

# 6 Properly Seated

In 1503, Henry VII's daughter, Princess Margaret, traveled to Scotland to marry James IV. At their prenuptial meeting at the Castle of Newbotell, she properly sat on a stool and he on the only chair. She showed some discomfort, and, in an act of courtesy, the king overturned the normal rank order, "because the Stole of the Quene was not for hyr Ease [he]...gaffe hyr the said Chayre."

A man, a king what is more, giving a lady, even if she was a princess, the only chair and seating himself on a stool. Unheard of behavior in the sixteenth century when who sat on a chair and who on a stool was of the highest social significance. But King James was not the only top-ranked figure to overturn the natural order of things. A full century and a half later, the Duke of Tuscany, whose titles were also "prince" and "his highness," followed suit. The occasion was a banquet, held in his honor, by the Earl of Pembroke in 1669. Count Magliotti, the duke's secretary, recorded the scene.

There was prepared for his highness, at the head of the table, an arm-chair which he insisted upon the young lady's taking; upon which the Earl instantly drew forward another similar one, on which the serene prince sat, in the highest place, all the rest sitting on stools. His highness obliged the earl to take the place nearest to him, though in his own house; and there were at the table, besides all his highness's gentlemen, the sheriff and several other gentlemen, in all sixteen. The dinner was superb, and served in a noble style; they remained at the table about two hours.



"...[he] gaffe hyr the said Chayre..." Mid-sixteenth-century great chair of caquetteuse form. Oak. Scottish. Courtesy private collection.



"...because the Stole of the Quene was not for hyr Ease..." Boarded stool, English, 1550-1600. Courtesy Private Collection.

## A Gallery of Great Chairs or Wainscots



Box seated chair with open arms. Carved back panel and crest, dated 1614 (see "Half Eight" p. 185) Seat slides to provide access to the box. Heavy slab arms. c. 1615. Seat: 23 1/2" w x 20 1/2" d x 20 1/2" h. Back: 46" h. Courtesy Fiske & Freeman.



Box chair, paneled beneath the arms, oak, mid-seventeenth century. 44" h. Seat: 23" w x 19" d x 17" h. Courtesy Fiske & Freeman.



Box chair, with front left open to provide comfort for the feet rather than storage. The wear on the front stretcher attests to the wisdom of the joiner's decision. Back panel with Somerset quatrefoil. c. 1650-75. Courtesy Fiske & Freeman.



Early fifteenth-century Scottish arm chair with arched base, spirally carved arm supports and two-paneled back. Seat lost, arms probably replaced. Courtesy private collection.



Elizabethan great chair, Devon, 1560-80. Found in a farm outbuilding where its arms had been used as a saw-horse. The back panel is unusual in having horizontal grain and decoration. Stretchers lost, one front leg replaced. Compare with the Dennis chair, p. 143. Courtesy private collection.



Elizabethan great chair with remarkable strapwork carving. Oak, 1580-1600. Courtesy private collection.

The markers of rank are precise: the duke (his “highness” or “serene prince”) outranked the host, who was a mere earl, and so it was he who dictated the seating arrangements. Even the earl had to sit on a stool.

What mattered most to the actors in this mini-drama was the enactment of social authority, both in deciding who sat on a chair and who on a stool, and also in who had the power to make that decision, in this case, the guest, not the host. There is little doubt about how important this was: Magliotti described the seating arrangements in great detail; the dinner itself he covered in a sentence.

Stools and chairs: the difference between them was perhaps the most important social distinction that furniture could make.



Great chair, exuberantly carved. Two-panel back, with intermediate rail carved to resemble a panel. Impressive crest and ears designed to emphasize the importance of the sitter. English, oak, c. 1630. Courtesy Fiske & Freeman.



At the royal court, etiquette decreed that only the sovereign could sit on a chair: in the royal presence, his or her subjects, even the most aristocratic ones, either stood or sat on stools or even on cushions on the floor. The great households followed the court: seating was a matter of social hierarchy, not of comfort. People were made more comfortable by knowing where they sat than by what they sat on.

Great chair and stool. The chair probably Scottish, c. 1640. Seat 25" w x 18" d x 18 1/2" h. Back 45" h. The box stool English, 1630-1650. Courtesy Fiske & Freeman.

## The Great Chair

It was not just the placement of the chair at the dining table that mattered: it was the wooden form of the chair itself. The great chair, now usually called a “wainscot chair,” was thronelike: it was designed to translate social authority into wood. Seated in it at the most important position at the table (or the “board”), the master of the household was literally, as we’ve called him ever since, the “chairman of the board.”

