

History of furniture design



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How did furniture develop through the centuries?

Furniture (probably from the French ‘fournir’ — to provide) is the mass noun for the movable objects (‘mobile’ in Latin languages) intended to support various human activities such as seating and sleeping in beds, to hold objects at a convenient height for work using horizontal surfaces above the ground, or to store things.

The question above is not an easy one to answer. Going through the ages of the past it can easily be seen that people invented loads of different types and shapes of furniture. To try to answer this question we would have to go all the way back to the medieval times. This period in time would have to be the starting point in this matter and the Fourteenth-Century’s Great Hall would have to be our point A. Moving forward in the pursuit of evolution of the furniture we would come across the Fifteenth-Century’s Solar (room) and following that road the typical Tudor Interior from the Sixteenth-Century in which the Elizabethan trend was the strongest one to point out. Another development going forward was presented in the Seventeenth-Century in the age of Stuarts quickly followed up by the Georgian Times with its changes in the furniture art and craft. Late Eighteen-Century was known as the golden age for furniture also names as “age of mahogany”. Moving forward into the Victorian times and drastic increase in furniture demand and finally put an end to the journey through the development of furniture and settle in the Twentieth-Century and its long history.

The pursuit of the answer to the above question will not be straight forward and it will involve getting into details of different fashion and behaviour of people who lived in the periods presented above. The time frames would

have to be examined carefully and the conclusion have to be made after comparing and reviewing examples from each period of time. The plan would be to keep the research chronically and go over the terms of years in historical order. That is the best possible way to point out the differences and potential development of the furniture along the ages. The fact that people are the creators of the furniture supports the positive answer to the question as all human beings are unique and person's mind is infinite. Therefore the furniture build by the hand of men can and will vary among the time.

MEDIEVAL: The quest through the ages in the aim of furniture development will start in the medieval time. Furniture in that period was created purely to help people with day to day tasks – table was used only to eat or draw on it. It was not designed to be a piece of art, it was more of a tool. There was a very little furniture in a medieval home and the piece were all of basic, utilitarian design. One of the most valued items was the wooden bed on which lay the feather mattress, supported on boards or rope mesh. After the bed the chest was the most important article of furniture, the craftsmen were outrunning themselves in the decorative piercing of them. There were also cupboards for storage of food and plate. Benches and long oak solid and trestle tables were popular as well in that time, the families were big and the longer the table the more people could eat at the same time. Practicality was the main purpose of the medieval age furniture. Great Hall was the main room where people used to dine and festive together. Most furniture was made of oak, boarded for the most part and decorated by carving and painting.

Medieval Trestle table Medieval Chest

ELIZABETHAN / JACOBEAN: The introduction of joined furniture towards the end of the Fifteenth-Century made possible stronger and lighter articles. In the time of the Tudor dynasty furniture was slowly becoming more varied in design and greater in quantity. Oak was still the wood most in use and decoration was by carving and inlay. In the first half of the Sixteenth-Century linenfold panelling was extensively carved to decorate panels for chests and cupboards. The reign of Elizabeth I (7 September 1533 – 24 March 1603) is a good starting point for the study of furniture. Elizabethan furniture is characterised by the bulbous leg, carved with acanthus leaf decoration (seen in beds, tables, court cupboards and buffets). The four-poster bed made its appearance in this century. The framework of tester, posts and headboard was richly carved over the entire surface. Though still not common, chairs were more numerous than in the previous times.

Elizabethan bedroom Elizabethan table

STUART: Furniture, as elsewhere in the house had become more adequate and convenient. Additionally to the kitchen table there was always a settle, a dresser, and chairs. In the second half of the Seventeenth-Century the carving of woodwork reached exceptionally high standard of craftsmanship. Classical ornaments were used in carving. Most common ones were egg and dart, bead and reel and acanthus foliage. After the Restoration of the Monarchy (1660) furniture become more decorative but at the same time they were more useful at home. Charles II after his return to England from France brought different methods of making the furniture. Also, use of the other types of wood and the meaning of ornamentation strongly evolved at that time. Craftsmen from France were permanently moving to England and <https://assignbuster.com/history-of-furniture-design/>

they were improving and implementing their way of creating the furniture to the local ones.

The period between 1660 and 1750's was known in the history as the "age of walnut". This wood was generally used purely due to the low cost and the colour of it. The construction of the furniture became more delicate and the design of it varied. Legs were turned in bobbin vase or columnar form or as the quality of lathe design improved, in the spiral twist. The day bed appeared along with the usage of more chairs and settees. Solid dining tables were pushed out by the gate-leg design, card and small side tables. Upholstery was in common use for seating furniture, it was covered with turkeywork, velvet or embroidery and edged with fringe and tassels. The appearance of new decorative techniques (veneering, japanning, gesso, marquetry) raised the art of furniture to the next level.

