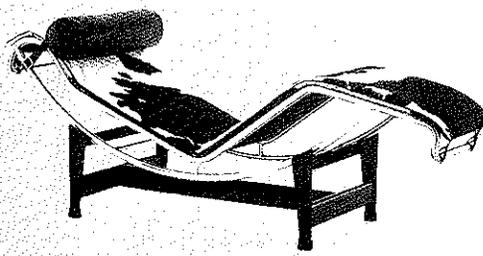
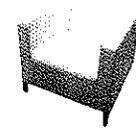
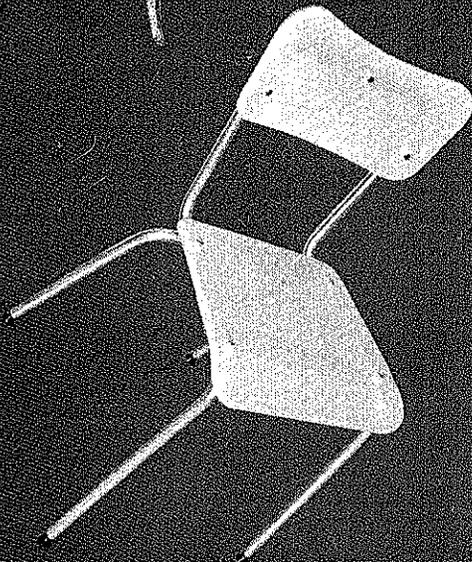
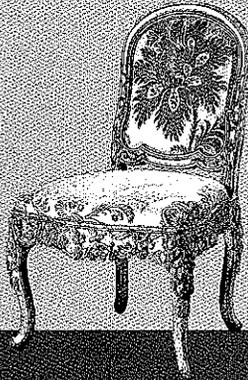


"Galen Cranz has written
a provocative book. Pull up
a comfortable chair—if you
can find one—and read it."

—WITOLD RYBCZYNSKI



The Chair

RETHINKING CULTURE, BODY, AND DESIGN

Galen Cranz

 Why do we have chairs, where did they come from, and why do we continue to sit on them? How have they become so fundamental that we take their presence for granted? They did not originate as a straightforward response to the bends at our ankles, knees, and hips. Biology, physiology, and anatomy have less to do with our chairs than do pharaohs, kings, and executives. Part I shows how the chair has become a way of displaying hierarchy in complex societies.

Chapter 1 turns to history and sociology for an understanding of the origins of chairs and their evolving social purposes. Ancient chairs reflected the relationship of power between rulers and ruled; chairs in today's homes, offices, and schools also elaborate differences between men and women, bosses and employees, young and old.

Why do chairs look the way they do? Chapter 2 explores the idea that chairs are carriers of style, through which we differentiate ourselves from others. Sculptors and architects have always been interested in the chair as a sculptural object. With artistic license, they treat chairs as a sculptural problem of intersecting planes and forms. Chair design poses teething problems for students, presents an opportunity for seasoned architects to take advantage of lulls in their practice, and forms part of the

fashion for designing all the details of an environment to be consistent with its larger architectural ideas. Chairs are the favorite of contemporary Western architects, who love them because they are both anthropomorphic and architectonic. Nearly all of the big names in twentieth-century architecture—Breuer, Mies van der Rohe, Bertola, Wright, Corbusier, Aalto—have designed famous chairs that we live with today.

Chapter 1

How Chairs Evolved

LIFE WITHOUT CHAIRS

In 1852, an English colonialist working in India voiced his complaints about the local workmen. He was particularly irritated and offended that blacksmiths, carpenters, and masons squatted to work, complaining indignantly, "All work with their knees nearly on a level with their chin: the left hand—when not used as the kangaroo uses his tail to form a tripod—grasps the left knee and binds the trunk to the doubled limbs." This man was not the first or last to liken people who sit on floors to animals. He was more explicit than many about why he found the posture inferior: it suggested "indolence and inefficiency . . . especially irritating to an Englishman," but even more so to one who hires and pays such workmen.

The colonialist tried to force these men to work his way, but they ignored him; so he ordered the anvils on which they worked to be bolted to surfaces at table height. The next day, he was pleased to see them working off the floor. But not for long. He returned the following day to find the men squatting on top of stools in order to reach the anvils. He gave up, reasoning that he could not get workmen to stand while working because of "a deficiency of muscular power in the lower limbs," which he at-

tributed to their not using chairs. Our amateur sociologist speculated that chairs or raised seats were “one of those natural steps toward a higher civilization.” He was wrong about that, but right in observing that we are apt to overlook the function of such artifacts until we imagine or experience life without them. Chairs have become second nature to us, virtually indivisible from us—and therefore invisible to us.

In the past century we have come to appreciate, rather than condemn, the way people in other cultures do things. The attitude of a nineteenth-century English colonialist toward Indian workers now strikes us as stuffy and disrespectful. Nevertheless, our lingering ideas about “progress” still tempt us to look down on or misunderstand the habits of others, including how they sit. Take an extreme example: the excitement and disgust Western tourists experience on having to use a squat toilet, even a clean one, for the first time. Though it is an anatomically efficient position for elimination, most visitors feel revulsion, superiority, or some combination of both. Northern Europeans call such toilets “Italian” and Italians call them “Turkish.” Either way, this artifact comes from a more “primitive,” less developed place.

In the United States, an example of our confused feelings about cultural differences is as near as your local Japanese restaurant. Such restaurants may have tatami mats where diners sit on the floor, but this touch of authenticity can only go so far. Westerners do not generally sit cross-legged or kneeling, so many of these floors have hidden wells under the tables for diners to sit in the classic right-angled posture we are used to. But do we accept this as a cultural difference, created by lifetimes of sitting one way versus another? No, we kid ourselves otherwise, with vague references to some imagined anatomical difference.

We still need anthropologists to remind us that almost everything—including how we hold our bodies—should be understood in its cultural context. The American anthropologist Gordon Hewes has done that for posture. He documented the tremendous variety of recognized postures—over one thousand steady postures—that human beings assume all over the world.² The right-angle seated posture is just one example, utilized by only a third to a half of the people in the world. But, you might ask, how can a person rest, eat, or write a letter without a chair? A Chinese might squat to wait for the bus; a Japanese woman might kneel to eat; and an Arab

might sit cross-legged to write a letter. Are they forced to sit without chairs simply because they are too poor to own one? People who can afford chairs throughout the Middle East, Asia, Africa, and Polynesia do not necessarily buy them; a common posture in Africa and Australia is what anthropologists call the “Neolithic” stance: the person stands on one leg and plants the sole of the other foot near the knee of the standing leg. As you will see, the reasons for sitting on the floor, on mats, on carpets, platforms, Chinese *k'ang*, or stools stem from cultural traditions rather than economic development.

Hewes emphasized that postural variations are culturally, not anatomically, determined. Sitting, like other postures, is regulated all around the world according to gender, age, and social status. Sitting on the floor with both legs straight out in front is generally a woman's posture, wherever it is found. The cowboy squat—the one used by Indian workmen to the annoyance of British colonists—is mostly a man's, with one knee up.

A particularly common alternative posture is sitting Turkish-style, what Westerners call cross-legged, or sometimes tailor-fashion. In Turkish homes, traditional “divans,” from which we get one of our terms for couches, are deep, wide, and firm enough to permit sitting in this way. The divans are low wooden platforms with pads and bolsters, built into a room called a “sofa” for receiving visitors and enjoying oneself with family. From this we have derived another of our terms for couches.

In mosques, Turks sit and kneel on richly carpeted floors. Carpets are butted one against the other, even overlapping—but never displayed in a sea of gleaming hardwood. Muslim religious practices are refreshingly sensitive to bodily experience. Carpets do more than protect the knees; all who enter a mosque (or home) take off their shoes, ostensibly so that no dirt is brought onto the carpets where people will put their hands and faces. But going barefoot stimulates the nerves of the soles, in turn refreshing the whole body. The bending and stretching ritually required five times a day is also good for the spine, a useful counterpoint to constant upright posture. The ritual use of water inside the mosque to cleanse the nose, neck, forearms, and ankles was initially practical in dry, sandy climates, but refreshes the skin in any climate.

In India today, especially rural India, many of the activities West-

erners would pursue in chairs, from sewing to university physics seminars, Indians perform while seated on the floor.⁵ Ergonomics researchers have attempted to measure the physiological effects of performing tasks this way; for example, the impact on the heart rate of making chapatis while squatting on the floor. Surprisingly, the effect is aerobic—so I no longer worry so much about lack of exercise for those women confined to family courtyards.⁴

Posture is regulated symbolically worldwide, whether on the floor, on a stool, or in a chair. (*Fig. 1*) In Africa, initiates use stools in special ceremonies to rest, eat, or watch dances. Stools are viewed as extremely personal, so that one would not even use a relative's in the same household. They were associated with leadership; when a king died, his stool was preserved in order to preserve the prosperity of the kingdom. When the European-style chair was first introduced to Africa by the Portuguese in 1481, the Africans quickly recognized it as a signifier of prestige and power.⁵

All around the world, the chair and chair sitting has become a symbol—and sometimes direct evidence—of Westernization. An American traveler gave this account of his visit to a remote mountain valley in Afghanistan in the late 1960s:

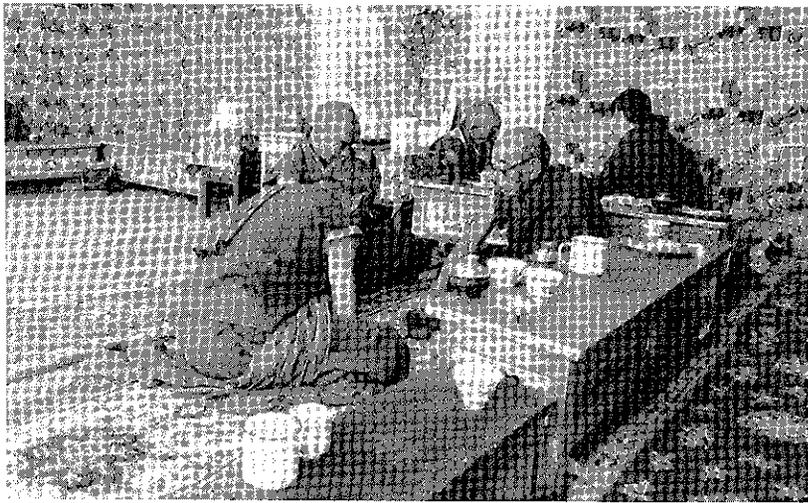


Figure 1. Contemporary Tibetans live comfortably on the floor with carpets and low furniture.

I had a good look at my first Kafiristani as he passed. He was fair-skinned with grey or blue eyes, very Western looking indeed. "Looks like a farangi," I said to Sarkal, forgetting that I was a "Frank" myself. "Yes, many of them do. People say that they are descended from the people of Alexander, but I don't know. They sit on chairs, like the Franks, though."⁶

In turn, Westernization has become a symbol of modernization and progress. Hence, journalists equate Japan's economic miracle with its rise from the floor to chairs.⁷ Chrome kitchenette sets crowd Japanese apartments—sometimes unused by the inhabitants, who continue to sit on the floor, but powerful symbols nonetheless. Conversely, when Gandhi wanted to make a point about the importance of retaining traditional culture, he chose to sit cross-legged on the floor, self-consciously rejecting a chair and the modernism that goes with it.

In cultures outside the West, then, the specific connotations of chairs are different, but the chair is still used to communicate status differences. When it was introduced to China in the second century A.D., the Chinese called it the "barbarian [their word for anything foreign] bed." It connoted informal use because of its years of association with military camps, temporary travel furniture, and garden use. It was more like a cot, and for years was never used indoors. People sat on it tailor-fashion, showing contempt, indifference, or extreme confidence. Nine hundred years later, a new seating type evolved: a folding chair with a back. This chair then became acceptable and was used by all, but the language of dignity and honor retained the use of the term "mat" rather than "chair."⁸ The Chinese are noteworthy for having integrated the chair into their lives without letting it dominate. In contemporary mainland China, people sit mostly on backless stools in schools, most workplaces, and the home—including when dining.⁹ (*Fig. 2*) One interesting exception is that on a parent's sixtieth birthday, he or she is accorded the special honor of being asked to dine in a chair.¹⁰

By and large Westerners, scientists and humanists alike, have generated few alternatives to the chair-and-table culture. We are, in a sense, locked into it. After all, even our architecture is shaped by chairs. The height of window openings, for example, is determined by our sitting about 18 inches off the floor. Furthermore, chair imagery pervades our sym-

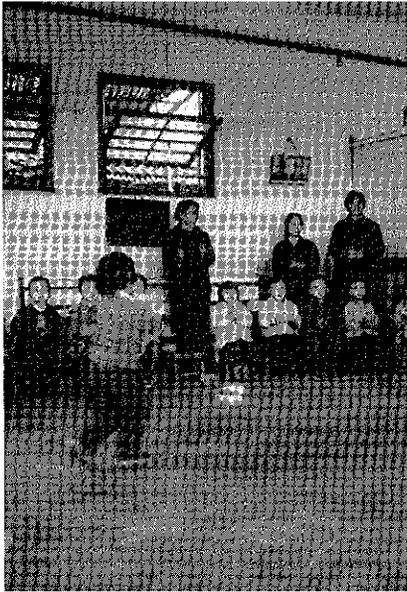


Figure 2. Often Chinese schoolchildren sit on stools or benches, like the ones lined up against the wall in this photo, rather than on chairs with back support.

bolic life. University professors hold “chairs”—positions funded especially for research and teaching in a designated subject. Departments everywhere have “chairmen,” “chairwomen,” or better yet, “chairpersons.” When a person has to choose between two jobs—say, acting and dancing—we sometimes say he cannot sit between two chairs. County seats, district seats, embassy seats, a private seat, seats on the stock exchange are all

metaphors for position, social role, and power, but the concrete object from which the metaphors have evolved is a chair. A hot seat is never a sofa, might possibly be a stool, but is most likely a chair. Sigmund Freud was famous for his couch; but today the reflection and conversation of therapy is more closely associated with chairs.¹¹ In Christian religious communities, an empty chair represents Christ, who may be understood to be present in the person of an unexpected guest; this convention has dual purposes, one symbolic and the other practical, if an unexpected guest arrives.

CHAIRS THROUGH THE AGES

Since not all peoples sit in chairs, why do we? The answer to that question may never be known, but historians do know a fair amount about the early history of chair use in the West. One thing is certain: our chair habit was created, modified and nurtured, reformed and democratized in response to social—not genetic, anatomical, or even physiological—forces.

The purposes of designed objects change over time, just as the mean-

ings of words do. Etymology always offers insight into contemporary usage, just as history helps us understand why things are the way they are today. The word “chair” comes from the Greek language, a contraction of *cathedra*—in turn a compound of *kata*, meaning “down,” and *bedra*, from “to sit.” A chair is a piece of furniture with a back, and usually four legs, on which one person sits. But so is a throne.

However, the word “throne” has a different origin. It comes from the Indo-European base *dher*, meaning “to hold or support.” The throne supports, while the chair is a place to sit down. A throne suggests the palanquins on which a potentate might be carried, while the underlying meaning of a chair is quite different. Physically, almost anyone can sit down, whereas only a very privileged few can be carried. Thus, a chair is more common and ordinary than a throne. From the beginning of recorded history, two types of chairs developed: the upright throne, and the more relaxed *clismos*, a chair with a modestly inclined back. Today, we mock the lowliest chair of all, the toilet, by giving it the term of greater privilege, “the throne.” President Lyndon Johnson held early morning audiences seated on such a throne.