## A Gallery of Great Chairs or Wainscots (continued)



Elizabethan great chair, the back panel originally with floral inlay. Base built up. Oak, 1580-1600. Courtesy private collection.



Great chair, remarkable because made of cedar. Stop-fluted legs and arm supports, Arcaded back filled with flower bearing a tulip and acorns(!) Architectural crest rail. 1600-1620. Courtesy Fiske & Freeman.



Great chair, dated 1636 with exceptional panel carved with Adam and Eve. Crest rail, feet and stretchers replaced. Courtesy Fiske and Freeman.



Paneled great chair with nulled crest rail and scalloped seat rail. Replaced stretchers. 1600-1625. Courtesy private collection.



Great chair with two-panel back and square-sectioned, chamfered legs. Welsh. c. 1650. Courtesy Jan and John Maggs Antiques.



Late Elizabethan great chair, oak, 1590-1615. Courtesy John Adams Collection.



Throne chair, with box seat and linenfold panels. English, oak, late fifteenth century. 72" h x 34" w x 18" d. Courtesy Bunratty Castle, Ireland.

In its day, the great chair was often called, simply, a "chair" – a chair had arms, and the name was enough to distinguish it from a stool or a backstool. Sometimes it was called a "joined chair" to distinguish it from one made by a turner (see below), and frequently, as in the account above, an "arm-chair."

But whatever we call it today, wainscot, joined, paneled or great, the seventeenth-century chair is the one form of furniture that was not disregarded and discarded in subsequent periods. Today it is perhaps the most eagerly collected of all forms. Wainscot chairs are beautiful, widely varied in decoration, deeply characteristic of their period, and, even without a cushion, surprisingly comfortable. It is no wonder

that they have remained a treasured part of English domestic life over the centuries.

The great chair derives from the thronelike chairs of the Middle Ages, massive structures, often with canopies, that were far too heavy to move. But then, of course, if the chair were in the place of authority, there would have been no cause to move it. By the early sixteenth century, more reasonably sized chairs that derived from it were coming into fashion. Like their medieval predecessors, these chairs were typically boxed in to the ground with a seat that lifted for access. Their backs were paneled, and on the sides the panels reached from the ground up to the arms. On the earliest examples the panels were carved with linenfold or "Romayne" work, and the overall appearance was thoroughly medieval.

Alongside them, however, more movable, more domestic looking chairs were also becoming fashionable. The paneling was confined to the back, and the arms and base were open. In Elizabethan and Jacobean houses, the chair may have declined in size and may have become moveable but it still



Box chair with arms paneled in: Draught proof. English, oak, c. 1620. 23 1/2" w x 20 1/2" d x 46" h. Seat: 20 1/2" h. Courtesy Fiske & Freeman.

## A Gallery of Great Chairs or Wainscots (continued)



James I great chair retaining many Elizabethan features. West Country. 1610-30. Courtesy Fiske & Freeman.



James I great chair, West Country, 1610-1630. The panel later initialed and dated "MC 1680." Courtesy Camcote Collection.



Late Elizabethan great chair with double-arcaded back inlaid with geometric pattern (inlay now lost). c. 1600. Courtesy Stair Auctions.



Armchair with Somerset quatrefoil and bobbin-turned legs, c. 1680. Courtesy Camcote Collection.



Great chair with arcaded back and splendid crest. Cotswolds, 1600-25. Courtesy Mark Jones Antiques.



Armchair with the massive crest and ears typical of the Leeds region, c. 1680. Courtesy Fiske & Freeman.

symbolized social power. When Capulet ordered the floor cleared for dancing (see p. 107), the tables, stools, and even the court cupboard were moved aside, but not, significantly, the chair.

The backs of great chairs vary widely, both in construction and decoration. Until about 1630 the top rail of the back was usually set between the upright stiles, but from about 1600 onwards, we begin to find top rails set over the stiles, sometimes protruding a couple of inches on either side with scrolled ears between their underside and the outside edge of the stiles.

The carving was what mattered most to the original owner – as to the modern collector. On many chairs, the most skilled artistry was devoted to the crest rail, which was set above the stiles and the top rail, often extending sideways so that it protruded an inch or more beyond the stiles. In these cases, it often had scrolled brackets, known as “ears,” between its lower edge and the outer edge of the stiles.

Besides pulling out all the technical stops for the crest rail, the carver also gave his imagination free rein, so that on crest rails we can find carving that is least bound by convention or by the structure of the chair. The reason for all this artistry is obvious: when the man of the house sits in the chair, the crest rail is still visible around his head. It literally magnifies the head of the head of the household.

