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06, No. 05, May 1900, by Various

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ARCHITECTURAL ILLUSTRATION, VOL. 06, NO. 05, MAY 1900 ***

THE BROCHURE SERIES
Chippendale Chairs

MAY, 1900



PLATE XXXV

CHIPPENDALE CHAIRS

THE
Brochure Series
OF ARCHITECTURAL
ILLUSTRATION.

1900.

MAY

No. 5.

CHIPPENDALE CHAIRS.

It is only within recent times that movable chairs have become common and indispensable. Seats of some kind must have been used from the time when houses were first built, but it is not until the civilization of the last two or three centuries had transformed the old ways of living that we begin to find them in common use. Representations of seats are found in the sculptures and paintings of Egypt, Greece and Rome, and all through the middle ages—many of them elaborate and luxurious—but their use was confined to the noble and wealthy. In church furniture chairs are familiar throughout the middle ages, but they were usually fixed parts of the building. The seats of the common people were probably constructed of rude blocks, or of single planks joined together with little finish or skill.

In England, even so late as the sixteenth century, chairs as we know them were of so rare occurrence as to be handed down from generation to generation, and of such importance as to be frequently mentioned in wills and deeds. Such chairs were of the rudest forms, ornamented, however, with embroideries and costly stuffs. In the middle of the seventeenth century it was customary even at royal banquets for all but the king and queen to be seated upon benches without cushions. In the reign of Charles I., however, with the encouragement of luxurious living, chairs became more common among the favored classes, and under the Commonwealth, with its levelling of class distinctions, their use was extended. But in the latter period the revulsion against unnecessary ornament and display simplified the models. With the Restoration there was a return to the opposite extreme. The growing taste for ease and luxury brought into requisition the richest fabrics obtainable, and we find stuffed seats and backs, with Turkish embroideries and heavily brocaded velvets. Chairs were elaborately carved and gilded. French furniture was imported and copied, and the influence of Indian art, through the recent acquisition of Bombay, can be easily traced. Of the simpler patterns, those made of turned spindles became common at the beginning of the eighteenth century. Forms were borrowed and adapted from many sources, from France, Spain and Holland. In the time of William and Mary, under Dutch influence, the seats and backs were broadened, colored inlay introduced, and the "cabriole" legs commonly employed, suggesting the forms later adopted in the Chippendale period. The strong point of English furniture was not its originality, but its catholicity. It was a mirror which reflected the outcome of other times and countries in a frame of its own.