Neither thrones nor chairs originated in classical Greece; they are far older. Chair sitting was already a widespread practice in the ancient Egypt of 2850 B.C. The oldest physical chairs we have come from the tomb of the young pharaoh Tutankhamen, who died in about 1352 B.C. Ancient Egyptian furniture lasted because of the dry climate and because the wood was encased in gold. But paintings, carvings, and hieroglyphs on temples and papyrus all show that chairs were used by many people, not only royalty, with rank determining who could sit in whose presence. Whether royal or common, ancient Egyptians did not use chairs as much as we do. For example, scribes sat on the floor to do much of the accounting and record keeping. Chair sitting continued into Islamic, medieval Egypt; by A.D. 650, Egyptians were routinely using chairs and stools in their homes.¹²

What about that other great river valley, the Euphrates? These two highly developed civilizations flourished at roughly the same time, and they had interchanges with one another. Mesopotamian civilization arose in a more humid climate, where wood and rush rot easily, so no actual examples of its chairs have survived. But carvings on stone funerary monuments (called stelae) show frequent chair use by kings and in domestic scenes with attention to rank. The Assyrian language has two different

words for *generic seats* (stools and benches) and *chairs* (seat with a back). So chairs were significant in Mesopotamia as well as in Egypt.¹³

Did these early civilizations invent the chair or were chairs in use before the societies flourished? Just how far back do chairs go? According to experts on Paleolithic times (the Old Stone Age), no existing cave paintings anywhere in the world include chairs.¹⁴ Before the last ice age, humans lived in caves or tents as nomadic hunters and gatherers who are thought to have revered the animals they hunted. The animals in their paintings are colorful, animated, dimensional. The human beings are few and far between; when they do appear, they are sticklike. Occasionally human tools are included, and they are even more sketchy and feeble in comparison to the vivid animals. But no chairs, or even stools, have been identified. Cave paintings depict actions and movement, possibly rituals, which might explain the absence of chairs in these pictures. So, we will probably never know if chairs existed in 40,000 B.C. before the last ice age.

But after the ice age, during the New Stone (Neolithic) Age around 10,000–4000 B.C., chairs did leave their mark. That was the age of flint tools and permanent stone houses, part of a settled way of life, with furniture. The archeological digs of building interiors and drawings of their reconstruction show benches and ledges for sleeping and sitting. Most intriguing of all, archeologists of southeastern Europe, the former Yugoslavia and Bulgaria, have found a large number of pottery models about two inches high of human figures, all of them female, some of them seated on chairs.¹⁵ Their relaxed, reclining posture communicates without doubt that they are not giving birth. (Fig. 3)

Besides providing the earliest evidence of use, these models are also the first example of the chair as a symbol of elevated status. But why only women? And why are they seated on chairs? One school of thought speculates that



Figure 3. Clay models of full-figured females seated on four-legged chairs with backs indicate that chair sitting was a part of Neolithic culture.

Neolithic societies may have been matrifocal—even though Fred played a bigger role than Wilma in *The Flintstones*. A settled way of life focused on women because managing crops in relation to water and seasons was primarily their work. Women were doubly fertile, the producers of babies and agricultural products. Hence, female fertility symbols dominate the representations of this period. In some Neolithic cultures, women's graves have ritual objects placed within them, while men's graves do not. Depicting women on chairs was probably yet another way to heighten or reinforce their status.

Because of its importance in both matrifocal and patriarchal cultures, we can conclude that the chair—the seat with a back for a single person—is a powerful symbol, potent enough to be appropriated by the most influential group or groups in a society as a way to communicate their significance. Yet, what was it about the chair that gave its sitter status? Or, put another way, what was it about the floor, a stump, stool, or bed that made those things inadequate for the purposes served by chairs?

Chairs are an improvement over what came before them—if Henry Petroski, the historian of engineering design at Duke University, is right that form follows failure.¹⁶ Being off the ground makes chair sitting different from floor sitting but not different from stools or benches. The chair generally holds only one person at a time, so it acknowledges the individual, unlike raised benches, sofas, beds, or platforms, which can accommodate two or more. Finally, chairs differ from stools because the chairback can display decoration and, if large enough, frame the sitter from the front view as a throne does. Thus, most chairs have directionality, while most stools do not.

Thinking about the differences between stools and chairs, early experiments with communication in small groups come to mind. An American sociologist named Alex Bavelas examined what happened to information when it was passed directly from one group member to another versus when it first had to be passed to a group leader.¹⁷ He set up boards between individuals to block communication by sight or sound to anyone but the leader in the center, and this experimental apparatus was named after him. One can imagine chairs as stools with Bavelas boards attached. From this perspective, chairbacks are like the individual windowpanes in jalousie windows, which allow us to direct incoming breezes; we can direct people's attention by turning chairs in one direction or another. Stools, with-

out directing backs, promote a star or network pattern of communication, whereas chairs promote a centralized or pyramidal pattern of communication. Obviously, stools lend themselves to more democratic, egalitarian social life and chairs to more hierarchical social structures. The back also can serve as a rest, which tells the lucky occupant he or she deserves to relax. The form of the chair literally expresses high status; it separates, and elaborates the separation, providing distinction, while it legitimizes support of the occupant's whole physical and psychological being.

We may never know when or where the first chairs originated, but we know that they are older than the period of recorded history when most furniture histories begin. The existence of chairs in Neolithic times raises new questions about the origin of chairs in classical antiquity—Egypt, Greece, and Rome. Egyptian thrones were of two types. The most common in depictions of royalty was planar and right-angled; the second type, with curved seat and back, came later and was probably the precursor to the Greek *clismos*. Does the *clismos* represent recumbent ease and the throne upright authority? Western civilization may have both because our classical culture embodies the fusion of two cultures—matrifocal agriculturalists and patriarchal nomadic invaders.

Yet another possible interpretation is that the throne has more to do with the sacred function of kings and pharaohs as links to the gods than with patriarchal social order. Sculptors may have depicted pharaohs upright in thrones because erectness was recognized as a necessary part of the path of connecting with a higher plane. Pharaohs were supposed to perfect themselves as evidence that it is humanly possible to connect with the forces (which Egyptians called “neters”) that make up the universe. Accordingly, their posture could indicate not only social rank but also the cultivation of self-awareness. Transhuman consciousness has been recognized in all meditation traditions from China, India, and the Middle East. Keeping the spine erect and self-supporting, with the head lifted on the tip of the spine, is an essential means to this end. Thus, the pharaohs' uprightness is not unlike the uprightness of the Buddha's posture. The sculpted pharaohs do not lean back on their chairbacks; this is not because their stoneworkers were not skilled enough to depict flowing ease and movement, but rather because autonomous seating has physical, psychological, and ultimately spiritual significance. According to this interpretation, thrones represent not so much patriarchy as spiritual aspiration. By

the same token, the *clismos* would not represent matriarchy as much as it represents earthly comfort and ease.

The problem with this interpretation is that one pharaoh slumped! He is the heretic pharaoh Akhenaton, a controversial and mysterious figure in Egyptian history because he tried to convert the country to monotheism before his death in 1362 B.C. His likenesses look inexplicably different from other pharaohs' in that his features are irregular, his face narrow, his nose huge, and his thighs fleshy as a full-figured woman's. But to me he stands out for other reasons. He sits with a rounded pelvis in chairs with curved seats. (Fig. 4) Some people think the intent was to show reality, as opposed to the ideal; while others suggest satire. One thing we know for certain: sitting upright without leaning back, without letting the pelvis slide forward as the lower back rolls backward into a C-shaped slump, takes discipline. So, was he telling us that even monks and pharaohs do not live up to the demands of their role every day? Or was he simply more relaxed, more ordinary, or more feminine than any of his predecessors?

No matter how this mystery is ultimately resolved, I venture to say that the Greek *clismos* is an elegant expression of the age-old behavior of slumping. Typically, furniture connoisseurs single out and praise the *clismos*, with its curved back and curved legs, for its grace, ease, and domestic use. (Fig. 5a and b) Drawings on pottery art of Greeks sitting in these chairs show people—usually women—reclining on their chairbacks. This relaxed posture—leaning backward while seated—is one that we use today, and maybe one we have used since prehistory. Contemporary scholars view this Greek posture as superior to the upright, unassisted position of the pharaohs, but I

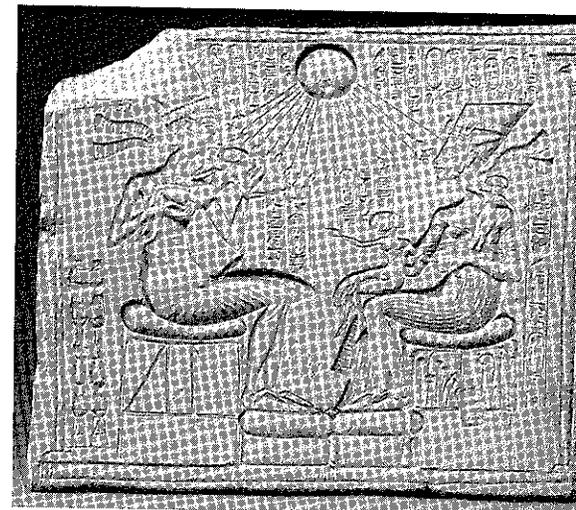


Figure 4. Pharaoh Akhenaton was the first pharaoh to be depicted with a rounded pelvis and lower back.

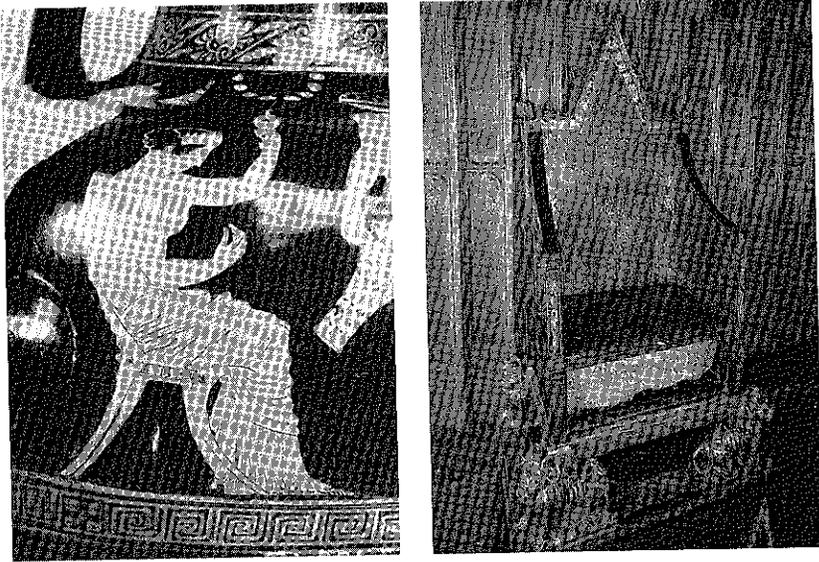


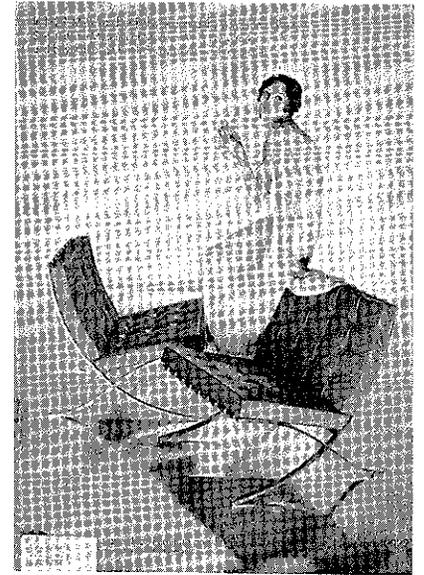
Figure 5. The clismos (a) and the throne (b) represent two different types of postures—recumbent ease and upright alertness.

think they fail to appreciate both the long-term stability and the spiritual aspiration associated with uprightiness. Mies van der Rohe obviously preferred the elegant slump of the *clismos*; his famous Barcelona chair of 1925 distilled the X-shape in its profile. Advertisers draped flappers into them and these chairs still prohibit upright posture to this day. (Fig. 6)

One certainty amid these speculations is that the Greeks adopted a good deal of science and culture from Egypt, including their furniture. Roman furniture, in turn, followed Greek types: a high-backed upright throne for occasions of state, the *clismos* of lighter build with arms for general domestic use, along with stools, footstools, tables, couches, and chests.

In Rome, furniture was sparse by contemporary standards. Even in wealthy homes, people showed their wealth not in the number but in the quality of items, including the precious materials used to make them and special shapes that would express their owner's sensibilities. For all classes

Figure 6. Mies van der Rohe designed this chair for the German pavilion at the 1929 World's Fair in Barcelona, introducing one of Modernism's enduring incongruities between formal purpose and informality of posture.



the bed was the all-purpose piece of furniture, far more important than the chair. Besides sleeping there at night, a Roman would eat, read, write, and socialize on a bed bolstered with matting, cushions, and fabrics. For the poor, such a surface might be as simple as a pallet on a built-in masonry shelf; for the rich, it could be as elaborate as cast bronze or carved wood, local or exotic.¹⁸

Banquets and dinner parties were organized around couches, called *triclinia*, configured as a U-shape with one side open for the server. More than nine guests required a second configuration. Jesus' Last Supper was a Roman-style banquet, meaning that he too lay down with his disciples "Oriental-style," each person propped up by pillows on one side, and each with a personal napkin. The napkin was primarily used to protect the pillow coverings, but also to take home special tidbits—an ancient version of the doggy bag. Over time the Last Supper has been converted to a table-and-chair event in order to seem more familiar to Western eyes.¹⁹ Passover, by contrast, symbolically expresses Jewish freedom by eating while reclining. A couch and pillows are part of the Seder, a direct legacy from the time when pharaohs reclined while eating and the chair symbolized the oppressed position of the Jews. Part of the ritual is to ask: "Why on this night do we eat reclining?" The answer is. To symbolize freedom, because in Moses' time only free men had the honor of reclining to eat. (Fig. 7a and b)

Roman chairs were rare, decorative items of luxury,²⁰ but even so, the two chair types were maintained. The chair with an upright back, the

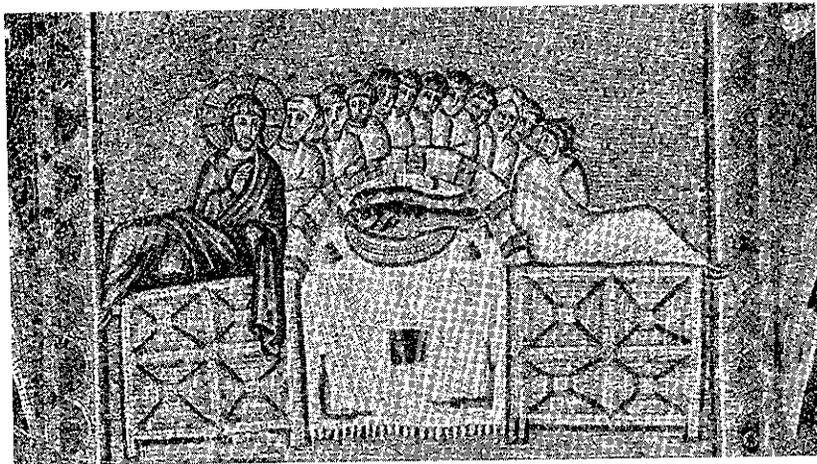
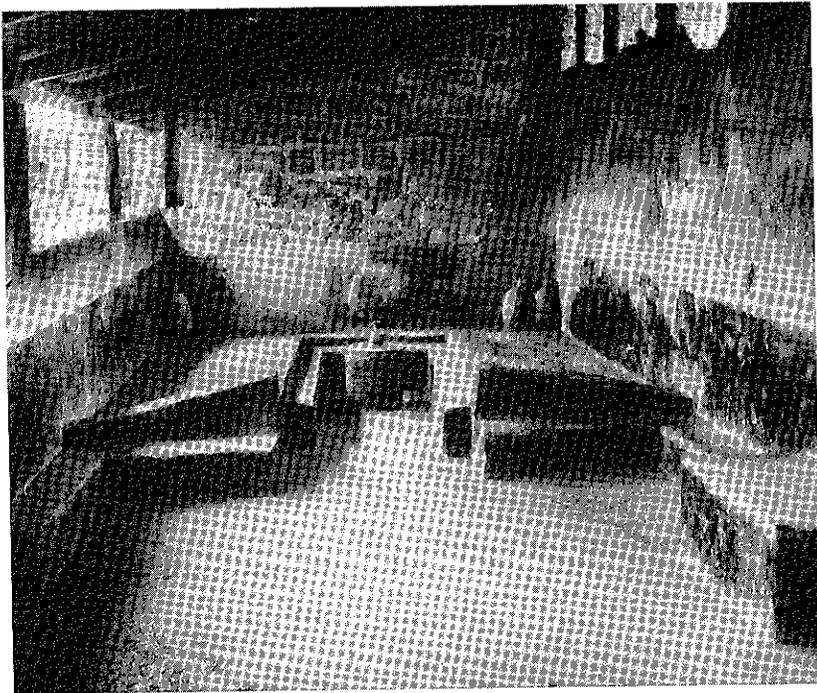


Figure 7. Upper-class Romans throughout the Empire ate while reclining, which means that the Last Supper was not a table-and-chair event. (a) Outdoor dining room in the House of Caro at Pompeii. (b) The earliest surviving image of the Last Supper, a sixth-century mosaic in Ravenna.

thronus, was used for governmental, religious, and scholarly functions. The *cathedra* had a sloping back and was reputed to be especially popular with women. Literature of the day described the indolence of high-class ladies, who reposed in them languidly.²¹ (Are there two competing ideas about comfort—one about alertness, the other about rest?)

