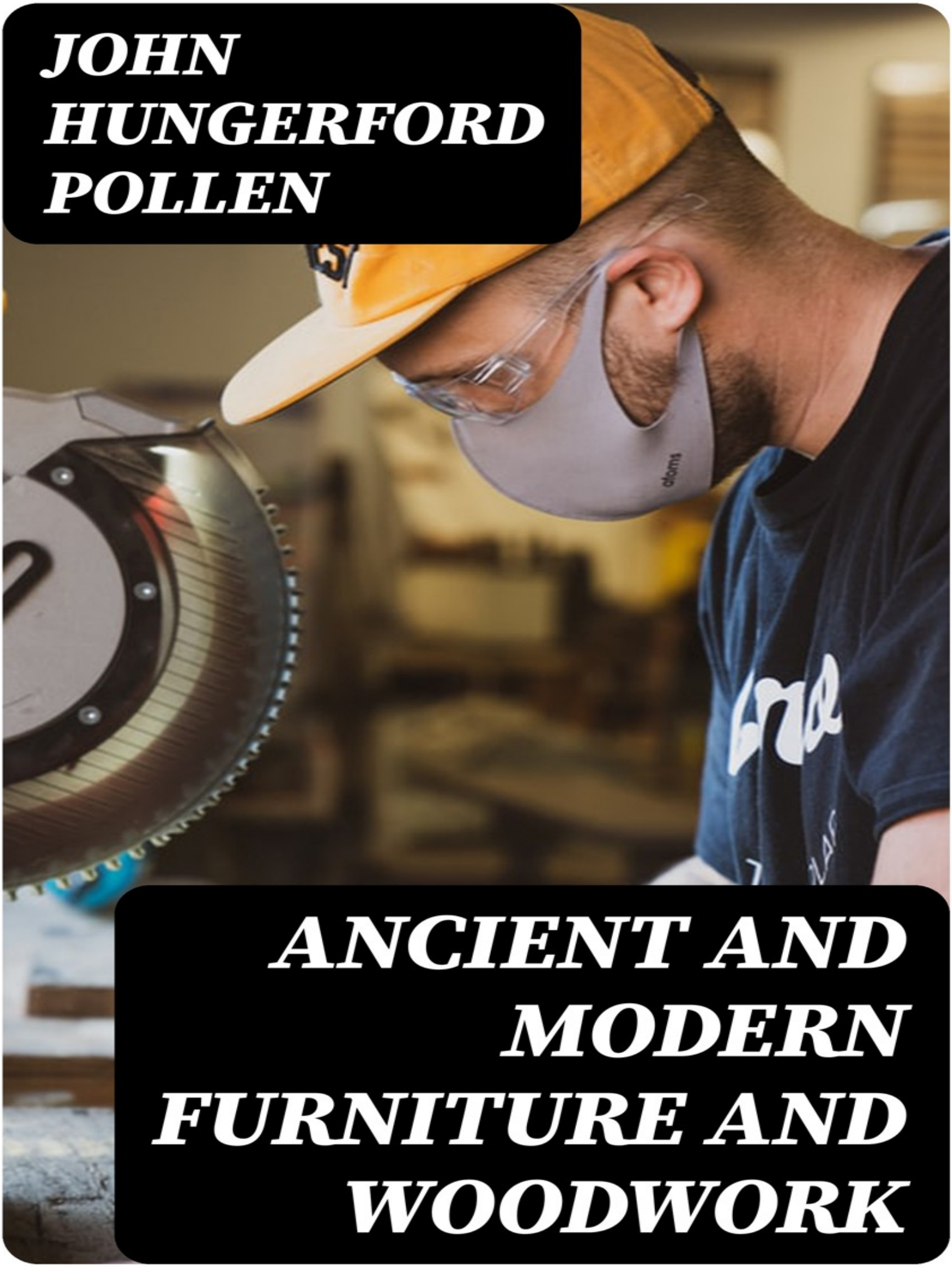
