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## The Semiotics of Furniture Form: The French Tradition, 1620-1840

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Article abstract

This paper outlines and illustrates a few of the principles that might serve as a basis for a general semiotics of furniture form, meaning a description and analysis of domestic objects and utensils as a coherent system of signs related to human activity, to physical, social, and psychological needs, as well as to material context. The approach is both structural and inductive, anchored in specific examples drawn from French and English traditions between 1620 and 1840. The Louis styles are central to the argument, which proceeds from formal characteristics of shape, structure and immediate function to questions of aesthetic, psychological, and ideological intent.

# The Semiotics of Furniture Form: The French Tradition 1620-1840

JOHN A. FLEMING

The following anecdote appeared in the *Quebec Gazette/Gazette de Québec*, 17 January 1765, page 1, at the top of parallel columns in English and French:

London, August 30

Monday last the Wife of a poor Man in Old-Street, bought an old Stuff Chair of a Broker near that Place, for 8d. When she carried it home, her Husband abused her for making so miserable a Purchase, and a Scuffle ensued; on moving the chair, something was heard to jingle, and the Seat being cut open, they found 150 Guineas, which had been concealed there; which terminated the Scuffle to their mutual satisfaction.

So from the wars of love and chance a moral lesson may perhaps be drawn: that one must never scorn either an old piece of furniture, or the person who finds it useful and a bargain, for use value and exchange value sometimes meet and marry in the secret life of objects.

The purpose of this paper is to outline and illustrate a few of the principles that might serve as a basis for a general semiotics of furniture form. I mean by this a description and analysis of domestic objects and utensils as a coherent system of signs related to human activity, to physical, social, and psychological needs as well as to material context.

Although the archaeologist has almost always had to reconstruct the social, political, and cultural meanings of lost or distant civilisations from surviving shards and other fragments of the past without written documents, it is only with the relatively recent attempts at conceptualisation of material culture/material history studies as a separate but cognate discipline that the definition of document within both a diachronic and synchronic frame has been extended to include the physical, material world of man-made objects in all their diversity of form.

My approach is both structural and inductive. Working from specific examples in the European, more specifically, French and English traditions of the last four centuries, I will try to describe and explain the formal characteris-

tics of these objects in *functional*, *generic*, and *stylistic* terms, as cultural indices of social values and meanings.<sup>1</sup>

All the objects we make are inscriptions of the human body and mind upon the circumstances of time and space. And if, until recently, historians and others interested in the historical record have largely ignored the furniture and domestic utensils which are so much a part of our everyday routines and activities it is perhaps because of their apparent lack of ritual significance and our indifference to the latent values expressed in these utilitarian things. Yet we impose upon the natural world in concentric spaces from the proximate and individual/solitary to the distant, hierarchical, and collective structures of society, a series of artefactual environments each with its signifying system of objects and relationships. Jules Prown, among others, in speaking of material-culture theory and method expresses a preference for the study of vernacular as opposed to high-style objects or documents because, in his view "cultural expression is less self-conscious, and therefore potentially more truthful, in what a society produces, specially such mundane, utilitarian objects as domestic buildings, furniture or pots."<sup>2</sup> To set aside *objets de style* or to ignore *style d'époque*, however, would, I think, make impossible an essential identification of social structures and attitudes generally, as well as the aesthetic and other impulses that help to shape most fabricated things high and low. It is here too that the vernacular and the *meuble de style* may perhaps come together as material manifestations of the same physical needs, although psychological drives and social circumstances may be widely divergent.

Since this paper can be no more than prolegomena to the subject whose complexities must eventually be determined within space, time, and cultural tradition, and by means of comparative procedures, I propose to use French furniture (since we are in Quebec) in its most potent and influential forms as my starting point and main body of evidence: that is, objects of the seventeenth, eighteenth, and early nineteenth centuries, with comparative asides to British decorative arts of the period where such examples may contribute to the conceptualisation of the subject by enlarging its perspective.

Nor does this paper deal explicitly with new objects and articles mechanically or industrially produced in quantity, but rather with pre-industrial, hand-made, often unique pieces of furniture, made by professional artisans or

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1 In French museological circles, the study of high style, as well as regional furniture forms, has for the most part followed the stylistic evolution and aesthetic qualities of the object, or the emergence and characteristics of local pieces and regional stereotypes, while interpreting social practices and values within an ethnological perspective. Other researchers in France base their conclusions upon the evidence to be found in economic structures and conditions as revealed through the broad frameworks proposed by the *Annales* approach to historiography.

2 Jules Prown, "Mind in Matter. An Introduction to Material Culture Theory and Method," *Winterthur Portfolio* 17 (1982): 4.

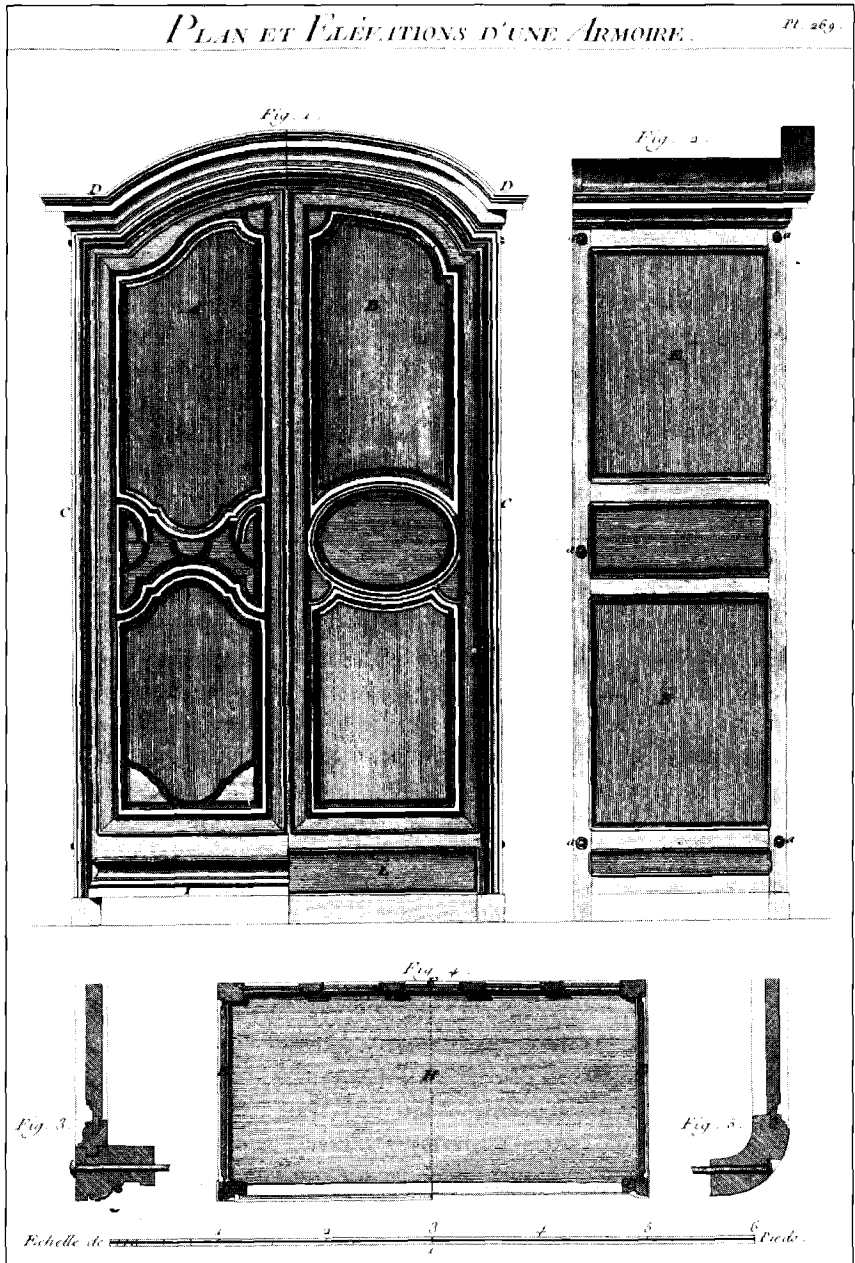
independents, in small quantities, for personal use, local markets, nearby environments, within relatively closed systems of distribution to family, friends, neighbours, patrons, and buyers on demand; an immediate public. This historical perspective brings with it conceptual restraints and methodological problems however. The material evidence, that is, the original and primary content of the pieces in question, their function and utility, their *semantic* dimension, has been diminished by time, and overlaid by a shift in perception towards *aesthetic* evaluation based upon the artisanal, anachronistic, perhaps antiquarian status of the object. We move thereby from the functional characteristics and historical circumstances of production and use, through formal and generic considerations, towards social and psychological connotations examined diachronically. Any broad principles of form and function established in analysing these pieces must still apply to post-industrial domestic furniture, although means of construction (moulded chairs, welded frames) and materials (plastic, glass, metal, artificial fibres) may depart from the historically preponderant use of wood, and the techniques of mortise and tenon, tongue and groove, dovetails, turning, etc.

