The Art Of Tablemaking And Its Pith Essay, Research Paper

The art of tablemaking has existed for centuries. The styles have changed and evolved over the years. Modern styles are now mimicking those of the earlier time. Though styles and methods change, the art continues to be popular and necessary.

People’s ideas about elegance and beauty have changed drastically over time. Sometimes the change is rapid, what was the trendiest of fashions to one generation is rejected by the next. Furniture tells a great deal about everyday life in the past and is an important piece of information for historians of art, and culture.

Although most furniture is made to fulfill a specific purpose, it nearly always holds an added dimension. Its purpose, George Hepplewhite suggested in the 18th century, is “to unite elegance and utility, and blend the useful with the agreeable.” Sometimes a concern for fashion has prevailed, while at other times concerns of utility have been the main interest. Furniture is three-dimensional evidence of a society’s attitudes, values, level of achievement, and its style of artistic expression.

Wood has been the most commonly used material for furniture, especially tables, since back in the olden days. Wood can be shaped both by hand and by power tools; it is relatively light and durable; many species are elegantly carved and grained. Most woods can be painted, stained, varnished or otherwise finished successfully. Available to most civilizations in varying degrees, wood is also a naturally replenishable resource.

Much inexpensive 20th-century furniture is made of various kinds of new materials, including plywoods and particle boards that are produced by shredding,

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heating, gluing and laminating woods. These materials possess strength and stability; they do not shrink and swell in response to changes in humidity as wood does in its natural state (Compton s Interactive Encyclopedia).

From ancient times until the 18th century, the craft of furniture making changed very little. The tools and techniques used by the craftsmen of ancient Greece and Rome would have been familiar to their buddies in the Middle Ages, or 18th-century France for example. The common woodworker’s tools included axes, adzes (hammer-shaped cutting tools with arched blades), large saws, files, rasps, chisels, planes, hammers, small saws, measuring devices, and lathes. (Dictionary of Woodworking Tools.)

Furniture was constructed in the pre-industrial period with relatively few methods. The simplest furniture consisted of boards and planks simply nailed together, or, as in the case of some Egyptian beds, the joints of the supporting framework were tied together with cord. More elaborate furniture was constructed with various methods of holding wood together, including the mortise-and-tenon joint, used by joiners to create paneled forms, and the dovetail joint, characteristic of work by craftsmen designated as cabinetmakers. (Making Modern Furniture.)

Beginning in the late 18th century, during the days of the old school, the manufacturers of furniture have used of various types of water, steam, and power machinery, designed to save labor, to assist in the mass production of component parts. By the late 19th century most furniture, particularly inexpensive furniture made for mass distribution, was produced in large factories with many employees. This trend continued unchanged into the 20th century, though even the mass production of furniture involves a considerable amount of skilled handwork in the assembling and finishing stages. (The Art of Woodworking and Furniture making.) Since the 1890s there has been a small but significant amount of furniture produced by craftsmen applying the tools, techniques, and shop practices of the world. While many of these craftsmen are home hobbyists, other modern woodworkers in this tradition consider their products to be works of art.

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The furniture of the superior class of ancient Egypt was richly decorated and looked real neat, though houses were skimpily furnished by 20th-century standards. Much of this furniture has survived from the Egyptian custom of burying household objects in tombs where they were preserved until dug up by archaeologists in modern times. Other evidence is derived from pictures on vases and other various objects. The ancient Greeks were the inheritors of the Egyptian tradition. Greek furniture consisted of chairs, stools, couches, tables, and chests. Hardly any furniture from ancient Greece has survived, so it is known today, again, only through pictures on vases and other items and from a couple written descriptions. The same as Egyptian furniture, stylistic change was slow, and houses were furnished relatively simply. The Romans inherited their designs from Late Greek styles and moved toward richer designs. They produced the same basic forms as the Greeks. Much of the imagery was derived from the animal world. The Romans also developed more permanent tables with round or rectangular tops supported by three or four legs to accommodate their increased number of household goods.

American furniture of the 17th century closely resembled the furniture made in the parts of England and Europe from which its makers had come from. Large cupboards, chests, chest of drawers, boxes, and other types of tables and stools were the most common types. Much case furniture, commonly made of native oak and pine and frequently painted, was decorated with small floral or strapwork designs carved into it. (Projects from Pine, 33 plans for the Beginning Woodworker). Some sophisticated furniture made in Boston, Mass., and New Haven, Conn., was derived from London styles of decoration, including inlay, split spindles, bosses (projecting ornaments at the intersections of moldings), heavy moldings, and architectural motifs. Chairs were generally made of turned posts, spindles, and stretchers or solidly framed with paneled backs or upholstered with colorful textiles. (How to make Wood Furniture for your Home).

In the 18th century, often called the golden age of furniture making, there were three

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succeeding basic styles: the late baroque, the rococo, the Neoclassical. The change from style to style occurred at different times in different countries, with France leading the way, as usual, as

the most influential on styles. As always, styles in rural areas changed more slowly. By the 1750s, however, recent archaeological discoveries and an interest in ancient Greece and Rome led to the development of the Neoclassical style. Neoclassical objects are decorated with ornaments selected from antiquity and are made with rectangular outlines and straight, usually tapered legs. The emphasis is on ovals and other geometric shapes. Neoclassicism reached America with full force after the Revolution. American Neoclassical furniture of the period from 1790-1820 is characterized by light, elegant forms supported on tapered legs and was often decorated with inlay. The card table, tambour desk, and sideboard were the more popular forms. Mahogany and mahogany veneer remained the most fashionable woods, and they still are to this day. The shops of furniture makers were sometimes quite large. Furniture was made in the 19th century in a series of succeeding and styles taken from history or borrowed from other traditions. Labor-saving, power-driven machinery was now used in furniture making, new marketing methods developed, new materials were introduced, and there was a fascination with mechanical furniture, such as the recliner. All of these were part of the movement from craft to industry as the years progressed. While much furniture has been made in a modern style, many people have consistently preferred furniture that is old school in terms of its materials, construction, and appearance. The machine has come to dominate furniture making, with the small exception of a few craftsmen in every country who have kept the handicraft tradition going.

Much 20th-century furniture reflects a continuation of the 19th-century obsession with bringing back history. In the United States, for example, reproductions and adaptations in the Early American style have been popular since the 70s and were a craze in the 20s. Early American remains a common style produced in the factories of Michigan, North Carolina, and New York. (Wood Work Projects).

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The art of tablemaking will always be around. The styles will continue to change according to the times, and yet, there will be those tablemakers who will revert to the old school style of craftsmanship.

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