

Abstract

A Study of the Development and Influences of the "Balloon Back Chair" in Early Nineteenth-Century America

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A Study of the Development and Influences of the "Balloon Back Chair" in Early Nineteenth-Century America analyzes and explores the history and origin of three examples of exceptional curvilinear chairs made in New York in the early nineteenth century. Although this chair form, an orphan in the study of nineteenth-century furniture designs, is significantly different in design from earlier nineteenth-century forms, this departure from the rectilinearity of the preceding Federal style has not been the focus of scholars or connoisseurs. As such, consensus is elusive on defining most aspects of this chair.

The motivation of this study, the first of its kind for the curvilinear chair, is to clarify the confusion on the date and place of origin as well as its etymology and to place the curvilinear chair in its correct historical context, at the end of the Neoclassical period. This is accomplished by plotting the early emergence of the chair's prototype within the transition between the Neoclassical and Rococo periods.

The study is able to document the date of emergence of the chair by reviewing preceding furniture forms to determine whether the chair is a revival style or a new form and examining daybooks and furniture pattern books. In doing so, it determines that the American versions of the curvilinear chair appeared earlier than previously believed and were influenced by the English firm Gillows & Sons, rather than previously suggested French sources.

The thesis concludes by placing these curvilinear chairs in the larger history of design by recounting the cycles of art history between orderly rectilinearity and natural or organic curvilinearity. As an object of material culture, this chair represents one part of an impressive cycle in design, following the pendulum as it swings from the rectilinear to the curvilinear and back, in a process that has been ongoing for centuries. Originating in Lancaster, England in 1822, spreading to Bristol and New York in the 1820s and 1830s, this English design successfully evolved into a globalized chair in a variety of different forms. It peaked in the mid-to-late nineteenth century but has enjoyed a second revival and then a redesign in the twenty-first century.

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