On the other hand, there are important advantages in following the linear movement of artefacts through time as an organising principle coincident with the structures of thought and experience. With pre-industrial artefacts, maker, means, and product have a direct physical relationship in a primary sense. With industrial fabrication, human energy, physical contact, and muscular movement are transferred to machines or external sources of power and thus detached from immediate human effort. The former embody more clearly the fundamental nature of furniture as an expression of basic needs than do the subsequent productions by steam, electric, chemical, or other interposed technologies which bring with them another set of theoretical questions and possibilities most succinctly summarised from the artisanal position of fabrication in the phrase "alienated labour."

The paradigms I propose conceptualise, in a first-stage formulation, elements that can be situated beyond the reach of temporal and site-specific (spatial) circumstances. In a second phase, an attempt is made to combine these observations with diachronic/synchronic and cultural specifics as they may appear in stylistic or other categories.

The Louis styles (Louis XIII, Louis XIV, Louis XV, Louis XVI, and Empire) will, therefore, be central to my argument, which will proceed from formal characteristics of shape, structure, and immediate function to questions of psychological, aesthetic, and ideological intent.

Without conceptualising the objects he describes, André Jacob Roubo, Master joiner by trade, in *L'Art du menuisier* (1772) places furniture in two general categories. One grouping includes all framed and panelled furniture, "Meubles à bâtis et à panneaux," items such as armoires, buffets, chests of



"Plan and elevations for an armoire," André Jacob Roubo, *L'Art du menuisier*, vol. II (Paris, 1772). Courtesy Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library, University of Toronto.

drawers, secretaries, closed desks and the like. The other comprises seating of all kinds – chairs, stools, and benches – as well as beds, screens, tables, and open desks (“Meubles à bâtis”).

In the first instance Roubo is speaking of what we would call case pieces; that is, furniture that encloses space, as does architecture, in its formal as well as functional aspects, is intimately related to architecture in both its origins and its history. Armoires, buffets, and cupboards have often been an integral part of the architectural structure, built into, fastened against, or hanging from the walls, imitating in their decorative elements the architectonic and stylistic features of their surroundings.

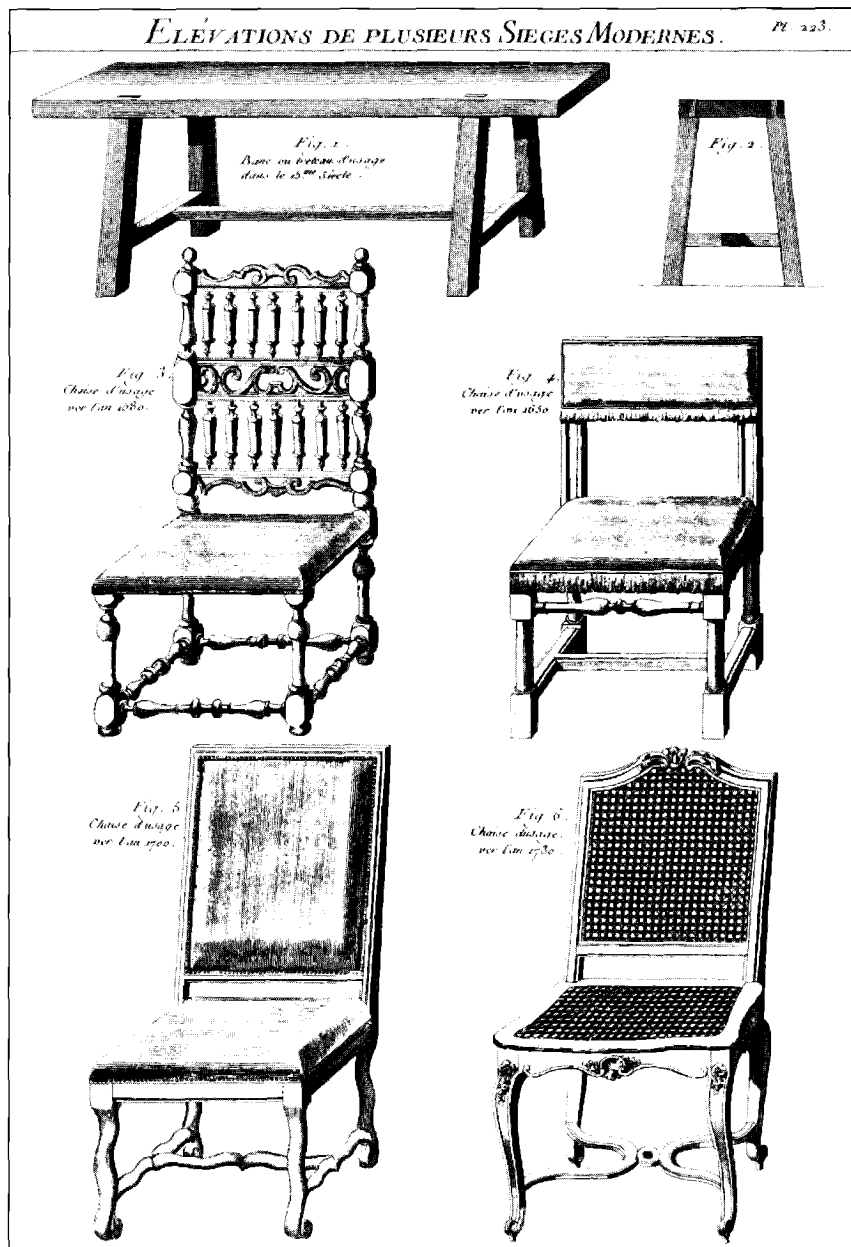
The only free-standing piece of furniture known to feudal society was the coffer or chest, made in every possible size and for every possible use.<sup>3</sup> Feet were added to this simple box-like structure at some point, probably in order to counteract the effects of humidity, and this footing in turn later took on the form of a second coffer below the first, together known as *le coffre de bahut*. The immovable joinery set in the wall which had been a fully integrated component of the architectural shell, designated by the term *armoire*, was eventually replaced by a vertical, elongated version of this movable *coffre-bahut*, which overtook both its function and name. As late as the sixteenth century, at the time of Henri II (1519-1559), two large hooks fixed to the wall were still being used “pour tendre les habillements du roi,” to hang the king’s clothes.<sup>4</sup> The *armoire* as we know it today was to become a feature in even the modest homes of villagers and farmers in France by the end of the *ancien régime*. The all-purpose coffer gave rise as well to other case pieces with variant proportions and spatial orientations, the *cabinet*, the *buffet*, the *commode* or chest of drawers, pieces, however, whose function (and form) tied them still to their architectural origins in time and place.

