CHESTS, CHAIRS AND SETTLES

BY JESSIE KINGSLEY CURTIS

The first article of furniture for comfort and convenience is a seat. From ancient vase paintings and from statues, we find the chair, in some form, to have had a very early existence. Many are in marble or bronze and were throne, as well as chair; that of the Olympian Zeus by Phidias was of this kind and undoubtedly rich in ornamentation. The first chairs of our English ancestors were of a very different sort; it was necessary that they be portable, and so were made in the form of a rude camp stool. When assemblies began to be held something better was provided for the master of ceremonies, hence came the expression, “the chair,” a term that in its present use, loses sight of the fact that once it was the sole chair in the room. As our ancestors gained wealth, use joined hands with beauty, and the chair was made from costly woods and variously ornamented. One of the oldest chairs known in England is the coronation chair of Westminster Abbey. The four lions on which it rests are a modern addition. Since the time of Edward I, all British rulers, except Mary Tudor, have been crowned in this chair. The special chair sent by the Pope to Mary for her coronation disappeared long ago.

Gothic chairs, very similar to this in the Abbey, are found in the old Cathedrals. These show the chair passing from a mere object of use into forms of beauty: henceforth the artist combines with the artisan to make this first article of furniture an object of art also.

When we study the inventories of our early New England ancestors, it looks as if chairs were rather scarce in their households, as the average was about two chairs to a family; the reason for this scarcity being that stools, benches and settles were still common. Some of these early chairs were strong, and often were more beautiful than comfortable. Many were ornamented with turnery in such a way that we exclaim, “uneasy rests the man” in such a chair. Chairs of this form have often
been sought for by the collectors of old furniture. Horace Walpole writing to a friend to buy him some of them, says, "They are loaded with turnery in an uncouth and whimsical manner." Some of these are of Dutch fashion and fac-similes are to be found in old Dutch paintings. The President's chair of Harvard College belongs to this era. Next we meet with the "Wainscot chair." These were probably first used in Scotland in the seventeenth century. They take their name from the panel used in the spaces between seat and arms. In these chairs cane seats, rush bottoms, leather and Turkey upholstering were used. The high back chair, often copied in the modern dining-room chair, belongs to this time. The bandy-leg with its typical crook was often used. Direct copies of this, which was probably at first a Dutch fashion, are seen in modern furniture. We often find the claw and ball foot. This is of Chinese origin and comes from the old fable of the dragon clawing the pearl, evil ever seeking to grasp the good to its service. These are said to be found in China as early as 1122 before Christ. The "round-about" chair shows a quaint design and is quite comfortable, as the seat is a right-angle in front, and one has the choice of two backs and several different positions, very comfortable for the uneasy sitter. The Windsor chair takes many forms and is frequently found. The back and sides are made of spindles. According to the form these spindles take, the chairs are called "fan-shaped," "sack-backed," or are given some other descriptive name. Sometimes a piece is inserted in the back for the purpose of strengthening it, or a line was run around the chair at right angles to the spindles for the same purpose.

There are various stories about the origin of the word Windsor. One is that the first of these chairs was discovered by George II in a shepherd's hut at Windsor, the shepherd having cut it with his knife in this shape. The king was so delighted that he had one copied for his palace. We find various advertisements
for Windsor chair-making in the early papers of this country, even before Revolutionary days. These were sometimes made of soft wood and painted; but the best were of hard wood, often of cherry and mahogany.

Another chair is the bannister chair, having a high back composed of slats similar to those used in the bannisters of our stairways. Many a modern dining-room chair is an exact reproduction of the old bannister chair of our New England ancestors. Chippendale chairs were brought to this country within ten years of their introduction in England. Sometimes the Chippendale chair is too ornamental, always a fault in a chair. In them wood is tied into bow knots or crimped and curled; and the best of them have a broad piece of handsome wood in the back, and are made strong enough to stand the tests of time. One inventory values six chairs, probably Chippendales, at $200. After the Chippendale followed the Sheraton and Hepplewhite chairs, all three being modifications by different makers of the same general principle of construction.

