

HISTORY OF FURNITURE

INDE 131 HISTORY OF FURNITURE (II)

At the very end of the 17th century, curved fronts were first used on large case pieces such as wardrobes and chests of drawers, reflecting the new baroque architecture. In chairs, rich carving on new high-backed forms came into fashion. Both English and Continental examples were made with caned seats and backs as an alternative to upholstery. Simple variations of these chairs were made with turned parts in place of the carved areas, but the same tall backs were used

French Baroque

The most elegant and elaborate furniture of the day was made for the court of Louis XIV in France. The outstanding craftsman André Charles Boulle created unusual forms and embellished them with inlays combining metal (pewter, gilt, bronze, or silver), tortoiseshell, and ebony in designs that were imaginative juxtapositions of classical motifs. These sometimes look as if the basic inspiration was ancient Roman fresco. Columnar legs, handsomely gilded, were used to support tables, chairs, and stands for chests.

English and American Colonial Baroque

Variations made in other countries limited the gilding and emphasized the new shapes. In England the influence is most easily seen in work from the reign of William and Mary, when marquetry was used most freely. On the North American continent, Renaissance design was still important in the late 17th century. American artisans used Elizabethan and Tudor models as partial inspiration for distinctively American "Pilgrim-style" efforts in oak, updated by being stained a walnut color.

Rococo Furniture

The baroque was popular in many areas until about 1730, when fashions changed, first in Paris and then in the rest of the Western world. The new style, now known as the rococo called for greater delicacy in the scale of objects and a more intimate connection of furniture and people. Architectural ornament was less relevant, as pieces in Parisian interiors were conceived to be in scale with people rather than with rooms

French Rococo

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French sources were of primary importance and influence and their results were the most elegant. Rococo began in the reign of Louis XIV and flourished during the reign of Louis XV. The French version included ambitious designs in a variety of materials that required great skill to execute. These were characterized by complex, sinuous forms that curved in every direction. Fanciful patterns were inlaid on layers of veneer that, in turn, were framed with ormolu (gilded bronze) outlining the legs, edges, and drawer fronts of a piece. Columnar legs were replaced by animal-form legs in a variety of curved shapes.

English Rococo

In England the rococo was much more restrained. Inlays were used rarely because cabinetmakers favored the use of walnut and mahogany veneers, which were handled with great skill to exploit graining. English designers—and those who were inspired by them—introduced cabriole (curved) legs with claw-and-ball feet for chairs, tables, and chests. This foot must have been inspired by the claw and ball known from Chinese bronzes (but not from Chinese furniture prototypes); it represents a popularization of Asian design. Toward the end of the rococo period in England, the London cabinetmaker Thomas Chippendale published a book of designs, *The Gentleman and Cabinet Maker's Director* (1754), in which he presented the English interpretation of the rococo style. He was the first to categorize the varieties of rococo as French, Chinese, or Gothic and offered samples of each approach. Innovative French designs of the 1750s were translated by Chippendale into engraved designs of elaborately carved examples without the French use of ormolu or inlays. The element of the rococo emphasized by Chippendale and by most English artisans was its air of whimsy, achieved in French examples by a novel use of classical motifs. In the *Director*, Chinese and Gothic designs were included as additional ways of achieving whimsy; moreover, these designs could be executed more easily than those based on French sources

From about 1740 to 1760, English designers worked consistently on a small scale. Some, however, chose to follow designs that were classical and more in keeping with an architectural style called the Palladian, in which Renaissance designs of the Italian 16th-century architect Andrea Palladio were scaled to 18th-century taste. The London cabinetmaker William Vile, who was employed by the Crown in the 1750s and 1760s, made some classical furniture along with rococo work. In the American colonies, the lightly scaled classical was as

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important as the pure rococo in furniture made between 1740 and 1780.

