The AGE *of* COMFORT

When Paris Discovered Casual—and the Modern Home Began

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CHAPTER SIX

Easy Seats

IN 1770, JEANNE Genet Campan, a young woman lucky enough to have secured a plush job at the French court as official reader to the daughters of Louis XV, was worried: the youngest, Madame Louise, had run off abruptly to become a Carmelite nun. Would a second daughter, Madame Victoire, decide to follow in the footsteps of her favorite sister? Victoire, however, quickly put her fears to rest. "She said to me as she pointed to the *bergère à ressort* [a heavily padded, luxuriously upholstered armchair] in which she was stretched out: 'Don't worry; I could never be like Louise, because I am far too attached to the comforts of life. This armchair will be the ruin of me.' "

Spoken like a true child of the age of comfort. When it all began, a chair could never have been the ruin of anyone, for there was no such thing as seating comfort. Then, within decades home furnishings went from primitive to sophisticated; the French, and other Europeans after them, became mad for furniture. By 1770, a great many people would have understood why Madame Victoire, "unable to give up the softly rounded curves of her favorite chair," decided to remain at Versailles.

Furniture went modern in close partnership with architecture. New pieces and styles of furniture were originally used in newly invented rooms; often the same architect had designed both the rooms and the furniture; the clients for new furniture were most often also those for new architecture. Between 1675 and 1740, people went from living with only a few stiff chairs with no padding to being literally surrounded by a truly dizzying array of well-stuffed and padded, curvy, and "orthopedically" proportioned seats: from armchairs and sofas to daybeds and chaises longues. And this new seat furniture—the first true

designer furniture, the first furniture ever designed with comfort in mind—was abundant, present in all interior rooms (even bathrooms), so that private life could be carried out in perfect ease.

In addition, the original modern seat furniture positively forced people into a new take on life. Stuffy, formal ways were swept away as soon as straight-backed seating was replaced by designs in which it was impossible to sit bolt upright, designs that for the first time ever made more casual posture the norm. Well-padded seats encouraged people to lean back, even to lounge. They forced the French, formerly the most magnificent people in Europe, to learn to relax. The new seat furniture, in short, was responsible for a revolution in style, lifestyle, and consumerism on a scale rarely equaled.

The ancient Greeks were the first to put comfort and seating together: they created chairs whose graceful curves were easy on the body and the eyes. After this, however, any notion of designing chairs for comfort disappeared, to reappear only at the turn of the eighteenth century. The Romans used the chair as a showy status symbol, and with the fall of the empire, the chair virtually vanished in the West. For centuries, most people perched on any available surface. Given the way they lived, complicated furniture was hardly possible.

The French words for furniture say it all: *meuble*, *mobilier*, from the Latin *mobilis*, mobile, that which can be moved. In the Middle Ages, all great families—and furniture design, like architecture, is naturally dictated by the wealthiest clientele—were regularly on the move, forced from place to place by war, famine, disease. As a result, interior decoration in the medieval castle had to be portable: rich tapestries on the walls, elaborate curtains around the bed. With the exception of the largest piece, the bed, families took their furniture with them. Furniture was thus made to save space during a move, to fold or break down easily. There was no point in making pieces decorative—anyone who's moved a lot knows what that does to furniture.

The effects of a more stable life on furniture first became visible at the end of the fifteenth century. The chair became common again at that time (with three legs rather than four); its frame was sometimes turned; upholstery first began to appear (only a bit of leather or tapestry stretched across the seat of a chair, but still . . .). At least until the middle of the seventeenth century, however, the situation hardly changed. People were no longer constantly on the move, but they had very little furniture: beds, tables, a few stools and basic chairs, some chests. Those who did still move about, royal families in particular, had only one set of furniture, which traveled with them when they changed residence.

The turning point just may have come as the result of events that took place

in 1648: the queen mother and the boy king Louis XIV were forced to flee Paris in haste during a budding civil war; when they arrived at the palace at Saint-Germain-en-Laye, it was naturally bare, and most people in the royal entourage were forced to sleep on hastily assembled piles of straw. This was a humiliation too great for the budding Sun King, and like Scarlett O'Hara, he seems to have vowed never to be poor again.