One of the fine early chairs of America has simply horizontal slats across the back and a simple graceful form that suggests the Greek. When of mahogany, these slats are inlaid with the crotch mahogany. Next came the empire chair made of solid mahogany, the back veneered with beautiful specimens of the crotch mahogany. Entire sets are to be found, all the chairs alike in shape, but with many variations of grain in the veneering. These are like beautiful pictures, a never ending study.

Any of these forms have intrinsic value as historic chairs. Comfort, convenience, strength and beauty are united in their construction. We find a passage from the Dutch forms to the special shapes of the different cabinet makers. Then variations of species under different rulers. The different continents, many countries, dynasties and geniuses have contributed
to the different shapes of chairs, while nature in the grain and color of the woods, man in the carving and construc-
tion of the chair itself, have united to make the most of these objects of art, and like everything truly artistic, time but increases their value. A few months ago two Chip-
pendale chairs sold at Christie’s for about $5,000.

The settle was a seat and chest combined. It was placed near the old chimney, while we used it for hall furniture. Settles were usually of hard wood, though sometimes of soft wood painted. Few re-
main to us to-day and these are mostly in collections.

The settles of New England were ornamented with panels or carvings. We rarely find them veneered. The settle was not merely a luxury, but a convenience. It served as a chest and as a seat upon which two or three people might be accommodated. It was probably an evolution from the old chest, some tired person wishing for a back to his seat.

The ottoman, as its name im-
plies, comes from the East, the land of luxury. These are of rather late date in America, belonging largely to the time of veneers, their beauty depending chiefly on the wood chosen, as otherwise they are simply a square seat upholstered. The divan is also eastern in origin, and the sofa is Arabic. In the East it served as a couch and was placed before the door for the tired traveller to recline upon. Its position and use were an indication of Eastern hospi-
tality. Skeat says that the word was first used in English print in the Guardian in 1713; “He leapt off from the sofa on which he sat.” The habits of an Oriental people are preserved among us in our words and customs, and we learn how fashion “makes the whole world kin.” The Amer-
ican sofa is found in various forms. The earlier sofas were not very large; the wood was solid with carvings or rope ornamentations, and the cover was put on with brass nails. Specimens of sofas thus constructed are rare and always costly. When the veneer came into use the
sofa was made larger and with broader wood-work. Sometimes there is a double roll of veneered wood at the end, sometimes heavy scrolls in place of arms. The backs are usually broad and simple. High prices are demanded for all the older forms. When the finer woods grew scarce the cabinet makers used them more sparingly, and decoration was lavishly employed. The sofas of the eighteenth century, and the early nineteenth, are really beautiful, and they are the most luxurious seats ever made. Cowper says:

"Thus first Necessity invented stools,
Convenience next suggested elbow chairs,
And Luxury the accomplished Sofa last."

In the early Middle Ages when the constant encroachment of an enemy prevented long residence in one spot, a receptacle for changes of clothing, folding stool and the few necessities of life to which each man still clung, made it quite necessary that he should have something in the house as a packing box; hence the origin of the chest. While this article has changed with the modern traveller to the smaller and lighter trunk, the English still retain the word box for this necessity of the traveller. When the early peoples became settled in homes, these chests were still needed as a safe deposit for plate and other valuables; while in the scarcity of seats, they took the place of chairs, and at night they served as a sleeping place. Chests were used in churches as a place of deposit for vestments, sacred vessels and valuable records. The earliest and latest chests were of plain wood and simply made; the first, because cabinet-making had not advanced to an art; the last, because the chest had been relegated to the attic as a place for clothing not in use. About the twelfth century, the exterior of the chest began to be carved and panelled, while some were inlaid and made from valuable woods. Many of these are the precious relics of great museums, like the Musee de Cluny. The chest was almost a necessity of our early
New England fathers, and the most valuable have been collected by our various historical societies. Dr. Lyon says that he met with only six carved chests among the New England records of the seventeenth century, the earliest known belonged to William Bradford of historic old Plymouth, and in the inventory it is spelled chist. One reason of the rarity of the adjective carved may be the commonness of these ornamental chests; the carvings were the acanthus, the shell, the leaf patterns, raised and clustered diamonds and the “nail-head decoration.” We also have raised lines in broken squares and rectangles, the egg and dart pattern and the classic triglyph. Some are japanned and variously painted. We do not find in American chests, the griffin and other symbolic figures which belong to European specimens.

