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DES 381: History of Interiors I
Design Development

X-Forms Through the Ages

In tribal culture, hierarchy was indicated by relative position in a group setting: tribal leaders would sit above the rest of the tribe, symbolizing his authority and connectedness to the gods or spirits. When the tribe would acquire stools to sit on, the leader's stool graduated into a chair. The pattern would continue: once the tribe members began using chairs, the chief would use a more complex throne. The stool serves as a foundational symbol of power and leadership dating back to antiquity (Harwood 11). As time went on, x-form stools and eventually chairs evolved from simple forms into complex, upholstered pieces with intricate detail, indicating not only power but wealth and social status.

Antiquity, from roughly 4500 B.C.E. to 60 B.C.E., provided a foundation for the development of more complex x-form chairs and stools. In Ancient Egypt, folding x-form stools were used by military commanders and indicated authority. Although simple in construction, the stools would often have duck heads at the feet and either leather, canvas, or woven grass seats (Harwood 44). In Ancient Greece, the *diphros* was developed: a rectangular x-form stool with turned legs and a woven leather seat (Harwood 57). The Greeks valued function, rather than decoration, and these stools reflected that with their simple silhouette (Hergenrather). Additionally, Ancient Romans adapted much of their furniture inspiration from the Greeks and created the *Sella curulis*, an x-form stool used by the highest ranking government dignitaries. The *Sella curulis* was more intricate than the Greeks' version and had a back, unlike the Greek's

diphros (Harwood 72). The *Sella curulis*, or *curule*, was used as a seat of judgment, much like in the aforementioned tribal communities.

The Middle Ages further developed and popularized the x-form. Early Christians took design inspiration from the Ancient Romans with the *curule*. In an illustration of St. Matthew in the *Coronation Gospels*, circa 800-810, he is writing while sitting on an x-form stool (Harwood 80). In Romanesque design, from the 8th century to roughly 1150 C.E., and in Gothic design, from 1150 to 1550, stools were far more common than chairs for seating (Harwood 108, 120). Toward the end of the Middle Ages and beginning of the Renaissance, chairs with backs became less popular, due to their cumbersome and heavy nature, with x-form stools replacing them as the preferred seating (Jacob).

Because of this shift, during the Renaissance, the x-form developed even further, particularly in Italy, Spain and England. Primarily made of walnut at this time, the x-form was no longer reserved for government dignitaries, but indicated wealth status with intricate detail and fine materials. In the 15th and 16th centuries in Italy, the *Savonarola* emerged, a folding x-frame chair (Smithsonian Institution). Named after a Dominican monk, the *Savonarola* chair was made to be comfortable and portable (Hergentrather). It was more complex than previous versions of the x-form with multiple interlocking, collapsible legs, an upholstered seat and a back (The MET). Simultaneously, the Spanish developed the hip-joint chair, a variation of the x-form. The hip-joint chair has four curved legs that intertwine, intricate bone inlay and was often upholstered with either leather or luxurious fabrics, like silk or velvet (Hergentrather, The MET). The hip-joint chair is the most intricately decorated version up until this point. In England, the x-

form chairs were similar in style to the Italian x-forms, but with upholstery (Hergenrather).

Works Cited

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