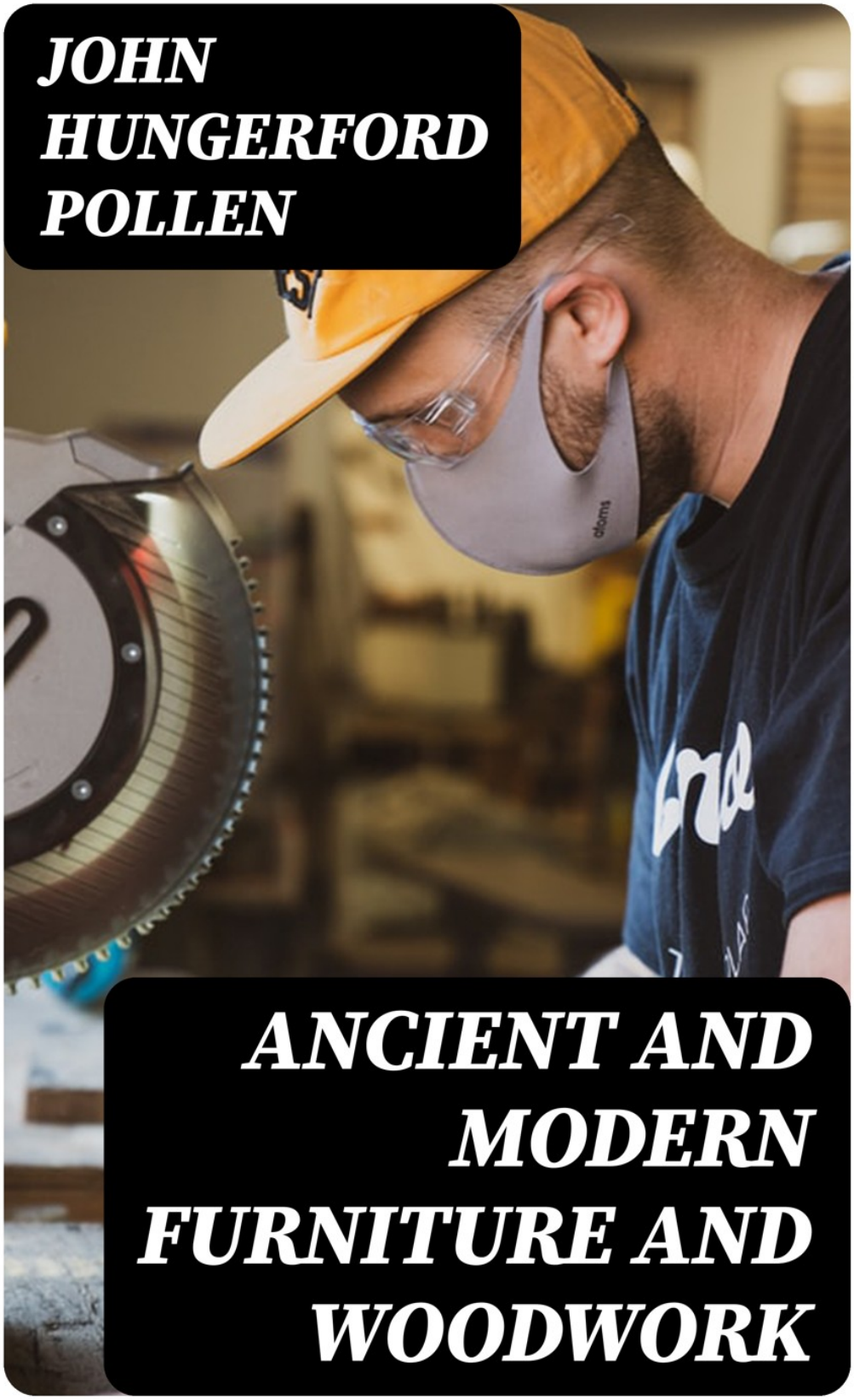