Within the Roman family itself, these two extremes of posture were tied to status. A family in republican Rome would dine together in the following hierarchy: the father would be served recumbent on a couch, the mother would sit nearby on a chair, while the children would sit on stools (as they did at school), and servants would sit at a separate table with stools.²² This pattern shows a differentiation of status between male and female, young and old, master and servant. Later, the arrangement changed to include both man and wife on the bed, but children and servants continued to sit. One nobleman, in order to protest the tyrannical rule of Julius Caesar, vowed to eat seated rather than reclined, a vow he kept until he chose the even more drastic protest of suicide.²³

After the fall of Rome, furniture and its development atrophied for a millennium. The Visigoths and Germanic nomads who sacked Rome had no interest in what the architectural historian Siegfried Giedion, who was a professor at Harvard University in the middle of the twentieth century, called the “instruments of a differentiated culture”—the chairs, statues, baths, inlaid furniture. Instead, he wrote, “Their habit was to squat on the ground, and so it remained.”²⁴ All through the medieval period, people sat in improvised and informal ways, often squatting more than sitting, on the bare floor or on cushions. Individuals sat crowded together, with their bodies touching. Sometimes they sat on storage chests pushed up against the walls of a castle, or took meals on benches, with their backs to the wall. Thus, the few chairs of the time were modeled on other types of furniture: storage chests and possibly choir stalls in churches.²⁵ The chairs with backs from this period looked literally like storage chests with pieces of wall attached at right angles. (Fig. 8) A table was a trestle frame across which boards were laid for meals—hence the phrase “setting the table.” Many people sat on three-legged stools. Even the wealthy owned little furniture except a trestle table, a few benches and stools.

The scantiness of the medieval household is usually attributed to the need to move frequently. The feudal household, which included both the

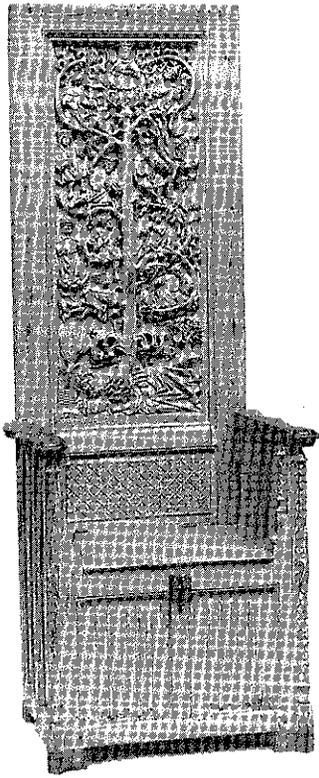


Figure 8. When chairs reappeared in medieval life they looked much like the storage chests from which they evolved.

rich and their poorer servants, moved often because of political insecurity and the need to seek protection elsewhere or because landowners had to travel continually to supervise their scattered holdings. Their houses stood virtually empty when the owner was away. In order to avoid theft, furniture was either heavy, immovable, and built into the walls, or freestanding and easy to take apart and move to another place.²⁶ (The significance of the word for furniture in many European languages, usually a variation on the Latin *mobilis* for “movable,” comes from this distinction between built-in and movable pieces.) Finally, classicists remind us that until the Renaissance all people lived with simple furniture because they went to bed at dark

and lived outdoors as much as weather permitted.

In any case, folding X-chairs or foldstools were used long before chairs, which remained a rarity. Even the richest houses seldom boasted more than one, reserved exclusively for the master of the household. Massive and stately, it was too heavy to move.²⁷ No ordinary person would have dared use it.²⁸ So the trestle and board were set up in front of the chair, rather than vice versa. When we use the title “chairman of the board” today, we are casting a linguistic line back to the time when the leader was important enough to get the stationary chair in front of which a table would be assembled. The relative scarcity of chairs gave them significance in church life as well as in secular life. The highest religious authorities of this era announced their decisions seated in their special chairs—hence the term *ex cathedra*, “from the chair.”

The social functions of medieval chairs reflected patriarchal style, power, and authority. Historians concur that throughout the Middle Ages all chairs were “rigid, upright symbols of power and rank.”²⁹ Those entitled to use them sat up; no one sat back. Reclining, warmth, and texture were clearly found elsewhere, probably in the beds where people lived and entertained.

As social conditions changed, chairs changed with them. By the fifteenth century, peace had gradually been restored in Europe, and trade centers and governments had become more centralized. Noblemen, therefore, were not forced to move as often and could concentrate their wealth in their homes. Furniture no longer had to be anchored to the wall. Now chairs moved out into the room, which gave them a freer status.

Around this time, the medieval foldstool evolved into a chair. Light, and easily transported, the new chair was a descendant of the Roman *curule*, a folding campstool used by magistrates. Still endowed with official dignity, it became the seat of kings, important laymen, and ecclesiastics. Additional honor was achieved by placing it on a dais with a footstool and cushions, probably with a canopy above.³⁰ A more common type of chair, a three-legged stool—with peg legs set directly into the seat and a narrow, slablike back, sometimes curved—evolved around 1490.³¹ Several preserved from the Strozzi Palace in Florence look alike, meaning that, at least in that part of Europe, the chair lost its rare, honorific value since it was used in series.

By the 1600s, decoration had become part of the design of ordinary chairs, chiefly in imitation of clothing fashion. Throughout this century, furniture in Holland, France, England, and Germany became more stylish. In England, the change took place during the Restoration period from 1660 to 1770, when carving and inlaid decoration began to appear on chairs. Foreign influences on the decoration of chairs came from India via Portuguese, Dutch, and British colonists, and from Japan, where lacquering captured the attention of European furniture makers.³²

The term “armchair” was first adopted during the seventeenth century to distinguish chairs with arms from backstools, also known as side chairs or single chairs.³³ During this period, chairs became more common as life became more sociable. Padded armchairs with high backs and decorative knobs at the tops of the uprights began to appear in the wealthier homes. The folding X-shaped chair survived from the Middle Ages in an

elegant and balanced form called, in Italy, a Savonarola or Dante chair, and in Germany, a Luther chair.³⁴ The upper classes had time for social life—conversation, card games, and music—so they needed more easily movable chairs. Thus, chairs on the average were becoming lighter even as tables were becoming heavier. During this time, chairs were specifically designed for women by widening the arms or lowering the back to accommodate women's dresses—a step that some historians have interpreted as a sign of women's rising status in society.

In England, the Renaissance changed the layout of the house. The hall became a reception area rather than the main meeting place. The family ate in a smaller dining room, with the dining table in a permanent position in the middle of the room. Since the table was no longer placed against the wall, benches were discarded in favor of chairs. The main reception room moved to the second floor, creating plenty of space for entertaining and relaxing, so that furniture did not have to be put against the wall. This in turn created a demand for a wider variety of furniture. The Baroque style was introduced, and the search for ease became linked to a desire for lavish display. Furniture in general, including chairs, became ostentatious and sumptuous.

The eighteenth century is widely viewed as an apex in chair history because of the new attention paid to comfort and artistic unity. Historians do not fret about the meaning of comfort, assuming that any response to the body represents a move in the direction of comfort. For example, Siegfried Giedion judged that eighteenth-century France took up seating comfort where it had been left during the fifth century B.C. by the Greeks.³⁵ Although the sociological contexts were radically different, in terms of topography he viewed the eighteenth-century chair as the return of a forgotten standard: support for the body that would allow it to enjoy a highly relaxed posture. (Giedion didn't realize just how "forgotten" this standard is. From what we now know about prehistoric Europe, Giedion was attributing to the Greeks a seating posture seen millennia before, in Neolithic times.) In any case, whether ultimately comfortable or not, ease, luxury, and flexibility in posture became fashionable in the eighteenth century, and chair styles adapted.

Historians have drawn seemingly different pictures of this Neoclassical European furniture. Some focus on architectural, rather than physiological, conformity, noting that in the eighteenth-century reception

rooms, the shapes of sofa- and chair-backs fitted into similar shapes in the wall paneling, and seating was upholstered to create a uniform band of color around the room. Even at the height of the Rococo period, with its flowing asymmetrical forms, furniture was still placed symmetrically. What was important was matching decor, not matching the human body. Sofas and chairs were richly upholstered in fabrics that matched, or at least blended with, the hangings in the room. The upholstery was the most expensive and prized part of the seating.³⁶ When chairs were derived from the classical orders of architecture, the unyielding, vertical back was retained. Some judge that this strategy produced uncomfortable furniture. However, for the purpose of maintaining alertness, uprightness has proved the most comfortable position over time. For the kinds of social and political functions staged in such rooms, alertness was undoubtedly appropriate and desired, and this chair style supported that purpose.

In eighteenth-century England, the old terms "cabinetmaker" and "enjoiner" had been dropped. These had stood for *parts* of the process of producing chairs. What is important about this change in terminology is that chairmaking now became a distinct craft, combining the skills of turner, carver, joiner, and upholsterer. This new occupation is credited with integrating, refining, and codifying the best rules for chair design—through craftsmen's pattern books—from both the physiological and the aesthetic point of view. For example, the cabriole leg "gracefully united opposing curves—convex above, concave below," and this leg "became part of a curvilinear composition, instead of an isolated support," since the back, too, was curvilinear.³⁷

Whether or not chairs succeeded in uniting comfort with beauty, they continued to play a part in social differentiation. Furniture for people with discretionary income elaborated themes derived from the Greeks, Romans, Egyptians, and Syrians.³⁸ In the meantime, the cramped conditions of working-class Londoners who lived near their work, since the city lacked any sort of mass transportation system, stimulated the production of ingenious, space-saving, dual-purpose furniture, such as an armchair that converted into a bed, or even a piano that converted into a bed.³⁹ (*Fig. 9a and b*)

Not surprisingly, the American social history of the chair roughly recapitulates that of Europe. Again, status, not comfort, was the main issue. Most people in precolonial times sat on benches and stools, and chairs were

special items denoting status. In fact, chairs were used to denote status from the 1700s through the nineteenth century in North America.⁴⁰ Only people of means could afford chairs in those days. By the 1800s, most households had enough chairs for family members to sit down to meals or to offer seats to guests, which meant that the average existing inventories in Massachusetts or Pennsylvania farmhouses show six to nine chairs or more. But prosperous households treated chairs as items for display, lining them up along the walls of parlors and sitting rooms.⁴¹ By the mid-1820s, there was a revolution in the marketing of factory-made “fancy chairs,” a democratizing process that made it possible for more families to display matching sets of chairs in their sitting rooms and parlors. The average number of chairs per household in central Massachusetts almost doubled between 1800 and the 1830s. (Inexpensive fancy chairs from Sears, Roebuck still show up in country auctions and antique stores today.) The urban poor,

by contrast, sat on their beds or made do with a broken barrel or two.

By the nineteenth century, the Industrial Revolution made a great deal of difference to how much time Americans, Europeans, and sitters everywhere spent in chairs. One reason is that the factory manufacture of chairs made them cheaper, so that more people could afford them. The more important reason is that the nature of work itself had changed. Industrial work was more likely to be seated

than agricultural work. Work at assembly lines and in the offices where accounting and record keeping took place was usually done seated, usually on chairs with backs, and only occasionally on stools. English clerks used to work standing, but that practice was never as common in the United States, and today office workers almost everywhere work seated at desks in chairs.

Most furniture historians overlook the significance of this watershed event. Instead of evaluating the social significance of people spending so much time in chairs, they merely focus on the object itself, appreciating the formal beauty of the eighteenth-century chair and lamenting the artistic decline in nineteenth-century ones. Their list of complaints is long. Originality played second fiddle to stylistic conventionality. Concern for comfort (as ease) overwhelmed structural expression and visual integration. To be viewed as luxurious, a chair had to be padded, upholstered in silk or brocade, and tasseled.⁴² In Victorian England, the new demand for comfort stimulated the use of spring upholstery, which in turn changed the easy chair's proportions,⁴³ causing it to grow “heavy and bloated.”⁴⁴ The legs became shorter, while deep seats and inclined backs encouraged lounging—which quickly degenerated into sprawling and slumping. The woman's easy chair has been sneeringly called “well-upholstered rather than well-designed.” Its low seat, with either tiny arms or none at all, made this easy chair look “squat.”

Historians have criticized nineteenth-century taste in furniture decoration as eclectic, using the pejorative phrase “cult of antiquity” to refer to the Greek, Roman, and Egyptian motifs that had been so fashionable, and condemning the other traditional Gothic, Renaissance, Elizabethan, and Rococo themes as well. At the time, two movements did react against this decorative eclecticism. The first, William Morris's Arts and Crafts movement, opposed the new “obsession with comfort” (i.e., padding) and the “low standards of design and production.” The second, known as Art Nouveau, promoted a non-historical style, despite its roots in the Rococo, in order to protest against the imitation of traditional types that critics felt “commanded and wasted so much skill.”⁴⁵

Historians may have downplayed the significance of more people sitting for longer periods of time, but some have at least been alert to the contrast between the conservatism of chair design and the rapidity of social change during the nineteenth century. Despite the fast pace of social

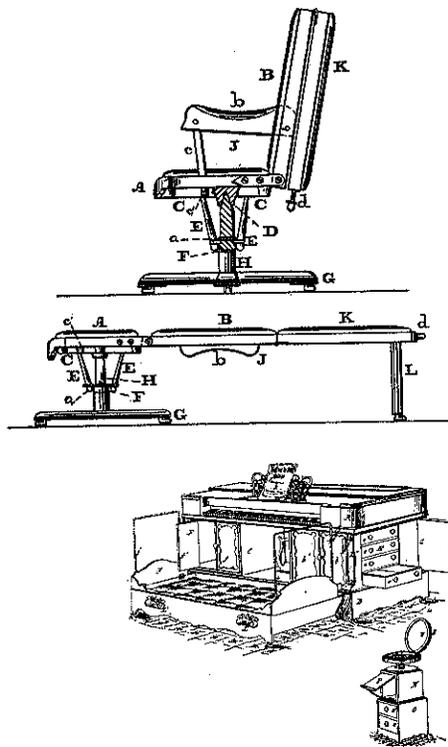


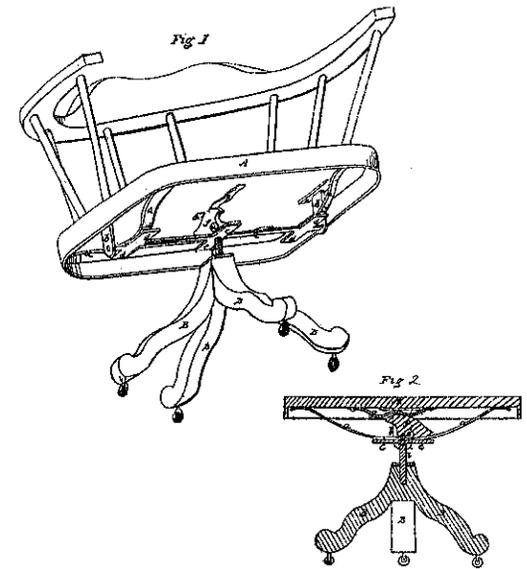
Figure 9. This armchair (a) becomes a daybed (1875) and this piano (b) becomes a bedroom suite (1866).

and technological change throughout Europe and America, one American furniture historian, Phyllis Oates, concludes that “style rather than technology still dominated furniture design.”⁴⁶ In addition to the strictly visual concerns for pattern, balance, rhythm, and the like, the ideas associated with a motif were important. Gothic was considered sound and sober for solemn masculine rooms, like the library, hall, and dining room, while the drawing room, boudoir, and ladies’ rooms were settings for the more frivolous Rococo style. The so-called Elizabethan style represented sturdy national traits. Light-colored wood was believed to create a happy, friendly atmosphere, whereas oak and mahogany were considered quiet and restful.