English and American chair designs are the exception to the rule of continuing classical emphasis. Fashionable designers in London developed elegant side and armchairs with wooden backs, a basic form different from the upholstered-back chairs favored on the Continent. At first, the backs were made with solid splats as the central support, framed by curving rails and stiles in a design that was a very free adaptation of Chinese chairs. Later, the frame was yoke-shaped, and the splat was executed in one of a large repertoire—rococo in spirit—of pierced-work designs.

In the English approach to furniture design, woods were handled with an appreciation of their distinctive qualities, and American cabinetmakers chose to follow the same path. In Europe, cabinetmakers were more intent on creating the appropriate rococo fantasies, using paint where inlays and ormolu might prove too expensive. Italian, German, Scandinavian, and even provincial French cabinetmakers followed this Continental manner of executing rococo design.

Neoclassical Furniture

Neoclassicism, a reaction against the rococo in favor of classicism, was a movement that began while the rococo was still at its height. The designers who initiated it advocated a return to ancient Greco-Roman sources rather than to the Renaissance. To suit 18th-century taste, however, they adapted the ancient models by scaling down the ornament to a delicacy that appealed to those bored with the rococo.

The question of who was responsible for this revolution in design is a disputed one. Robert Adam, the English architect, introduced the first of his neoclassical designs before 1760. Across the English Channel in Paris, however, an important collector, La Live de Jully, had furnished a room “à la grecque,” or in the neoclassical style, at about the same time. Artists of English, French, and other nationalities were finding the ruins of Rome and Athens worthy of study and were becoming aware of the place of history in the study of design. Neoclassicism was the first conscious effort to revive a style, rather than to use elements of a past style as inspiration for new designs. The earliest efforts were less Roman than its designers seemed to believe, but the change to purer historicism occurred in a relatively short time

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French Neoclassicism

In France the first phase of neoclassicism is called the Louis XVI style, although his reign began in 1774 and prime specimens were made earlier. The classicism of this style manifested itself in a whole vocabulary of motifs derived from Greco-Roman sources, but the overall shapes also reflected the new style. Furniture shapes were simple and geometric: Rectangular, circular, and oval forms rested on straight, tapering legs that were either square or round in cross section. Garlands of flowers or drapery, architectural motifs such as paterae (medallions), dentils, Doric, Ionic, or Corinthian moldings, and related details were used as ornaments on neoclassical pieces.

English Neoclassicism

In England painted furniture became popular, and interest in inlaid decoration, which had all but disappeared in the rococo era, enjoyed a revival. The new neoclassical high style was appealing to a growing number, and design books communicated suggestions for new furniture forms, shapes, and decorations. The posthumously published *Cabinet Maker and Upholsterer's Guide* of 1788 by George Hepplewhite adapted some French and some traditional English designs to the needs of cabinetmakers seeking neoclassical suggestions. The most famous part of the book is the section on chairs that describes a number of shield-shaped backs, but Hepplewhite's repertoire was much broader (see Hepplewhite Style). Popular neoclassical design in England is generally regarded as being inspired by Hepplewhite or by Thomas Sheraton, whose first book, the *Cabinet Maker and Upholsterer's Drawing Book*, appeared, in part, in 1791. Sheraton's complete work, published in 1802, included designs that were more literally classical, but what is popularly considered Sheraton are the rectangular chair backs shown in his first book.

Empire Furniture

The use of archaeologically inspired design increased in the late 18th century, and it appears to have influenced furniture made both in England and in Europe. This new emphasis marks a second phase of neoclassicism, called the Empire style because it was first identified with Napoleon's imperial efforts. Although the tendency to design furniture in ancient Roman style had begun before the French Revolution (1789-1799), Napoleon's designers, Charles Percier and Pierre François Léonard Fontaine, were the most innovative. A collection of their

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designs for furniture and interiors was published in Paris in 1801. Beginning in 1796, designs inspired by Percier and Fontaine were also published in the *Journal des Modes* of Pierre de La Mésangère, which helped make the style international. The furniture plates in La Mésangère's journals appear to have been appropriated by Rudolph Ackermann for use in his London-based journal, *Repository of Arts, Literature, and Fashions*, which began in 1809. German-language publications disseminated versions of the Empire style throughout the Continent and Scandinavia.