In the second category, Roubo places pieces that are not connected directly with architectural form and function: chairs, stools, tables, etc. Here too, as with architectural furniture, a certain external diversity of form conceals an underlying morphological identity of open as opposed to enclosed space.

According to Edmond Bonnaffé, the lesser furniture forms (in the purely material sense) are related to clothing as case pieces are to architecture. But this notion is not quite right in my view. The easy mobility, constant human contact, and relative perishability of stools, chairs, benches, and tables do indeed resemble the use made of clothing, but clothing also encases the body, protects it, and

3 G. d’Avenal, *Histoire économique de la propriété, des salaires, des denrées... depuis l’an 1200 jusqu’en l’an 1800*, tome VII (Paris, 1926). Reprinted New York, 1968, p. 317. “Le bahut est coffre, huche, banc, lit même parfois, armoire, trésor; c’est le meuble domestique le plus usuel du moyen âge,” Viollet-Le-Duc, *Dictionnaire raisonné du mobilier français* (Paris, 1858), 23.

4 d’Avenal, *Histoire économique*, 318-19.



"Elevations for modern seating furniture of several kinds," André Jacob Roubo, *L'Art du menuisier*, vol. II (Paris, 1772). Courtesy Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library, University of Toronto.

has an important decorative function. These are objects that do not contain or enclose.

Furniture of the second sort, framed but not panelled, seems more obviously a replica and extension of the human body into both the shape and lexicon of furniture parts (foot, leg, arm, seat, back, head) as cornice, door, panel, and post come from the terminology of architecture.

Chairs, benches, and tables in their many specialised forms constitute the *animate*, *movable* element of interior space as armoires, buffets, and commodes make up the *inanimate* or *fixed* environment within which the former may be arranged and rearranged to reflect the changing needs and patterns in the life of its human inhabitants.

The articulation of many tables (gate-leg, trestle, drop-leaf), folding or adjustable chairs and stools makes explicit this anatomical analogy. This structure itself implies movement in at least two ways. Just as the body may be extended or contracted in space in response to a variety of circumstances and required actions so the gate-leg or drop-leaf table may be extended from its minimal stance to accommodate a larger number of diners or players, or reduced in size after use to leave space for other activities. Contraction of the piece will also render it more easily movable from storage or its accustomed place into some other spatial configuration or set of circumstances. The tea table drawn into the centre of the room or placed by the fireplace on cold days, a writing table or tapestry frame moved near a window to provide light for these sometime activities, but otherwise situated when not in use, these are obvious examples of the close relationship and often parallel movements of furniture and people within a domestic setting. Military furniture – the folding camp bed, and stool, the trestle table – all so necessary historically to officers in the field, are simple adaptations of standard open forms to the basic requirements of constant movement and temporarily reduced quarters. In this sense, it might be observed that until the end of the sixteenth century what little furniture there was in the chateaux, palaces, and dwellings of kings, princes, and nobles often followed its owners from one place to another with the change of seasons. Louis XIII travelling from Saint Germain to Vincennes and separated by a storm from his bed and its accoutrements which had been sent ahead, and not knowing where to sleep in Paris since no bed had been prepared for him in the Louvre, spent the night in Val-de-Grace with the queen, a fortuitous encounter of the two spouses who had practically lived apart for several years, to which the birth of Louis XIV has been attributed by some sly observers.<sup>5</sup> Louis XIV himself had nine “porteurs de lits et meubles,” as though to assure that no such misadventure would thwart his movements and his place in bed.<sup>6</sup>

5 Ibid., 306.

6 Alfred Franklin, *Dictionnaire historique des arts, métiers et professions...depuis le treizième siècle* (Paris, 1906). Reprinted New York, 1968. See “Porte-meubles,” 587.



Whatever the etymological origins of the French seating furniture known as *bergères*, *marquises*, *duchesses*, and the like, nothing could be more obvious than the swelling cushions and sinuous lines of these eighteenth-century chairs and sofas whose tender colours and voluptuous profiles resemble so closely the female nudes of François Boucher (1703-1770). Indeed, the style known as Louis XV was variously called *le style rocaille*, *le style rococo*, *le style Pompadour*, *le style Boucher*.<sup>7</sup>

More than a hundred years later, Joris-Karl Huysmans, in his celebrated novel of decadence, *À Rebours* (*Against the Grain*), published in 1884, describes in erotic terms the salon furniture of the Age of Enlightenment, unmistakably the Louis XV style, which imitates so closely the charms and sensuality of the female figure:

Indeed, only the eighteenth century has been able to envelope woman in a depraved atmosphere, moulding furniture in the shape of her charms, imitating the contractions of her pleasure, the coils of her spasms, in the undulations, the contorsions of wood and bronze, spicing the sweet languor of the blond, with its clear and lively décor, lessening the salty taste of the brunette by means of tapestries in softened, watery, almost insipid tones.<sup>8</sup>

This analogy does not exaggerate the characteristics of the rococo style in its more outrageous and flamboyant effects. One could speak of *le mobilier galant* as one speaks of *le roman galant*. I mention in passing the novel of Crébillon fils entitled *Le Sofa* (1734) in which the narrator – a rose-coloured sofa with silvered seams – recounts the amorous adventures to which it has been a party and a participant. Similarly, the dialogue of *Les Chaises du Palais Royal* (1762) describes their scabrous adventures as silent partners in the activities of social life in that particular quarter of Paris.

