

# EGYPTIAN FURNITURE: ANCIENT AND REVIVALS

*How do they relate to each other?*

James Goodwin

Concerning Egypt itself I shall extend my remarks to a great length, because there is no country that possesses so many wonders, nor any that has such a number of works which defy description' wrote Herodotus, the so-called 'Father of History', in 484-425 BC.

Four thousand years on from their

earliest artistic creations, Egyptian-styled art continues to capture the collector's imagination as *Forbes* magazine pointed out six years ago in an article 'The revival that won't die'. Alongside this fascination is a belief that ancient Egyptian civilisation is central to the development of much Western art and architecture.

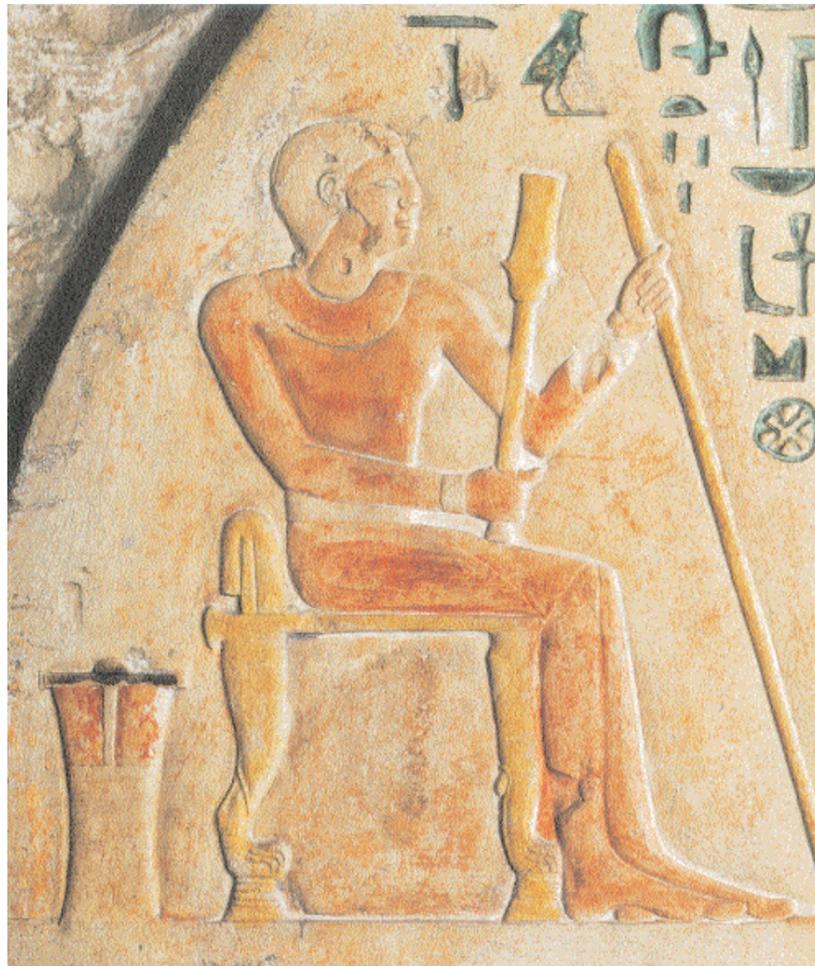
In fact, interest in Egyptian objects was first recorded during Rome's Republic which was later resurrected by Octavian's naval victory over Cleopatra at Actium in 30 BC and enhanced by the collecting habits of Emperor Hadrian in AD 117-138. Added to this, there was an increasing amount of allusion to Egypt in Roman art.

Moreover, since the Middle Ages there have been over five revivals and re-revivals of varying magnitude, length and interpretation, according to James Curl. All of which makes interpretation of the influence of the originals that much more difficult for art historians.

So to what extent would Egyptian revival furniture be recognisable to the ancient Egyptians?

For the purpose of simplicity, Egyptian furniture revivals may best be divided into (a) exact copies of the originals, (b) derivations and designs based on Egyptian architecture, and (c) symbolism. In practice, the last of these amounted to no more than the addition of a crocodile, sphinx, pharaonic head or winged disc added to an article of conventional form which could be substituted with Greek or other motifs, according to Patrick Conner. The aim was exoticism with eclecticism. Thousands of armchairs, commodes and furniture of all kinds all over the world have been decorated with these figures from Louis XVI to the present.