Of course, such ideas about decoration are also ideas about social relations—usually connected with power and wealth. In America, as earlier in England, furniture type often matched social class. Specifically, elite markets concentrated on revival furniture; popular markets concentrated on the adjustable, mechanical furniture known as patent furniture; and folk markets concentrated on vernacular styles such as the Windsor chair or the rocking chair.⁴⁷

The sharpest critic of nineteenth-century furniture was undoubtedly the architectural historian Siegfried Giedion. He dismissed a good deal of nineteenth-century furniture because so much of its style was copied from previous eras. He felt that such copying was an opportunity lost to create more original designs based on physical comfort and convenience. He thought patent furniture was genuinely inventive, because it was adjustable, could perform multiple functions, and could respond to any desired position of the human body. Thus, he cared literally about the body, and presumably hoped that new designs based on its comfort and convenience would generate new tastes and preferences in style. He reported that Americans were proud of the patent furniture exhibited at the Paris International Exposition of 1878, with its emphasis on comfort and on functional problem solving. So he could not understand why patent furniture did not get the attention it deserved. Actually, the emphasis on body-based design rather than status probably guaranteed that such furniture would sink into oblivion. Patent furniture of the nineteenth century may have what Giedion calls its “distinct place in the history of comfort,” but I would say that it lost its place in the history of style precisely because it did not

Figure 10. Why isn't this chair (ca. 1853) stylish?



make claims to exclusivity, allowing an office worker to be as comfortable as the office boss. (Fig. 10)

Giedion thought that the turning point in taste from American inventiveness to European ruling taste came at the Chicago World's Fair of 1893. This event glorified neoclassical architecture and elaborate embellishments, so that people began to be ashamed of the “flat, machine-made surfaces of American equipment—and patent furniture . . .” This furniture was relegated to special technical purposes and work environments—factories, dental offices, and business offices—but banished from homes. Giedion accuses the nineteenth century of the rule of pseudo-monumentality, responsible not only for architecture but also for the “furniture of the ruling taste, with its excess of decoration and ornamentation.” He blamed the wealthy for their assumption that traditional European styling would elevate their taste and prestige. Emulating their betters, the middle class could now purchase machine-made furniture created in the style of handmade furniture, and this gave them the illusion of being able to live at a higher-class level: “the insignia of wealth and panoply wield a fascination that . . . may inhibit healthier instincts.”

According to Giedion, the posture that was distinctive to the nineteenth century—involving both movement and relaxation—could only be permitted in the work environment because “ruling taste” dominated the domestic scene. In their parlors, people comported themselves somewhat formally, the reverse of our practice today, when we relax in the home and

are more constrained in the office. In his time, movement and relaxation were more easily accepted in office work and in dentists' offices, railway seats, and the like.⁴⁸

If adjustable furniture had come into our living rooms a century earlier, would our increasingly sedentary ways have caused so much trouble? Perhaps our back problems would not be so severe. Maybe critics of nineteenth-century furniture *are* right that style is the problem. If style refers to how we communicate social identity, then, insofar as communicating status blinded our grandparents and their parents to the value of movement, style is the culprit. They probably took movement for granted, but prized having the leisure to sit upright and still as an achievement. Why not elaborate that achievement with brocade and tassels?

Social realism suggests that until the social elite adopts new ideas about posture and comfort, chair design for the general market will not emphasize physical or practical needs. Remember that changes in women's dress, for example, from painfully corseted Gibson girls to uncorseted flappers, occurred when a social elite embraced the new physical freedom as high style. Similarly, chair design will express first and foremost claims to superiority—in art, education, money, and power.

And the home is the place where people communicate their social identity.⁴⁹ This is connected not just to income but to what work one does for a living, how one chooses to spend money, one's educational level, travel experience, family and religious affiliations. Such status was once revealed in public by one's dress and accent; but increasingly over the last two centuries, starting with the Dutch, it has been expressed by how one furnishes the home—how much and what kind of furniture, the quality and symbolism of fabrics (draperies and upholstery), carpets, paintings, sculpture and other art work, sporting trophies, travel mementos, musical equipment (including stereos and CDs), books, and now TV, video, and computers.

All these things are arranged with some regard for practical movement and purpose; but even more important are unwritten codes about how to unify and order all this material. The rules for what should be in a nineteenth-century parlor and how it should be arranged were different from the rules we follow today. So we can appreciate that nineteenth-century Americans might not be able to incorporate mechanical patent furniture into a Victorian tableau that consisted of richly upholstered fur-

niture, swagged drapery, fringed tablecloths, and such newly affordable luxuries as carpet, along with keepsakes, travel knickknacks, Romantic statues, and nature paintings. Critics like Giedion hoped that the body's needs might come first; but higher-status groups have to be convinced of the social superiority of this approach, not just the physical benefits. This is where designers can be most persuasive. Body-conscious design has to be aesthetic, fashionable, or very, very familiar.

The rocker is a good case in point. It is responsive to the body first and status second, but it fared far better than patent furniture. Rockers—curved pieces of wood, allowing a rocking motion—were first attached to babies' cradles in Europe, but the rocking chair is an American invention. An ingenious inventor, or perhaps more than one, attached rockers to chair legs around 1760.⁵⁰ Regular Windsor chairs fitted with rockers on their legs came to be known as Boston rockers. Platform rockers were patented sporadically until the late 1760s,⁵¹ but no Hepplewhite, Chippendale, or Sheraton chairs were converted into rockers, so we must assume that rocking chairs were a vernacular taste, not an elite one.⁵² Yet the rocker became acceptable to those who could afford parlors, probably because of its familiar materials and home-grown connotations. Visually and symbolically, it could fit into Victorian parlors, despite being good for the body.

Moving into the twentieth century, the Modernists made no claims to comfort but to moral and aesthetic superiority. Architects like Mart Stam, Marcel Breuer, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, Le Corbusier, and Charles Eames took up the challenge of designing overtly with industrial materials and production processes. As chair designers, these architects valued sculptural originality rather than recognizable tradition. Their reaction against nineteenth-century imitation was even more severe than either the Arts and Crafts or Art Nouveau. They emphatically rejected the use of coiled upholstery, a nineteenth-century trademark in both comfort and the illusion of comfort.

The Modernists experimented with new manufacturing processes—lamination and steel production—and new construction materials like steel and plastic. European theoreticians wanted to embrace the reality of industrial processes while at the same time suffusing them with intelligence and harmony in proportions. They believed that the discovery of new principles would yield rational new designs—hence their emphasis on originality. Not surprisingly, hopes for standardization were stalled by an

“endless series of new starts.”⁵³ Twentieth-century furniture designers were more interested in novelty than in improvement of form or function. Their designs have become high-art classics, often seen in the lobbies of corporate headquarters today.

The split that Giedion noticed between the home environment and the office environment was to widen throughout the twentieth century, even yielding two different design fields—one for status furniture and the other for technical work settings. Thus, on the one hand, the chairs of early twentieth-century Modernist architects are revered as pure sculptural statements, and newcomers seek novel and surprising twists in appearance; on the other, computer chairs have become fairly sophisticated, physiologically speaking. Will the twain ever meet?

CHAIRS AND GENDER

Today, as in the past, chairs are differentiated by age, gender, and class. They still remain embedded in power relations. Rarely is the power literal; it is usually more subtly interwoven into ideas and emotions about social order that we unconsciously tolerate or support. The modern office separates the furniture of men from that of women, of manager from that of employee. In schools, children learn to regulate their bodies first and foremost by the chairs they are given to sit on. Even at home, furniture continues to reflect age and gender distinctions.

In the hierarchy between men and women, posture has always played its part. (*Fig. 11*) Today, even the most quintessentially female activity of giving birth has been regulated by males. Various midwives and birthing specialists have argued that giving birth in a crouching, sitting, or squatting position is anatomically easier than giving birth while lying on the back; nevertheless, starting in the seventeenth century,⁵⁴ for the convenience of the male doctor, women were placed supine on a bed for delivery. Only today are reformers trying to change this situation.

Since the chair is one of the chief regulators of posture, it has played a major part in maintaining hierarchical and power differences between the sexes. Royalty in different cultures might extend the privilege of sitting in a chair to the women in their immediate family or court, but in that case usually some kind of distinction would be made between the



Figure 11. Spaniards in the thirteenth century differentiated themselves from Muslims, animals, and women by sitting on chairs rather than on the floor.

throne or the chair of the male rulers and the seating for their female entourage. Early in Rome, wives could not recline to eat with their husbands, but later this rule changed so that they could. In Roman Britain, men sat on wooden chairs while women used wicker and basket chairs.⁵⁵ The Chinese considered it indecorous for women to sit in chairs, long after men had gotten used to them.⁵⁶

By the nineteenth century, in capitalist economies women of the ruling class were supposed to spend in the private realm what their men had earned in the public realm. Many historians have documented this division of spheres—with the home becoming the female domain, including the supervision of servants, the planning of meals, entertainment, supervision of children, provision of moral uplift for the family, and the comforting of the male. As manager of the home, women also spent money to buy things, including furniture.⁵⁷ For example, women chose feminine styles for their bedrooms and other private areas, but they se-

lected masculine styles for the more public rooms of their homes.⁵⁸

In the late twentieth century, feminists began to criticize the fact that women's posture and use of furniture were different from men's and that women's conventional posture was contrived to emphasize vulnerability, weakness, and debility.⁵⁹ One British ergonomics researcher, E. F. Le Carpentier, agrees that women sit differently from men: with their lower legs close to the vertical and their trunk erect, whereas men lean back and stretch out their legs. However, he accepts rather than criticizes this gender difference, which could have to do with dress codes or underlying differences in feelings of authority and self-confidence or both. In any case, he recommends that chairs for use by the general public should be available in at least two models, differing in size as well as shape.⁶⁰ A less convoluted reason for his otherwise perfectly sound proposal is that men and women vary in size.

Accordingly, even the most stereotypical male chair, the recliner, now comes in two sizes. In mainstream America, the recliner, made by La-Z-Boy, Barca, and others, has traditionally been the male chair for relaxing and watching television. In 1991, *The New York Times* commented: "Perhaps no piece of furniture in modern times is more gender-specific than the one that has cradled, rocked, pivoted and massaged the American man. While women have not been moved by motion furniture, as the industry calls it, until recent years, men have attached themselves like barnacles to mechanized chairs almost from the day they got off the ground in 1927." Twenty-five percent of U.S. homes have this male reclining chair, according to industry figures. The *Times* article continued: "Historically, of course, women's relation to the recliner was to dust under it or to decorate around it. Women also carried food and beverages to the chairs, some of which were fitted with snack trays."⁶¹

In the nineties, some manufacturers and retailers attempted to expand their market by restyling recliners to create a female version. A new scaled-down ladies' style for those five feet five and under, in "feminine" fabrics like velvet and "feminine" colors like red, with details like skirts, hit the market. Some couples are now buying matching loungers in two different sizes. More likely, the woman's chair is flowered in velvet or damask or "sweet rose velvet" in contrast to his "mahogany-colored leather with studs." The women's styles also have different names: cashmere, champagne, sterling, chablis, opulence, first lady. Women want the re-

duced scale, not only because of their smaller size but also because it is more fashionable, and the chair has a different rocking mechanism so that it can fit closer to a wall than the standard size.⁶²

Clearly, women's concern with expressing the correct image for the whole family and for managing the interior environment endures. According to the furniture industry, seating is becoming feminized because women buy the seating.⁶³ Sheila de Bretteville, a graphic designer and feminist critic, contends that the couch is essentially feminine because it accommodates more than one person, which allows people to sit touching each other. She may be right that the couch is less individualistic and more group-oriented than the chair, which we associate with masculinity.⁶⁴ However, men seem to do a good job of stretching out on the living-room sofa. One wonders if buying more couches or a more feminine look in chairs can truly undermine the hierarchical differences between men and women that have been part of domestic politics.

What about women as designers rather than consumers? Is male-female hierarchy still an issue for them? Women have only recently entered the arena as chair designers, in any number. Charlotte Perriand did design the famous 1928 chaise longue with Le Corbusier and his brother Jeanneret, but she is seldom acknowledged for this achievement.⁶⁵ The architect Eileen Gray also designed several early modern chairs that few people remember.⁶⁶

Women designers do not want to be classified by gender, and their work varies considerably. Journalists, however, prefer generalization, and thus ignore these variations. A contemporary British journalist's coverage of "Sit," an American exhibit on chairs, emphasized soft, organic shapes; humor, elegance, oceanic scenes; thoughtful practicality; refinement and comfort: "Some of the stereotypes do . . . hold. . . Comfort and practicality are definite priorities. Very few chair designs by women lose sight of their use, as objects that should be both pleasant to sit in and able to fit in the broader design of a room. Thus, rather than . . . the womb, is probably why so many women . . . use curving organic forms in their work. The human bottom, whether male or female, is rounded." (The female journalist here fell into the trap of thinking that mimicking the human shape is the best way to support it. More on this in later chapters.)

Perhaps women designers are less interested in the chair as an agent of hierarchy and power than as a medium for relatedness and physical ease,

à la Neolithic goddess. The same journalist notes, "Even among the few women who work in metal, there is a delicacy and a concern for comfort that is not present to the same degree in men's work."⁶⁷ Women designers may in fact epitomize traits shared broadly with women consumers; market researchers report that men are likely to buy something solely for its image and status, whereas women will always be juggling a second equal concern for what it will be like to sit in.

The relationship between comfort and status for women's predilections in furniture appears tangled, because women certainly do not ignore status, especially in light of their role in communicating the family image. One male journalist, who loves his La-Z-Boy no matter what his wife says, exaggerates and simplifies women's concern with status, saying that women "see furniture the same way [they] see shoes: comfort's irrelevant, all that matters is whether it looks good."⁶⁸ Certainly, women desire what they anticipate others will admire. The apparent contradiction over status versus comfort may be resolved by the work of the Harvard psychologist Carol Gilligan, who has made the point in the context of ethics and moral development that females often refuse to prioritize two competing values, but instead seek a way to have both.⁶⁹ Perhaps as both designers and consumers, women really are juggling two values, status *and* comfort.

These are not the only two relevant values. We have already discussed others like relatedness and sensuality, which have long been considered feminine strengths—or weaknesses, depending on your point of view. What happens to all these qualities in the workplace, especially the office, where women today are so numerous?

THE MODERN OFFICE

In the modern office, hierarchy rules, and chairs play their part in expressing and creating rank. A recent novel by Po Bronson, *Bombardiers*, satirizes bond trading, the information economy, and the workplace of the 1990s for exactly this reason. Bronson creates a bureaucratic creep, Kalinov, who berates the fearless new kid on the salesfloor, Eggs Igino, for standing rather than sitting in his corporate padded chair to make telephone calls. Eggs Igino insists that he can stand up to work if he wants to. Kalinov asks, What would happen if everyone got rid of their chairs

just to be more comfortable? What if they did? Eggs rejoins. Kalinov explains that it's a slippery slope: jogging shoes, blue jeans, individual desk lamps. These would destroy corporate image. Chairs are embedded in a network of symbols.

In this novel, the national corporate office is lavish but nevertheless as much like its branch offices as motel chains; corporate culture tolerates no variation in carpeting, wallboard, chairs, lights, telephones, or desks. Ergonomically correct pretzel chairs are prescribed to stop the further degeneration of wrists and backs by the corporate physical therapist Dr. Perkova, but the young stud explains to the hero, Sid Geeder, that standing up would protect his back by making it easier to move around and avoid holding one position all the time. "Our bodies are not made to stand still. Our bodies are made to move. . . . Stand up! They want you to sit down all day," he cries, confirming Sid's lament that the firm has got him locked in, "chained to his seat."⁷⁰

Obviously this is a novel based on close observation of real life. A journalist told me about a colleague of hers who after many hours at a computer terminal wanted to rest his back by lying down. The office was cramped, so he lay down under his work table, out of sight of visitors. But the boss came by, saw him on the floor, and made him get up, yelling, "I can't believe you're doing this! It is *not* professional to lie down!"

Researchers in ergonomics have studied many aspects of office function, including status, and have concluded that the workstation *should* be an indication of the worker's status in the office hierarchy. In open-plan offices, with their overtly democratic intentions, distinguishing between managers and ordinary workers became difficult, and dissatisfaction on both sides has resulted from this incongruence.⁷¹ Managers had assumed that workers would like a more egalitarian-looking environment and might consequently be more productive; but that did not turn out to be the case.

