A Short History of Furniture

The following is a snapshot of the origins, developments, main art and design movements and well-known names in (mainly) European furniture.

John Makepeace divides furniture into three broad areas:

Tables – a surface raised from the floor in some form of celebration originally as an altar and evolving to become a family table.

Chairs – originally the exclusive privilege of the ruler, industry has made them attainable to all.

Chests and cabinets – originally a hollowed out tree trunk – an additional layer of protection for things we value.

Edward Lucie-Smith[1] says furniture has four purposes. We have furniture for function, furniture which confers status, furniture as technology and, probably most relevant to a contemporary furniture exhibition, furniture as a personal statement about the person who made it and the person to whom it belongs.

Ancient furniture, in its simplest description, is something designed to support human activities such as sleeping (beds), eating (tables and storage) or seating. Most furniture is moveable, but this Neolithic furniture (3100 – 2500 BC) pictured below, is part of the architecture and made of stone.

Stone furniture in a hut at Skara Brae, Orkney.

Ancient Egyptian royalty, contemporary with Orkney's stone furniture makers, sat on couches with carved ivory legs, had wooden beds and jewellery boxes. Queen Hetepheres had an elegant armchair.[2]

Ancient Egyptian carpenters

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[1] Edward Lucie-Smith. *Furniture, A Concise History*, Thames and Hudson, 1979

[2] The mother of Cheops who built the Great Pyramid at Giza. When her tomb was excavated it was found to contain her furniture. The wooden parts had rotted but thick gold plate had covered most of the timber so it was possible to see exactly how it would have looked.

Ancient Egyptian coffins show us that their carpenters knew how to make mitre joints, dovetails, butt joints and halving joints.

Ancient Egyptian chair

Ancient Greek couch

Pliny[3] dates the lathe to the seventh-century and credits its invention to either the Syrians or the Greeks. In ancient societies (Greek, Roman, Persian) furniture was both functional and ceremonial. The Greeks had light, functional items, couches, tables and chairs; the Romans had a rich assortment of ornate furniture, perhaps a reflection of their settled, luxurious way of life. Upholstery had not yet put in an appearance but lavish use was made of cushions and pillows. Nomadic people (people who move from place to place to find pasture and food), of necessity, have very little furniture.

In Britain, until the fourteenth century, existing examples of furniture are extremely rare. There is not even much pictorial evidence. Chairs were uncommon and therefore 'special'. Stools and benches were the norm. Chests were for valuables and ecclesiastical records.

The medieval bed was draped and canopied. There are surviving examples of these extravagant beds – they were regarded as heirlooms. Shakespeare left his 'second-best bed' to his wife.

The Great Bed of Ware ('undressed' and 'dressed')

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[3] Pliny the Elder, Roman writer and historian

The Great Bed of Ware, built by Hertfordshire carpenter Jonas Fosbrooke (circa 1590), measures ten by eleven feet and reputedly can sleep over fifteen people at once. It originally stood in the White Hart Inn in Ware but is now in the V&A. Many of those who have used the bed have carved their names into its posts. On a similar grand scale, a circular table top, eighteen feet in diameter hangs on a wall in Winchester Castle.

The sixteenth century saw new skills being employed in furniture construction. Joined furniture, pegged together, made lighter furniture with more freedom to expand and contract with the seasons. These skills resulted in a hierarchical craft guild system – carpenters, turners and joiners. In Britain, by the time Elizabeth I sat on her own fine throne, joinery was the normal way of making furniture. However, about one hundred years later, innovative immigrant craftsmen from Europe introduced finer methods of construction that enabled more sophisticated furniture with large flat surfaces that could be veneered or decorated with marquetry

Baroque Cupboard (c. 1650)

Cabinet making, with all its various techniques, had arrived. Urban taste favoured more luxurious and ornate styles, while country craftsmen repeated the same tried and trusted designs over and over.

As international trade grew, Chinese furniture, Japanese lacquer work and Indian cane furniture all appeared in Europe. Seventeenth century English craftsmen, already running short of native woods, began to import oak and fir from Norway and walnut from Spain and France. In the eighteenth century, imports of tropical hardwoods, particularly mahogany, flowed into Europe. England, with its skilled makers, became Europe's greatest furniture exporter.

Eighteenth century makers really understood the relationship between function and luxury. One of Louis XV's unmarried daughters, on being asked why she did not enter a nunnery like her sister, is said to have replied, 'It was an armchair that was my undoing.'

Thomas Chippendale (1718 - 1779) captured the spirit of the age with his designs. He became highly fashionable among the aristocracy and made furniture for many of the great houses being built in the middle of the eighteenth century. Solid, yet graceful and well proportioned, the chair backs are often pierced with openwork ribbons and scrolls. George Hepplewhite was contemporary with Chippendale and produced more refined forms characterised by greater simplicity. Like Chippendale before him, Thomas Sheraton (1751 – 1806) became famous for his influential publications as well as his furniture.

Chippendale chairs in the Rococo[4] style

The Regency period (roughly 1790 – 1820) harks back to antiquity – Greek, Roman and Egyptian. Regency furniture is strong, ornate and sometimes overdone. It was bought for, and used, in prosperous homes.