Fundamentally, most of the furniture discoveries date from the mid rather than the early 19th century when Egyptian revivals reached their peak. Notable Egyptian furniture finds were at Deir el Bahri from the 1860s, Saqqara from 1884, Tel al Amarna from 1887, Naqada from 1895, Nag el Deir from 1901, Deir el Medina from 1905, Valley of the Kings from 1922 and Giza from



An Egyptian treasurer, Meru, sits on a seat with lions' feet on tall truncated conical bases; the seat has a low back, over which is draped a cushion. The frame ends in lotus flowers; there are traces of black on it, indicating that the wood employed was ebony. 11th Dynasty, Abydos, Drovetti Collection.

1925. The survival of many of the best examples was helped by the dry climate and sealed underground tombs.

Thanks to this, there are nearly 1,000 fragments of furniture in 73 museums worldwide, according to Geoffrey Killen. A third of these are found in the UK though the best examples from the Hetepheres (2500 BC), Yuia & Thuiu (1200 BC) and Tutankhamun (1500 BC) collections remain in their home country.

The enduring qualities and, as far as we know, originality of ancient Egyptian furniture are unparalleled. Egyptian furniture was exported and given in tribute to foreign dignitaries as well as serving as the model for other ancient cultures and furniture makers today.

In practical terms, necessitated by a shortage of domestic timber, the Egyptians invented many wood-working tools (4000-1500 BC), joints (2000-1750 BC), dowels (2700 BC), veneer (3000 BC), inlay (2600 BC), glue (2400 BC), gesso (1500 BC), varnish (1500 BC) and plywood (2700 BC), as well as weaving and dyeing (1300 BC). In the design of furniture, during the Middle Kingdom (2000 BC) they developed a drawing technique familiar to artists today based on a grid system where the human figure was broken down into measured parts. With these skills the following types of furniture were developed: beds (3000 BC), boxes (3000 BC), tables



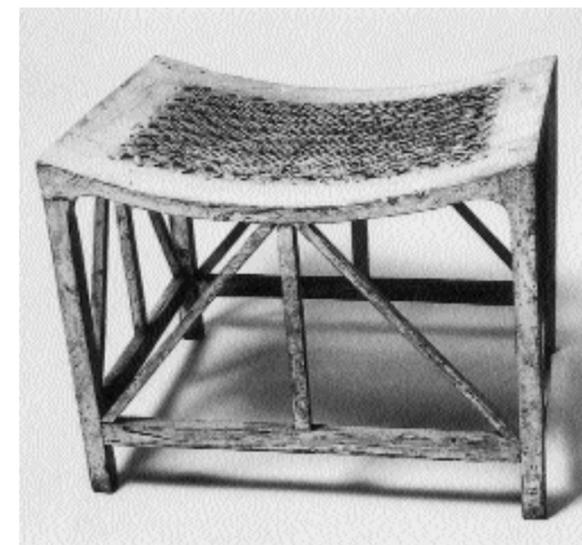
Folding stool with ducks' heads, richly inlaid with ivory and ebony, with leather-covered seat. (Deir el-Medina, Tomb of Kha, Schiaparelli excavations, 1906; Museo Egizio, Turin)

(2400 BC), types of stool and chairs (2700 BC), cushions (1500 BC) and games boards (1500 BC).

Owing to these archaeological discoveries it was not until the last 150 years that any designs were faithfully reproduced from the originals. Hitherto, many designers, even those who were collectors of antiquities, had acknowledged the difficulty of adapting

Egyptian furniture or even applying its ornament to modern purposes.

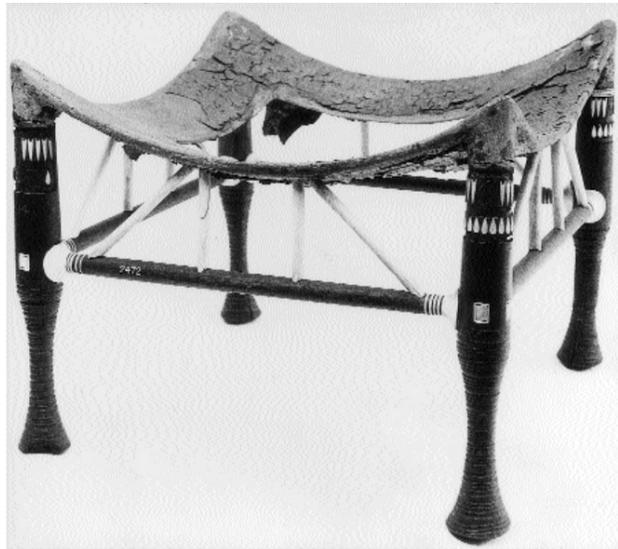
However, as the 19th century progressed credibility became the overriding aim. According to Jean-Marcel Humbert, Curator of the Louvre, even the sphinxes, not found on ancient Egyptian furniture, became more like the originals. Significantly, those that did reproduce the originals