Which type of office do you work in? Can anyone visiting for the first time guess who the boss is without being told? You can probably tell by looking at differences in partition height, amount and location of work space, lighting, color, as well as such intangibles as privacy, ability to control access to others, and the opportunity for personalization. You might also consider very tangible traits—quality of furniture, upholstery, number of chairs, thickness of carpet.⁷² Researchers report that idiosyncratic

status markers like the color of telephones or wastepaper baskets developed in the absence of the opportunity to display conventional markers.

Since appropriate markers contribute to satisfaction, and worker satisfaction is essential to productivity, status differences have to be maintained, ergonomists say. One textbook on office planning emphasizes the need for a clearly defined status understood by all users: "It is not so much a question of *what* they are, as *that* they are." Practically speaking, the trick is to get people to assign value to easily transported objects, such as telephone color, ashtray size, nameplate type or location, which can "denote status without impairing flexibility and without resulting in wasted space and dollars."⁷³ One could speculate that since clear expression of status is directly related to worker satisfaction, it might indirectly be related to productivity. This conclusion would be disappointing in the context of our democratic ideals generally, and especially in the context of rhetoric about stimulating productivity in the workplace by tapping people's creative potential without regard to rank. I wonder if they feel that as long as pay and authority differences exist, the environmental messages should be consistent. Alternatively, perhaps people need the ethical guidance implicit in such rankings; the practice of creating distinctions and then matching them to notches along a moral dimension from inferior to superior may serve the cause of moral development. A simpler explanation is that people like to know where they stand, and the physical environment helps to communicate this.

In any case, as status markers in the office, chairs are important. After surveying 529 office workers in three government and three business offices, psychologists at Buffalo, New York, confirmed the expert opinion of industry consultant Fred Steele that the number of chairs in a personal office (wooden chairs were preferred to metal) was a crucial indicator of the inhabitant's supervisory status. Other indicators were large desks, multiple work surfaces, greater storage capacity, and privacy.⁷⁴

Most of the research done to date on office environments stems from an interest in worker productivity. But which is more important to worker satisfaction—physical comfort or status symbols? When interviewed by the American pollster Louis Harris in a survey sponsored by Steelcase, the world's largest manufacturer of office furniture, 80 percent of those who complained (70% of the total) said that discomfort reduced their productivity a great deal or somewhat.⁷⁵ They defined "comfort" in rank order

as: good lighting, a comfortable chair, a place to concentrate, quiet. Chairs have become so important that finally organizations recognize that individuals' chairs should be adjusted to fit them instead of being assigned to them on the basis of their place in the organizational hierarchy. Concern for productivity, more than concern for democratic fairness, is responsible for the trend to push for physical comfort for each worker.

But concern for productivity may eventually do something for equity. Here is where numerous research and popular magazine articles remind us that "creativity is not, after all, a reflection of rank or title; the potential is everywhere. To tap that potential, companies will have to change their static and status-ridden ways."⁷⁶ In other words, to be more productive, status differences may have to go. From this point of view those scientific studies that do not acknowledge status issues are correct, if naive, in reporting only their findings, for instance, that desks should be lower and adjustable in height for women office workers.⁷⁷

These two contradictory conclusions about productivity—the need for status and the need to be free from status—create a riptide, indicating perhaps a sea change in office culture. Until recently, all U.S. commercial furniture lines still carried "executive" and "secretary" chair models. More progressive firms now use the terms "managerial" and "task," although in that language I still hear managers being distinguished from workers. I suspect that the effort to overcome the use of seating to symbolize hierarchy in the office will be a back-and-forth struggle. As Linda Brown and Deyan Sudjic, organizers of a British exhibition on the modern chair in the 1980s, put it:

The issue that most manufacturers only coyly hint at in their sales brochures is that of status. In the supposedly democratic open plan office, with its characteristic low partitions and screens replacing full-height walls, the rhetoric is all of teamwork, and non-hierarchical working methods. In fact, however, office furniture, and in particular the chair, conveys the status of the occupant. Considerable ingenuity is used to suggest the status of the owner. There are ironies here. The most costly chairs are generally those that offer the most movement, but these have come to be associated in many organizations with clerical workers, which can provide undesirable connotations

for the more insecure of managers. So, paradoxically, the executive chair in a range may actually be the cheapest to produce. And, rather than add directly useful or comfort-providing extra features, the high status chairs simply use a more costly covering, or are, with unobviousness, made flatteringly larger. As a result, the pricing policy for the standard chairs is affected by the possibility of making better returns on the supposed luxury, top-of-the-line models. Of course this is simply the modern manifestation of a very old tradition in furniture, realized for once in injection-molded plastics and cast alloys, rather than wood.⁷⁸

Their observations remind me of a 1980 survey of ten thousand office workers by the Buffalo Organization for Social and Technical Innovation, in which researchers discovered that those whose work actually required the best lighting were the least likely to have it, while managers usually had the best.⁷⁹

An important distinction in the office, still clearly maintained, is the one between bosses and secretaries, which is still mostly a difference between men and women. Not surprising, then, that marketers of the Norwegian balance chair have had to confront the unwritten law of office status symbols, because their chair does not differentiate between the boss and the secretary. In the United States they were especially handicapped because their chair does not have a back, and the height of a chair's back is one of the "essential indicators of high social status." In response, a leading manufacturer of balance chairs brought out a line with high backs. The brochure of another company marketing conventional chairs with a tilting seat deals with the issue by using double entendre, calling theirs a chair "for any position."⁸⁰

Over and over, we will see status locked in a life-and-death struggle with other values, such as equity and worker health, the two current contenders. The modern office relies increasingly on the use of computers and video display terminals (VDTs), and numerous physiological problems have come to be associated with that fact: eyestrain, back pain, and repetitive strain injury are only the most prevalent. For all three problems, the underlying condition is the static posture held by workers in front of VDT screens. Insofar as the chair stabilizes posture, it contributes actively and

directly to disorders of the eye, back, and wrist. People cannot take advantage of ergonomic chairs, with some capacity for movement built in, because their eyes and hands become entrained with the keyboard and screen they are working on. In this case we cannot really blame the chair; it is simply a part of an integrated complex of chair, keyboard, person, and screen, which together forms a new machine. Ergonomics was once defined as the interaction between man and machine. Now, there is no longer interaction. It is exaggerating only a little to say that man has now become *part* of the machine and no longer disengages from the keyboard and terminal.⁸¹

The physical consequences of this entraining with machines is of course infamous: already carpal tunnel syndrome is a household phrase. While some people might accept the demands of an electronic workplace as requiring high degrees of hand-eye coordination with mouse, keyboard, and display screens for prolonged periods of time, I want to challenge the wisdom of accepting such a work environment. If stable support is necessary for tasks requiring hand-eye coordination, then the people who perform those tasks also should be assigned other tasks in the course of the day in order to vary their posture.

One would think that the advent of the home office would subvert the rhythm of machines and the power of status in office furniture. Surely here, of all places, one could develop a way of working based on personal physiological patterns and rhythms. Advertisements for equipment for home offices show wood grain rather than metal shelving, and desk systems, potted plants, Oriental rugs, family photos, and views out of residential-scale windows. The chairs, however, are the same ergonomic computer chairs being used to promote increased productivity in offices. Ironically, many furniture companies targeting those with home offices offer an executive high-back chair, as well as a leather ergonomic chair, so you can, presumably, continue to feel like a big shot even while working at home!

SCHOOLS

So how do people learn distinction by rank, or that leather is better, or that wider is more powerful? The process begins early in life. It is well known

that schools prepare children to reproduce the workforce, with appropriate habits—both physical and mental.

A contemporary German philosopher and historian, Hajo Eickhoff, has argued that the chair is a sedative to create a docile population not inclined to criticize or become politically active. (Note that the verb *sedate*, meaning “to calm,” comes from the Latin “to sit.”) This process of socialization to passivity starts early in schools, where the first task is not to teach children content, but to teach them orderly behavior—specifically, the ability to sit still for long periods of time.⁸² Don Johnson, an American philosopher and head of the department of somatic studies at the California Institute of Integral Studies in San Francisco, also fears that the way in which children sit at school is evidence of a disturbing educational philosophy.⁸³ He sees the practice of sitting quietly in rows of seats as primarily a way for teachers to maintain authority and keep radical ideas safely contained. He would like both students and teachers to have the freedom to move around energetically.

Montessori and Steiner schools offer two examples of how education can incorporate activity with learning. Dr. Maria Montessori wrote *The Montessori Method* in 1912, describing how children were reduced to immobility in the Italian classroom, “not disciplined, but annihilated.” She recommended simple tasks and spontaneous work rather than enforced, seated effort.⁸⁴ In the United Kingdom, state primary schools have adopted the Montessori model, and in the United States Montessori theory has made a resurgence, mostly in private schools, but also in some public school systems. Recently, American brain researchers have also come to believe that learning increases with physical activity.⁸⁵ More public schools have been experimenting with allowing kids to sit without chairs and in clusters rather than rows. But for generations American schoolteachers have struggled to get children to sit still.

Thanks to a detailed study of what a seven-year-old boy did at school and at home over the course of one day in a small midwestern town, we can scroll back in time to see, minute by minute, how a teacher in 1949 regulated students’ posture.⁸⁶ This early study by two psychologists, Roger G. Barker and Herbert F. Wright, is still respected for its attention to behavior in natural settings, as opposed to laboratories or clinics. I recently reread it with an eye to how, when, and where the boy named Raymond used chairs. One of the more striking points is that the teacher continu-

ously monitored the first and second graders’ posture, frequently telling them to “sit up straight,” “settle down,” and “get in position.” Another striking pattern is that on his own, Raymond *never* sat. All play—at home, on the courthouse grounds, school, and a vacant lot—involved running, skipping, hopping, jumping, twisting, dipping, and generally cavorting to entertain himself kinesthetically. In fact, the only times Raymond ever sat in a chair were at the dining table at home and at his desk at school. Children have little natural inclination to sit in chairs, so it’s little wonder schoolteachers have to invest so much time and effort to get them to stay still there.

Adults certainly have become fully devoted to chair sitting. One of the psychologists who recorded Raymond’s behavior inadvertently projected adult feelings. After an exactly detailed description of the young boy sitting at his desk slouching, sliding, jiggling, shuffling, turning, slumping in boredom, she concluded with the nonsequitur: “I had the feeling that although the story wasn’t especially interesting, he liked this restful part of the day when he could just sit.” Other observers had recorded that keeping up with Raymond on the playground or on his way to school was challenging. The observer who got to record during one of the thirty-minute shifts when Raymond is in one place must have been pleased that *she* could just sit.

Children know by an early age that adults want to sit in chairs, and Raymond knew this well before age seven. How do children learn? Raymond would have picked up this information from scenes like the following. A female observer explained to Raymond, “I’ll pretend these steps are a chair and I’ll sit here while you play.” Raymond’s mother was surprised that the observer was sitting on the back stoop; so she asked, “Wouldn’t you like to have a chair?” The observer had to explain: “No, I’m very comfortable. I often just sit on steps because I like to.” The expectation shared by Raymond, his mother, and the recorder is that adults sit in chairs; deviation from the norm requires justification. Part of the definition of being an adult is sitting in a chair—a primary lesson in the unspoken curriculum of schools. How refreshing then that Pee-Wee Herman’s television character “Chairy” from the eighties was capable of creative ideas and was very animated. Chairy may be subversive, subliminally suggesting that chairs and the children in them should be interactive and creative.

The most common explanation for children avoiding sitting is that they prefer active play. However, that obvious reason obscures another very important one. Having to sit at tables and chairs is the most common source of physical stress for children, and probably for adults too, for that matter. But children, being young, are particularly deformed by stressful postures. As early as 1743, a French orthopedic physician, Dr. Nicolas Andry de Bois-Regard warned against the deformities caused by improper school furniture: "It is usual to give Children, when they are taken from the Nurse, small Elbow-Chairs, made of straw or Rushes, which have all a hollow in the Bottom, because they cannot be made otherwise. Thus they place the Children upon these little Chairs, by which means their Bodies begin to grow deformed, by little and little, in their tender Years."

We no longer have a problem with rush seats today, although we still have overly contoured seats that are scooped in the bottom. Dr. Andry de Bois-Regard enumerated other such problems in the design of furniture for children, including the relationship between chairs and tables: "Most part of Children have their Bodies made crooked in learning to write, because People are not at the pains to give them a Table high enough for the purpose." But the tables could also be too high: "Those Masters and Mistresses who teach Children to read or write upon too high a Table, which rises above their Elbows (for it ought to be two Inches lower) expose them to the same Deformity."⁸⁷ He thought this problem especially acute in schools for young children where there was only one table for all the children. Imagine how surprised he would be by our situation today: the luxury of individual desks, but all at the same height! Despite having spent more money on education, we have not taken advantage of the opportunity to adjust each desk to each child.

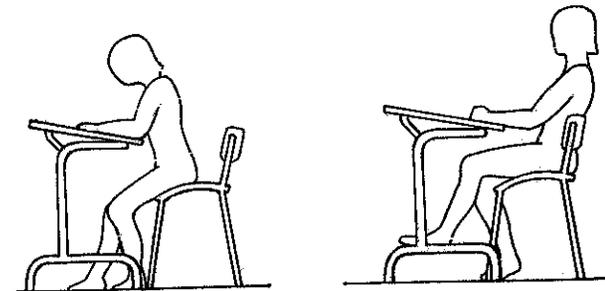
A contemporary Danish physician, A. C. Mandal, continues to worry about these issues. The best place to begin effective prevention of crippling back complaints in adults, he says, is in the schools. Like Dr. Andry de Bois-Regard over two hundred years ago, he examines the slope of tabletops, the height of chairs, the height of tables, and the slope of chair seats. The critical issue, according to Mandal, is the relationship between the legs and the spine. When that angle is anywhere between 120 and 135 degrees—approximately halfway between sitting and standing—sitting upright is easy, because the work of the muscles in front and in back of the pelvis is completely balanced.⁸⁸ His chair also allows the sitter to

perch forward or lean back and extend the feet. But to have the legs drop that far away from the body, you need room for the lower leg, a higher seat, and a forward-tilted seat. A higher seat means that table height must also increase. (Fig. 12)

Another reason for higher work surfaces stems from our eyes, not legs. Mandal observes that children's visual distance is less than adults—an average of 12 inches. If the table height is not brought up to within their visual range, children compensate by bending over their papers and books. Of course schoolroom tables are usually not that high. So children are constantly forced to round their backs and distort their bodies in order to see their work. Mandal has found that when children in his lab are allowed to place the tabletop where they want it, they usually put it 6 to 10 inches higher (one-half the child's body height) than the international standard adhered to by school furniture manufacturers. The ideal chair height chosen by children was also higher (at least one-third the child's body height). And how many of the children Mandal studied chose the international standard for chair height? None.⁸⁹

Mandal points out that the average height of children has been steadily increasing over the years, but the height of school tables and chairs (in Denmark, at least) has been steadily decreasing. "The tragic consequence of this misjudgment," he says, "is that more and more flexion and strain are imposed on the backs of our children at a critical period in their lives."⁹⁰ He finds the strain of sitting so deleterious, in fact, that he wants to give it up as a routine posture and substitute perching. He lamented that janitorial concerns get more attention than pupils' well-being: "Abuse of children's backs during adolescence could well be the rea-

Figure 12. Dr. A. C. Mandal of Denmark has convinced the school systems in Scandinavia to provide schoolchildren with chairs that protect the lumbar curve naturally through intelligent use of body mechanics. He instructs students to sit on the sloped portion of the seat for reading and writing. The backrest is for use only when listening or resting.



son for the rapidly increasing number of back ailments. Designers of furniture have learned nothing about the anatomy of the seated person, and local school authorities seem to place high priority on low-cost furniture that is easily stacked and compactly stored."⁹¹ Dr. Mandal's campaign has been successful. His research persuaded the rest of the Scandinavian countries, and the European furniture standards committee, that schoolchildren's health will be improved by increasing the standard height of both chairs and desks, and tilting the seats and desktops toward one another. In 1997, the International Standards Organization included this option in their new standards for school furniture.

However, children in Australia, unlike those Dr. Mandal studied, tended to choose chairs without regard to anatomy. Educational authorities there studied twenty kindergartners who were allowed to choose among various chair heights. The kids said they preferred the largest chairs, regardless of their own stature, although 95 percent dangled their feet when sitting.⁹² These children have learned that the bigger the chair, the more power and status accrues to the sitter. Studies conducted with American children in the late 1950s found that most of them visualized God sitting on a throne or seat.⁹³ Most likely Australian children also see God in a chair—presumably a large one.