JOHN HUNGERFORD POLLEN

ANCIENT AND MODERN FURNITURE AND WOODWORK



JOHN HUNGERFORD POLLEN

ANCIENT AND MODERN FURNITURE AND WOODWORK

John Hungerford Pollen

Ancient and Modern Furniture and Woodwork

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FURNITURE,

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ANCIENT AND MODERN.

CHAPTER I.

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The study of a collection of old furniture has an interest beyond the mere appreciation of the beauty it displays. The carving or the ornaments that decorate the various pieces and the skill and ingenuity with which they are put together are well worthy of our attention. A careful examination of them carries us back to the days in which they were made and to the taste and manners, the habits and the requirements, of bygone ages. The Kensington museum, for example, contains chests, caskets, cabinets, chairs, carriages, and utensils of all sorts and of various countries. Some of these have held the bridal dresses, fans, and trinkets of French and Italian beauties, whose sons and daughters for many generations have long gone to the dust; there are inlaid folding chairs used at the court of Guido Ubaldo, in the palace of Urbino, and of other Italian princes of the fifteenth century; buffets and sideboards that figured at mediæval feasts; boxes in which were kept the jesses and bells of hawks; love-tokens of many kinds, christening-spoons, draught and chess men, card boxes, belonging to the fifteenth, sixteenth, and seventeenth centuries; carriages of the London of Cromwell and Hogarth, and of the

Dublin of Burke; panelling of the date of Raleigh; a complete room made for a lady of honour to Marie Antoinette.

Besides these memorials of periods comparatively well known to us, we shall find reproductions of the furniture of ages the habits of which we know imperfectly, such as the chair of Dagobert, and various relics illustrating the old classic manners and civilisation, as they have come down to us from Roman and Greek artists, and brought to light by the discoveries at Herculaneum and Pompeii.

The field through which a collection of old furniture stretches is too wide to be filled with anything like completeness; but the South Kensington collection is already rich in some very rare examples, such as carved chests and cabinets, decorated with the most finished wood carving of Flanders, France, and Italy, as well as of our own country.

As wood is the material of which furniture for domestic use has generally been made, there are, of course, limits to its endurance, and not much furniture is to be found anywhere older than the renaissance. Objects for domestic use, such as beds, chairs, chests, tables, &c., are rare, and have not often been collected together. The museum of the hôtel de Cluny, in Paris, is the best representative collection of woodwork anterior to the quattro or cinque cento period —*i.e.* the end of the fifteenth and beginning of the sixteenth centuries. Some carved and gilt carriages belonging to the last century are also there; and a set of carriages, carved and gilt, made for state ceremonials, used during the latter part of the last century and down to the days of the empire

of Napoleon III. are, or were till the war of 1870, kept at the Trianon at Versailles.

Many cabinets and tables in Boule work, Vernis-Martin work, and in marquetry by Riesener, Gouthière, David, and others, in the possession of Sir Richard Wallace, were lately exhibited in the museum at Bethnal Green, and examples by the same artists from St. Cloud and Meudon are in the Louvre in Paris. A fine collection of carriages, belonging to the royal family of Portugal, is kept in Lisbon. These are decorated in the "Vernis-Martin" method. Several old royal state carriages, carved and gilt, the property of the emperor of Austria, are at Vienna.

In order to take a general review of the kinds, forms, and changes of personal and secular woodwork and furniture, as manners and fashions have influenced the wants of different nations and times, it will be well to divide the subject in chronological order into antique; Egyptian, Ninevite, Greek, Roman:—modern; early and late mediæval:—renaissance; seventeenth and eighteenth century work: to be followed by an inquiry into the changes that some of the pieces of furniture in most frequent use have undergone.

CHAPTER II.

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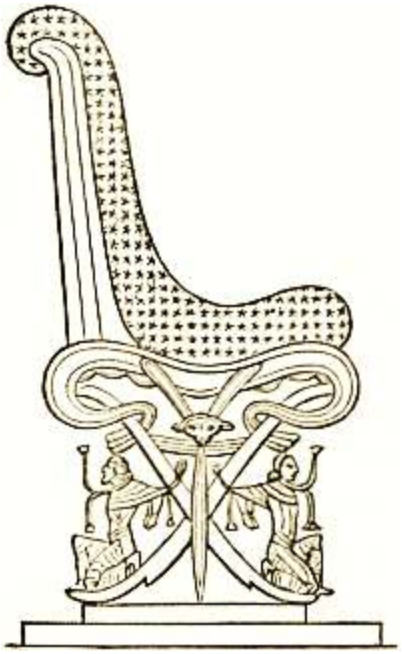
ANTIQUE: EGYPT, NINEVEH, AND GREECE.



