

Brianna Lee

Professor Hergenrather

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Design Development: From Ancient Cultures Through 1800

A chair may be easily overlooked when thinking in broad terms of furniture. Chairs are fundamental to everyday routines and have a valuable role in our lives. Many characteristics, design traits, and cultural attributes can be seen throughout the evolution of chair design. In this essay, I will highlight the chair's evolution from ancient centuries up to eighteen hundred and focus on key aspects from specific periods. Concentrating on the function, social influences, shapes, materials, method of construction, meaning, and decoration.

The chair is a very significant part of furniture that man has developed since ancient times and many changes have been made to its design. The earliest traces of a chair used as furniture are from Egyptian times. The Egyptian chair's common characteristics are the animal's paws at the feet, a rectangular back, a lion's head, and a simplistic form (Egypt Supplemental PPT). With carved and gilded wood, they were covered with precious materials and magnificent patterns. The seats were typically corded or dished in wood with a pad or cushion on the top (Britannica, *Chair*). Hatnefer's Chair is a woodworking example from ancient Egypt that used the Mortise and Tenons method of construction to join pieces to assemble the chair. (The Met, *Hatnefer's Chair*).

Ancient classical Greek design had more of an emphasis on function rather than decoration. The klismos was a simple yet sophisticated chair developed by the ancient Greeks. Appearing in the 4th century B.C., the klismos was a symmetrical chair with legs that curve out and a backrest continuing the curve upward but in the opposite direction. This shaped an extravagant “S” curve of the chair. A low, concave panel supported the sitter's back. It maintained the shape and form of a rectangle with curved legs and was often built with wood like the Egyptians. The klismos is represented in various versions of art, paintings, pottery, and relief carvings from the ancient Greek era. The Klismos became a prototype of designs that reappeared throughout the following centuries of chair design.

The Roman throne chair, followed by Greek prototypes, are sumptuously decorated and important status symbols (Buie, pg.72). The influence of the Roman throne chair is apparent in later European chair designs, especially the Italian renaissance. The sella curulis, a common Roman chair, is an X-shaped folding stool that is more elaborate in shape and decoration than Greek klismos prototypes (Boger, pg.7). This chair was used by higher Roman magistrates, usually made of ivory with curved legs and with or without arms.

Gothic chairs were scarce and associated with a sense of state majesty, being used only by the masters. There was an increasing interest in comfort and materials including wood, textiles, and metal. Chairs and thrones of this period are ceremonial and may feature turned elements. Common types include turned X-frame and choirstall chairs. Derived from churches, Choirstall chairs, are rectangular boxes with tall backs, solid paneled arms, and storage in their bases. Whether intricately carved or plain,

thrones and chairs reveal rank, particularly when placed on a dais under a canopy (Buie, pg.120).

The Savonarola folding X-form chair and the ladder-back Sgabello chairs were commonly seen during the Italian Renaissance. The Savonarola chair also called curule, has crossed legs and seats were often made of leather or fabric. It was designed for both comfort and portability. The Sgabello chair, a small stool or chair, usually carved and ornamented wood legs and back. Not a chair for comfort but used for seating during a public function (Italian Renaissance PPT). During the French Renaissance, we see an interpretation of the Gothic choirstall chair. Also, the X-form and caquetoire are common during this period. The caquetoire armchair, used mostly by ladies, takes its name from the French word caqueter, meaning to chatter or gossip (Buie, pg.155). Characterized by a U-shaped or trapezoid seat, it has a tall, narrow back embellished with carved, decorative period motifs and outward-curving arms. As the period progresses, chairs become lighter and more moveable.

The William and Mary style is a major furniture development that makes up the Restoration period. The royal couple William III and Mary II hugely affected decorative arts like furniture making. The style drew on both French and Dutch influences. The chairs during this period often have curving silhouettes, cabriole and trumpet legs, spoon backs and splats, and pied-de-biche feet (Boger, 239). Some definitive characteristics are richly figured veneers, marquetry, and flat stretchers that repeat the shapes of aprons and turned, baluster or trumpet legs.

During the Rococo period, seating came in many different sizes and forms for maximum comfort. Following new stylistic developments, seat furniture's shape, outline,

and decoration changed in the eighteenth century. Major characteristics include lightness, asymmetry, elegance, cabriole leg, scroll feet, interlaced shell decoration, floral motifs, and C- and S-scrolls. A new chair type called the *fauteuil* is an open armchair with an exposed wooden frame, and a flat or concave upholstered seat, back, and arms. The *fauteuil* was not placed against the wall but in the center of the room. The *bergère* another new model is a larger armchair with an enclosed back and arms. It features a separately upholstered seat cushion and a full backrest. (Daniëlle Kisluk-Grosheide, *French Furniture in the Eighteenth Century*)

The English Neo-Palladian-Georgian period produced many popular chair styles including Chippendale, Queen Anne, William Kent, and the Windsor chair. The Queen Anne chairs have more delicate proportions and graceful curves. Continuing the Dutch traditions of the William and Mary style, the Queen Anne style relies on silhouette and wood grain for beauty rather than applied decoration. A solid backrest, central splat, curved cabriole leg, undecorated knees, and slipper feet are all characteristics of the style. The Chippendale chairs continue the Early Georgian form with low, broad proportions and pierced splats. The Chippendale style often featured architectural elements such as the broken scroll pediment, carvings of shells, ribbons, acanthus leaves, cabriole legs, and claw feet. Chippendale's most popular chair styles include the Gothic, Ribbon-back, and Chinese style. Early pieces may feature the cabriole leg but later tended to be more restrained (Lucie-Smith, pg.96).

During the Early Neo-Classical period the Federal style adopts the scale, contrasts, and classical ornament of European Neoclassical styles including Hepplewhite and Sheraton from England and the Louis XVI style in France. Chairs

generally follow Hepplewhite and Sheraton forms, but a few emulate Louis XVI.

Imitating the style of English cabinetmaker George Hepplewhite, these chairs display common characteristics of both Late English Georgian and the American Federal style of the late 18th century. Proportions are light and slender, and details are classically derived. Chairback shapes include camel, shield, oval, heart, and rectangular. Thomas Sheraton is stylistically similar to Hepplewhite but more angular with straight lines. Hepplewhite often refers to curved backs and tapered rectangular legs, while Sheraton means square backs and cylindrical legs.

Overall, furniture is a substantial part of interior design and exists throughout all cultures and for many centuries. Chairs are fundamental to everyday routines and have a valuable role in our lives. Many characteristics, design traits, and cultural attributes can be seen throughout the evolution of chair design. By concentrating on the function, social influences, shapes, materials, method of construction, meaning, and decoration you really start to understand the significant developments made to its design throughout history.

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