

Origins of Today's Furniture

While anything is possible and while you, of course, have a choice among a huge range of historical or non-historical styles, inevitably, many clients will want to go with the modern and trendy, to keep up with the Jones' and have a timely look! Of course, fashions change quickly but many contemporary trends base their looks on previous generations of fashion.

Today, for example, most popular furniture designs are heavily influenced by Art Deco and Art Nouveau. Bold colours such as the oranges and reds and yellows and greens that frequently adorn shop windows are another influence from this period. It is essential to have a good knowledge of history of art, design and architecture and to be aware of some classics, some of which are mentioned below.

The work of Le Corbusier (1887–1965) holds strong sway over today's designers. Born Charles Edouard Jeanneret, Le Corbusier began his career in Paris under the tutelage of the Parisian architect Perret. While originally an architect, completing his first building at age 18 in around 1920, Le Corbusier began to experiment with furniture design. Collaborating with another architect named Charlotte Perriand and his cousin Pierre Jeanneret, his works have since been dubbed 'modern classics' and took a new look at structure versus function. For example, he experimented with popular steel tubing in terms of design rather than as a purely structural element.

Charles Rennie Mackintosh, another designer whose influence is worth mentioning here, hailed from a rather low-income neighbourhood of Glasgow but advanced to the forefront of interior design and architecture. After attending the

Glasgow School of Art, he began to work with a masterful hand at light and space. His furniture displays a mixed influence of Scottish and Art Nouveau forms with the simplicity of Japanese designs.

Eileen Gray (1879–1976) of mixed Irish and Persian descent and born to an aristocratic Irish family, began her career studying the art of lacquer under painter D. Charles in Paris after attending the Slade School of Fine Arts in London. While eventually focusing on architecture, persuaded to do so by Le Corbusier, she did design influential furniture pieces. Working with a brilliant sense of artful asymmetry, her famous non-conformist chair and a similarly famous side-table practically defined Modernism.

Aside from Art Deco and Art Nouveau influences, we still see many of the older pieces that once adorned pre-20th century homes. The four-poster bed has remained a popular item, as has the Greek *klismos* chair and the Egyptian bed. The sleigh bed, very popular today, derives from older French styles.

Upholstery

We have thankfully come a long way from the leather-slung chairs of the ancient world and even from the straw-stuffed chair cushions and mattresses of medieval times. Upholstery was the result of our desire to be more comfortable, especially during more modern times when food was abundant and life was easier to live. We got soft, and so did our chairs!

As we have already discussed, upholstery first made an appearance during the 17th century in French parlours. In 1880, the coil spring was invented. These two innovations helped to produce comfortable and luxurious chairs and sofas by incorporating springs into the frame of a chair, overlaid with upholstery. For example, the Turkish frame, made entirely of metal and furnished with coiled springs and a deep upholstery was renowned for both comfort and beauty. The settee, which evolved from the medieval daybed, featured an upholstered seat with a wooden back, and later developments in sofas featured fully upholstered designs. The Chesterfield sofa with a buttoned back was the first example of such a construction.

Upholstered furniture — sofas and armchairs — are made on a wooden frame. The different components of the frame are joined together with glued dowels and fixed in place with corner blocks. The bottom of the frame is then criss-crossed with webbing. The springs are then tied down and sewn together for pressure resistance. Burlap is stretched over the layer of springs and is tacked to the frame. Next is a layer of wadding and a cover of calico, ensuring that the surface is smooth. On top of this upholstery, loose cushions can then be placed, the use of such cushions is a fairly modern practice. There is a variety of fillings for scatter cushions, the most popular being feather and down, though anti-allergy, hollow-fibre can also be used.

As with all elements, choose your upholstery fabric to match your general decor, both in terms of pattern and colour. If you choose multiple patterns, they should coordinate and don't mix too many! You can change the seeming dimensions of furniture with the choice of the right pattern. For example, an overly large chair can be optically reduced in size with a large pattern and vice-versa, or by choosing an upholstery fabric that is the same colour as the carpeting or walls. Textured fabrics work well with floral designs and smooth-surfaced fabrics are good for resisting dust and grime. If you are working with period furniture it is best to choose a fabric and design that evokes the period in question.

Also, be sure you pick the right kind of fabric for the furniture's probable use. Natural fibres, such as wool and cotton, are great choices but man-made fibres are usually a more durable alternative. Check the Martindale rub count for upholstery fabric particularly when in an environment which will require a lot of wear and tear. Cotton, which is quite stretchy, works best for loose covers and, most importantly, can be easily washed. For durability and longevity, leather is an excellent choice and it is traditionally used in libraries, offices and studies because of its more masculine feel. Imagine a dark red, deeply buttoned Chesterfield sofa surrounded with oak-panelled walls and you get the idea. Nowadays, a tan or brown leather sofa or two, is a popular alternative for a family room.