This same anthropomorphisation may be taken much further back in time to such texts as Gilles Corrozet's *Blasons domestiques* of 1539, already an adaptation of the earlier minor mediaeval poetic genre, the blason, in which the poet directed his praise to various parts of the female body. In Corrozet's text, the furniture and rooms of the house replace female anatomy as the subject of praise:

Lowly seat,  
Mate to the stool  
Thy praise must shine  
forth like a jewel

7 Henry Martin, *La Grammaire des styles: Le Style Louis XV* (Paris, 1944), 17.

8 J.-K. Huysmans, *À Rebours*, texte présenté par Marc Fumaroli (Paris, 1877), 156. My translation.

For thou art cousin to the throw  
 And in the drawing-room do go.  
 Covered o'er in soft attire  
 Where noble ladies do aspire  
 To sit in pleasure and delight.  
 Where thigh and buttock  
 find respite...<sup>9</sup>

If I pause a moment over these literary examples, these personifications of pieces of furniture, it is to show how, from the Middle Ages to our own day, such objects have entered into the psychological, erotic, and imaginary spaces of life as active players in the social relations of the sexes, and made explicit the enclosed architectural dimensions of the feminine (the salon, the boudoir, the *ruelles*, and the bedroom).

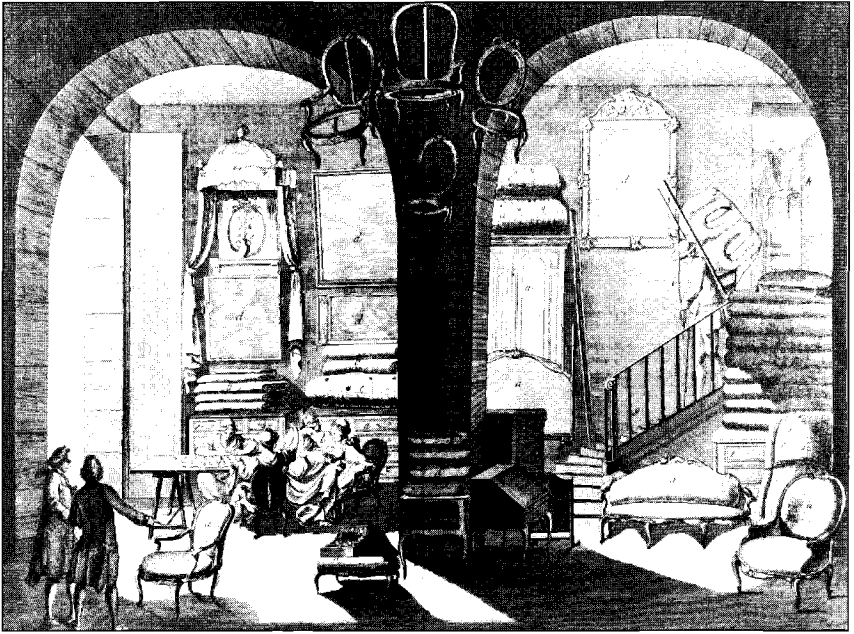
As furniture freed itself, from the seventeenth century and after, from the walls and structural features of architectural space, a proliferation of specialised types, belonging to the category of open furniture forms, made more and more evident, in the Anglo-French context at least, this extension of the human body into certain pieces – coffee tables, card tables, toilet tables, work tables, writing desks, easy chairs, etc. These were objects that functioned as tools and mirrored human activities within the temporal confines of daily life. The principle of their existence was active, unlike the passive life of armoires, commodes, and chests which, on the contrary, were linked through form (cornices, vertical orientation, enclosed space, etc.) and through function (storage, protection, security, display) to the basic, three-dimensional enclosure of space which constitutes architecture, and the immobility of structures either fixed or functionally situated in a psychologically stable position.

In fact, among the various furniture genres, the chair in its structure and profile is the piece most analogous to the human body. To function properly, its rectilinear and curvilinear constituents must follow the bone structure in its articulatory points, and the disposition of the muscles. Its size as well must be in proportion, to its user's size in practical terms, although other aspects of form, proportion or function may be necessary to particular circumstances of use.

Seating furniture has, in addition to its primary function, almost always expressed as well aspects of status and social hierarchy. Between the throne and the lowly footstool lies an elaborate world of etiquette and protocol. At the court of Louis XIV, where ceremony ruled over comfort, and the formality, imposing size, rich decoration, and general rectilinearity of furniture still suggested a rapport with architecture, members of the royal household were

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<sup>9</sup> *Les Blasons domestiques* (Paris, 1865). Facsimile reprint of the first edition of 1539. My translation.



"Interior of an upholsterer's shop," Denis Diderot and Jean Le Rond D'Alembert, *Encyclopédie ou dictionnaire raisonné des Sciences, des Arts et des Métiers*, vol. IX (Paris, 1771). Courtesy Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library, University of Toronto.

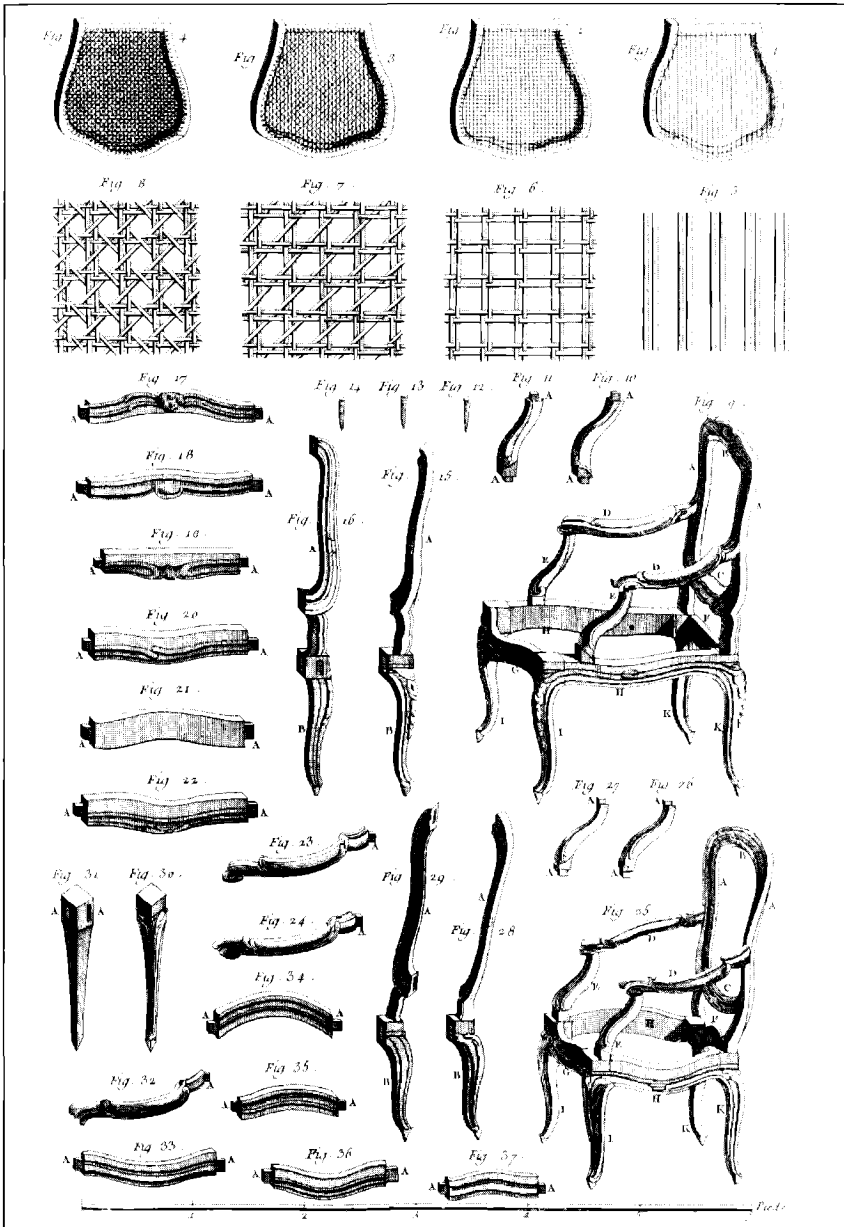
consigned to modest *tabourets* (stools) in the presence of the monarch, or left to stand until invited to sit, as was Louis' own brother, while the king dined. The expression "avoir droit au tabouret,"<sup>10</sup> to have one's place or *entrée* into the presence of royalty or the socially prominent, makes concrete linguistically the role that furniture played in the hierarchical order, and all that this implies of power, authority, deference, and submission. Louis XIV's armchair in wood, as described by Saint-Simon, painted red with gilded striping, covered in crimson velvet and embellished with fringes, stood in contrast to the armless, backless, short-legged stools, amputated emblems, upon which others of lesser rank might be invited to sit at the king's pleasure.<sup>11</sup> A document entitled *L'Etat de France pour 1712* notes that "neither prince nor princess may be seated in an armchair or on a chair with back in the presence of their Majesties."<sup>12</sup> Of course, these protocols are still with us on ceremonial and official occasions such as the judge's entry into the courtroom, to be seated beneath either the