More careful investigation, however, reveals special distinctive sources in each country. In England—where the style was called Regency—Henry Holland, architect to the Prince of Wales beginning in the 1780s, designed furniture in the Empire spirit for royal residences and major country houses. Thomas Hope, a collector and connoisseur with great enthusiasm for the classical, was the author of *Household Furniture and Interior Decoration* (1807), which illustrates his conception of a classical style in which Greek and Egyptian influences predominate.

Empire became an international style, with Scandinavian, German, Italian, Russian, and American interpretations. The basic concept was constant, with ancient prototypes adapted to 19th-century taste. The major change, besides the increase in archaeological influence, was in scale. Designers were attempting to regain the sense of monumentality that had been lacking since the beginning of the 18th century, when it was diminished to achieve the human scale then desired. In the German-speaking areas, the style, recognized as typically middle class, has been called Biedermeier, after a comic character who was supposed to satirize middle-class tastes. The name was applied as the style was going out of fashion in about 1850. Under whatever name, Empire was a lasting style; introduced before 1800, it did not disappear completely until the middle of the 19th century. In the United States, one cabinetmaker, the New Yorker Duncan Phyfe, who had begun activity in the 1790s, did not close his shop until 1847. His output included a grand variety of neoclassical designs, although he is best known for distinctive work made between about 1800 and 1820, in which light proportions and archaeologically correct details were integrated.

Victorian Eclectic Furniture

Concurrent with the neoclassical revival in the first half of the 19th century were revivals of other styles.

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Gothic Revival

The Gothic, which Chippendale had used as a source of ornamental motif, was also of interest to Sheraton and a few later designers. In George Smith's *Collection of Designs for Household Furniture and Interior Decoration* (1808), a few Gothic designs are shown along with the predominantly neoclassical work. By the 1830s, interest in the Gothic was more profound. The Gothic was admired by some as a delightful reaction against the classical, while others regarded it as a Christian style to be preferred over the pagan. On the one hand, romantic enthusiasm favored ruins and asymmetry; on the other, there was a strong desire for design inspired by faith. Whatever the impetus, the Gothic Revival flourished on both sides of the Atlantic, in England as well as on the Continent. Research into Continental aspects, however, is far behind that of English historians, who have discovered the accomplishments of two generations of Pugins—the father, Augustus Charles Pugin, and his son Augustus Welby Northmore Pugin. Essentially, revival of the Gothic involved the use of Gothic architectural ornament on 19th-century forms. Closely associated with the Gothic Revival is what Americans call the Elizabethan Revival, inspired by 16th-century and 17th-century English designs

Rococo Revival

A completely different approach was taken by the designers who strove for a return to elegance. Beginning in the 1820s, the 18th-century rococo was the inspiration for a revival—actually a reinterpretation—of Parisian rococo design. The rococo revival was popular in England, on the Continent, and in the United States. The American rococo revival, which flourished between about 1840 and 1860, is possibly responsible for the most distinctive furniture. One New York manufacturer, John Henry Belter, obtained four patents for improvements in production that enabled the Belter shop to make flamboyantly carved work curved to the extreme by using laminated wood. Belter and contemporaries in Europe as well as in the United States found inspiration in baroque as well as rococo ornament

Renaissance Revival

By the 1860s the rococo fad had subsided and Renaissance Revival became fashionable. Renaissance was defined very broadly, because the revival style

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included neoclassical motifs as well as those based on French Renaissance models. A revival of Louis XVI design was favored by some, but in general the new style was characterized by large, straight-lined forms veneered in dark woods and decorated with inlays, low relief, and incised linear decoration. French, English, and Continental examples include a broad range of decoration that is more elegant than that on most American examples.