Considering the perishable nature of the material, we cannot expect to meet with many existing specimens of the woodwork or furniture of ancient Egypt. There are to be found, however, abundant illustrations of these objects in the paintings and sculptures of monuments. The most complete are on the walls of the tombs, where we see detailed pictures of domestic life, and the interiors of houses are shown, with entertainments of parties of ladies and gentlemen talking, listening to music, eating and drinking. The guests are seated on chairs of wood, framed up with sloping backs, of which specimens are in the British museum; others are on stools or chairs of greater splendour, stuffed and covered on the seat and back with costly textiles, having the wooden framework carved and gilt,

generally in the form of the fore and hind legs of tigers, panthers, and other animals of the chace, sometimes supported, as in the accompanying woodcut, on figures representing captives.

The British museum contains six Egyptian chairs. One of these is made of ebony, turned in the lathe and inlaid with collars and dies of ivory. It is low, the legs joined by light rails of cane, the back straight, with two cross-bars and light rails between. The seat is slightly hollowed, and is of plaited cane as in modern chairs. Another is square, also with straight back, but with pieces of wood sloped into the seat to make it comfortable for a sitter. Small workmen's stools of blocks of wood hollowed out and with three or four legs fastened into them may also be referred to, and a table on four legs tied by four bars near the lower ends.

The Egyptians used couches straight, like ottomans; with head boards curving over as in our modern sofas, sometimes with the head and tail of an animal carved on the ends, and the legs and feet carved to correspond. These were stuffed and covered with rich material. The Egyptians did not recline at meals. Their double seats, δίφροι, or bisellia, were such as were used by the Greeks and Romans. They had shelves and recesses, chests and coffers, made of pine or cedar wood, and of a material still used in Egypt, the *cafass*—palm sticks formed into planks by thin pegs or rods of harder wood passing through a series of these sticks laid together. "Of their bedroom furniture," says Sir Gardner Wilkinson, "we know but little." They used (he tells us) their day couches probably, or lay on mats, and on low wooden pallets made of palm sticks. These last had curved blocks,

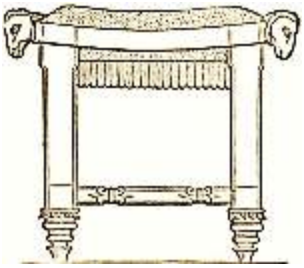
which served for a pillow, forming a hollow to receive the head. Examples in alabaster and wood are in the Louvre and in the British museum.

Their materials for dress were of the most delicate and costly description. The robes of the ladies were often transparent, and the gold and silver tissues, muslins, and gossamer fabrics made in India and Asia were probably also used in Egypt. All these, as well as their jewels and valuables, imply corresponding chests and smaller coffers. Small toilet boxes elegantly carved into the form or with representations of leaves and animals, are preserved in the Louvre and in the British museum and other collections. They were generally of sycamore wood, sometimes of tamarisk or sont (acacia), and occasionally the more costly ivory or inlaid work was substituted for wood. Larger boxes may also be seen in the Louvre, some large enough to contain dresses. They are square, with flat, curved, or gable tops, painted on the surface, and generally lifted from the ground by four short legs or prolongations of the rails that form the framework. These boxes are dovetailed, and secured by glue and nails.

Their chariots and the harness of their horses were rich in proportion, the former painted, inlaid with ivory and gold, or with surface gilding, containing cases for their bows and arms, and made of wood filled in with the lightest materials, perhaps canvas stiffened with preparations of lac in the Japanese manner, and put together with a skill that made the carriage-makers of Egypt famous in their day. It will be sufficient to add that the great Jewish kings had their chariots supplied from Egypt. Solomon paid about £75 of

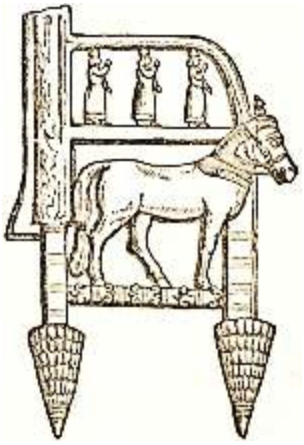
our money for a chariot, and of these he kept (for war purposes alone) a force of fourteen hundred, with forty thousand horses.