10 Jacques Levron, *La vie quotidienne à la cour de Versailles aux XVII<sup>e</sup> et XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècles* (Paris, 1965), 34.

11 Levron, *La Vie quotidienne*, 52.

12 Franklin, *Dictionnaire historique*. See "Porte-fauteuils," 586.

# THE SEMIOTICS OF FURNITURE FORM



"Joiner's work, armchairs," Denis Diderot and Jean Le Rond D'Alembert, *Encyclopédie ou dictionnaire raisonné des Sciences, des Arts et des Métiers*, vol. VII (Paris, 1769). Courtesy Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library, University of Toronto.

monarch's portrait or other symbols of the state, while we in turn occupy benches situated at a still lower level. Church pews and pulpits are a common variant upon this theme, as are high tables in college and university dining halls.

Yet the chaise *d'aisance* or *de commodité* (commode chair) levels class and reminds us of our common animal status, although Louis XIV saw no threat to either his dignity or his power in condescending to allow an audience even when seated upon that special throne. Louis XIII's fool, Marais, said to him one day: "Il y a deux choses dans votre mestier dont je ne me pourrais accommoder. —Hé! Quoy?—De manger seul et de ch... en compagnie."<sup>13</sup>

The association of the human body with the open forms of furniture is paralleled by the stylistic use of other elements of animate nature. The furniture of Greco-Roman antiquity was unknown in France before the archaeological discoveries of the eighteenth century (Pompeii 1748), yet the lion's paw occurs on some Louis XIV pieces as does the *pied de biche* (doe's foot) long before such elements could be related to classical precedents or models. This almost suggests a Jungian archetype of the collective furniture unconscious, that an identification of animal and human forms constitutes a similar projection or transfer of animate life into the things we make. When the later Louis XVI and Empire styles use animal motifs it is clearly as a consequence of classical influences, in the former for aesthetic reasons, in the latter for ideological purposes as expressed in that imperial style. A local folk reversal can be found in a Louis XIV style *arbalète* commode with boot feet in the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts.

From another conceptual perspective the closed and open forms of furniture in the Louis tradition may be further described through a corresponding distinction between *rectilinear* and *curvilinear* shapes. Case furniture of the seventeenth century for the most part was, in basic configuration, rectangular, square, cubic, its decorative features formed or framed by the parallel lines of multiple mouldings, fielded panels, triangular and lozenge-shaped forms, in an essentially geometric architectural ensemble. Straight lines are first of all technically more simple to execute and in terms of the material used historically (mainly wood), lend themselves to greater structural strength. Straight lines are more artificial and abstract than curves as well, and imply the imposition of a certain order and control upon the material used, a human and intellectual intervention in the random ordering of natural things. Psychologically they suggest according to some theoreticians of perception, through the balance and symmetry of the rectangle, square, and equilateral triangle, a stability and security that contrast with the unpredictability and spontaneity of natural phenomena. This preference for simple geometry, well-defined vertical/horizontal axes and diagonals may also express an ideological content of conservative and authoritarian

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13 Franklin, *Dictionnaire historique*. See "Porte-chaise d'affaires," 85.

values, predictable and well-ordered structures whose reassuring stability excludes all random and eccentric possibilities of change.

Because curved lines are intrinsically more complicated than straight line geometry they may often require complex technical solutions to problems of construction. When the structural or decorative line does not follow the natural grain of the wood, the non-continuous parts of the structure will be subject to breakage, splitting, and greater stress. In perceptual terms, however, curved lines will be closer to naturally occurring forms and will possess greater spontaneity and a larger measure of unpredictability than rectilinear shapes. The effect of the latter will always be more formal, more general, more abstract; the former will suggest, on the other hand, the exuberance and energy of living movement and the particularity and diversity of natural phenomena. This is to say that factors other than practical and expedient motives will play a role in *aesthetic* effect and *psychological* or *ideological* desire or intention.

Abraham Moles insists in a general way that a cultural pre-eminence is accorded to the cube and the rectangle as preferential systems of evolution, and stable functions, that once established in a cultural language, will not be dislodged.<sup>14</sup> Orthogonal preferences may indeed be linked to the human body, erect and perpendicular to the earth, the eyes situated in and directed to the horizontal plane, body balance dependent upon the intersection of the vertical and the horizontal axes, but these are more properly the abstract and conceptual lines of immobility that have subtended Western architecture for thousands of years. In contrast to the curvilinear tendencies of morphologically open furniture, the rectangular nature of architectural space is related to a conceptual system of geometric inspiration from which curves are by no means excluded, but in which they must be related to considerations of a technical nature: material, structural, trigonometric. The arch, the flying buttress, even the perceived exuberance of rococo architectural elements, are subject to structural constraints which inhibit spontaneity of line and impose a conceptual rigidity at odds with the unpredictable and irrational aspects of natural phenomena. Buildings that stray from the abstract and the geometrical in their structure (not necessarily in their decorative aspects) are often psychologically unsettling in their time, freakish in the public eye, and controversial within the professional establishment. Antonio Gaudi's *Sagrada Familia* in Barcelona, Douglas Cardinal's *Museum of Civilization* in Hull, Frank Gehry's recent art museum in Bilbao are renegade buildings because they are based upon natural or irregular rather than geometrically motivated concepts. They exploit the underlying abstraction of landscape and vegetation.