The Revolt Against Mass Manufacture

The striving for elegance inspired a certain amount of fakery. Veneers were used to cover up cheap woods, and both the carving and inlays that embellished low-priced stylish furniture were poorly executed.

Arts and Crafts Furniture

In reaction to mass-produced sham, the Arts and Crafts movement was established in 1861 by the English poet and designer William Morris. Along with such associates as the architect Philip Webb and the Pre-Raphaelite painters Ford Madox Brown and Edward Burne-Jones, Morris sought a return to medieval handcraft traditions. Together, the group produced designs for every branch of the decorative arts, with the intent of elevating them to the level of the fine arts. Their products, including furniture, were much admired for their beauty and consummate craftsmanship and were widely copied. By the 1890s, the movement had spread to the Continent and North America. The influence of Morris and his followers was enormous; their designs are often considered the wellspring of modern furniture design. Morris's ideas were popularized by the English architect and writer Charles Eastlake in his hugely successful *Hints on Household Taste in Furniture, Upholstery and other Details* (1868). Eastlake advocated a return to simple, rectilinear designs inspired by country work, executed in oak and various fruitwoods. In the United States, where Eastlake's book became a decorating bible, the simplicity was often embellished with such luxurious additions as ebonized wood, gilding, and inlays.

Art Nouveau Furniture

Directly fostered by the Arts and Crafts movement was the style called art nouveau, which flourished between the 1890s and 1910 in all of the arts. Art nouveau may be characterized as a style derived from organic forms that convey a sense of movement, exemplified by the famous "whiplash" curve found in many

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art nouveau works. In furniture, its early exponents were the Belgian architects Henry van de Velde and Victor Horta, who furnished the interiors of their buildings with pieces designed to complement the sinuous forms of the architectural settings. In France, the architect Hector Guimard, creator in 1900 of the graceful Métro (subway) stations in Paris, also designed similarly asymmetrical, heavily carved free-form furniture. The noted glassmaker Émile Gallé also designed some of the most opulent art nouveau furniture, in which plant and flower motifs predominate. Louis Majorelle produced luxurious furniture, again inspired by forms from nature, and went on to become a notable art deco designer after World War I (1914-1918). The Scottish architect Charles Rennie Mackintosh produced, in his unique interpretation of art nouveau, chastely beautiful furniture. Characteristic pieces are of oak painted white, with elegant inlays and appurtenances of metal or stained glass in curvilinear, abstracted plant forms.

20th-Century European Furniture

Reform and revolution in the arts, including furniture design, marked the turn of the century. Prominent among the leaders of the revolt was the Austrian architect and designer Josef Hoffmann, who, with other architects and artists, founded the Vienna Sezession and the Wiener Werkstätte (Vienna Workshop) in 1903. The Werkstätte produced, among other types of decorative arts, furniture in cubicular forms that contrasted radically with the art nouveau obsession with curvilinear forms. They are reminiscent of Mackintosh's restrained designs, which were much admired by the group. The right angle was used consistently, and detailing was rigidly austere. Sezessionstil was the precursor of two major 20th-century styles: the German Bauhaus and the French art deco.

Bauhaus Furniture

The Bauhaus, founded in 1919 in Weimar, Germany, by the architect Walter Gropius, was a comprehensive school of art and architecture that proved to be one of the most influential forces in the development of 20th-century art. Classic contemporary furniture, still being manufactured, was designed by its most renowned architects, Marcel Breuer and Ludwig Mies van der Rohe. Breuer designed his "Wassily" armchair, of chrome-plated steel tubing and canvas, in 1925 and his much-imitated cantilevered side chair, of tubing with wood-framed cane seat and back panels, in 1928. Mies created his world-famous Barcelona chair, a masterpiece consisting of two elegantly curved X-frames of chromed

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steel strips supporting rectangular leather cushions, in 1929. The aim of both architects was to devise aesthetically pleasing furniture for mass production.