Mummy cases of cedar, a material readily procured and valued for its preservative qualities, are to be seen in many collections, and examples can be examined in the British museum. They are richly decorated with hieroglyphic paintings executed in tempera, and varnished with gum mastic.



The furniture of Nineveh is not so elaborately or completely represented as that of Egypt, where the preservation of sculpture and painting was helped out by a climate of extraordinary dryness. But the discoveries of Mr. Layard have thrown on the details of Ninevite domestic life light enough to give us the means of forming a judgment on their furniture.

"Ornaments," says Mr. Layard, "in the form of the heads of animals, chiefly the lion, bull, and ram, were very generally introduced, even in parts of the chariot, the harness of the horses, and domestic furniture." In this respect the Assyrians resembled the Egyptians. "Their tables, thrones, and couches were made both of metal and wood, and probably inlaid with ivory. We learn from Herodotus that those in the temple of Belus in Babylon were of solid gold."



According to Mr. Layard, the chair represented in the earliest monuments is without a back, and the legs tastefully carved. This form occurs in the palace of Nimrúd, and is sculptured on one of the bas-reliefs now in the British museum. Often the legs ended in the feet of a lion or the hoofs of a bull, and were made of gold, silver, or bronze. "On the monuments of Khorsabad and by the rock tablets of Malthaiyah we find representations of chairs supported by animals and by human figures, sometimes prisoners, like the Caryatides of the Greeks. In this they resemble the arm-chairs of Egypt, but appear to have been more massive. This mode of ornamenting the throne of the king was adopted by the Persians, and is seen in the sculpture of Persepolis." The woodcut represents such a chair, from a bas-relief at Khorsabad. The lion head and lion foot were used by other oriental nations. The throne of king Solomon was supported by lions for arms, probably in the same position as the horses in the Khorsabad chair; and lions of gold or chryselephantine work stood six on each side on the six steps before the throne.

The forms of furniture of a later date in the sculptures of Nineveh at Khorsabad are of an inferior style. "The chairs have generally more than one cross-bar, and are somewhat

heavy and ill-proportioned, the feet resting upon large inverted cones, resembling pine-apples." All these seats, like the δίφροι and *sellæ* of important personages in Greece and Rome, were high enough to require a footstool. "On the earlier monuments of Assyria footstools are very beautifully carved or modelled. The feet were ornamented, like those of the chair, with the feet of lions or the hoofs of bulls."

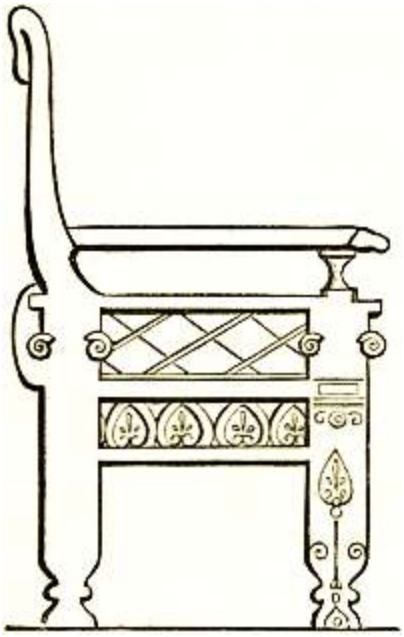
The tables seem in general to have been of similar form and decoration to the thrones or seats, the ends of the frame projecting and carved as in the woodcut above, only on a larger scale. The couches were of similar form, but made of gold and silver, stuffed and covered on the surface with the richest materials. The tables and the chairs were often made in the shape also found in Greece and Rome, with folding supports that open on a central rivet like our camp-stools, and like the curule chairs which were common not only in Rome but throughout Italy during the renaissance.

A large piece of wood of pine or cedar is in the British museum. It is of a full red colour, the effect of time. Cedar was probably most in use; but both in Egypt and Nineveh, as also in Judæa under Solomon and his successors, woods were imported from Europe and India; ebony certainly, perhaps rosewood, teak, and Indian walnut. Ebony and ivory were continually used for inlaying furniture. Of their bedroom furniture we can say little, nor do we know of what kind were the cabinets or chests made to preserve their dresses and valuables. It is probable, however, that these were occasionally as rich and elaborate as any of their show or state furniture.