In the home, in the office, and in schools, social purposes override physiological comfort when it comes to chair design. Even in zero gravity, where there is no up or down, no floor or ceiling, and the body swims in space, the Earth-based designers decided to put a chair into the first space capsule of astronauts in order to make the occupants feel at home. Once it proved absolutely useless in outer space, the chair was dropped from future missions. Maybe after a few more centuries of experimentation, mankind will come to the same conclusion.

When I do sit, I do not sit
to hearten my behind.
I rather do enjoy the fit
of chairs as sculptured by my mind.
The mind, led by its frugal hoax,
when judging chairs, sees style,
leaves "sitting" just to common folks: a use of chairs, so vile!

—"The Aesthete," by Christian Morganstern (1871–1914)¹

Chapter 2

The Elements of Style

You may easily forgive chairs for relegating comfort to second place, particularly if you have a special fondness for art and beauty. After all, a chair can be viewed as a work of art. Forget class, social superiority, authority, and distinction. Enter line, proportion, shape, materials, decoration, and craftsmanship—all criteria for appreciating chairs as craft, as sculpture, as pure form.

Potentially, an artistic approach to chair design could be more attentive to the body than an approach preoccupied with social position. Custom-made items, especially those made by hand, can be fitted to the individual. Further, when Modernist designers embraced industrial manufacturing processes in the early twentieth century, they sought a new aesthetic, and came up with the slogan that "Form follows function." So it should stand to reason that the form of chairs will accommodate the physical activities of sitting, moving, and resting. And later, in the 1970s, when artists started appropriating furniture for their work, they paid most at-

attention to chairs—much more than to tables, beds, or chests of drawers—because chairs are anthropomorphic. They look like us: with feet, legs, seats, backs, and arms. Surely at least some statements about chair design might take inspiration from the human body, in which case we could expect a spate of idiosyncratic chairs scaled to the artist's or patron's body.

In actuality, artistic approaches to chair design have taken our culture away from the concerns of the body. Surprisingly, as chairs have moved from the workshops of craftsmen to the ateliers of designers to the studios of artists, their form has reflected less and less concern for the biomechanics of sitting. When *Connoisseur* magazine runs an article on the "Twenty-Three Best Chairs," they don't mean anatomically best or even best in the *Consumer Reports* sense of a combination of most functional, durable, and economical. Rather, they mean the personal favorites of important curators, collectors, or art historians who have made their own stylistic judgments.² Ironically, the comparatively anonymous manufacturers who have supplied chairs to both elites and the masses may have addressed the concerns of the body more successfully than individual craftsmen, designers, and artists.

Why has an artistic approach taken us away from concern with our bodies? One reason is that we assume that the needs of the body have already been met. Since the chair has been with us for at least ten thousand years, and its basic form has stayed more or less the same ever since, it may be thought to be perfect. This basic perfection would make it an appropriate arena for strictly stylistic play and refinement. In actual fact, the chair is far from perfect, functionally speaking, as we shall see in Part II.

Another reason that an artistic perspective diminishes concern for the body is that style is actually just another form of social differentiation and ranking. Once we start discriminating one form from another, it is very tempting to attach values. One chair is different from another—so isn't it also *better* than the other? Indeed, the most stylish chairs usually belong to those of highest social standing. Benjamin Franklin lamented that sight was inextricably bound to rank when he said, "The eyes of other people are the eyes that ruin us. If all but myself were blind, I should want neither fine clothes, fine houses, nor fine furniture." Accordingly, style readily becomes another way through which we differentiate ourselves from others; we don't just seek to be different but also better. In the end, thinking about chairs as objects of art leads back to appreciating that chairs serve the purpose of social ranking.

Communication is an important part of artistic expression, and communicating the right message can often be more important than what we feel physically. A photograph of President Jimmy Carter at Camp David during a moment of reflection in the Middle East peace talks shows him sitting outdoors on a seat carved out of a log; here a rustic look was more important than real (read physical) comfort.³ Conversely, when JFK needed a rocker because of his severe back problems, rockers became a stylish fad because people identified them with his charisma, not because rockers are functional. If the shape of a chair communicates the right message, we don't care how it feels physically. How it feels *emotionally* is what counts. Accordingly, we often observe that artists create, sitters select, and collectors buy chairs for aesthetic reasons—it looks better as an object—without regard to how they feel physically.⁴ In our age of consumerism, a British observer of pop culture confirmed that a chair was "not just a utilitarian item which performed a service, but a culturally-loaded symbol which helped to express our attitudes, aspirations and identity: it communicates to others our chosen 'lifestyle.'"⁵ Sociologists have included chairs as a non-verbal indicator of either social rank or of traditional versus modern identity.⁶

Style eclipses physiology—as paper covers rock—through several mechanisms, including connoisseurship and decorating. Interest in the look of a chair means that some people become enthralled with connoisseurship—knowing which ones are the more authentic expressions of a type and why. A recent *Smithsonian* article described a connoisseur in action:

Wolfson is transfixed. It is, he realizes at once, a rare exemplar of a line of mass-producible wooden furniture that echoed the gracefulness of Art Nouveau while prefiguring the later austerity of the Bauhaus. Wolfson doesn't have one of [Richard] Riemerschmid's distinctive chairs, but he knows he needs one—it will fill an important historical gap in the inaugural show. . . . "It's the first time I've seen a Riemerschmid that I like," Wolfson tells me excitedly as he circles the piece. "I mean, this chair explains everything."⁷

A poignant account of collecting modern furniture on a much tighter budget comes from *The Washington Post* for June 4, 1992. With a touch of self-mockery, the staff writer in the Style section describes how her family

kept faith in the Modernist vision of the “perfect life by design” for over forty years—even though Modernism “costs too much, doesn’t wear well and the chairs are uncomfortable.” In retrospect, she reports having “recently sat in turn in our hard-sought collection of Modern chairs—each chased down like a Holy Grail in secondhand office furniture stores, want ads, hard-to-find warehouses. And I realized there was not a comfortable place to sit in the house. But Modern is beautiful, and that may be enough.”⁸

If not connoisseurs, many of us at least want to know which chair best fits our decor. Chairs are an important component of recognized decorating styles: traditional, Colonial, contemporary, Modern, high-tech, French Provincial, Spanish, Mediterranean, Gothic, and Arts and Crafts, among others. Decorators and image consultants are paid to help individuals hone the unspoken language of their interior furnishings. For those of us who cannot or do not want to pay for such professional help, home-decorating magazines (which designers sometimes disparage as “shelter” magazines) offer advice more readily.

Picking the right chair to communicate the right message is so important that some people experience panic attacks. “We call it sofa/easy chair anxiety,” said an interior designer for the department store Marshall Field in Chicago. “It’s a very common malady. People will design and build an entire house, but it will take years of indecision before they’ll pick that sofa or easy chair.”⁹ Such status-conscious people are not thinking about issues of physical comfort like whether the chair cuts into the underside of the leg or provides adequate back support. Clearly, this is an extreme example; yet the rest of us do care about style to some degree or another, and to that degree we too may turn from our own bodily awareness to accept various discomforts. The communications design consultant Ralph Caplan has made a similar point, a little more ironically, about chairs being “‘statements’ about the social position, wealth, and modernity of the owner. Many of our most elegant living rooms and lobbies are furnished with such statements . . . they can also be sat in, although that sometimes hurts.”¹⁰

THE ABC'S OF STYLE

What can we learn about chairs by paying attention to their looks? Since style is so compelling—enough to override and even shape physical

experience—studying it can tell us a lot about which values and concerns have the most powerful emotional significance.¹¹ Style tells more about people’s attitudes toward things than about the things themselves. For example, during the so-called Machine Age between the two world wars, the industrialized societies of Europe and America were valiantly trying to integrate the look and the rhythms of the machine into daily life. As a result, all kinds of household objects, and even buildings, such as New York’s Chrysler Building, and large public works like bridges and tunnels, were shaped to look like either heroic or streamlined machines.

Style is the way all the parts of a composition are assembled around its main idea or attitude. Well-designed objects, including chairs, accomplish more than one thing at a time, but if the designer has succeeded, all the different functions look unified. An object looks integrated only because of very deliberate efforts to harmonize its many components. Accordingly, one can evaluate style by paying attention to the relation between the parts. Does it all add up, with a clear hierarchy, to a dominant visual idea? For example, if the dominant idea is an S-shape, a chair designer will compose the back, feet, and seat to contribute to the overall impression of an S. In sociologese, style would be said to perform an integrative function, not only because it integrates all parts into an overall pattern but also because it resolves competing and complementary values into a hierarchical pattern. The implied priority of one value over another is what allows cultural historians to characterize eras by the style of their art and artifacts. Think, for example, of the Time-Life series on American history in which one volume is devoted to each decade—say, the Jazz Age—and its art, politics, and economics. The implicit theory is that the design lines, proportions, shapes, and decorative motifs of the time crystallize the concerns and aspirations of the day. Another example comes from a study of American bathroom and kitchen aesthetics during the forties and fifties: “the fluid modeling of streamlined forms reflected the period’s twin obsessions with *bodily* consumption and *economic* consumption. . . . The molded forms of streamlining yielded an excretory aesthetic . . .”¹²

Obviously from this perspective, style is shared, not idiosyncratically personal. Yet in trying to soothe those anxious about selecting the right chair, retailers encourage insecure shoppers to view chair selection as “a personal thing” and reassure them that style is in the eye of the beholder, since “furnishings are a personal matter and shoppers have to trust their in-

stincts.” But the reality behind that idea is social, since the same retailers continue, “It’s like your clothing, your easy chair says what you are all about.”¹³ Style has to be shared, even if within a very small group, in order to communicate and be recognized.

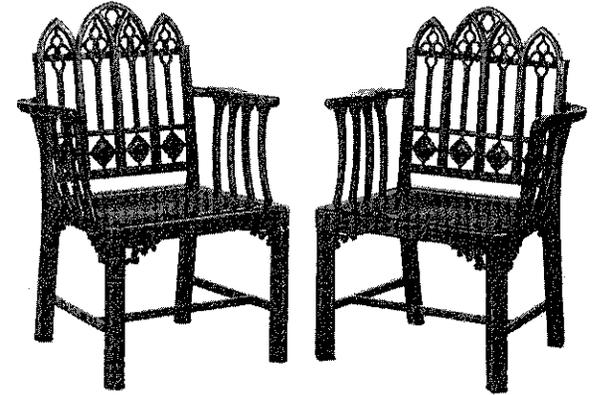
What are the codes that make all this communication possible? Broken down to its basic elements, style is the visual synthesis of three aspects: shape, line, and decoration. Shapes are perceptual fields defined by line. The relation between shape and line introduces proportion, which is another element of visual or stylistic analysis. Chair scholars constantly use all these terms in their descriptions. For example, in describing the “sensuous curves” of Art Nouveau, the focus might be on line (*Fig. 13*); discussing the proportion of Gothic Revival arches requires attention to both shape and line (*Fig. 14*); and referring to the horizontal panel of Renaissance Revival (*Fig. 15*), or to the oval and circular backs of the Rococo Revival, involves the concept of shape (*Fig. 16*).

Decoration is a particularly important component of style because it communicates content or meaning more overtly than shapes and lines. (The word “decoration” comes from the Latin for ornament, in turn based on the Indo-European words meaning “to receive, be suitable, make decent”; from which it has come to mean “adding to make more attractive.” The closely related word “ornament” comes from ordain, meaning “to put in order,” and has come to mean “mere external display.” Both words share the common synonym “adorn.”) Moreover, the materials used for decoration provide yet another medium for expression. Precious materials worked elaborately with inlays or carvings probably signify an elite, while common materials signify or even glorify the modern masses.



Figure 13. Sidechair by the French furniture designer Eugene Gaillard. The fluid lines of the frame and the curving tracery on the leather back are typical of Art Nouveau.

Figure 14. Periods and styles often overlap. These George III chairs are in the Gothic style.



Notice how quickly rank works its way back into the most fundamental discussion of style.

Nevertheless, the communication function of style gives it a measure of autonomy from status. For example, two equally high-status groups might choose different styles: French Provincial or Art Nouveau. One cannot predict the sort of furniture people own solely on the basis of their power or economic status. The term “lifestyle” was invented to acknowledge this kind of free play between economic status and consumer choice. It acknowledges that people’s social identity is based on more than their economic standing alone. Because style cannot be reduced to economic status, it usually merits its own category when analyzing designed objects. The Roman architect Vitruvius distinguished between what he called “firmness, commodity, and delight.”



Figure 15. The lines of this walnut Renaissance Revival hall chair emphasize its width rather than its height.

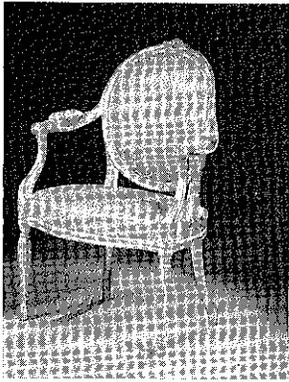


Figure 16. This Rococo-styled chair has an oval-shaped back.

that is, construction, social purpose, and aesthetics. By recognizing that aesthetic style is an indicator not only of social rank but also of other values, we can revisit the social history of chairs in order to see what can be learned from their looks. In this chapter, we will be thinking more about the symbols encoded into chairs by their creators than about the meanings implied by their uses.

FIVE MAJOR CATEGORIES

I see five extremely broad categories of chair styles: handmade, mass-produced, craftsman, designer, and artist.¹⁴ The number of handmade chairs declined when factories began producing chairs in the nineteenth century. During the twentieth century they have come back into fashion, since they are a way of distinguishing the privileged from the ordinary.

Over the centuries, as the number of chairs in the world and the number of people who have access to them increased, chair styles became more finely determined. Chairs first represented their culture and could be described as cultural types: Asian, Medieval, Egyptian, Hellenistic. Then they became identified with specific countries: Italy, France, Great Britain. Since the eighteenth century, chairs have been identified with furniture makers such as Chippendale, Sheraton, Hepplewhite, and the Adam brothers in the same way that paintings are known by their artists' names, whether or not the master artist did the physical work himself. If done in his workshop under his general direction, it bore his signature. In the twentieth century, significant chairs were even more closely identified with individual designers, who were trained as architects but wanted to try their hand at chair design: Corbusier, Aalto, Breuer, Eames. We know their names not just because we have accurate information about who the designers were but also because chairs have become a medium and a subject

for artistic expression. Recently, even fine artists have explored chairs as a subject for individual expression, though not necessarily for sitting. In the future, with our emphasis on the individual, chairs may become associated even more closely with the person who designed them. Just as *Mega-trends* author John Naisbitt posited that "high touch" may be a compensation for "high tech," perhaps the individual will be revered as compensation for massive numbers and impersonal production processes.

Handmade Chairs

In the West, preciousness in materials and elaborateness of decoration characterized the ancient period in furniture because of the strong association between visual richness and high status. However, the messages communicated on ancient chairs tell us about more than just the rulers' high standing. Egyptian tomb furniture was encased in gold, but this speaks to more than a high standard of luxury. Explicit messages were also worked into the decoration. For instance, one footstool from Tutankhamen is inlaid with nine bound figures, representing the traditional enemies of Egypt.¹⁵ Not only are the enemies bound, but also the sitting pharaoh puts his feet on them. In both Egypt and Greece, intricate pictures and patterns provided narratives about war, domestic life, and myths. Even the apparently purely formal repetitive patterns used for borders and friezes communicate content about the local botany, land forms, and cultural concepts. Admittedly, only elites get such decoration, but the decoration carries information in some measure free of social rank.