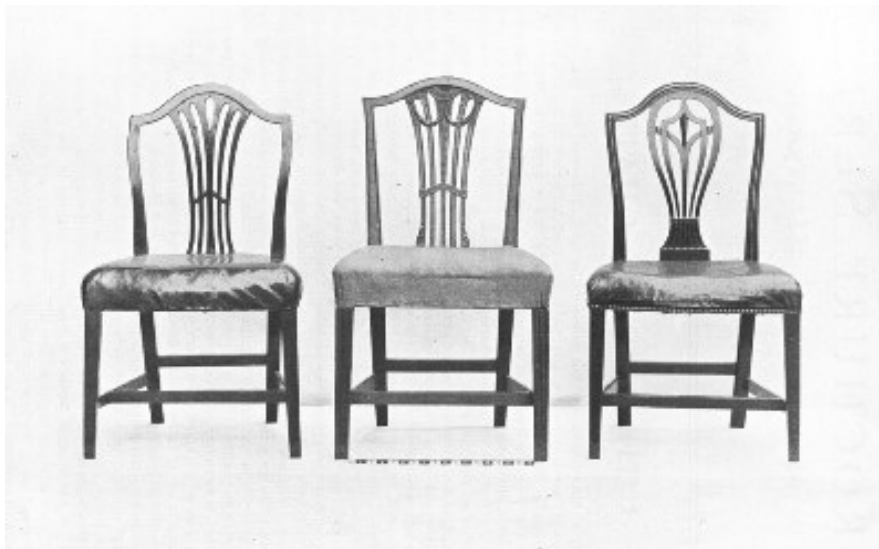


PLATE XXXVI

CHIPPENDALE CHAIRS

The period when Chippendale appeared on the scene seems to have been one very favorable to the success of his enterprise. The middle classes were already accumulating wealth and beginning to assume numerical and political importance. The troubles of civil war were over, the reigning dynasty had successfully overcome the last attempt at revolution, and the situation promised an age wherein the comforts of life might again be enjoyed in security. English trade with Holland, doubtless very largely fostered by the Dutch proclivities of William III., had helped to disseminate a love for pottery and lacquer work of the East; artificial works were multiplying,

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and the middle classes, above all, wanted for the furnishing of their rapidly rising, substantial dwellings something more sumptuous than the humble simplicity of the common Jacobean—something which would have a taste, at least, of the luxurious extravagances of the French reigning style.



English furniture of the time of Chippendale had profited by the best of the past and of the present. It closely resembled the French work of Louis XIV., but it had reached such a stage of perfection, though still made up of heterogeneous elements, that it was for the first time valued above the productions of other countries, and was even taken abroad to be copied, while the books of designs published by the English cabinet-makers were translated into other languages. In the preface to Hepplewhite's book of designs, published in 1789, there is this statement, which is of interest as indicating the esteem in which English cabinet work was held abroad, viz.: "English taste and workmanship have of late years been much sought for by surrounding nations; and the mutability of all things, but more especially of fashions, has rendered the labours of our predecessors in this line of little use; nay, in this day can only tend to mislead those foreigners who seek a knowledge of English taste in the various articles of household furniture."

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PLATE XXXVII

CHIPPENDALE CHAIRS

Oak had been the prevailing material up to this time, but now mahogany took its place. An interesting account of the introduction of mahogany for furniture is given by Frederick Litchfield in his "History of Furniture." He says, "Mahogany may be said to have come into general use subsequent to 1720, and its introduction is asserted to have been due to the tenacity of purpose of a Dr. Gibbon, whose wife wanted a candle-box, an article of common domestic use at the time. The doctor, who had laid by in the garden of his house in King Street, Covent Garden, some planks sent to him by his brother, a West Indian captain, asked the joiner to use a part of the wood for this purpose; it was found too tough and hard for the tools of the period, but the doctor was not to be thwarted, and insisted on harder-tempered tools being found, and the task completed. The result was the production of a candle-box which was admired by every one. He then ordered a bureau of the same material, and when it was finished invited his friends to see the new work; amongst others the Duchess of Buckingham begged a small piece of the precious wood, and it soon became the fashion."

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The Jacobean and cognate styles, consisting fundamentally of "framing" based on rectangular forms and decorated with characteristic carving and turning, may be described as essentially suitable for oak, of which the open character of the grain forbids any extreme minuteness of detail. The particular qualities of the work of Chippendale and his successors demanded, on the other hand, the use of a very different material. Chippendale's delicate carving and his free use of curves, even in constructive members of his design, could have only been satisfactorily wrought out in a wood of fine, hard and close grain, and one which also possessed great lateral tenacity, such as mahogany. It is scarcely too much to say that, but for the introduction of this beautiful wood the specialty in the work of the cabinet-makers of the eighteenth century would have been impossible.

Together with the refinement of design came a perfection of construction and workmanship which has rendered the furniture of this period practically indestructible. It is said that Chippendale never carved a fret without gluing together three thicknesses of wood with opposing grain, and his work is so joined with tenons and pegs that it stands as well today as when first put together. Sheraton devoted whole pages of his book to constructive directions for the most simple table. This excellence of construction, and the eminently practical and usable character of the best of the eighteenth century work have been potent factors in helping to preserve the many examples of it which we fortunately possess today.