19th Century Dutch marquetry. Mahogany with foliage birds and butterflies.

One of the remarkable developments in Victorian furniture was the huge number of patented inventions for the industrial manufacture of furniture devices. Typical was one for sprung upholstery taken out by Samuel Pratt, Camp Equipage Maker of New Bond St., on 24 December, 1828. Mr Pratt's patent was for 'wire springs in beds, cushions etc.' Springs were slow to catch on and it wasn't until metal beds became mainstream, apparently influenced by bed bugs' dislike of them, around 1850, that springs became common.

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[4] **Rococo:** also referred to as "Late Baroque" is an 18th century style which developed as Baroque artists gave up their symmetry and became increasingly more ornate, florid, and playful.

Fuelled by the rise of middle-class consumption, the search for new products, techniques and materials began to take off. Steaming, bending and laminating techniques developed but factory production of furniture was still in the future. Machines, even though many were patented, were accepted with reluctance.

The Pre-Raphaelites, founded by William Morris in 1848, reacted against the commercialism of Victorian design. Concerned about the quality of life imposed on factory workers, they believed in the integration of art, architecture and the applied arts. Morris's company made both 'necessary workaday furniture' and 'state furniture'. The Arts and Crafts Movement, largely attributable to Morris's writing, evolved around 1875. It was inspired by the perception that medieval craftsmen took a deep pride in the integrity of their work and the honest use of materials. The philosophy and designs appealed to an intellectual middle class and influenced a generation of architects, eg. Ernest Gimson and Edwin Lutyens and furniture makers, Ernest and Sydney Barnsley. Schools of Design had begun to examine the overall picture.

The English Aesthetic[5] and the Arts and Crafts movement made a contribution to the rise of Art Nouveau (1890 – 1905). Charles Rennie Mackintosh (1868 – 1928), architect of the Glasgow School of Art designed distinctive furniture. He didn't follow the curves and symbolic plant forms of Art Nouveau but made pieces of elongated form and restrained decoration. He had links to the Wiener Werkstätte[6] and Mackintosh's work made just prior to the First World War shows a reciprocal influence.

Chair by Charles Rennie Mackintosh

The German design school, the Bauhaus[7], sought to develop a machine aesthetic to express the emerging means of production. Metal furniture designed by Bauhaus

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[5] The Aesthetic Movement was a 19th century movement that emphasized aesthetic values over moral or social themes in literature, fine art, the decorative arts, and interior design. It belongs to the anti-Victorian reaction and had post-Romantic roots, and as such anticipates modernism. It took place in the late Victorian period from around 1868 to 1901.
[6] Established in 1903, the Wiener Werkstätte (Vienna Workshops) was a community of visual artists. The workshop brought together architects, artists and designers whose first commitment was to design and make art which would be accessible to everyone.
[7] Bauhaus, a style of the early 1900's, takes its name from the Design School. This minimalist style has had a great effect on contemporary architecture and furniture design.

architects, Marcel Breuer and Mies van der Rohe, mostly in the 1920s, became a symbol of contemporary life. Bauhaus furniture is characterised by its clean lines, economy of means and understanding of the nature of materials.

Bauhaus Chair

The name of the Art Deco[8] period comes from the 1925 Paris exhibition, *L'Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Modernes*. The distinctive style affected ship design, architecture, interiors, vehicle design, luxury goods and furniture internationally.

The mass-produced Utility furniture of 1940s Britain, plain and functional, was largely made from indigenous materials. The 50s, 60s and 70s saw more technological innovation such as fibreglass and reinforced plastic and Kitsch, conscious 'bad-taste', makes an appearance. So does Classic Modern (Bauhaus designs), Radical Modern, Package Modern and in the 1960s Pop. Radical Modern includes such classics as the inflatable arm chair and the bean-bag.

The rationing of food and materials through the 50s severely restrained consumer choice. Once this eased, design retailing grew rapidly influenced by Scandinavian and subsequently Italian design. By the 1990s, years after the Bauhaus, its influence eventually effected a swing to Minimalism in the UK.

Post Modern style is distinguished by neo-classical features using the huge range of epochs and styles now available to the artful borrower. Package Modernism is best symbolised by the 1964 opening of Habitat, flat-packed, quick assembly, take-it-away-and-sit-in-it instant furnishing largely made in Eastern Europe. The low costs enabled retail mark-ups to increase from 60% to over 200% on goods imported from the Third World, exacerbating the decline of furniture production in the UK.

Design now has a new and versatile tool, the computer. A wealth of materials, natural and man-made, are available as are a huge range of technologies. Sustainable materials are an increasing preoccupation for makers and designers whilst sustainable methods of production remain an issue. Craftsmanship and good design are still with us but at a cost.

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[8] A streamlined, geometric style of home furnishings and architecture popular in the 1920's and 1930's. Characteristics include rounded fronts, wood furniture with chrome hardware and, or, glass top

So where does John Makepeace fit into this great panoply of furniture evolution? The last word should go to Edward Lucie-Smith who describes Makepeace's craftsman-made furniture as 'emphatically something which the machine cannot hope to rival.'

Mitre Chair by John Makepeace (1977)