As we have seen, the ancient tradition of chair sitting barely stayed alive through medieval times. Even kings and popes received ambassadors while sitting on their beds. The chair was not "reinvented" until the sixteenth century. Historians argue that the printing press was partly responsible for chairs coming back into favor, because the press made possible the widespread dissemination of theoretical texts from classicism. These texts included illustrations of engravings that were used for ornamenting chairs. Even more important, they proposed theories on proportion that were perfectly applicable to chairs, and could be used in more stable cultures. From this point on, the chair moved from a simple utilitarian tool to an object worthy of visual attention and stylistic expression.¹⁶

The next two centuries of chair design were remarkably coherent. For the two hundred years between 1610 and 1810, English cabinetmakers

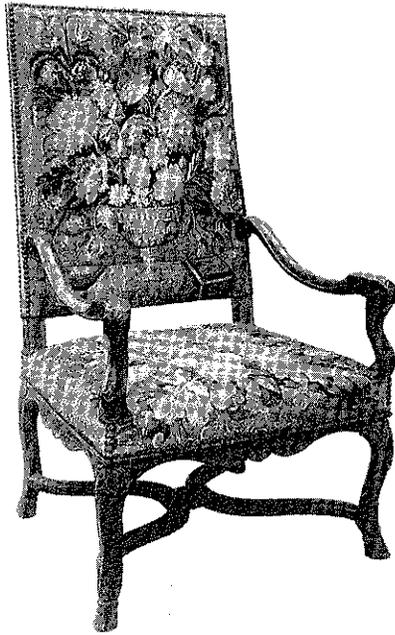


Figure 17. An example of Louis XIV masculine Rococo.

generated only ten discernible styles and the French only eight as a result of the constancy of society and design ideology. For this period, in France, and to a lesser extent in England, anyone who could afford expensive furniture copied royal and aristocratic taste, so that particular styles changed infrequently—usually corresponding with the reign of a French monarch. The furniture named after Louis XIV, the Sun King (1643–1715), was classical, but incorporated Oriental themes, was novel rather than historicist, and showed off

the artisan's skill (Fig. 17); that named for Louis XV (1715–74) was Rococo, meaning profusely and delicately ornamented, small-scale, light, and extravagantly curved in reaction to the Baroque (see Fig. 16); Louis XVI (1774–92) has come to be recognized as Neoclassical, full of “right angles, straight lines, architectural proportions, fluting, and decorative elements borrowed from Greece and Rome.”¹⁷

In England, without an absolute monarch, royal taste was not emulated in the same way, so that by the eighteenth century chairs were approached as sculpture, and the signature of the cabinetmaker was for the first time important enough for his works to be known by name: Thomas Sheraton (Fig. 18), Thomas Chippendale (Fig. 19), George Hepplewhite (Fig. 20), and Robert and James Adam. (However, in the next century the English named furniture after Queen Victoria.) During this same period, because it had no royal court, Holland developed a distinctive look in interior decoration, which its painters have made famous.¹⁸ The Dutch relied on their comparatively simple vernacular style for about two centuries. Ultimately, technological, social, and economic changes in the nineteenth

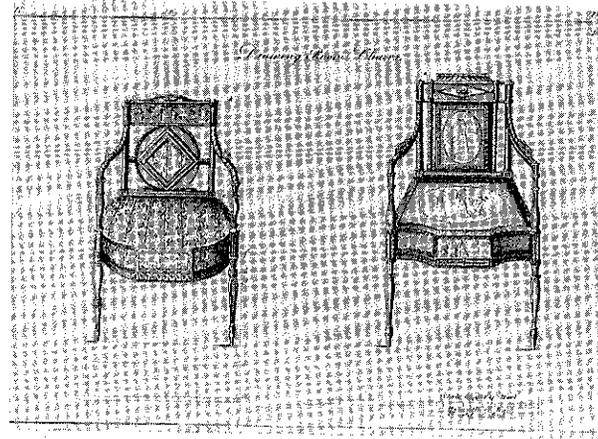


Figure 18. Thomas Sheraton's sketches for two drawing-room chairs.

century disrupted this stylistic stability all over Europe and the Western world.

Mass-Produced Chairs

Once mass production began to dominate chair manufacturing, styles proliferated without regard to nationality or artistic lineage. Thus, the nineteenth century is known as the century of revivalism, without individual furniture makers who distinguished themselves artistically.¹⁹ The earlier styles from England and France, plus vernacular and medieval prototypes, along with Greek and Roman models, were reproduced and combined in endless profusion. Those styles included Gothic Revival (Fig. 21), Rococo Revival (Louis XV), Elizabethan (sometimes called Cottage style), Renaissance Revival (Louis XIV), Colo-

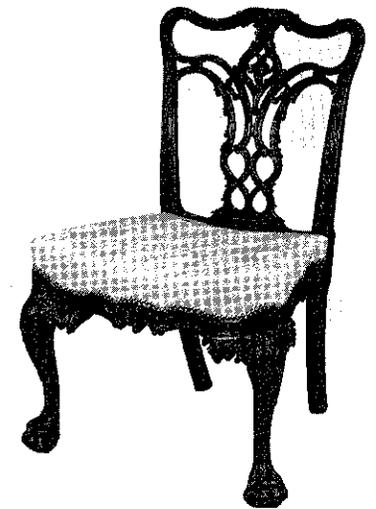


Figure 19. A classic English Chippendale-style chair.

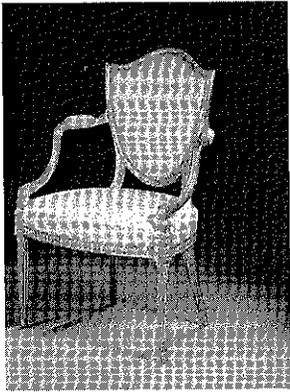


Figure 20. An English Hepplewhite shield-back chair.

nial Revival, Japanese, Louis XVI Revival, Neoclassicism, William and Mary, Queen Anne or Early Georgian, Victorian, Craft Revival (often referred to as Arts and Crafts), Frontier style, Windsor, Shaker, and Mission—sometimes with vernacular stenciling. All of these were originally handmade, but all could be copied using machines.

Some contemporaneous and later critics disliked the social significance of revivalism. Specifically, they did not like the fixation on the past, or the sharp distinction between work and home. Remember that in domestic and hotel settings, revivalist models were preferred, while the chief innovation of the nineteenth century, patent furniture, was relegated to the office and other technical arenas such as trains, outdoor camping, barber shops, and laboratories.

However, mechanical improvements did manage to work their way into residential furniture. One such invention was spring upholstery. Earlier, upholstery had meant a thin layer of horsehair, fabric, or tapestry, so the application of coiled springs to upholstery made it deep and changed it qualitatively.²⁰ This kind of upholstery became a hallmark of the century, criticized in the early twentieth century for

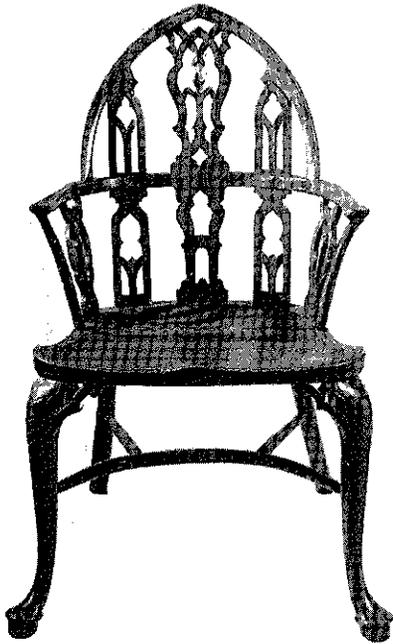


Figure 21. This English Windsor chair has a Gothic back.

obscuring underlying structure. Another mechanical feature that successfully insinuated its way into the present-day American living room was motion furniture, known more commonly by its brand names La-Z-Boy, BarcaLounger, and Lane recliner. These never became a high-status item and were considered stylistically clunky. The number one objective recently has been to restyle them so that they no longer *look* like recliners, but rather like traditional armchairs.

Most of the twentieth-century furniture market continues to rely on industrialized manufacturing, no matter what the look. In addition to revival themes and the various expressions of “efficiency” in office furniture, manufacturers have been churning out “knockdown” and contract furnishings. Knockdown furniture allows the manufacturer to reduce the cost of assembly, and just as importantly, the cost of shipping by having the buyer assemble it at home. The look of this furniture is necessarily full of straight lines, and so lends itself to simple wooden furniture of vaguely modern styles, manufactured almost anywhere in the world. The Scandinavian versions were immortalized in song by John Lennon’s “Norwegian Wood,” and are marketed today by IKEA. The contract furniture industry produces furniture in multiples, by contract, rather than piece-by-piece selection, for such institutions as schools, offices, libraries, auditoriums, airports, and waiting rooms. The power of mass production has not been harnessed to reproduce historical styles for these institutional settings, but rather to broadcast the “contemporary” look of pleasantly neutral efficiency we know so well from the bureaucracies we inhabit.

Craftsman Chairs

Although industrialization has remained far and away the most important force in terms of number of chairs produced, it has lost its ideological prominence, especially for craftsmen and fine artists, and even for the designers who once looked to it for inspiration. Today, the handmade chair has been revived by craftspeople who value a piece of furniture first and foremost because it is handmade. As early as 1880, the Arts and Crafts movement, led by William Morris in England, was based on the social critique that the easy production of all styles of furniture made possible by industrialization favored the ostentatious and pretentious. (Fig. 22) The handmade was a return to authenticity not only for the consumer but also

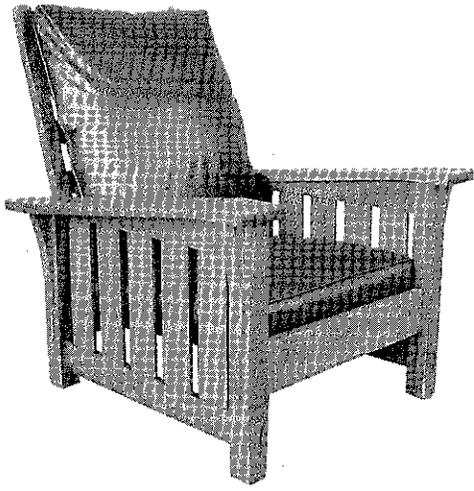


Figure 22. An American Arts and Crafts-style chair.

for the producer. Critics believed that workers were alienated by mass production because they did not understand how the parts that they were working on fitted into the whole. In contrast, craft advocates then—and now—idealized the American Shakers because they exemplified unalienated labor, and

their work, including handmade chairs, was simple, unpretentious, structurally understandable, and carefully constructed.

In the high-minded social ethics of the Crafts movement, beauty is idealized as a goal in itself, not as a means to establishing high status. There are contradictions here, of course; handcrafted chairs are too expensive for most people. The waiting list for one of the chairs by the most famous contemporary American craftsman, Sam Maloof, is long and the people on it can afford to collect paintings. In the words of one critic, "Morally speaking, . . . 'craftsmanship,' far from being synonymous with self-disciplined virtue, [could be] . . . rather a shameless extravagance of human resources."²¹

Another tenet of Arts and Crafts ideology is that art should be part of life, so one should not make a distinction between utilitarian and artistic objects. Creating this kind of unity can produce a meditative state in the craftsperson, which is why former President Jimmy Carter makes his own chairs. Slowing down to make the whole thing, while working with natural materials, certainly can be therapeutic.

Those who believe in the unity of art and life also believe that craft should be viewed as fine art. However, they are probably fighting an uphill battle, because the very categories of craft, design, and art suggest enduring cultural distinctions. Travel guides, newspapers, and city magazines

usually have separate listings for craft shows and galleries. Over time this may change because today craftspeople tend to have college backgrounds and emphasize intellectual concepts, in contrast to earlier generations of craftspeople, who emphasized the quality of their raw materials. Further evidence of the possibility of blending categories is that a new category has emerged, that of studio furniture maker, who aims to bridge the two approaches by producing limited editions.

Even though today the Craft movement no longer can hope to replace the organization of the assembly line, it has renewed itself throughout the twentieth century. Since the 1950s, Scandinavian designers have made significant contributions to the movement, both stylistically and conceptually. One well-respected Danish designer, Hans Wegner, views himself as a furniture designer who works with and builds on the strengths of craftspeople. He thinks furniture designers should be familiar with tools, but he does not necessarily build everything himself.²² In contrast, Sam Maloof twenty years ago turned down a \$22 million contract to produce his furniture, saying that he believed that the designer should also be the furniture maker. Here is the essential difference between the craftsman and the designer; when a person provides the ideas that are then executed by someone else, the term "designer" is precisely accurate.²³

Making chairs by hand usually—but not always—means working with natural raw materials like wood, rush, and occasionally leather, rather than steel or plastic. In the early twentieth century, European and American Arts and Crafts chairs were made of wood, sometimes with leather seats, and in the second half, Scandinavian modern also used wood, usually with seats of natural wool fabric. The way the wood is worked—how it is shaped and joined—is where the craftsman's skill is judged. Craftsmanship is used to assess durability, price, and aesthetic value.

Designer Chairs

In contrast, around the same time, a group of early twentieth-century architects were searching for a new aesthetic appropriate to industrialization, which has been called Modernism.²⁴ They turned to chairs because they viewed them as a microcosm of the designed environment. Like buildings, chairs are three-dimensional, complex, and need to include pragmatic as well as symbolic functions. Moreover, chairs can stand for people in the photographs and drawings of buildings, which architects often like to de-

pict without the visual interference of real people. Paul Overtly notes in *Art in America* the special role of chairs in modern architecture: "Geometric and stylized but at the same time a metaphor for the body, the chair mediates between the human body and the abstract, geometrical forms of modernist architecture."²⁵ These early architects-turned-product designers desired to show off new industrial materials and the ways they could be joined; but ironically, the details selected—such as the welding required on the famous Mies van der Rohe Barcelona chair—were often labor-intensive, requiring much handwork, (see Fig. 6). Unintentionally, custom fabrication became involved, and perhaps for this very reason, these chairs have retained our interest aesthetically and financially as collectors. From a craft point of view, even plastic or metal chairs can be well or poorly made, which is why the architectural historian Vincent Scully noted that early Modernist, pro-industrial chairs actually share a craft orientation with their predecessors. These modern chairs have some of the status of sculpture and antiques, and are collected. In Europe, a Swiss chair manufacturer, Vitra, commissioned the prominent American architect Frank Gehry to design a new museum on the Rhine just to house its collection of Modernist chairs.

The twentieth-century revolt against nineteenth-century furniture design was a twin revolt against revivalism and upholstery. Designers in the twentieth century, starting with proponents of Art Nouveau, were interested in finding ways to express their own age, so they did not want to use historical styles. Whether thinking about architecture or chairs, Modernists hoped to express new ideas and attitudes by turning to the new materials and new construction techniques associated with industrialization.²⁶ They eliminated surface embellishments like carving, inlays, and moldings, and replaced the traditional wood and fabric with laminated wood, canvas, stainless steel, steel coated with alloys or enamel, plastic, rubber, latex, foam, and other resins. Stylistically speaking, they were still working with shape and line, but they were much less obviously working with decoration. Twentieth-century decoration is subtle indeed. It lies in the nature of the materials that the designer chooses to explore and the construction techniques used for joining those materials. According to the British art historian Edward Lucie-Smith, the disappearance of animal, vegetable, and architectural ornaments indicates that the chair had become a thing in itself, not an allusion to something else, like royalty, national his-

tory, flora, or fauna.²⁷ These forward-looking materials of the new industrialism were meant to communicate simultaneous references to the new industrial order as well as nose-thumbing disdain for the backward-looking nineteenth century.