PLATE XXXVIII

CHIPPENDALE CHAIRS

It will probably be a surprise to the reader who has had no occasion to inquire especially into the history of household furniture to know that a century and a half ago furniture makers, in England and elsewhere, resorted to much the same method of securing customers, by publishing illustrated catalogues, as do our own enterprising manufacturers. Among the earliest of these trade catalogues, as we now call them, was that of Thomas Chippendale, the first edition of which was published about 1750 (the exact date is in doubt), and two later editions are known. This catalogue has been reproduced in recent years and many of the plates have been frequently copied, until the Chippendale designs have become familiar, and the name applied broadly but loosely to all of the work of the period, including a great deal which by right has no connection whatever with Chippendale. The illustrations in this catalogue were elaborately engraved on copper, and it was entitled "The Gentleman and Cabinet Maker's Director." It contained over two hundred engravings of useful and decorative designs, some of which, however, were probably never executed. It included designs "in the most fashionable taste" for a great variety of furniture "calculated to improve and refine the present taste, and suited to the fancy and circumstances of persons in all degrees of life." A great deal of the design is traceable to French influence, and may have been borrowed directly from similar books by French cabinet-makers.



"CHINESE" PATTERN

CHIPPENDALE CHAIRS

Of Chippendale himself little of a personal nature is known. Both he and his father were carvers, and it is no doubt true that to the repute established by his father as a basis, he added superior skill and taste, and the shrewdness of a tradesman. It is by no means certain, however, that in his time, or immediately after it, his reputation was greater than that of other cabinet-makers. His present celebrity depends more upon the survival and later reproduction of his book of designs than upon any contemporary fame. That he had refinement of taste is proved by his designs; but that he was anxious, above all, to secure patrons is hardly open to question. Mr. J. A. Heaton ("Furniture and Decoration in England during the Eighteenth Century") calls him a "vulgar hawker" ready to make anything that would fill his purse. His book, the text of which is written in the bombastic style of the period, begins with an explanation of the classical orders of architecture, holding them up as the only basis of true design in furniture; but he later refers to certain designs "in the Chinese manner"—which were made, quite certainly, in response to the fashion introduced in England by Sir William Chambers,—as the most appropriate and successful of his whole collection.

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PLATE XXXIX

CHIPPENDALE CHAIRS

Although much of the furniture of the middle and latter part of the eighteenth century is wrongly attributed to Chippendale, and he is now popularly held responsible for many excellencies as well as many faults which do not belong to him, the evidence of his book goes to prove that his work

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at its best was superior to that of his contemporaries, and vastly superior to that which either preceded or followed it.



Chippendale's ordinary furniture may be conveniently classified under three heads of very various artistic value. The first is the pure rococo. In this class of work we find, as Mr. Basil Champneys has happily described it, "intemperately flowing lines, wantonly twisting volutes, fantastic and unmeaning forms, suggestive about equally of organic and inorganic nature, bursting here into a gryphon's or sphynx's head, or there into a bunch of flowers; writhing into a mermaid, or culminating in a trophy; here the volutes are propped with an utterly dissipated and abandoned Gothic shaft, there is the ghost of a classic pediment; here a whole piece of ruin is bodily foisted in; a fortuitous interval is occupied by a sportsman or a flirtation, or by the conventional Chinaman, with an impossible mustache and inconceivable hat. The two sides of the design are seldom alike; symmetry is ostentatiously avoided; everything twists, twirls, writhes, changes, gets distorted like the images in a dyspeptic dream over a book of travels, from which the reader will be glad to awake."