In 1662, one of the major early decisions of his independent reign sounded the death knell for portable furniture: a formerly rather modest tapestry-weaving workshop known as the Gobelins was moved to Paris and elevated to the status of royal tapestry works. The king's painter, Charles Le Brun, was named its director. In 1667, the Gobelins gained still more importance and became the official supplier of the Crown's *meubles*. Many new types of artists and artisans moved into its vastly expanded enclave—various kinds of furniture makers, specialists in bronzework and lacquerwork and the art of marquetry. From then on, the Gobelins had the capacity to produce every kind of decorative object. Le Brun thus became the first architect to design furniture and to oversee every aspect of its production, and the Gobelins began to produce the first furniture taken seriously enough to be documented. The stage was set for the age of architect-designed furniture to begin.

Because of the Gobelins, the original furniture industry was created. Between 1670 and the mid–eighteenth century, French designers and craftsmen invented most of the pieces that are still crucial in homes today. The modern age for furniture began after the young king made a second major decision: he would no longer travel with all his possessions. Henceforth, royal furniture would be immobile, for every royal château was to be kept fully furnished at all times. This gave the newly enlarged Gobelins a gigantic outlet for its production.

The word *meuble* was soon redefined. First, as furniture became less mobile, it was more often used to refer to the furniture made for a particular room: the concept of a matched set of furniture was thus born. Second, the word less often designated the most portable decorative items, tapestries in particular, items we no longer think of as furniture. The realignment of the Gobelins in 1667 initiated, in other words, the process as a result of which tapestry came off the walls and was put onto the chairs. Finally, the word gradually came to refer less to the fabric alone and more to the entire piece, the fabric and the frame combined.

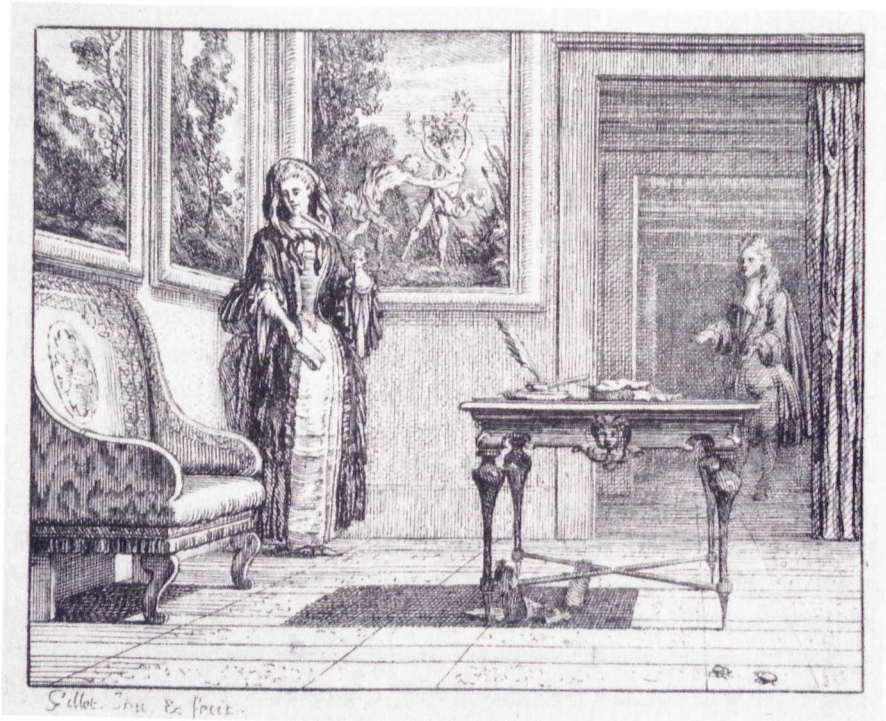
In the early 1670s, when this process began, someone using the word *meuble* in its just emerging meaning of the matching furniture found in a specific room thought little or not at all of the design of that furniture; it was a matched set if

all pieces were covered in the same fabric; the value was mostly in the textile. A half century later, the fabric still matched, but so did the design of the pieces: their carving, their shape, and their style. The fabric, moreover, was no longer the only source of value. During that century, the concept of furniture design had been born and become commonly recognized. By the 1720s, people were using the term furniture as we still do.