Passing from these general considerations of closed and open forms, architectural and anatomical structures, passive and active functions, rectilinear and curvilinear profiles, to the specifics of period style we can find in the Louis

<sup>14</sup> Abraham Moles, *Théorie des objets* (Paris, 1972), 118.

XIV idiom an emphasis upon the vocabulary of architecture, while the lexicon of the Louis XV style provides a dictionary and grammar of the natural and aesthetic motifs which were to become the most enduring and widely influential of French furniture styles from the eighteenth century to our own day.

The style associated with the name of Louis XIV owes much to the king's initiative in reviving the traditional trades in seventeenth-century France through the establishment of the Royal Manufactories and the introduction into the French system of Italian craftsmen and designers whose new ideas and skills set off a renewal of the decorative arts and furniture making in France. Louis' political ambitions soon began to find material expression in the formality, scale, symmetry, and generally rectangular outlines of furniture whose use of mouldings to frame panels and the entire case, the parallel lines of multiple cornices and lower rails, echoed the architectural settings in which such pieces were placed. Arranged around the perimeter of the room these pieces asserted their identity with its architecture and gave prominence to the "mouldings [which] are to Architecture what Letters are to Writing" in Giacomo da Vignola's words.<sup>15</sup>

The Louis XIV style is not without curves, although these are normally of short radius and often combined with straight lines in balanced arrangements as in the legs of chairs *en façade*, which extend beyond the seat of the chair to form the arm support as well. Curved panels may also delimit the surface areas of armoire doors and sides, shaped in a single semi-circle joined to the verticals of the frame on either side by short, straight, horizontal lines. Motifs too are centrally placed or arranged symmetrically, and imply in emblematic fashion the Sun King's presence and taste through masks, sunbursts, solar wheels, acanthus leaves, and trophies.

First the architectural form in its suggestion of stability and enclosure reinforced by the parallel lines of mouldings determining the limits of the overall piece and its constituent parts, then the symmetrical and balanced composition of the whole and the absence of natural or undulating curves which might express movement or lack of order, and finally the gilding, veneering and marquetry of decorated surfaces (precise, geometric in spirit, tightly organised); all these characteristics express the authoritarian nature of the regime, its centralising ambitions, its love of ceremonial and display, its need for control and order on a continuing basis and so clearly acted out in the invariant aspects of ritual at Versailles, the pecking orders of court life, the geometrical arrangement of the gardens, etc.

The Louis XV style that followed was the antithesis in almost every way of all this. Although the basic morphology of closed and open forms, identifying the former with architecture and the latter with the human body, stands as a

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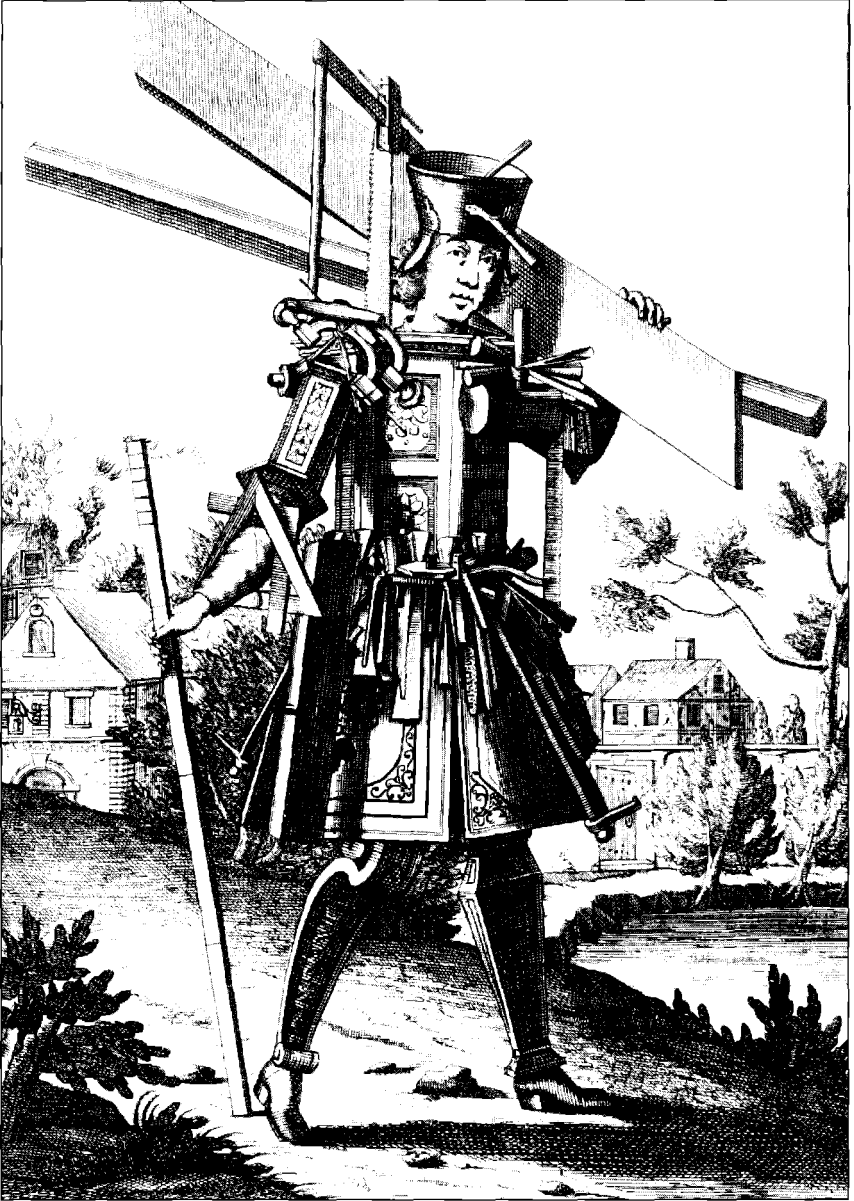
15 *L'Architecture de Vignole avec les commentaires du Sr. Daviler*, vol. I (Paris, 1720), aaaiij.

first principle in the semiotics of Western furniture forms, the distinction between the geometric/rectangular structures and profiles of Louis XIV furniture and the curvilinear dictionary of natural and aesthetic motifs that constitute the Louis XV style will lead in the eighteenth century to the expression of a secondary set of functions quite opposed to those described in relation to the preceding period. The ceremonious, stiff and formal attitudes inherent in Louis XIV furniture, architectural decor, and geometric space are replaced by the informality, even intimacy, of smaller spaces, less majestic size, an emphasis upon comfort rather than ceremony, natural rather than artificial shapes, and motifs drawn from physical nature rather than the products of intellection and conceptual thinking. Cartesian reason gave way to the reason of the senses, best represented perhaps in the dialectical formulations of Denis Diderot and the subversive texts of the *Encyclopédie* which proposed a world of human labour and productivity in which tools and objects were an extension of the artisan's hands and a concrete manifestation of his social identity and needs (physical and psychological).

