

Furniture Design

By Nikki Elert



The use of furniture—defined as movable articles used to make a space more livable and functional—can be documented as far back in time as the Neolithic Era. An excavated settlement in Scotland, dating back to 3215 BCE, held examples of beds, seating, and storage pieces all made of stone. By the time of the ancient Egyptians, furniture had become much less unwieldy and far more comfortable than what was found in Scotland. The tombs of nobility and royalty held pieces of furniture as well as depictions that showed an attention to aesthetics in addition to function, with the use of exotic woods and inlays of precious materials.

While the boxy shapes that characterized Egyptian furniture could still be seen in ancient Greek and Roman designs, there was a softening, and lightening, with more curves and less ornamentation. The couch was the primary furniture piece at this time, used for seating during the day and sleeping at night. Medieval furniture became much heavier and darker, with blocky shapes covered in carving. Multifunctional chests were important during this period as they could be utilized for storage, as seating or a table, and they were easily portable.

In Asian cultures, as seating was on floor mats or simple platforms, furnishings consisted mainly of low tables and screens; the influence of trade can be seen in the eventual appearance of chairs. Chinese furniture incorporated color and was highly lacquered and decorated, often with intricate carving, whereas Japanese style was more minimal and subdued. Asian design would later play a part in the evolution of modern art in Europe as artists incorporated elements of Asian style—particularly from Japan—into their art.

From the Renaissance on, European furniture design reflected a sort of call-and-response of aesthetic elements. Contrasted with the dark and heavy pieces of the Middle Ages, Rococo design was airy and highly ornamented, almost frothy, with scrolled motifs and lighter colors. This gave way to furniture with a more geometric style reminiscent of ancient Egyptian, Greek and Roman pieces, which eventually led to Gothic Revival—characterized by a return of the design features of medieval pieces—during the Victorian era.

With the advent of the Industrial Revolution, manufactured—as opposed to custom-made—furniture became more the norm, which in turn led to a backlash of sorts in Britain in the form of the Arts and Crafts movement of the late 19th century. While the style incorporated medieval motifs, the colors and shapes were lighter and tended toward the angular, in keeping with the philosophy that objects should be primarily functional and their form secondary. Proponents believed that the beauty of an item was directly related to the handcrafting process. Shaker furniture, made by the members of an American religious sect during the mid-19th century, was also characterized by the philosophy that form follows function and was renowned for its simplicity and expert craftsmanship.

In the 1920s, Art Deco style—also referred to as Art Moderne—swept around much of the world from its origins in Paris. Defined by very geometric shapes, the heavy use of lines, shiny surfaces, the incorporation of color—particularly black, red and green—and, along with wood, employment of such unusual materials as mirrored glass and plastic. Art Deco furniture has remained popular, with original pieces highly prized by collectors, and references to the style can still be found in items designed today.

As the name suggests, Mid-Century Modern style became popular from the late 1940s, when it began in the United States, through the mid-1960s and was characterized by spare silhouettes and undulating shapes that recalled German Bauhaus style. As in the 1920s, furniture incorporated plastic and other unconventional materials like metal wire and tubing, along with natural wood and lighter-toned stains; the color palette was brighter at this time and highlighted pastels, including pink, peach and yellow, along with turquoise and mint green. Furniture of this period also relied on the aesthetics and values associated with Scandinavian design: simplicity, functionality and affordability. The current taste for furniture with clean and simple lines can be traced to those Scandinavian roots.

Sources

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