At the start, Louis XIV's directives did not move furniture in a new direction. The first design studio was initially famous for its great showpieces, the kind produced in Renaissance Italy. In 1673, for example, the Parisian newspaper *Le Mercure galant* announced—and this may be the first time that a newspaper's coverage had extended to furniture—that the Gobelins had just completed "six big *cabinets*." The cabinet—a sort of dresser with doors and compartments—ideally suited the age of magnificence. Itself the height of flashiness—made of exotic woods, inlaid, encrusted with semiprecious stones—it was also a display piece, made to show off its owner's most fabulous collectibles. As for new seating or any furniture designed for comfort . . . well, in all of Versailles when it was unveiled to the public in 1682, there was precious little of that. On his 1687 visit, the foremost Swedish architect of the day, Nicodemus Tessin the Younger, noted in the king's bedchamber only chairs designed as showstoppers: "made of solid silver with a cushion in crimson and gold." The public portion of the age of magnificence unfolded rather like one gigantic cocktail party with people always on their feet.

The Gobelins studio had another outlet for its production: the more intimate châteaux where only the privileged few were invited and protocol was relaxed. There, artists had greater license to innovate. In these places where the age of comfort began, the age of furniture got its start. Only a few decades later, people owned more than just a few pieces of furniture. And once they did, furniture quickly moved beyond the utilitarian and into the realm of style and fashion. In 1769, Roubo felt able to pronounce that "it is disgraceful for one's furniture not to be as up-to-date [*à la mode*] as one's clothing." Furniture also entered the domain of comfort. And as soon as these ideas were in place, artists began to depict a new experience: people in love with their furniture.

The golden age of French furniture was also a golden age for French engraving. An astonishing number of prints are set in the new interior rooms, and they are above all furniture plates, images that show off the latest ways to furnish a room, as well as various kinds of endearing behavior that furniture seemed to inspire in the first people able to enjoy private life in private space. This scene (page 106) features a fashionable woman in her equally fashionable interior. She is looking fondly—not, as one might expect, at the handsomely



Early-eighteenth-century engravings such as this one are the earliest depictions of a new phenomenon: house-proud individuals in love with their furniture.

turned-out suitor seen in the doorway holding out his hands and gazing longingly at her, but . . . at her sofa. Sofas were then still relatively new, and this is a recent model—one of two that were vying for sofa supremacy—and it clearly "works" with its surroundings, fitting neatly beneath the mythological scene on the wall above. She touches her fan to her face in reverie as she gazes at it, as if lost in her pleasure at the way her interior has turned out.

This print and countless others like it testify to the role that the new conception of furniture played in the age of comfort, a role that became ever more pronounced as the eighteenth century unfolded. One of the biggest differences between the daily life of Louis XV and that of Louis XIV involved the presence of furniture. Louis XV was a member of the first generation to grow up with the modern conception of furniture, and it showed. During his reign, royal châteaux were stuffed to the gills with furniture, all of it conceived specifically for the room in which it was placed, all of it French made. One category of furniture had become dominant—seat furniture in a wide range of styles,

not one of which had even been a gleam in a designer's eye in 1675. In the age of magnificence, people lived on their feet; in the age of comfort, they were ensconced in easy seats, armchairs, and sofas—well-cushioned and padded armchairs and sofas. Madame Victoire was every inch her father's daughter.

The revolution in seating naturally began with the chair. Prior to the age of comfort, the chair functioned first and foremost as a status symbol. All chairs were essentially stand-ins for the king's seat, the throne; in every dwelling, the best chair was reserved for the head of the house. This was particularly true of any chair with arms. Larger and more imposing, the armchair was the power seat, the place from which justice was handed down. This explains why there was almost no comfortable seating in Versailles's public rooms: anyone in an armchair in the king's presence could be seen as the king's equal.

During the second half of the seventeenth century, the armchair began its modern life in schizophrenic fashion. On the one hand, armchairs became ever more evidently power seats when they were expanded to previously unheard-of proportions. Their seats became wider and deeper, their backs wider and higher—on average, thirty-two inches high. This was furniture intended expressly to overwhelm everything else in the room. (They were also stiff and rigidly rectilinear—in short, anything but inviting.) Then, soon after the Gobelins received its expanded mission, the armchair moved in another direction: the new chairs were called *fauteuils de commodité*, comfort armchairs. They adopted the oversize proportions of power armchairs, but they added new features, most significantly the earliest use of a device with a big future in the history of seating, wings that projected out from the chair's back. In French, these are called *joues*, cheeks, since one can rest one's cheeks there. Cheeks made the big chairs suddenly cozy and prove that comfort was beginning to steal the scene from power.

