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### Chairs from Ancient Times to 1800

Styles and trends are constantly evolving. Things may be popular one year and out of style the next. Sometimes there is no rhyme or reason for what is fashionable and what is not, but oftentimes, trends shift as needs change. Furniture is no exception. From the beginning of humanity, people have always needed a place to sit and rest, so cultures from all around the world have come up with their own solutions to this constant. Chairs have seen many drastic stylistic changes throughout history, and these changes reflect the overall style of the location and period in which it was designed.

Egypt is believed to have unified in 3,100 BCE, making it one of the oldest civilizations in the world. Because of this, there was little to no trade with foreign groups, so resources were limited to what was locally available. Ancient Egyptians did not have access to vast forests, so the use of timber was limited. In contrast, Ancient Greece was a civilization centered on trade. The location also provided abundant forests and access to a larger variety of resources than Egypt. The Greeks used many motifs from other cultures, such as animal legs on furniture. A striking example of a Grecian chair is the Klismos. It embodies the qualities of Greek design. It is balanced and elegant with curved legs and back yoke. It conforms to the body so that it would be comfortable to sit in for long periods of time. It was "...Often found in the home, variations of

this form appear in theaters as seating for aristocrats” (Harwood et al. 57). The design is timeless and comfortable for it to still be in production today.

The shift from the dark ages to the Middle Ages saw many advancements. Different countries emerged and transformed the world into something more recognizable to modern humans. England, France, and Spain are a few of the most influential states of this time. Furniture changed drastically from simple, clean lines in Egyptian and Grecian examples to more ornate, elaborately decorated pieces. These features can be seen in the Coronation Chair of King Edward I of England from the Gothic Period. It was still constructed out of wood, but the wood was “...covered with a coating of plaster, gilded over...” (Litchfield 30). The shape becomes more boxy and rectangular with the arms featuring the only major curve. Gothic motifs were commonly carved and engraved around the exterior of the chair. Quatrefoils, trefoils, tall Gothic arches, and geometric patterns litter most of the piece. The overall shape and design are very indicative of the prominent Perpendicular Gothic style that was most common in England. Because of the intricacy, chairs were reserved for royalty and the powerful. Many surviving examples can be found in churches because the Christian Church held as much power as the government.

The Renaissance saw a major shift back to a more classical style. The stiff forms used by Gothic designs reverted back into more organic shapes similar to those found in Greece and Rome. The Wainscot Chair replaced the large Gothic thrones. The chair itself is much smaller and visually lighter. Instead of solid panel arms, the arms are open with only a vertical support and a horizontal arm resting on top. The legs were made of turned wood and the seat and back were constructed from panels. It sat against a wainscot-covered wall so only the front and sides would be visible, so the front legs were typically turned while the back two were solid

rectangles. The only decorative carving found is on the inside face of the back panel. The motifs became more natural and less geometric and rigid. The designs mimicked carvings from wooden wall panels with linen scrolls being very popular. While Middle Age chairs were adorned with Christian scenes and symbols, Renaissance chairs displayed mythological scenes and allegories (Litchfield 56). Henry VIII split England from the Catholic State in 1534 so royal commissions were no longer required to have Biblical themes. Comfort also became important again through the use of upholstery and cushions. Luxurious materials such as “stamped leather and rich velvets” (Kimberly 33). Furniture was made by skilled craftsmen who were trained in Italy and then traveled throughout Europe to work. Because it was a specialized job with few skilled artisans the exclusivity of chairs was amplified.

King Louis XIV brought many changes throughout France. His reign oversaw the design and construction of the Palace of Versailles from 1678 through 1687. Because of his inclination toward art, France “...replaces Italy as artistic leader of Europe” (Harwood et al. 195). In 1648, the French Royal Academy was founded. The Academy controlled the education of artists and the art market. Only selected artists could become members, so it was exclusive and only reserved for the best of the best. Because of this, it served as a collective guild and union for artists where they were trained. The baroque period was centered on extreme luxury and grandeur through the use of massive scale and emphasis. Fauteuil chairs are prime examples of the principles of Baroque design. Seating was reserved for the King and Queen only so there would commonly only be two armchairs in a room. Furniture was not intended to be comfortable, but rather to show the wealth and prestige of the person who sat in it. Chairs were large with tall, upholstered backs and seats. The arms and legs were made of wood and carved and gilded. Typically, the arms were curved with volutes at the front end of each arm, but the

overall form was straight and rectangular. King Louis XV came to power in 1715 at the age of five after his great grandfather passed away. He moved the Court back to Paris, but like Louis XIV, he spent his time recreationally. Although the style of Rococo furniture may seem the same as Baroque, it is more loose and naturalistic. The Fauteuil chair remained popular, but the shape shifted from having seemingly independent parts to ones that flow together to form a whole. The back curved forming a shield-like shape and the arms featured upholstery on top. Each wooded part was carved with organic swirls and symbols. Each part served an aesthetic purpose in addition to a structural function.

Neo-Classicism sought to bring classical structure and rigidity back. The English Parlor Chair has many variations, but it is very blocky overall. “Backs may be shield, heart, oval, wheel, camel, square, or rectangular” (Harwood et al. 283). Upholstery and solid panels of wood are also no longer used to cover the seat and back. Seats are either wood or reeded, and cushions may be added for some comfort. Backs are open with “...spindles, slats, lattice, or splats” (Harwood et al. 273). Arms and excessive ornamentation are uncommon. Each piece of the frame is thin and dainty which strongly contrasts with the excessively large and bulky Baroque and Rococo chairs. Chairs were no longer reserved to the upper class. They could be found in “...public and private rooms for entertaining, dining, or sleeping...” (Harwood et al. 284). Many furniture makers created catalogs or books for people to view.

East Asian furniture has been around as long as European furniture. China and Japan are some of the oldest civilizations. China has always been based on respect for age and traditions. Because of this, the designs have remained constant for thousands of years. Chairs rely on beauty from “...simplicity and refined proportions instead of applied ornament” (Harwood et al. 19). Pieces are hand carved with extreme precision and accuracy. Pieces do not need to rely on

fasteners or glue because the mortise and tenon joints are so precise and tight. There are two major styles of chair, one features a rectangular back and independent arms while the other features a curved back that flows into the arms. Both backs have a central splat, four legs with stretchers at the bottom, and a flat seat. The splat is sometimes decorated with piercings, carvings, paint, or inlays of marble and porcelain (Harwood et al 20). The simplicity and focus on craftsmanship never changed even with European colonialism and trade.

All over the world, chairs have been used as a means of seating. People are connected over the need for rest, but the location and period determine how a chair looks and feels. Some groups reserve chairs for the wealthy, while others use them for everyone. Some chairs are massive extravagant thrones, while others are modest and small.

## Works Cited

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