Nicolas de L'Armessin's *Grotesques et Métiers* of about 1695 anticipates these ideas in an extraordinary series of engravings in which he represents the trades and professions of the end of the seventeenth century. These popular images in the baroque spirit recall the court mascarades of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, in which the royals and the nobles of the realm, including the king, transformed themselves into *garniture de porcelaine* (decorative sets of porcelain), bowling games, or yew trees in imitation of the inhabitants of the park of Versailles as did Louis XV upon the occasion of what came to be known as the "ball of the yew-trees" given to celebrate the marriage of the Dauphin in 1745. De L'Armessin treats the images of tradesmen in an allegorical and balletic style characteristic of the period, in which one might say "clothes make the man," and vice versa. Dressed in his tools and the objects he has himself made, the joiner/cabinetmaker represented in these engravings symbolises the interrelationship of artisan, means of production, and product. In this synoptic image, activity and object produced combine to express the profound relationship of the artist/artisan with the material world in which he lives, human life and energy here depicted and transposed in an ongoing symbiotic exchange.

Irregular, asymmetrical shapes imitating the particularities of animal, vegetable, and mineral phenomena displaced the straight-line geometry and the mechanical predictability of the seventeenth century with foliage, leaves, vines, tendrils, waves, shell forms, in which a play of lines in spirals, volutes, scallops, S and C curves, combined to create an apparently spontaneous and living line in constant transformation. The "sinuous line of beauty" as William Hogarth called it, did not separate or enclose autonomous spaces, but created rather a dynamic of spaces in which inside and outside were both active in the representation of energy. The shell emerged as the dominant motif of the Louis





*"Joiner/Cabinet-maker's attire," N. de L'Armessin, Grotesques et Métiers, c. 1695 (Paris, Cabinet des Estampes). Courtesy Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library, University of Toronto.*

XV style, a complex symbolic and mythological reference subsuming the scientific elements of conchyliology, female human anatomy, and several centuries of aesthetic representation (from Botticelli's "Birth of Venus" to Boucher's pink and pearly nudes). None of this should be separated from the growing interest at the time in the "cabinet de curiosités" and its contents, the word "cabinet" referring to both a piece of furniture and an enclosed architectural repository of exotic objects, natural, scientific, and ethnographic.

This shift from the rectilinear seventeenth to the curvilinear eighteenth is the material representation through object-accessories of a change in the social ideal and the way of life in the early to middle years of the eighteenth century.

I have spoken of furniture within the context of architectural space and related its semiosis to both the architectural shell and the human body, the ways in which differing forms, active and passive, *meuble* and *immeuble*, participate in the activities of everyday life. I want now to open the door literally into another space, the open spaces of nature as opposed to the enclosed spaces of humanity, to show how this environment too had its effect upon furniture historically in the time and space of the Louis styles in France and their English counterparts. For a moment, high style and vernacular forms touched visually as the former extended its reach into the realm of nature tamed and domesticated with the development in France and England of formal and natural gardens – nature denied and nature improved respectively. Just as interior decor is related generally to architectural space, so too were tables, chairs, benches – open furniture forms related to the human body rather than architecture – made to fit in with the natural, outdoor setting through the use of the material most obviously suited to the purpose, the roots, trunks, branches, and twigs of trees more or less transformed by the artificialities of geometry and human intervention. The assimilation of manufactured and processed articles to naturally occurring forms was a sleight-of-hand endeavour similar in spirit, although more obvious in execution, to the landscape improvements brought to the grounds and gardens of country houses in England. As John Evelyn put it: "Caves, Grotts, Mounts and irregular ornaments ... contribute to contemplative and philosophical enthousiasm [sic]."<sup>16</sup> The sources both possible and certain for the converging elements of rococo, rocaille, picturesque, and rustic are extremely complex. On the human and social side, the pastoral tradition in its literary forms must be counted an influence as well as the social structures and ideals of certain élites as shaped by classical references and earlier adaptations of them. In France, Antoine Watteau's *fêtes galantes* refer to the former – an idealised society of shepherds and shepherdesses playing at love in a rustic setting, while the ladies of the courts of Louis XV and XVI, Mme de Pompadour

16 From a letter to Sir Thomas Browne dated 28 January 1657. Quoted in Philippa Lewis and Gillian Darley, *Dictionary of Ornament* (New York, 1986), 151.



*Fanciful chair design published by George Edwards and Matthew Darly in A New Book of Chinese Designs calculated to improve the Present Taste, consisting of Figures, Buildings and Furniture... etc. (London, 1754). Courtesy Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library, University of Toronto.*

and Marie-Antoinette, acted out Watteau's images of fabricated simplicity based upon this idealised vision of rural life in make-believe natural settings at total variance with the realities of peasant life.

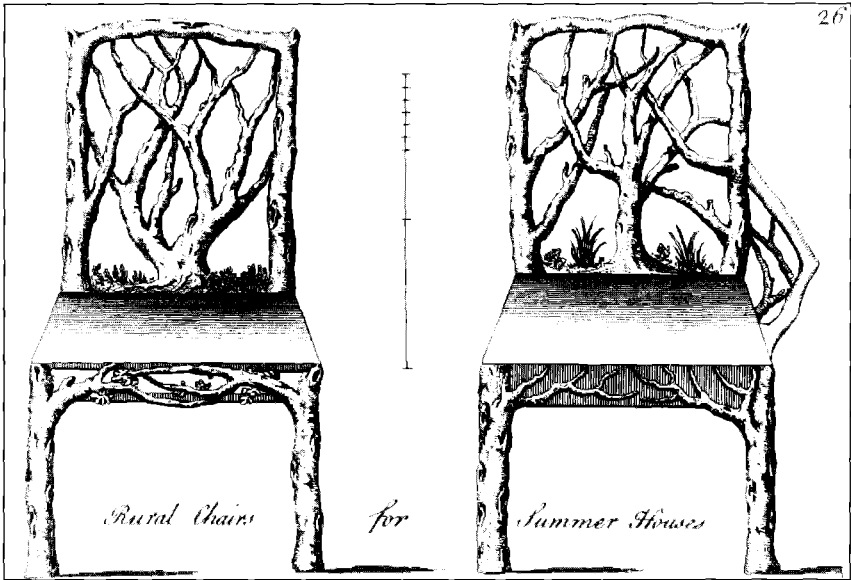
Unlike this aestheticisation of rustic forms, vernacular furniture is tied to use value above all else. Its generic nature is maximal, its *semantic* content is completely realised, while *aesthetic* value is muted at best and exchange value is not an issue.

Robert Manwaring's *The Cabinet and Chair-Maker's Real Friend and Companion, or the Whole System of Chair Making Made Plain and Easy* proposes "...very rich and elegant rural Chairs for Summer-houses finely ornamented with Carvings, Fountains and beautiful Landscapes, with the Shepherd and his Flock, Reaper and Binders of Corn, Rock Work, etc. Also some very beautiful Designs, supposed to be executed with the Limbs of Yew, Apple, or Pear Trees, ornamented with Leaves and Blossoms, which if properly painted will appear like Nature..."<sup>17</sup>

This was country life for city people or rather people in society, a hierarchical and formal society which, it seems, needed another set of conventions to offset the pressures and complexities of life at court, the aristocracy playing at rural living.