At first, many of the new chairs were designed for invalids. These incorporated some sort of contrivance—usually a ratchet system—so that their backs could be adjusted to a variety of angles. For the first time, those confined to a chair could enjoy some ease. The concept of the recliner was an immediate hit—understandably so, since this was the first form of seating ever to allow someone to sit in a manner other than bolt upright—and soon comfort armchairs were no longer just for invalids. The huge armchairs actually provided only minimal comfort—their frames were still rectilinear, their padding slim—but they marked a giant first step toward a completely new life for seat furniture.

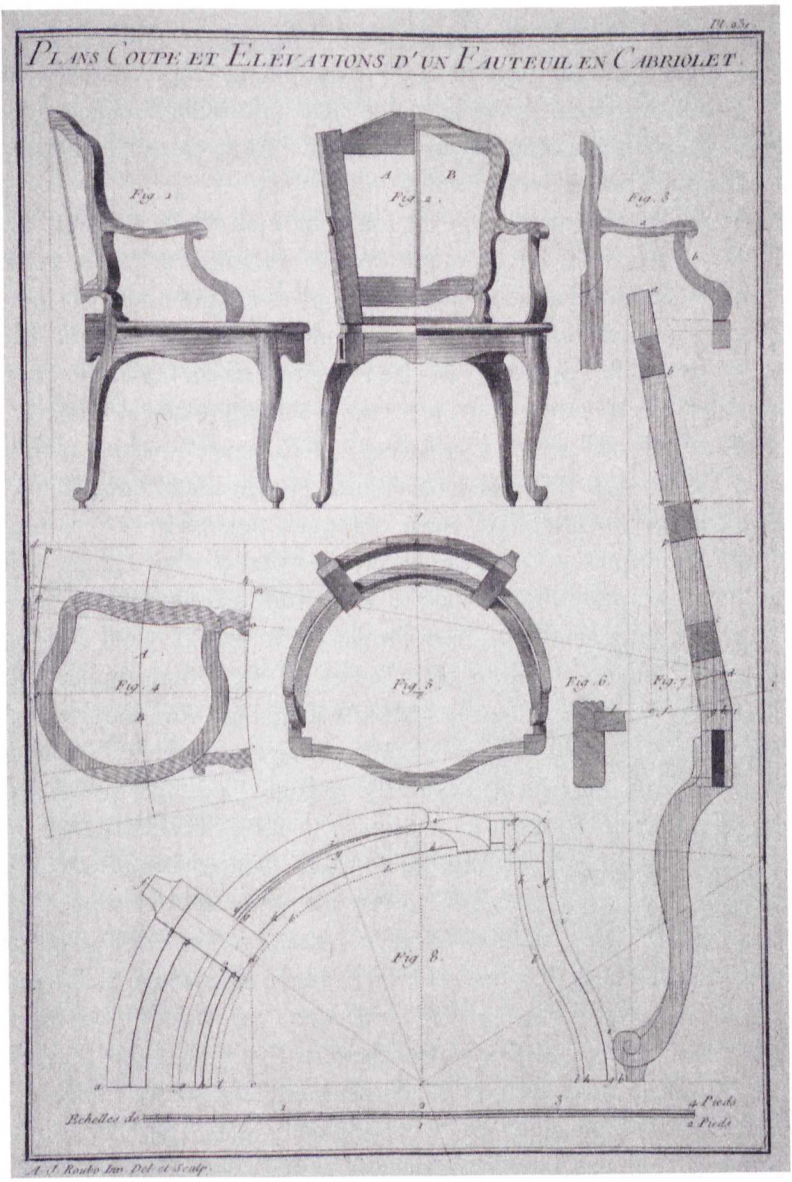
As early as 1672, "big comfort armchairs" began to be made for small royal châteaux and the most private rooms in Versailles. A small model was even

created for Louis XIV's firstborn, Monseigneur, when he was only eleven, perhaps the first furniture designed for a child's body. (The king's comfort chairs were in crimson velvet, whereas his son's was done up in yellow, which may indicate that Monseigneur always had his own sense of decorating style.) Already in 1673, a Parisian newspaper announced that "fashionable people" had begun to imitate the look Montespan had invented for the Porcelain Trianon. Among the things they were copying was a new armchair, with a much higher back, "elaborate carving on the top of the frame," and a "gilded frame." Thus, a single press release announced three major changes in furniture history: the earliest turning away from brown furniture, the beginning of the frame's importance, and the first evidence of the spread of modern furniture design beyond a royal palace. Within two decades, Parisian merchants were putting big comfort armchairs in their shops to put clients at ease (see page 224). And the idea that a chair should do more than impress, once implanted, inspired the creation of all new forms of seat furniture.

