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Michael Snodin, 'Introduction', *The Rococo in England*,  
Georgian Group Symposium, 1984, pp. 6–7

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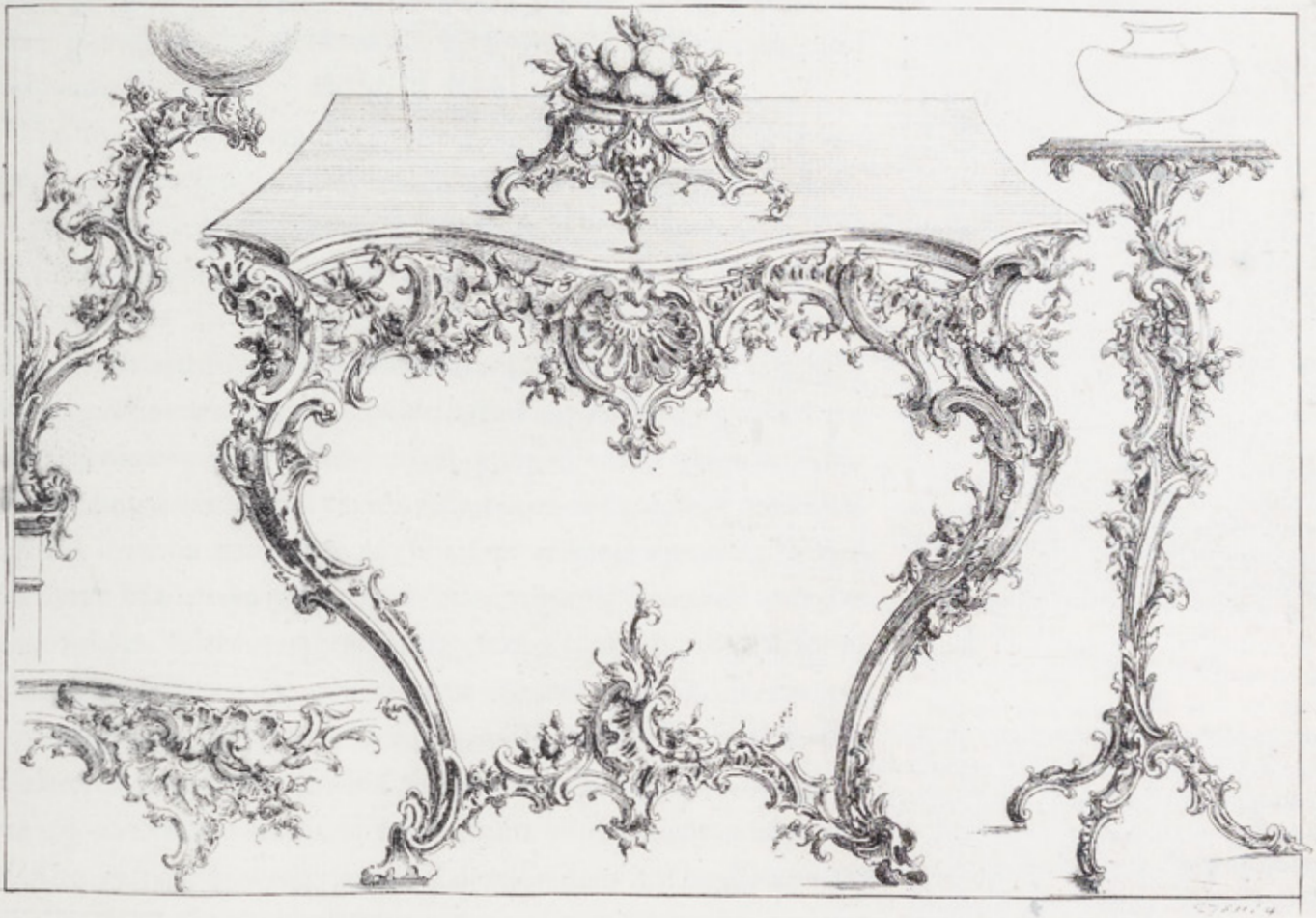
## INTRODUCTION

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'Rococo, or rocaille, literally 'rock-work', a style of architectural and mobiliary decoration popular throughout the greater part of Europe during the first half of the 18th century. . . . A debased style at the best, essentially fantastic and bizarre, it ended in extravagance and decadence. . . . The best French work possesses a balance and symmetry which are usually entirely absent from its imitations. Spain and Italy produced many monstrous travesties – it is impossible to imagine anything more grotesque than the flamboyant convolutions of the monumental Roman style of the third quarter of the 18th century. In Germany, weak and lifeless imitations were as popular as might be imagined in a land which was content to take its art, especially its bad art, from France. England did not escape the infection, and Chippendale and his school produced examples of rocaille work and *coquillage* which were quite foreign to their own sentiment, and rarely rose above respectable mediocrity.'

(*Encyclopaedia Britannica*, eleventh edition, 1911)

For such a light-hearted and evanescent style the rococo has drawn upon itself an extraordinary amount of criticism and comment. The criticism began early, in fact in the 1730s, and from the start was chiefly concerned with the breaking of rules. The comment, which quickly divided into national camps, began in the mid-nineteenth century and has chiefly been concerned with definitions. In all these disputes English rococo has been dismissed by foreign scholars as a poor provincial offshoot and by English scholars as a negligible, passing phase, as expressed in Sir John Summerson's statement that rococo 'merely sent occasional eddies of influence across Palladian England'. The serious study of English rococo began to gather pace in the 1950s, and included the pioneering work of Mark Girouard, Desmond Fitz-Gerald, John and Eileen Harris, Helena Hayward and many others. This phase culminated in the celebrated issue of *Apollo* of August 1969, devoted to the English rococo, in which Denys Sutton suggested the exhibition which has finally opened in the



Victoria and Albert Museum in May 1984: *Rococo: Art and Design in Hogarth's England*. The exhibition demonstrated that a clear definition of the style in the decorative arts was possible and that the rococo as practised in England was not only beautiful and skilfully executed but also, to a surprising extent, original in design.

The idea of a symposium was also suggested in Denys Sutton's famous editorial. These papers will serve, I hope, as the stimulus of what one might call the second generation of English rococo studies, which will perhaps provide answers to the many questions which were raised and left unanswered by the exhibition.

Michael Snodin

*Chairman, Rococo In England Symposium.*

Matthias Lock, a pier table and candlestands, *Six Tables*, 1746.