Of Hebrew furniture we can give few details. It is probable that the Jews differed but little from the Assyrians in this respect. The throne of Solomon has been already noticed. In the story of Judith the canopy and curtains of the bed of Holofernes may have been taken by the chronicler from familiar examples at home, or may have been strictly drawn from traditional details. In the figurative language of the Canticles, the bed of Solomon is of cedar of Lebanon, the pillars of silver, the bottom of gold. Ordinary bedroom furniture is spoken of in the Chronicles, when the Shunamite woman, a person of great wealth, built for the prophet Elias "a little chamber on the wall, and set therein a bed, a table, a stool, and a candlestick." Ivory wardrobes are mentioned in the 45th psalm, but of what size or form we cannot determine. In the book of Esther allusions are made to Persian furniture decorations, white, green, and blue hangings fastened with fine linen to silver rings and pillars of marble. The beds were of gold and silver, &c. The bed of Og, king of Bashan, was nine cubits long by four, and was of iron: it was preserved as a trophy.

As the chariots of Solomon were made in Egypt, and the artists employed on the Temple came from Tyre, it is not unreasonable to suppose that furniture was either made by foreign workmen, or that the Hebrews borrowed freely the forms and decorations of surrounding Asiatic nations. Though specially and purposely jealous of any innovation or interference with religious rites and observances, we have no cause to think that they objected to the use of furniture or utensils such as they found first during the long sojourn in Egypt, and afterwards in other countries. They are said in

earlier times to have spoiled the Egyptians with reference to the ornaments and jewels carried away at the migration. We know that Moses was "learned in all the wisdom of the Egyptians;" and two particular artists, and two only, are named in the book of Exodus as qualified to execute the sacred vessels and utensils. Whatever their technical qualifications were, these had been acquired in Egypt.