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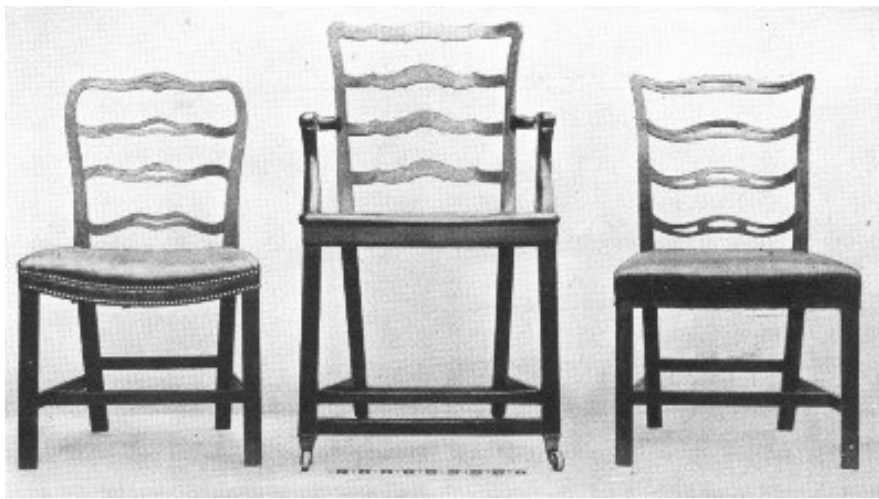


PLATE XL

CHIPPENDALE CHAIRS

Fortunately for Chippendale's fame this class of work forms but an insignificant portion of the remains of his furniture now extant—a fact which is owing in some measure to its constructive weakness. Its merits are purely those of a skilful carver.

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A second important characteristic style was that which may be described as "fret work." Some pieces coming under this description, shelves and cabinets for china, amongst others, are constructed almost wholly of thin slabs of wood pierced with a great variety of small patterns, many of them very intricate. These are dainty pieces of furniture, well suited for the drawing-room and boudoir; and it speaks volumes for the care and finish in the workmanship that any of them have been handed down to us in a perfect state during so long an existence.

What is sound of the reputation that Chippendale has earned, however, apart from the excellence of his workmanship, lies in the furniture coming under the last head of our division—in pieces wherein we find the decoration applied, a little lavishly it is true, with a certain admixture of straight lines and plain surfaces with which to contrast it. In these, members otherwise square and straight are enriched with delicate and shallow sunk carved work, sometimes based on geometrical patterns. The backs of chairs, although consisting of curved forms, have commonly a rectilinear disposition of the principal lines, and the curvatures of the constructional members are so subtle and restrained that the impression of strong wooden construction is not wholly destroyed. The supporting members, such as legs of tables and chairs, are often kept straight, and the carving, where applied, is kept so shallow that it does not interfere with the apparent or real capacity of the parts for the function for which they are designed.

In appraising his merits it must always be remembered that Chippendale was pre-eminently a *carver*; and as a carver producing work applied to objects of utility he holds an unchallenged position.

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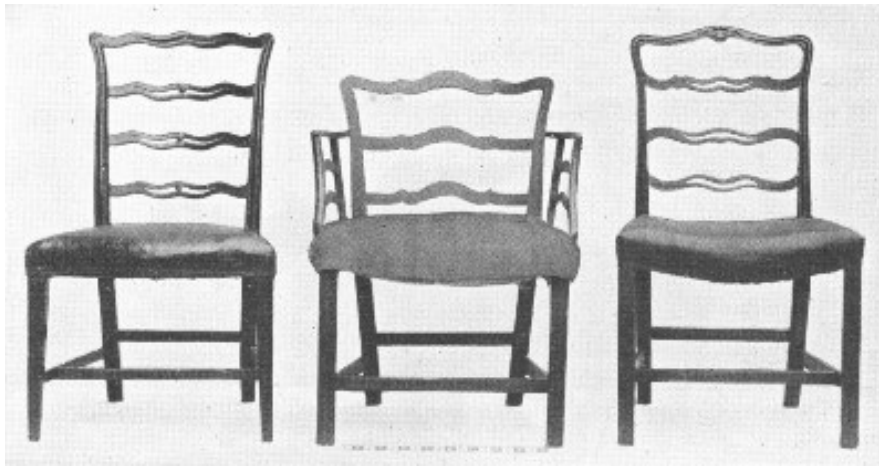