Art Deco Furniture

Art deco, although its name is derived from the 1925 Paris exposition of decorative arts, can be traced back to the first decade of the 20th century, especially to the sharply defined geometric forms of the Sezessionstil. The Bauhaus concern with the use of new materials also had its influence. The art deco style persisted through 1939 and has had a revival of interest and even imitation in the 1970s and 1980s. The most accomplished art deco designers were French: Louis Majorelle, André Groult, Pierre Chareau, and Jacques Émile Ruhlmann. Their pieces have a streamlined richness that owes as much to superb handcrafting—lustrously finished rare woods with inlays of such exotic materials as ivory in angular, abstract designs—as to their daring geometric shapes. The style was rapidly debased, however, by shoddy mass-produced pieces.

Scandinavian Furniture

Some of the most widely admired contemporary furniture originated in Scandinavia, especially in the years following World War II (1939-1945). To name two of a host of designers, the Finnish architect Alvar Aalto and the Danish designer Arne Jacobsen created laminated wood furniture of exquisite proportions and eminent practicality for mass manufacture.

20th-Century American Furniture

Until 1946, furniture designers in the United States were, with few exceptions, overshadowed by their European counterparts and were heavily influenced by them.

American Furniture to 1939

American arts-and-crafts movements led at the turn of the century to the establishment of numerous ateliers and small factories, such as that of Gustav Stickley. Stickley created the mission style, ostensibly based on old Spanish furniture in the California missions. His carefully constructed oak furniture, made between 1900 and 1913, was rectilinear, simple, and utilitarian, with decoration

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limited to the handsomely crafted hardware. American mass manufacturers took up the mission style with a will and produced great quantities of ponderous imitation Stickley.

With the exception of the work of Louis Comfort Tiffany, who designed furniture primarily for his own use, the United States produced no outstanding art nouveau furniture. Art deco flourished in the United States, mostly in mass-produced furniture of lesser quality. A notable exception is the work of the studio of Donald Deskey, which in 1932 created the palatial art deco interiors and the furniture of Radio City Music Hall in New York City. The American architect Frank Lloyd Wright also designed furniture, but its idiosyncratic appearance defies categorization, since the furniture design was entirely subordinated to the design of the building; the same motifs appear in both. Wright consistently favored built-in furniture, which tended to merge with the architecture.

Contemporary American Furniture

In the decade following World War II, many American furniture designers came to prominence. Among the best known were the architects Charles Eames and Eero Saarinen. Adapting wartime technology in the use of wood, metals, and plastics, they collaborated on the design of the so-called Eames chair and ottoman, constructed of subtly curved molded plywood with deeply padded leather upholstery, set on a metal pedestal base. In 1956 Saarinen designed an entire range of pedestal furniture in molded plastic and metal; the white chairs, in silhouette resembling a wineglass, have loose cushion seats in bright fabrics; the tables, ranging in size from side tables to conference tables, have tops of either marble or wood. These, like many other well-designed modern pieces, have been copied extensively by mass manufacturers. Other gifted designers included the sculptor Harry Bertoia, who in 1952 produced the lightweight wire mesh chair that bears his name, manufactured by Knoll Associates; Florence S. Knoll, like Eero Saarinen and Bertoia a graduate of the Cranbrook Academy of Art in Bloomfield Hills, Michigan, and later president of Knoll International, New York City; and Paul McCobb, who based his widely marketed Planner group on simple and functional 18th- and 19th-century Shaker furniture.

By the 1990s furniture styles had proliferated to such a degree that literally hundreds of examples existed. The positive aspect of this stylistic glut was the enormous range of choice it offered, from classic modern pieces still in manufacture to “high-tech” medical and industrial furnishings, from antiques of

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any period (or costly reproductions of them) to inexpensive do-it-yourself unassembled furniture in any style desired.