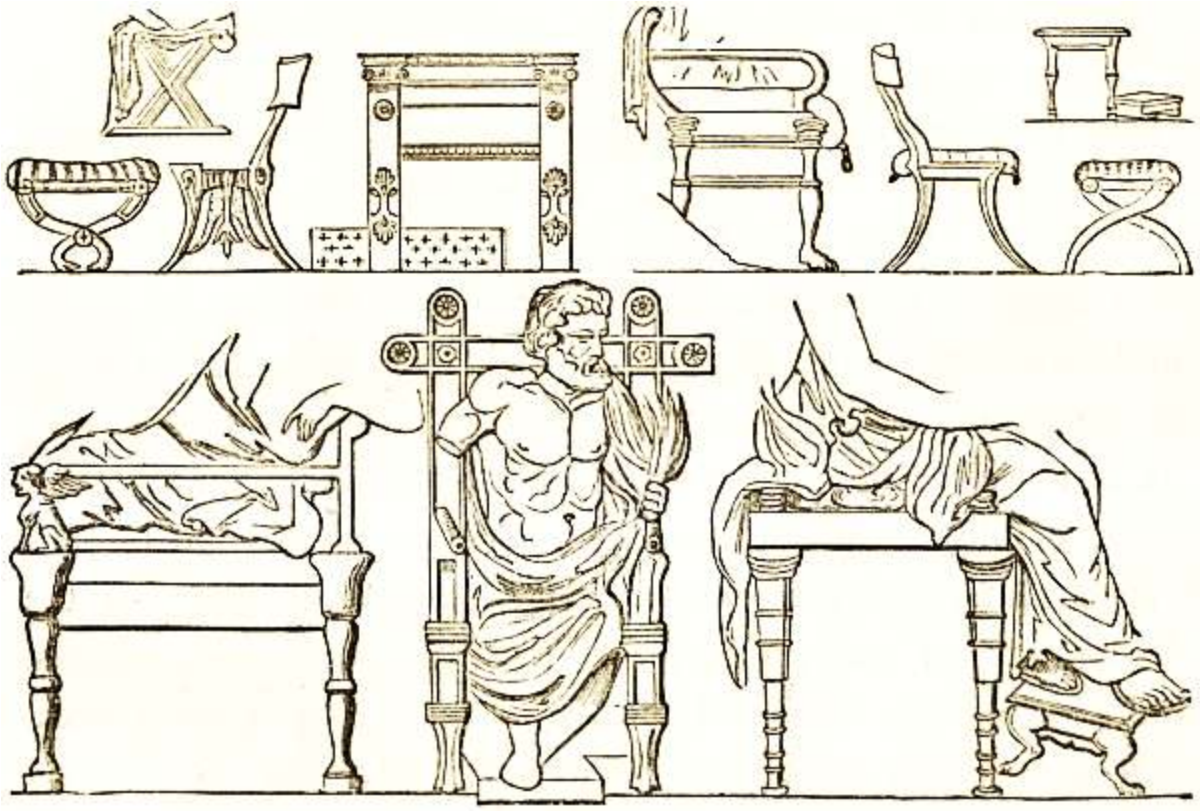


In any attempt to picture to ourselves the kind of furniture and objects of daily use apart from chariots, arms, &c., that surrounded the Greeks in early ages, it will be necessary to bear in mind the close connection which that people must have had with the Asiatic races, and the splendour and refinement that surrounded the wealthy civilisation of the oriental monarchies.

They were so continually the allies or the rivals of the various states in Asia Minor, and pushed out into that fertile region so many vigorous colonies, that it cannot be doubted that the splendid stuffs, beds, couches, thrones, chariots, &c., used by Greeks on the Asiatic continent or in Europe, had much of eastern character in form and method of execution; perhaps, at first, in decoration also. This woodcut represents a chair of Assyrian character on a bas-relief from Xanthus, in the British museum.

Much that is oriental figures in poetic accounts of the arms, furniture, and equipments of the Greek heroic ages. The chiefs take the field in chariots. These could have been

used but in small numbers on ground so uneven as the rocky territories of the Morea. The beds described by Homer, the coverlids of dyed wool, tapestries, or carpets, and other instances of coloured and showy furniture, were genuine descriptions of objects known and seen, though not common. Generally the furniture of the heroic age was simple. Two beds of bronze of Tartessus, one Dorian and one Ionian, the smallest weighing fifty talents, of uncertain date, were kept in the treasury at Altis, and seen there by Pausanias towards the end of the second century. The chariots differed little except in the ornamental carving, modelling, or chasing, from those of Egypt.



The oldest remaining models of Greek furniture to which we can point are the chairs in which the antique figures in the Syrian room at the British museum are seated. These are dated six, or nearly six, centuries before Christ. They

represent chairs with backs, quite perpendicular in front and behind. The frame-pieces of the seats are morticed into the legs, and the mortices and tenons are accurately marked in the marble, the horizontal passing right through the upright bars. These early pieces of furniture were probably executed in wood, not metal, which was at first but rarely used. The woodcuts show the different forms taken from antique bas-reliefs.

The chest or coffer in which Cypselus of Corinth had been concealed was seen by Pausanias in the temple of Olympia. It was made about the middle of the sixth century B.C. The chest was of cedar, carved and decorated with figures and bas-reliefs, some in ivory, some in gold or ivory partly gilt, which were inlaid on the four sides and on the top. The subjects of the sculpture were old Greek myths and local legends, and traditions connected with the country. This coffer is supposed to have been executed by Eumelos of Corinth.

The great period of Greek art began in the fifth century B.C.; but those were not days favourable to the development of personal luxury among the citizens. An extreme simplicity in private manners balanced the continual publicity and political excitement of Greek life. The rich classes, moreover, had little inducement to make any display of their possessions. The state enjoyed an indefinite right to the property of its members; the lawgiver in Plato declared "ye are not your own, still less is your property your own." In Sparta the exclusive training for war admitted of no manner of earning money by business. In Athens the poorer class had so exclusively the upper hand of the rich that the latter had to provide the public with entertainments of sacrificial solemnities, largesses of corn, and banquets. "The demos," says the author of the "Gentile and the Jew," "understood the squeezing of the rich like sponges." Greece was the paradise of the poor.