Stuart chair Gate-leg table

GEORGIAN: The form of classicism followed by architects during this long period changed markedly. Palladianism appeared and developed in the early years of this period (1714 - 1760). Typical English style restrained and almost austere on the exterior, correct in its classical design and detail, richer, warmer and bold within. The country houses of this type were set in carefully selected exteriors, ideal positioned in laid out parklands. The Eighteenth-Century was the golden age of the English house. The quality of design and craftsmanship in architecture and the decorative arts had been steadily improving since Elizabethan times and this reached its zenith in the years 1760 - 1790.

There was a trend in furnishing design to follow a rapidly changing variety of different source material. The standard of workmanship suffered due to mass production of decorative parts based on the cost and time saving background. In total, the time and patience required to train a craftsman and the money to pay him to produce a superb piece of furniture were running out and the decay of taste was imminent. The general quality of the furniture was dropping down rapidly. Due to quick increase of population classy and stylish furniture were pushed out by simpler quicker to made designs, more efficient and less effective mass products.

The golden age was also called the mahogany age in the furniture history. Although walnut was continued in use until mid-century, other woods were also employed. After the abolition in 1721 of the import duties of West Indian timbers, mahogany began to enter the country in numbers. It was a perfect wood for a furniture making industry. Strong, suitable for delicate carving (ribband or lyre back chairs and cabriole legs terminating in claw and ball feet), also available in greater widths than walnut what made it ideal for veneered surfaces of larger area and for table tops. It had a beautiful patina and resistance to woodworm. In this period many new designs appeared at a glance, such as tables, chair, stools, settees, bureaux. China and corner cabinets were also popular, along with dumb waiters, mirrors, candle stands desks and commodes. The designs of the first half of the century were larger scale, nicely carved in classic manner and superbly veneered surfaces.

1750's was the time of the Rococo motif in furnishing, followed by Chinese and Gothic forms. 1760's was a more delicate period characteristic with carved mahogany but also painted and gilded beech, harewood and

satinwood veneers, ormolu mounts and marquetry and brass inlay. In this period more delicate furniture pushed out the heavier designs from previous years i. e. the cabriole leg was pushed out by the tapering square leg. New items started appearing in the 70's and 80's of Eighteen-Century and Pembroke table was one of the examples.

At the end of the century came the Sheraton era, displaying simultaneously strength, function and delicacy in the furnishing designs. Decoration was restrained in painting, inlay and veneer, often with metal inlay and mounting. The design was plain and mostly copied from antique originals – Greece. The sofa table evolved from the Pembroke form. Chairs were characterized with by horizontal backs rather than vertical splats, and legs which often curved in sabre design (Egyptian or Etruscan samples). Typical of mirror design was the circular convex type. The long dining table was revived, standing on curved legs and pillared supports.

1740 – 1750's room 1760's room (Adam's Room)

Pembroke table Lattice-back chair Rococo set Regency furniture (late 18th cent.)

VICTORIAN: Nineteenth-Century period. The interiors of Victorian houses were in marked contrast to the previous century. One of the major reasons for this was the urbanization process and the migration of people from country to the cities. Also, the major growth of population forced the change in the design of the houses and its interiors. Mass-production methods of supplying the needs led to a greater similarity in their designs, which overall resulted in a poorer level of design and workmanship. The early part of this period saw machines beginning to replace hand labour, the beginning of the

industrial age.

This period created a large gap between the designer and the craftsmen. The factories had changed, the designers no longer had direct contact with the customer. The new machines were introduced to take away from man the back braking jobs and speed up manufacture. They soon began to take over most of the work and the furniture started to be designed around what the machine could make, therefore the quality of design declined. The demand for furniture was high, the factories were manufacturing at a fast pace, and a frantic rush for the designers to keep ahead of each other created poor quality design.

Interior decorative schemes were in great contrast to the Regency ones. White or light painted wood work had been replaced by dark brown tones. Furnishing fabrics were all darker and richer in hue and most often strongly patterned. There was a strong tendency to drape materials over everything, tasselled velvet covers to tables and chimneypieces, antimacassars on the chair and sofa backs. Upholstery was heavy, button designs were very fashionable. The whole interior was over furnished and over decorated, a profusion of stuffed birds, framed photographs, lace mats and wax fruit. Designers rather used and modified many styles taken from various time periods in history like Gothic, Tudor, Elizabethan, English Rococo, Neoclassical and others. The clean Grecian lines of the Regency period were out of favour by 1835 and everyone wanted furniture that was showier with plenty of curves. This showier furniture after 1850 led to low prices and poor construction and workmanship that was often hidden by veneer and applied

ornament. The Gothic and Rococo revival style were the most common styles to be seen in furniture during this time in history.