As the large space of the chest is not the most convenient place for the multitudinous articles of the household, a drawer was added below the chest, later two drawers and thus the bureau gradually evolved from the chest. This was at first called a chest of drawers, a proof of the method of its evolution. In early New England these were among the most valuable pieces of furniture. We have these drawers mounted on a small table, and as the table was the “low-boy,” these were called the “high-boy.” When the drawers reach to the floor they are called the “high-daddy.” Hepplewhite was one of the first to make them. The bureau has continued with few changes to our times. The earlier specimens had no mirror, this being kept for the dressing table. When the San Domingo mahogany came into use, carving was little used because of the beauty of the grain, whose waves and scrolls suggested such work. Some of the finest bureaus have columns at the side with similar ones to uphold the mirror. These are sometimes carved in the rope patterns, others have the acanthus patterns, the veneered columns are either round or square and without carving. The older ones had the large
upper drawer of elaborate crotch mahogany and an inlaid border, the lower drawer of fibre mahogany. The handles were of glass or brass. When our ancestors learned to write they needed a place for writing utensils, and the bureau became a writing table. The large upper drawer opening with a lid was divided inside into compartments as a desk. Again we have a slanting desk placed above three or four shallow drawers, often with a book-case above. These were Chippendale’s invention. We find the best specimens of the mahogany bureaus and writing desks about the middle of the eighteenth century. By the middle of the nineteenth when wood began to fail, less of it was used and cheap ornaments took its place. In the best specimens nature had carved and colored the wood in waving lines of black on a rich brown so that inlaid and carved work seemed cheap indeed. The fronts of these old bureaus are nature’s choicest work, her finest rhythms in wood are written here.

When the table was cleared a place must be found for the dishes, hence the cupboard came early into use. The first were very simple, made merely for use. Later they were variously ornamented, and then called “court cupboards.” We find this term used by Chapman, Shakespeare and others. Sometimes this cupboard had several tiers of shelves, but usually only three, one quite near the floor, the edge of each shelf and the sides that held them were variously ornamented. This piece of furniture stood in the hall, parlor or chamber. Soon the upper part was made with doors; later the lower part was thus closed while the upper was divided by shelves, and thus was developed the modern sideboard. In its name, as we see, is used the old word for table. Some are called knee-hole tables, like the beautiful sideboards of Sheraton and Hepplewhite, imitated in modern furniture and sold as Chippendale. Some of these are called press cupboards. The same ornamentation was used as in chests and bureaus. The Hepplewhite side-
boards were usually inlaid. Some beautiful specimens of mahogany are found in these veneered sideboards. It is said that the sideboard was introduced into England by William III, but Milton uses the expression “stately sideboard,” showing that the sideboard was known by his day. The sideboards of Chippendale are really not sideboards at all, but simply cupboards, a series of shelves not enclosed by doors.

Thus we find that furniture has changed during the ages and that all kinds have developed from necessity into beauty, though the grotesque has been the ideal of art in some eras. The ancient nations made their furniture of enduring marble or bronze, one fashion serving for centuries. Northern Europe had no such thing as household furniture until after the disturbances of the Middle Ages had passed. Everything must be portable property when the Gothic nations were wanderers in the wilderness, and very little of that was demanded. The building of the cathedrals developed ornamental furniture for the church in chairs, tables and chests and magnificent specimens now exist in the cathedrals of Europe.

Artistic furniture came from the East, where man loves to change the necessary into the beautiful. Such furniture entered Europe through Venice, worked its way gradually over Western Europe, until it settled down for a permanent residence in England. There it was specially developed by the Adams, Chippendale, Sheraton, Hepplewhite and Pergolesi. From them America has received many forms that are called artistic to-day.