The Modernist attitude toward materials actually had roots in the late nineteenth century, when the Austrian furniture maker Michael

Thonet applied steam to wood and molded it into Bentwood chairs (see Fig. 32). Consistent with that tradition, twentieth-century chairmakers utilized newly available glues and steaming and lamination processes to explore plywood as a medium. Metal was also shaped in new ways. The German architect Marcel Breuer looked at bicycle construction in the early 1920s and thought of using bent metal tubes for chair structure. (Fig. 23) New metals such as steel were strong enough for this kind of construction, so he and others like Mies van der Rohe, Mart Stam,

Le Corbusier, Charlotte Perriand, and George Nelson explored metal in combination with leather, canvas, wood, and rattan. Ray and Charles Eames along with architect Eero Saarinen molded plywood to create new kinds of laminated wooden chairs. Fiberglass and

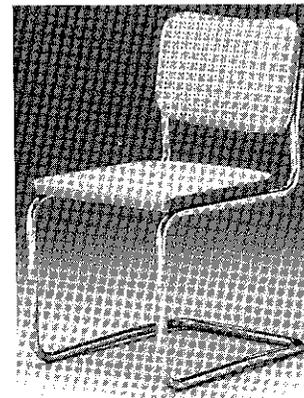
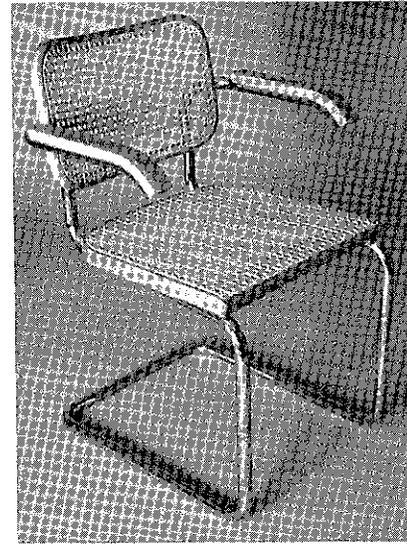
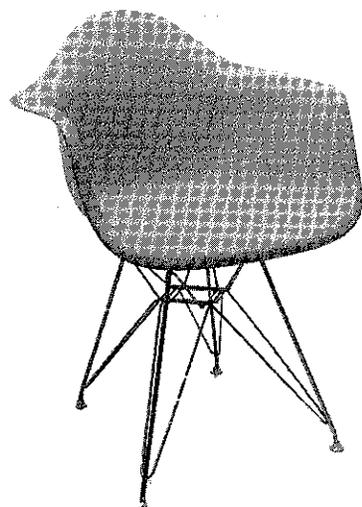
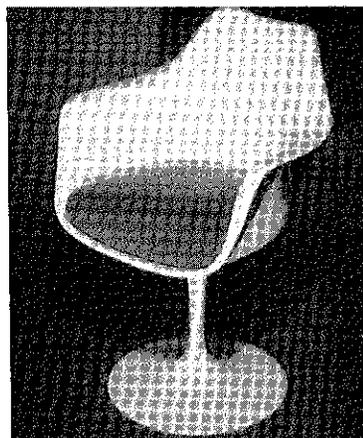


Figure 23. Marcel Breuer designed arm and armless versions of this cantilevered chair (1924–25), which has come to be known as "Cesca"—the nickname of his daughter, Francesca.

plastic stimulated Saarinen and Eames to explore integrating seat, back, and arms into one eggshell-shaped unit—much to our anatomical detriment. (Fig. 24a and b) Frank Gehry explored cardboard in the 1970s, and these chairs are now collectors' items, still in production by Vitra today. In the early 1990s, the design magazine *Metropolis* still found the challenge of building a chair from an unusual material like shredded paper provocative enough for a front cover. Note, however, that modern chair designers have not invented new technology, but rather have adapted technology from other fields. They do not first see the need for a cantilevered chair and then invent the materials and processes that could facilitate their vision. This is yet another way of saying that design has integrated culture, rather than forcing it to change.



As designers began to exploit the qualities of new materials, these materials formed the very categories for this century's aesthetic understanding of chair design. For example, elasticity came from the use of leather, plastic, or cloth in tension. Cantilevering was the outcome of new metals (steel or aluminum) in thin tubes or sheets. Moldability emerged from the properties of plywood and plastic resins. Strength came from new glues, as well as from

Figure 24. (a) The tulip pedestal chair by Eero Saarinen (1956) is one of a series of fiberglass molded chairs he and Charles Eames designed together after World War II. (b) Earlier (1948), Eames designed the ubiquitous one-piece shell chair with metal rod legs.

steel. The architect Allen Greenberg notes that these aesthetic categories were "simple and expository" because they emerged from the "expressive characteristics of materials or related techniques of jointing."²⁸

Since the technical construction of the chair and the sociological expression of modern values influenced the form of early twentieth-century chairs, does that mean that the Modernists followed the dictum that form follows function? Surprisingly, these designers were not particularly interested in responding to the functions of their own bodies. The British curator of the museum show on chairs, Deyan Sudjic, has made a similar observation that early modern chairs "obviously owed a lot more to architectural slogans than to the principles of ergonomics."²⁹ As Greenberg also explains, in Modernist chair design, the expression of aesthetic ideas "requires clarity and conciseness, and compromises in design, for the sake of comfort, especially in details, are often difficult for the designer to accept." Greenberg cites Bruno Taut, the early twentieth-century German architect, who wrote, "Beauty originates from the natural qualities of the material and from elegance of construction."³⁰ All of the Finnish designer Alvar Aalto's work exemplifies the exploration of wood as decorative material. Aalto in turn influenced Gerald Summers, a British designer who "pushed the idea of the plywood chair to a logical extreme," cutting and folding a chair from a single sheet of plywood, "almost like an origami conjuring trick."³¹ (Fig. 25) I would add that sitting on it also requires a trick of some sort.

Early twentieth-century modern chairs are now classics. The contemporary postmodern scene has not generated the passionate ideas about proper form that early Modernism did. Those who have the most fervor about getting things right these days are the designers who are investigating the implications of ergonomic science for chairs. The categorical split between furniture for the office versus the home

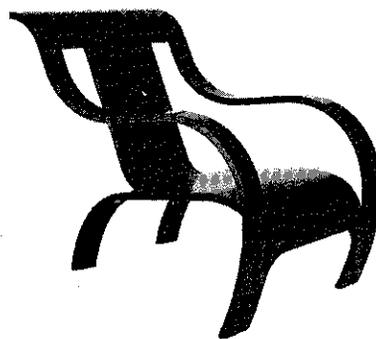


Figure 25. Birch "Summers" plywood chair by Gerald Summers (1933-1934).



Figure 26. Emilio Ambasz and Giancarlo Piretti's "Vertebra" chair.

means that virtually all of this experimentation is focused on office furniture. Ergonomic styling aims to communicate sleek efficiency, look-alike shapes, utilitarian textures, subdued colors, black or gray with varying amounts of chrome. Emilio Ambasz, an Argentine-American designer and former curator of design at the Museum of Modern Art, with the Italian designer Giancarlo Piretti designed one of the first office

chairs that automatically adjusts to a conventional range of seated postures while continuing to support the spine. (Fig. 26) The designers wanted to express the movement and flexibility of the chair as a visual idea, so they equipped their chair with a distinctive black corrugated plastic tube. Of course, the look could be and has been copied without its ergonomic substance.³²

Today, we are left vacillating between the non-aesthetic aesthetic of the ergonomic chairs and the bold experiments of earlier designers. Designers today such as the French Philippe Starck and the Americans Dakota Jackson and Robert Venturi either exaggerate one of the lines of the classics, or parody it, even to the point of mocking themselves. Consumers and designers alike share a retro-interest in the twenties, thirties, forties, and fifties, with no commitment to any one decade. The nineties seem to have no particular style—except minimalism and simplicity to the point of austerity—but a decade or two from now a characteristic profile will undoubtedly emerge. For the present, we experience a disparate mix, including a nostalgic Ralph Lauren Frontier style, African stools, art from preindustrial societies, fancy Louis XIV chairs, and industrial knockoffs. As the art critic Sidney Tillim puts it, "Flea-market '50s taste is everywhere today; at its best it comes off as a kind of high kitsch that criticizes our lack of true style while masking its own emotional investment in style by mocking it."³³

A more tolerant view of this eclecticism is provided by the American sociologist Fred Davis, who explains that our social identities are amalgams to start with and ever-changing thereafter, so that fashion in clothing expresses our multiple and conflicting identities; insofar as chairs are like clothing and other art codes, we use them to assemble and then reassemble our definitions of ourselves.³⁴ Edward Lucie-Smith makes a similar point when he says that interior decor today has to do with assembling still lifes in the artistic tradition. He thinks that we are more interested in what some historians have called assemblage, or collage. When it comes to the chair, it is part of that ensemble or collection of objects in our rooms, part of an artistic tableau.

But does this eclecticism offer the possibility of expanding our visual repertoire to include a body-inspired sensuousness? Even though the industrial design approach to chairs has taken a turn down the path of ergonomics with little expressive symbolism, the artistic approach, in contrast, might have articulated or celebrated the mechanics of the human body more delightfully.

Artists' Chairs

Artists have played with the communication function of chairs more overtly than either craftsmen or designers. They have used chairs as an opportunity to engage in social criticism and comment on social arrangements, including status, even to make visual puns. Many artists have used chairs as the "apparent subject matter" of their paintings and sculpture. In the early 1970s, some artists unsuccessfully attempted to do away with making objects. Consequently, as Naomi Gilman, the curator of an American show on chairs called "Form, Function and Fantasy," which took place in 1978 in Sheboygan, Wisconsin, explains, "without the possibility of creating meaningful new objects or non-objects, painters and sculptors began turning to the banal: common things that already exist in such abundance they cannot be seen as precious or profound. The chair suits this purpose perfectly."³⁵ One artist in this show split a chair in two, while another created a wearable chair.

In the nineties, artists continue to use chairs to make statements about society. One local installation of five chairs in Oakland, California, is intended to increase awareness of the stages of a person's life or social roles: high chair, desk chair, wheelchair, office chair, and rocking chair.³⁶

Group shows have been organized on chair themes. In "The Chair: Deconstructed/Reconstructed," a show held at the Sybaris Gallery in Royal Oak, Michigan, each artist was asked to take inspiration from a "found" chair to create "their own incarnation either functional, sculptural, or frenetic."³⁷ One made rubbings of an old-fashioned wooden dining chair onto a white damask tablecloth and disassembled the entire chair into its components, which were displayed below the fabric images. Another artist covered a chair in furlike shag that was partially clipped, presumably by the clippers lying on its seat. A 1996 benefit for an AIDS-related project involved giving one hundred chairs to artists, who had three months to "decorate" or redesign the chairs, which would be photographed along with their creators for a catalogue and auctioned as a fund-raiser. Promosedia, an Italian organization that represents about one hundred chair-manufacturing companies in Italy, invited twenty artists to "interpret" chairs, which were auctioned in 1997, also to fight AIDS.³⁸

Lucie-Smith observes that furniture has become visually so significant that it can challenge sculpture. The modern movement in art, he explains, taught us to look at forms attentively. "This means that we look at an artefact such as a chair with entirely new eyes. If it is old, we are conscious not only of the talismanic properties . . . but of its qualities as pure form. If it is new, we automatically compare it to the contemporary sculpture it so closely resembles."³⁹ If they are unique pieces, chairs by sculptors may not really have "style" in the sense of a shared code. (*Fig. 27a and b*)

For the body, do the chairs by sculptors and artists work better than those by designers? Imagine a continuum from designed chairs to highly expressive or critical art works. Two different exhibits mark the ends of this continuum: the Cooper-Hewitt National Design Museum in New York City, a branch of the Smithsonian Institution, held an exhibition entitled "The Outdoor Chair" in 1988. In that exhibition, even though most of the chairs featured are not in production, and in that sense are unique prototypes, they would still have to be described as "responsible design," oriented toward the seated body. Providing high-status elites with freshly interpreted or highly refined versions of Modernist principles, these chairs are architectonic in attitude. They emphasize orthogonal, right-angle lines within another set of rectangles or squares, and the small refinements come in the materials or the proportions. By contrast in the earlier exhi-

bition, the chairs were idiosyncratic. They were used as criticism, cultural commentary, and envisioning—one flexible vinyl simulating wood, another motorized to go through a cycle of automatically breaking down and building back up. They usually mock the body or ignore it altogether.⁴⁰

Somewhere along this continuum are the "one-off" chairs by architect-designers sold in galleries, which blur the distinction between artist and designer. Rather than merge the two identities, collaboration between designers and artists has been a recent practice in several arenas, including that of chair design. Such collaboration started in the 1980s with federal and then state legislation that required 1 percent of

a public building's budget to be spent on art. Artists usually feel that if they were given a greater role in such collaborations, the resulting work would be more specifically fitted to the site. For chairs, rather than getting a standard designed look for a home or office or park, the public would get a more individual, fresh and distinctive treatment. Thus, their motives include commitment to improving

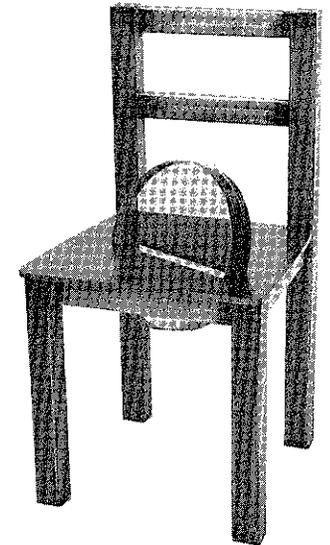
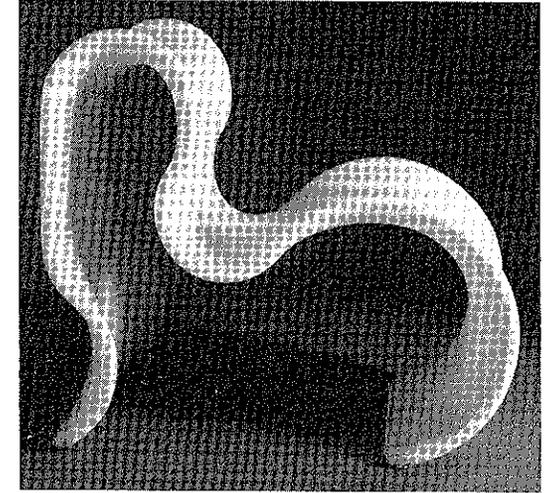


Figure 27. (a) The chair as sculpture is often still usable, but just as often (b) it is unusable because the artist is making a social commentary.

the built environment. But from the point of view of the body, putting two heads together still has not generated any particular interest in the experience of the body—outside the traditional interest of artists in visual scale and proportion.

If someone is making a one-of-a-kind chair, what is it that they are exploring? Worldwide, when artists create a chair, they are usually exploring something about materials, not a new posture. In New York City, design galleries represent international designers who offer “limited editions” of chairs in order to capture part of the fine art market. In Europe today, Ron Arad, avant-garde furniture designer, explores sheet metal as a medium for armchairs meant to be viewed as sculpture. Occasionally a sensuous rationale is offered, as in the case of Zadik Zadikian, an Armenian émigré living in New York, who is making chairs out of plaster of Paris because it feels “organic, sensuous” against the skin.⁴¹ But, as this example shows, the emphasis is on materials—plastic, metal, and wood in varied applications—rather than on the effect of the chair and its structure upon the body and *its* structure.

These various sculptural manipulations for one-of-a-kind, handmade chairs have not been customized to an individual’s body or used to establish new prototypes for mass production. Chairs are indeed anthropomorphic, but a chair in a gallery is more likely to have a CAUTION, DO NOT SIT sign than to invite one of us to sit on its lap. Ironically, artists have used chairs, by and large, to address more abstract sets of concerns—as a social, psychological, or cultural commentary.

Given this tendency toward conceptualism, and the recent scholarly attention to the body, I suspect that some artists may eventually try using chairs to express ideas from social theory. One such idea is that the body is a salvation from the repressions required by our modern bureaucratic society. Nineteenth-century industrial capitalism imposed its own specific controls on the human body regarding, for example, sexuality, rest, eating, and leisure. Correspondingly, social thinkers of the day conceptualized people as significant for their thoughts and feelings, while relegating the body to the role of mechanical support for the mind and soul. A second notion popular by the mid-twentieth century is that the body is interesting as the battleground where tensions between social codes and the self are experienced and eventually resolved. A third concept is that the body is a text—

a complex social reality used for social communication through gesture, marking, and costume.⁴²

Intriguing as all these ideas are, the challenge when communicating any such ideas about the body is how to stay with the experience of the body itself. Since chairs are so physical, they could be a vehicle for embodying these ideas—particularly the resolution of tensions between social codes and the self—in a way that could be directly appreciated. One idea that *has* been clearly expressed, by paying so much attention to the chair rather than the sofa or table, is the cultural importance of the individual.⁴³ Because the chair seats only one human being at a time, it responds to the body. Otherwise, none of the approaches to style—historical, craft revivalist, Modernist, abstract sculptural—that have flourished since the nineteenth century have taken inspiration from the finer points of human morphology or individual differences. This neglect has consequences we feel every day.

Yale professor Vincent Scully in his *New World Visions of Household Gods* offers three important ways to evaluate a chair: its craft, its relation to the body, and its emblematic or communicative function.⁴⁴ In his view, twentieth-century chairs share a craft orientation even though they use industrial processes, because of the emphasis on the nature of the materials and how they interact—the tensions between steel and leather, for example. He also judges these chairs as strong on the emblematic/communicative function. However, he thinks they are quite weak as, in his term, “an active physical object,” because of an “underdeveloped relationship” between the chair and the body. As we go on to examine what’s wrong with the chair, I hope to clarify just what an understatement he has made.