In the last 20 years of the century colours became lighter again, patterns less vivid, and fewer pieces of furniture were placed in a room. Mass production was still at its height therefore the quality and individualism of the furniture started to extinct. Because of the technical progress in the industry the interior became more casual and was supposed to be functional more than elegant. Furniture was less attractive, it was heavier in design and often over elaborately decorated. In the late century the whole 18th century and the earlier style designs were copied and reproduced for a mass market. It was very hard to establish which the differences between the originals and the reproductions. One of the characteristic Victorian features was the extensive use of the papier mache and to a lesser degree, Tunbridge ware. The balloon back chair and the introduction of brass and iron in the construction of the bedsteads were crucial in the Victorian furniture history. Rocking chairs were very popular along with tent beds. Plainer, more traditional furniture was made by a number of designers at the end of the century.

William Morris started a rebellion against this trend, founding a company to demonstrate the superiority of quality handmade furniture. Honesty of the handmade joints was his feature of construction. This led to the Arts and Crafts Movement on the 1880's leading on to Art Nouveau. This drew attention to the merits of 18th Century furniture and led to the practice of purchasing second hand furniture and the antique shop began.

Victorian chairs Victorian hall Victorian rocking chair

Balloon back chair Tunbridge ware box Papier mache table

THE TWENTIETH-CENTURY: Throughout history there has been great change in furniture design, but by far the most rapid and revolutionary period of furniture history was the 20th Century. The two world wars of this century were not themselves responsible for the changes in society. The wars did however act as catalysts speeding up the processes of change. They have created specific barriers before and after the years of struggle with no chance of returning back to the previous existence. All of the above has changed people's attitude towards change drastically. After each war the position of women and their functionality had altered fundamentally. Middle and upper class housewives found themselves without sufficient labour to run their homes as before needed to arrange labour save equipment and finishes without outer help.

Interiors quickly became plain and far lesser furniture was used inside. The history of furniture design in the 20th century reflects the changing tastes and trends within the design community. The early years of 20th century design were dominated by the slow reaction from the mid-Victorian over furnished interior, where the excess of decoration taken place once again. International Arts and Crafts Movement which was quickly followed by Art Nouveau (circa 1910-1920) and Art Deco (circa 1920-1930) became more of a trend than periods in the early 20th century furnishing history.

There was a great furniture demand to supply all new build houses after the wars. Machine production had to be established to cope with the needs, however this has greatly impacted the quality of the furniture. Some

excellent modern designs were manufactured in Scandinavia and in the 30's were gradually influencing the English product for the better. This flat packed furniture revolutionised the market in the whole Western Europe.

By mid century Modern and Post Modern styles accounted for the changing tastes of post-war consumers. Convenience and time-saving became more important to the whole family in the decades after 1945. After World War II, the public as a whole looked to warmer and softer furniture, organic forms, warmer products like timber and upholstered chairs. They wanted to be cared for by their furniture, feel comfortable and most of all have some luxury that had long been missing. Central heating replaced the heating of the individual rooms. These two factors, together with a rising standard of living and a desire for greater privacy for the individual members of the family led to general rearrangement and the new decor of the rooms. The recognition that with a central heating there was no need for a fireplace led to the fact that in most homes the TV receiver became now the focal centre. Smaller, more individual bedrooms appeared in the households.

One of the most popular developments of that period was the usage of plastic textiles. In the field of plastic an extensive range of materials has become available to produce colourful, attractive, and easy to care surfaces at home. The plastic materials together with development of synthetic textile fibres, have revolutionised the decoration processes in the furniture industry. Plastics were like the tubular steel of old, it opened up doorways for new furniture design, lightweight and versatile, designers like Joe Colombo, Vernon Panton and Anna Castelli-Ferreri stormed ahead concepting and manufacturing plastic stacking chairs, beautiful and versatile. The industrial

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style or Hi Tech movement developed in the 70's. The greatest advances were in office furniture and equipment with Olivetti of Italy leading the way. The 80's period of furniture design continued to focus on the industrial sector. Designs were predominately commissioned for retail shopping, hospitals, restaurants, schools and hotels. The favoured materials were metal, perforated metal became popular along with steel reinforcing mesh.

Designers of this period searched to find greater meaning and purpose for their furniture design. Some strange and unusual forms were explored like the W. W. Stool by Phillippe Starck a fantasy style piece of furniture that makes you question if you can indeed dare to sit on it! The Soft Heart chair by Ron Arad showed how by using polyurethane foam that the choice of shapes and form was limitless! Clever materials, technology and production methods meant that the only limits were the designers imagination.

Going through the period of time and examining all different trends in the history of furniture few interesting conclusions appeared.....

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