A more common item of domestic furniture is the stool with lattice support, with seat of plaited herringbone-style cords. (Deir el-Medina, Tomb of Kha, Schiaparelli excavations, 1906; Museo Egizio, Turin)



This type of three-legged stool is especially common in representations of workshops, being highly practical as a work seat. (Schiaparelli excavations, 1906; Museo Egizio, Turin)



Round-legged stool, c.1540-1295 BC. (British Museum, BM EA 2472. Photograph courtesy of Lorraine March-Killen)



Thebes stool in mahogany with velvet mohair seat, Liberty & Co, c.1885. This stool has been attributed to Christopher Dresser and was advertised by the Art Furnishers Alliance. When that company failed in 1883, the design was taken and patented by Liberty's. (Courtesy Liberty's)

found their designs mass-produced.

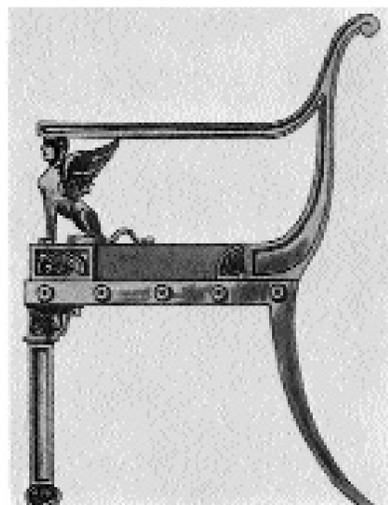
In the 1870s, helped by the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869, the value of the furniture trade in Egypt was the highest in Africa which was second only to Europe, according to Edward Joy. The industrially-inspired period to follow was described by Christiane Ziegler of the Louvre as the democratisation of Egyptomania.

Holman Hunt seems to have been the first designer to create a chair based upon an original: the four-legged Thebes stool sold by Liberty's 30 years

later. Moreover, he appears to have been the first designer to realise the creative possibilities of imitating the construction of Egyptian furniture. Hunt had travelled to Egypt in 1854 as a painter and had said that 'in furnishing my new house (in Fulham) I was determined, as far as possible, to eschew the vulgar furniture of the day ... and the designing of the chair based on the character of an Egyptian stool in the British Museum, was to serve as a permanent piece of beautiful furniture.'

Decorated with seven inlaid lotuses derived from a different stool, the addition of a back was the only innovation on the original. A pair of these chairs made by J.G. Crace of London in 1856 in walnut, sycamore, ivory, ebony and cane can be found in the Birmingham Museum and one was later depicted in a Sir John Everett Millais painting. Soon other members of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood had Egyptianising furniture made.

Equally the style was not without its detractors. In the 1860s, A.W.N. Pugin,



'Egyptian' designs for three open back armchairs by George Smith, 1808.



in his bid to promote the Gothic style, taught that only medieval furniture was based upon principles of sound construction. Christopher Dresser responded in his 1873 book 'Principles of Decorative Design', drawing the conclusion that pleasing line and quality of material as well as construction were important. Several of Dresser's designs are based on Egyptian prototypes, including a mahogany sofa with leather seat and back, strengthened with ties to the cross rails between the legs and decorated with uraeus (snake) friezes. Dresser also produced cast iron armchairs decorated with papyrus. In 1878 Batley went further by designing a dining-room plan derived directly from the wall ornamentation of tombs and mastabas. Furniture derived from originals formed the indispensable complement to the decor.

Drawing on these designs, the Liberty Furnishing and Decorating Studio began, in 1884, to manufacture patented 'Thebes' stools (and chairs) based upon surviving Egyptian furniture in the British Museum. These stools with four round legs were developed in Egypt during the 18th Dynasty (1500 BC) and were directly influenced by the simple stool with shaped legs of the Middle Kingdom. Whether the legs were made by primitive lathe or by hand carving, filing and rubbing with sandstone is disputed. Fine examples of the originals can also be found at the University Museum, Manchester, Metropolitan Museum, New York and the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford.

According to David Beevers, they are perhaps the most familiar expression of Victorian Egyptian taste. They were mass-produced until 1919 in walnut, oak and mahogany with leather or rosewood straps and are occasionally sold today. In October 2005, the *Antiques Trade Gazette* recorded the sale of a Liberty's stool in walnut at Winterton's auction house, Derbyshire for £1,500. Usually their prices range from £400 to £2,000.