The back panel provided another inviting canvas for the carver, but here his art was structurally constrained: the panels on chair backs often echo the panels on coffer fronts for both occupy structurally similar positions. The backs may have one or two panels and in rare examples, usually from Scotland, the panels may not extend down to the seat – the gap is known as a “letter box.”

Because great chairs were more prestigious than coffers, we often find more imaginatively developed designs on them. But not on all: chair backs can range



from the stunningly original through the boringly conventional to the completely plain. The framing members of a chair back, like those of a coffer, are often carved with running motifs, with those on the top rail usually being more elaborate than those on the bottom, because, obviously, it was closer to eye level. But, whatever the design, the best chair backs show a range of color from dark chocolate to chestnutty red from the wear of the thousands of backs that have rubbed against them. Color and patina are every bit as important as carving to the collector.

In some Elizabethan chairs, as in later provincial ones, particularly from the Leeds area, the carving is enhanced with inlay. Often the inlay is in straight lines of checkerboard or saw-tooth pattern, either

Well carved great chair with pronounced crest and ears. English, Leeds area, c. 1650. Seat: 27-3/4" w x 17" d x 16-1/2" h. Back: 42" h x 25" w. Courtesy Fiske & Freeman.

## A Gallery of Great Chairs or Wainscots (continued)



Armchair with carved back panel and crest, Lancashire/Cheshire, c. 1680. Courtesy Keith Hockin Antiques.



Small armchair with bobbin turnings, and the double humped crest rail typical of Wales. 1675-1700. Courtesy Fiske & Freeman.



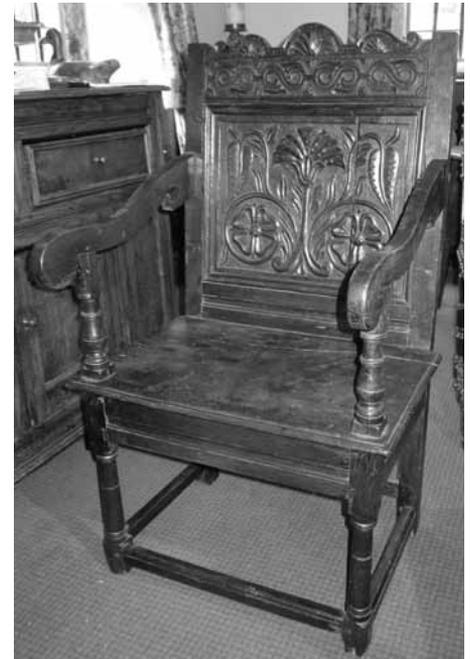
Armchair carved with lozenges and rondels. Cheshire/Lancashire, c. 1680. Courtesy Peter Bunting Antiques.



Armchair with carved back panel and crest rail, and, most unusually, turned and carved arm supports. Lancashire/Cheshire, c. 1680. Courtesy Fiske & Freeman.



Small armchair, Durham area. 1670-90. Courtesy Fiske & Freeman.



Armchair with carved back panel and crest, Lancashire/Cheshire, c. 1680. Courtesy Peter Bunting Antiques.

on the frame or around the edges of the panel itself, but sometimes the whole panel is inlaid with flowers and foliage. Sadly, much inlay has been lost, partly due to the woods of the panel and the inlay moving differently, but mainly, we suspect, because the back panel of a chair receives so much wear that it was not a good choice for inlay in the first place (inlay on coffers or cupboards has a much better survival rate).

Early in the sixteenth century chairs often had horizontal arms made from horizontally set boards that scrolled outwards. These were typically paneled in. By the seventeenth century, the arms began to be set higher in the back so that they curved downwards toward the front. They were now made of vertical boards and were open, not paneled in.

After the Restoration, the wainscot chair went out of fashion in the southeast and in towns almost everywhere, but it continued to flourish in rural areas, particularly in the southwest and the north, where it became, if anything, even more elaborate



Great chair with well carved crest rail and ears. English, Leeds area, oak, c. 1675. Seat: 22" w x 16-1/2" d x 17-1/2" h. Back: 43" h x 23" w. Courtesy Fiske & Freeman.

## Chair-Tables



Magnificent Elizabethan chair-table. Courtesy private collection.

Chair-tables rarely attract admiration among the experts: "Comfortable in neither position" is the consensus. The experts may be correct, but chair-tables are none-the-less an interesting form. Settle-tables (see below) are usually rustic, and we can see their utility in small cottage or farmhouse rooms. Chair-tables, however, are often well carved and look as though they were intended for the



manor house rather than the cottage, where we would expect a shortage of neither space nor furniture.



Chair-Table, oak, c. 1640. The front seat rail is actually a door that pivots to allow access to a "secret" compartment under the seat. Photos courtesy the author.