The transposition of this stylistic phenomenon into Victorian North America was, at the beginning, largely within the context of the picturesque and the development, particularly in literary terms, of the Romantic sensibility which gave an entirely different meaning to the natural world. Nature was no longer part of a potentially harmonious and unthreatening setting that might be further improved upon by judicious intervention and the application of principles of good taste and measure. It was rather an overwhelming and dangerous presence to be feared and resisted. And trees were an impediment to civilised life rather than an enhancement of it and a source of aesthetic pleasure. Natural materials were to be used for practical purposes, and their transformation into the goods of daily life was in many cases born of necessity rather than from a desire for aesthetic effect. There was no time or wish to play at country living. In short, the European vernacular tradition which had little or nothing to do with the fashion for rustic furniture in eighteenth-century England and France found its counterpart throughout North America in the functional adaptation of natural materials to the requirements of everyday life: a house made of logs, a chair hewn from the trunk of a tree, birch-bark containers, or burl bowls, implements and domestic furniture, simply made, from the materials to hand, for immediate purposes.

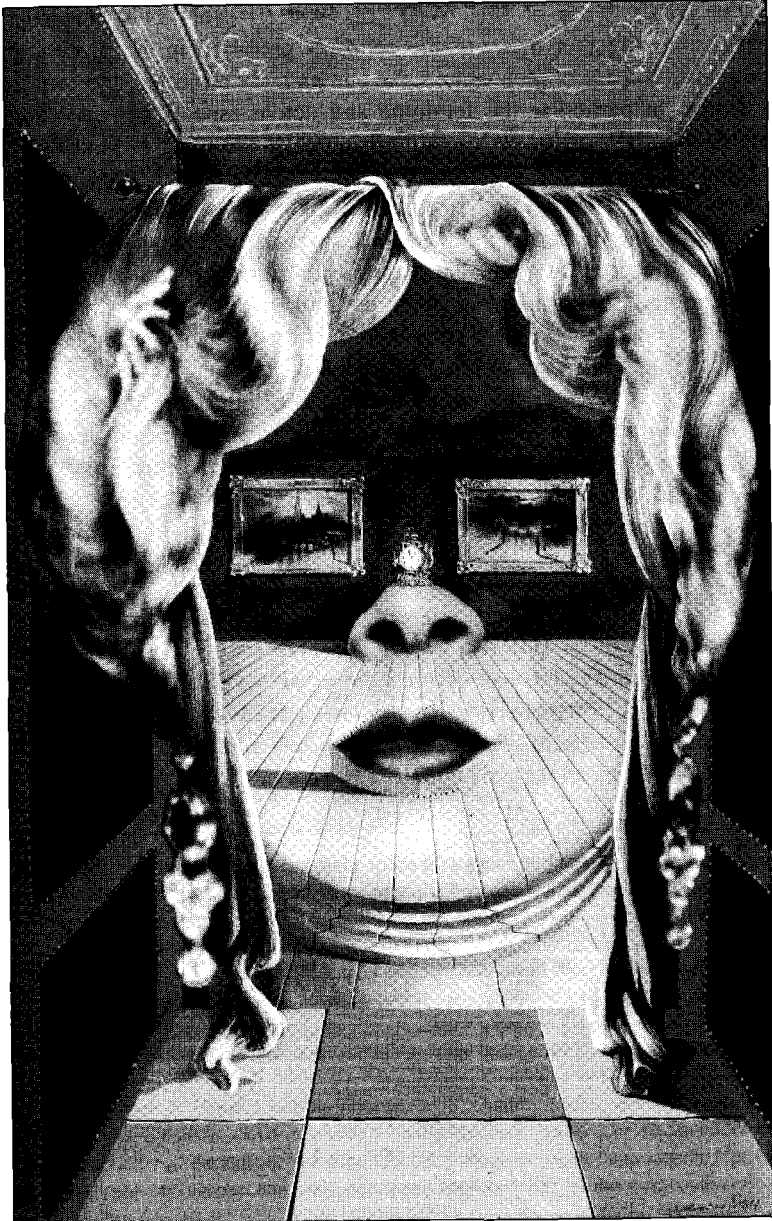
<sup>17</sup> Robert Manwaring, *The Cabinet and Chair-Maker's Real Friend and Companion, or the Whole System of Chair Making Made Plain and Easy* (London, 1765). From the title page.



Robert Manwaring, *The Cabinet and Chair Maker's Real Friend and Companion, or the Whole System of Chair Making made Plain and Easy* (London, 1765). Courtesy Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library, University of Toronto.

A further consequence of nature *confronted* in this manner was a reversal of direction in terms of the relationship between social man and the physical world. The many pattern books of eighteenth-century England and France project, in a limited way, interior decoration into the landscape through the principle of nature improved, as in the summer-house chairs of Robert Manwaring; these are artefacts masquerading as found objects of natural shape. The vernacular productions of nineteenth-century North America move in the opposite direction bringing nature into the domestic interior as a practical necessity without, in the first stages, aesthetic forethought. Stick and twig furniture, like the front porch upon which much of it found a place eventually, was a point of juncture in this dynamic of space whose counterpart in the adjacent interior was the hall tree, the hat rack, the umbrella stand, and the like, just as some of the hall chairs in European pattern books of the eighteenth century had sprouted limbs and leafy embellishments in apparent anticipation of movement in the direction of the summer house, the park lodge, and the folly.

From general, conceptual categories, through period styles culture-bound in time and space, we come finally to our own perspective in the here and now. My conclusion is, of course, open-ended, and takes the form of an ambiguous and amusingly ironic image.



Salvador Dalí, "Mae West," gouache on paper, c. 1934, 29.2 x 17.8 cm.. Gift of Mrs. Gilbert W. Chapman, 1949, #517 © 1989, The Art Institute of Chicago, All Rights Reserved. Courtesy of the Art Institute of Chicago.

Salvador Dalí's "Face of Mae West" of 1934 (Useable as a Surrealist Apartment) brings together many of the concepts proposed in the preceding pages: the enclosed space of architecture, the human body projected into certain furniture forms, in particular the feminine and active aspects of decor and arrangement, as expressed in the narrative content of the image: "And don't forget – come up and see me sometime?" as Mae West says to Cary Grant in *I'm No Angel* (1933). The sofa lips, front and centre, were twice made in wood and satin, the colour of Schiaparelli's shocking pink lipstick of the period (1934-35). The fireplace-nose and the picture-eyes represent and invest both the curvilinear and the orthogonal with psychological meaning, bringing together subject and object within a curtain-frame of curly hair in a single *mise en scène*. Just as the portrait captures the essence of its sitter, so the decor we create around us stands as a material representation of ourselves. At the same time Dalí cuts down to size – room size – some of the great themes and achievements of high art – the female body truncated, the Dutch genre scene, the psychology of portraiture, the mimetic ideal in general.

Let us turn historiography around then for a moment and claim the material world in its "thingness" as the primary documentation whose meaning can often be confirmed or developed by the additional information contained in aesthetic and written documents as secondary sources.