Another 'Thebes' stool manufactured by Liberty's, but with three curved legs, was copied from an original dating from the Middle Kingdom and now in the Salt Collection at the British Museum. Other original examples can be seen at University College, London and the

Royal Scottish Museum, Edinburgh. A reproduction can be seen at the Royal Pavilion, Brighton.

According to Killen, the first Egyptian example of a three-legged stool was discovered much earlier at a grave in Tarkhan (2600 BC). By the time of the New Kingdom (1500 BC) the greater affluence of craftsmen led to them sitting on these stools rather than squatting. To increase comfort, the stool seat was dished with the front edge straight and the back fashioned into a rounded form with three square mortice holes to accommodate the leg tenons. This type of construction led Nancy Goyné Evans, in the 1979 edition of the *Furniture History Society Journal*, to observe a similarity to Windsor chair design of the early 18th century.

The finest example of a three-legged stool was found in the tomb of Tutankhamun, and is now housed in the Egyptian Museum, Cairo. In this example, the seat is pierced and finely carved on both faces to represent two lions bound head to tail by their feet. Between the brace and the seat is the characteristic openwork motif representing the union of Upper and Lower Egypt.

During Hellenistic times (332-330 AD), the three-legged stools evolved into tables which, in rectangular form, had played a religious role since the Archaic Period (3100-2686 BC). In 1876, E.W. Godwin developed a table based on the four-legged stool which was also sold in large numbers. Better known for his Anglo-Japanese designs,



An 'Egyptian' design from George Smith's book of 1808. A painted and parcel-gilt armchair with lion head terminals, a Medusa mask flanked by scrolls, caned sides and lion monopodia front and back.

his drawings also included copies of ancient Egyptian furniture, especially the lattice bracing on stools which was so popular during the New Kingdom. This bracing added to the stool's load-bearing capabilities. It should be noted that Godwin was not interested in direct reproductions, preferring 'a modern treatment of certain well known and admired styles'.

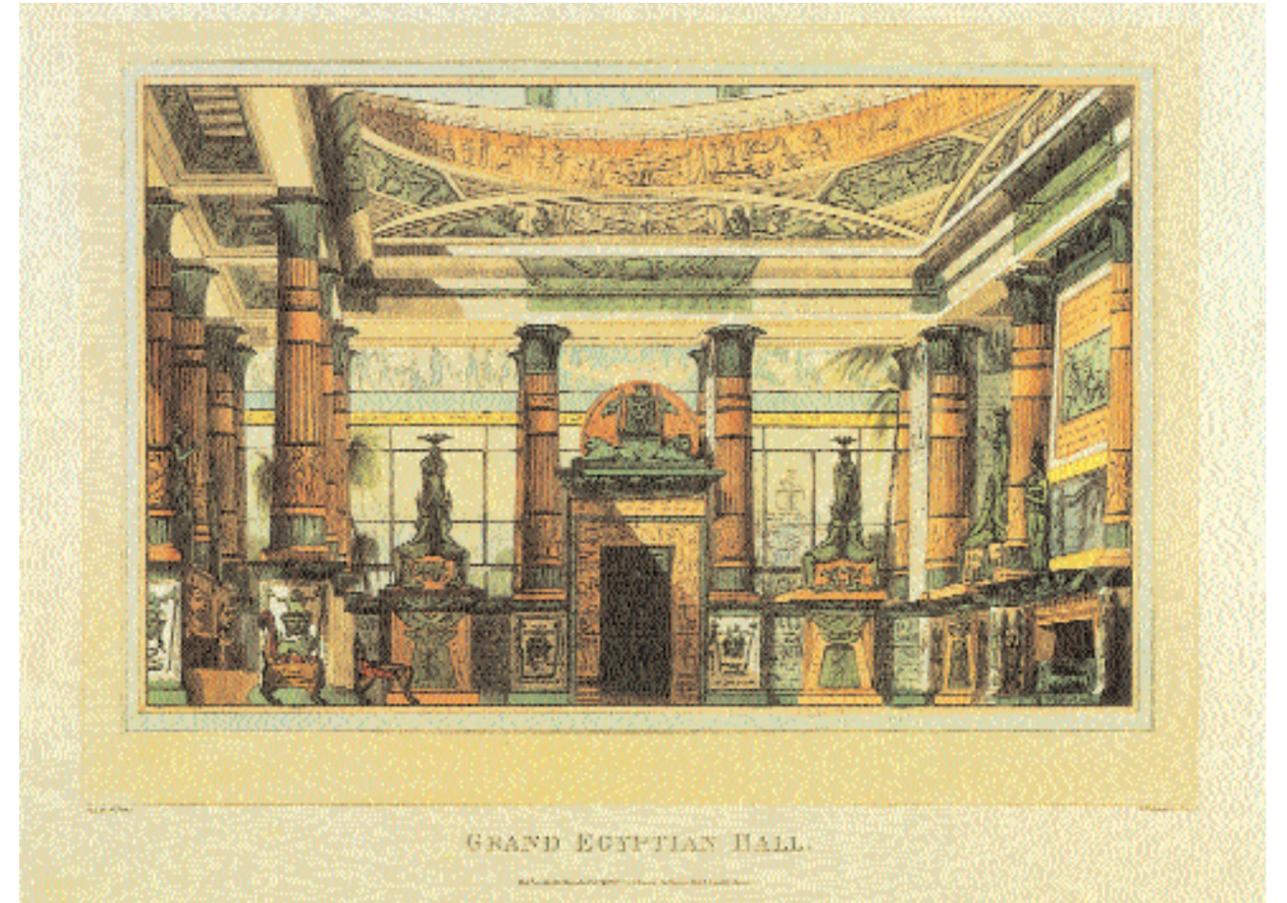
Most of Godwin's designs were produced commercially by William Watt and Collinson & Lock and marketed by Art Furnishers Alliance in Bond Street. Today examples can be found in the V&A, while ancient versions can be seen at the Brooklyn Museum, New York, Medelhavsmuseet, Stockholm and the Egyptian museums in Turin and Cairo.

