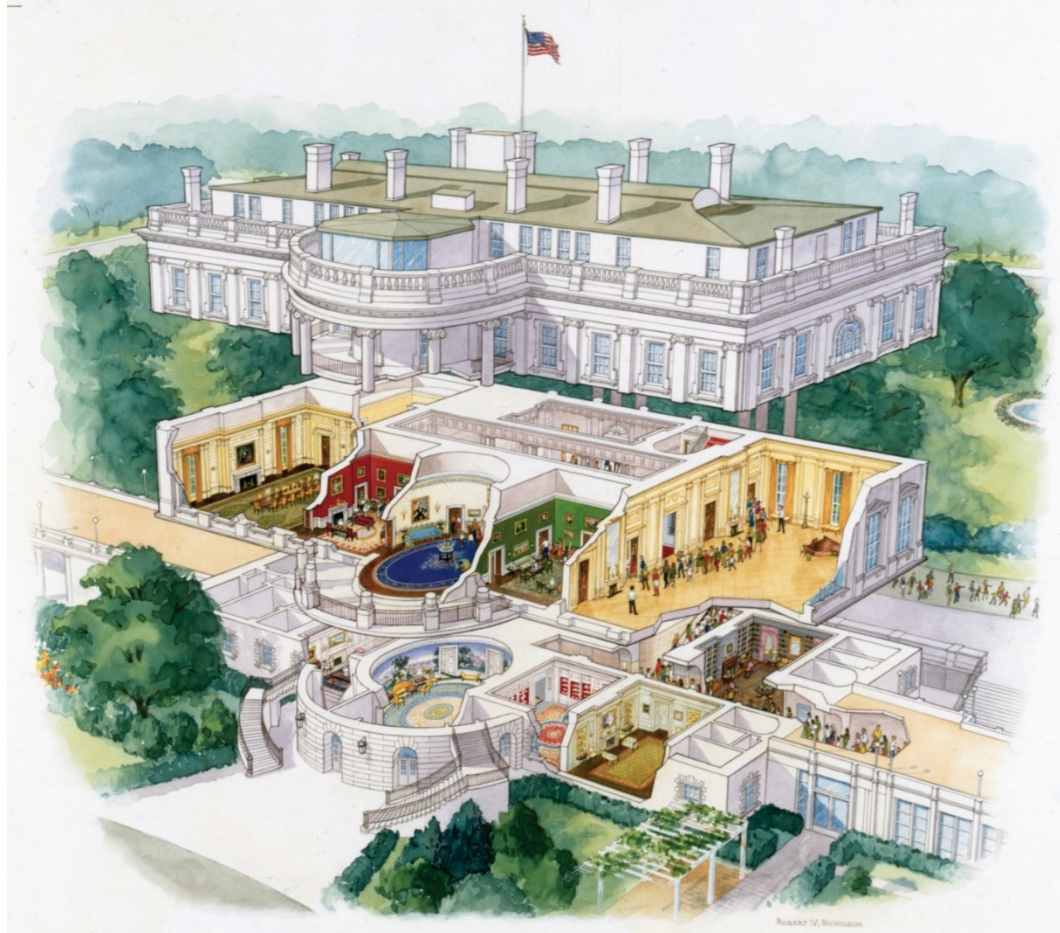
Gilded brass and marble table, Charles Honoré Lannuier, about 1810.  
White House Historical Association.

## Design Your Own White House Furniture

You are going to design a piece of furniture for the Red Room in the White House. Review the symbols you circled in the photographs. Draw your own piece of furniture and include at least two symbols in your design. You can include more than two. Be as creative as you can!



# White House Restoration Slideshow



Cutaway of the White House Residence  
Courtesy of the White House Historical Association.



First Lady Jacqueline Kennedy accepts the donation of a silver pitcher from James Hoban Alexander, descendant of original White House architect James Hoban. Diplomatic Reception Room, White House, December, 5, 1961.



View of the Curator's Office, the White House, 1962.



This portrait shows French Emperor Napoleon Bonaparte standing next to a Greek-style chair.

The lion figure on the desk leg was common in ancient Egyptian and Roman designs. Notice the animal paw foot.

*The Emperor Napoleon in His Study at the Tuileries*, Jacques-Louis David, 1812, National Gallery of Art.



The Blue Room, the White House, 1963.





This side chair, by Parisian furniture maker Pierre-Antoine Bellangé, was placed in the Blue Room in 1817 by President James Monroe. White House Historical Association.

**Using the symbols glossary, together let's identify the ancient symbols in this chair.**



The Red Room, the White House, ca 1948.  
White House Historical Association.



The Red Room, the White House, 1962.