PLATE XLI

CHIPPENDALE CHAIRS

Mr. K. Warren Clouston, describing the work of this period (*The Architectural Record*, Vol. VIII.), says: "Chippendale, above all things, was a chairmaker, and his chairs are full of variety, at first with the high back, cabriole leg and claw-and-ball foot of the so-called Dutch taste; then rising to lighter fancies, either with vase-shaped ornament, flowing ribbon bows, interlacing frets of Gothic tracery. But what matters it whether the rococo ornament then prevailing on the continent, the Chinese leanings of Sir William Chambers, or Strawberry Hill Gothic were adopted, when the different sources are blended in one harmonious whole? We give Chippendale the first place simply from his book, for the squat backs and ungainly chairs of Manwaring and the Society of Upholsterers, and the badly designed seats of Ince and Mayhew only serve to accentuate the work of the master hand."

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The chairs chosen for illustration in this number are of the simpler patterns. It will be seen that they have very little ornament, and that this is almost entirely confined to the backs, the legs being in most cases square and plain. In the backs the same lines occur as in those made in the time of William III., but instead of the frame of the back being covered with silk, tapestry or other material, Chippendale's are cut open with fanciful patterns. Those with cabriole legs usually have claw feet and a shell or leaf at the top. The chairs in Chippendale's book are much more elaborate than those here illustrated or than those he ordinarily produced. This is naturally accounted for by the desire to induce customers to purchase the more expensive pieces. The simple square leg without taper is one of the distinctive marks of Chippendale's time. Later in the century, in the work of Hepplewhite and others, the legs were made more tapering and the whole chair much lighter and more elaborately ornamented to correspond with the Renaissance forms then in vogue. The turned leg is rarely found, although much used later. The shaping and ornamentation is generally confined to the front legs. Mahogany, as has been stated, was the wood most used, and the ornamentation was confined as a rule to carving. Inlay and marquetry, brass and ormolu were employed on other articles of furniture, but the chairs rarely have such ornament.

The rococo of Chippendale's earlier work, corresponding to the French of Louis XV. and XVI., was succeeded by a modification tending towards the severer Renaissance, influenced by the designs of the architects, Robert and James Adam, who gave their attention to the minutest details of interior decoration and furnishing, as well as the larger problems of architecture. Of Chippendale's contemporaries, Ince and Mayhew, who also published a book of designs, are now looked upon as most deserving to share his fame, although there are records of many others.

Hepplewhite forms a connecting link between this period and that of the more severe lines of Sheraton and Shearer. Sheraton was a skilled and cultivated man and an excellent draughtsman. Among the subscribers to his book, "The Cabinet Maker and Upholsterer's Drawing Book," published in 1793, are the names and addresses of no less than four hundred and fifty cabinet-makers, chairmakers and carvers, not including musical instrument makers, upholsterers and other kindred trades. This gives some idea of the extent to which such books were then employed, and the number of makers whose work is not now distinguishable and whose names are lost in oblivion. Following the work of these men came the "Empire" style introduced in France after the French Revolution.

Readers interested in the subject of the furniture of the Georgian period are referred to the recently published large collection of photographic plates, entitled "English Household Furniture" (see announcement in our advertising pages) from which our present illustrations have been reproduced.

NOTE.—The illustrations in this issue are reduced from large photographic plates in the recently published work, entitled "ENGLISH HOUSEHOLD FURNITURE, MAINLY DESIGNED BY CHIPPENDALE, SHERATON, ADAM AND OTHERS OF THE GEORGIAN PERIOD. 100 PLATES, ILLUSTRATING 348 EXAMPLES." Bates & Guild Company, publishers, Boston. See advertisement on another page.



PLATE XLII

CHIPPENDALE SETTEE AND CHAIR

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