A folding stool made in 1880 in mahogany with ebony and ivory inlay and illustrated in Gardner Wilkinson's *The manners and customs of the ancient Egyptians* in 1837 was another replica of ancient Egyptian furniture. The folding stool which originated during the Middle Kingdom was popular because it was light and easily stored but rigid when used. By the New Kingdom it had become a fashionable

*Right. Armchair, painted black and gold with bronzed and gilded ornament, from the 'Egyptian' Room at Duchess Street, illustrated in Household Furniture.*



*Below. Mahogany desk with carved 'Egyptian' and philosophers' heads, made by Thomas Chippendale the Younger for the library at Stourhead in 1805, costing £115.*



*Grand Egyptian Hall from Gaetano Landi's Architectural Decorations, 1810, illustrating many of the Egyptian ornamental motifs popular for decorative details on furniture.*

piece of furniture depicted in many wall reliefs. The most common characteristic is that the terminals connecting spindles and rails are finished with goose heads and decorated with ivory inlaid isosceles triangles to imitate feathers. Three folding stools were found in Tutankhamun's tomb, and it was observed that the pharaoh's throne chair is very similar in design.

In the first part of the 20th century faithful replicas of recently discovered Egyptian originals continued to be made, principally armchairs and couches. The furniture discovered in the tomb of Yuia & Thuiu in 1905 was copied almost immediately and continued to be made even after the large quantities of furniture were found in the 1922 discovery of Tutankhamun's tomb. The replication was so extensive that it was sometimes difficult to identify the date and place

of manufacture. The pure lines of the originals were surprisingly consistent with the new aesthetic and lent themselves to the Art Deco idiom.

Amidst all this Egyptomania, it is worth offering a few words of wisdom regarding their revivals, courtesy of the German art historian, Wilhelm Worringer writing in the late 1920s. He argued that the highly stylised and conservative character of ancient Egyptian art satisfied deep psychological needs and that in periods of uncertainty people rekindled the need for its abstract forms to counteract alienation. For example, in the mid-19th century Egypt had been used as a standard of reference: it was the land of wisdom and justice, whose values were to be infused into police stations, prisons and court houses. In commerce, Egyptianising references were used to highlight the solidity, permanence and quality of products.

While under Napoleon it was arguably manipulated to support a more sinister revolutionary ideology.

Today, as price records for two Egyptian statues were surpassed in one auction at Christie's New York last December, London awaits the 'Tutankhamun and the Golden Age of the Pharaohs' exhibition in November 2007 (currently touring the USA) and the world anticipates the Great Egyptian Museum in Cairo in 2010, Egyptian furniture may again be due for a revival. The last major revival was in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Depending on your psychological stance, the next revival may be a welcome ray of sun brightening any dark clouds ahead.

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