Card table, unknown cabinetmaker, 1825.  
White House Historical Association.



Card table, Charles Honoré Lannuier, 1810-1815.  
White House Historical Association.



Grecoian style sofa, unknown New York cabinetmaker, 1810-1825.  
White House Historical Association.



Sofa table, unknown cabinetmaker, 1815-1820.  
White House Historical Association.



Gilded brass and marble table, Charles Honoré Lannuiet, about 1810.  
White House Historical Association.



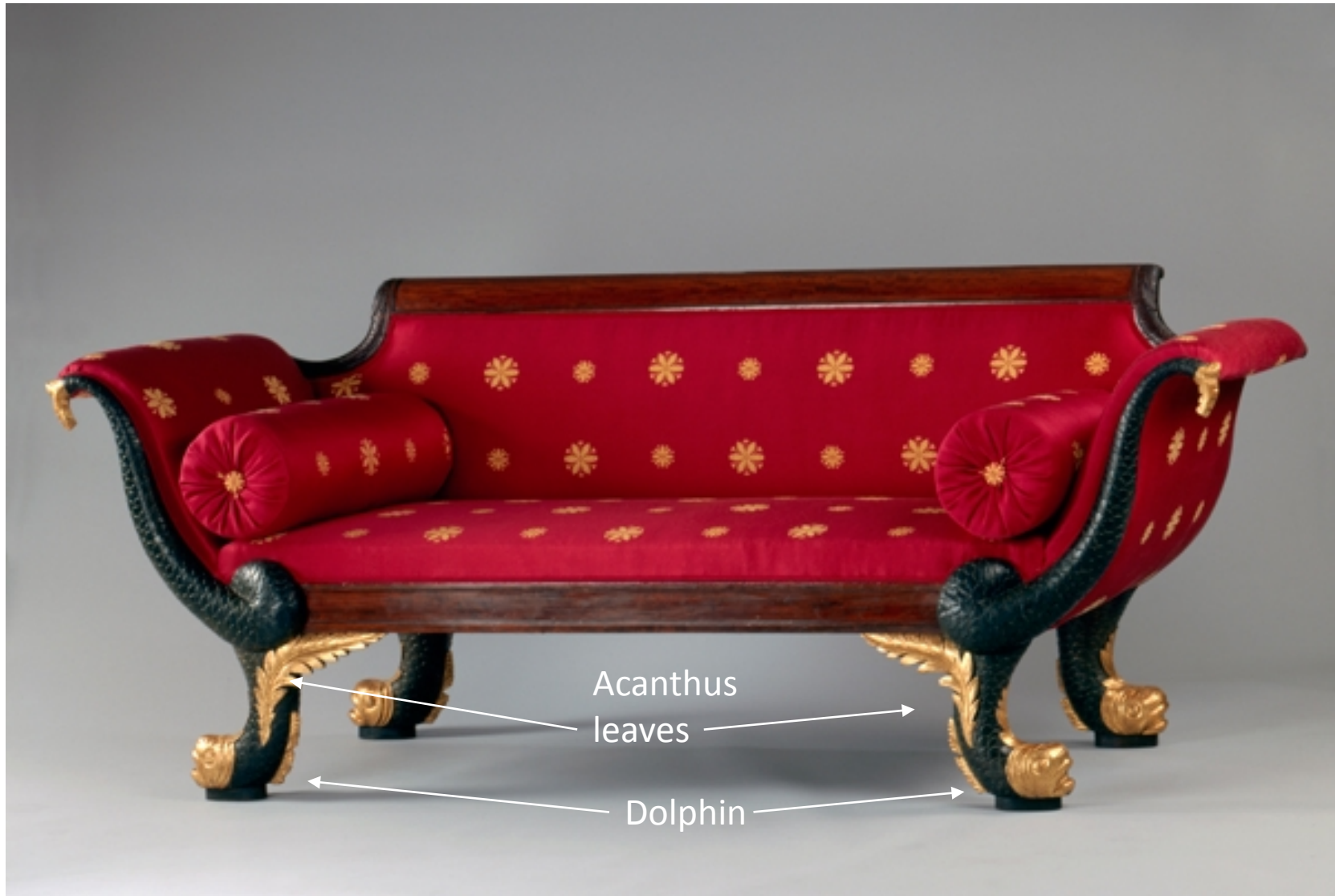
White House Red Room  
Symbols Identification Answer Key



Card table, unknown cabinetmaker, 1825.  
White House Historical Association.



Card table, Charles Honoré Lannuier, 1810-1815.  
White House Historical Association.



Grecian style sofa, unknown New York cabinetmaker, 1810-1825.  
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Sofa table, unknown cabinetmaker, 1815-1820.  
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