The best introduction to the original modern furniture was composed in 1769. Its author, Roubo, was uniquely poised for the job of furniture historian: he designed and made furniture; he was a protégé of the architect Blondel, who taught him the skills he needed to engrave plates of the age's best designs. For Roubo, the history of modern furniture is the story of the quest for comfortable seating—which he defined as seating that allows the torso and legs to relax—and the history of the modern chair began about 1680, with those comfort armchairs. Roubo's design manual takes readers on a virtual tour of the eighteenth century's easy seats. At the turn of the eighteenth century, the "gigantic back" was lowered. (It came down by a full eight inches, to roughly twenty-four inches high.) Then, the rigid arms were reshaped into various more comfortable forms. Next, about 1715, the armrest was moved back some five to six inches from the front edge of the seat, thus allowing those with less than gigantic stature to take full advantage of its support.

The seat was then completely redesigned. The seventeenth century's square seat became more fluid and gradually relaxed into a continuous curve that could be adapted in various ways to the body's shape and to the way people sit. As Roubo explained it, "When one sits, the thighs naturally take on a bell shape"; furniture designers should use the curved seat so that "the body's weight is distributed more toward the fleshier part, the inner thigh," thereby "making seating more comfortable." And for "those who write" and therefore "spend long periods" leaning forward, he shows how the seat's curves could be adapted to this particular distribution of body weight and thereby help writers "resist fatigue." (I only wish someone would think like this today.)

Finally, about 1740, curving reached the last frontier, the armchair's back, with the invention of what Roubo calls "the most fashionable chair of the day," the *cabriolet* (see below). The name comes from the verb "to caper or frolic about," and the model was indeed sprightly. Prior to this, the backs of armchairs



This diagram explains how to make one of the eighteenth century's favorite armchair styles, the cabriolet, *characterized by its flared, circular back.*

had inclined and had curved along the top and sides, but they had remained flat. Once the *cabriolet* came onto the scene, all flat-backed styles became known as *à la reine*, the queenly style, undoubtedly because they forced one to maintain a more regal bearing. Roubo illustrated in detail the making of a *cabriolet,* because, as he admitted, its flared, circular back was "the most difficult for the craftsman to get right." The model's trim proportions—its seat was twenty-two to twenty-six inches wide and eighteen to twenty inches deep, whereas larger armchairs tended to be about twenty-eight inches wide and twenty-two inches deep—and especially the comfortable circularity of "the fit against the back" immediately made the *cabriolet* an essential part of every French furniture maker's repertoire.

Those comfortable curves were the foundation on which a national furniture industry was built. Even though French craftsmen probably produced more of the supersized armchairs than anyone else, that model was not seen as uniquely French. Rounded, curving armchairs, however, soon became known as French chairs; craftsmen elsewhere copied the style, but everyone agreed that the best French chairs were those actually made in France.

In addition, the curves were a visible sign of furniture's participation in the values of the new age. Undulated, curvilinear French chairs signaled not only comfort, but a more casual style. Even gilded and covered in rich fabrics, they were still designed to say: Come sit here and be a part of what's going on in the room. French armchairs were made to work with a room's décor and even with changing styles in fashion (see color plates). In the 1720s and 1730s, a particularly low model (only about eight inches off the ground rather than the standard eleven) with an unusually wide seat shared drawing room space with intimately proportioned mantelpieces, mirrors hung low on the wall, and a softly flowing dress style, the *robe volante*, or flying gown (see color plates), to produce the first interiors designed to be casually inviting rather than imposing.

In barely a half century, the armchair's status changed completely. From a rarely found object and a symbol of majesty and power, it had become the most common form of seating and an invitation to relaxation. The *Encyclopédie* taught its readers that in France, "ordinary chairs" had been relegated to the garden and were "much less used" inside the home, where the armchair had taken over.

Once the basic principles of French armchairs had been established, eighteenth-century craftsmen invented one model after another. Many of these were small, like the rooms in which they were originally used. There were adorable little *fauteuils à coiffer*, hairstyling armchairs, at times with a heart-shaped back whose center dip allowed for the perfect placement of trailing locks. (Some even had a mechanism that made it possible to recline the upper part of the

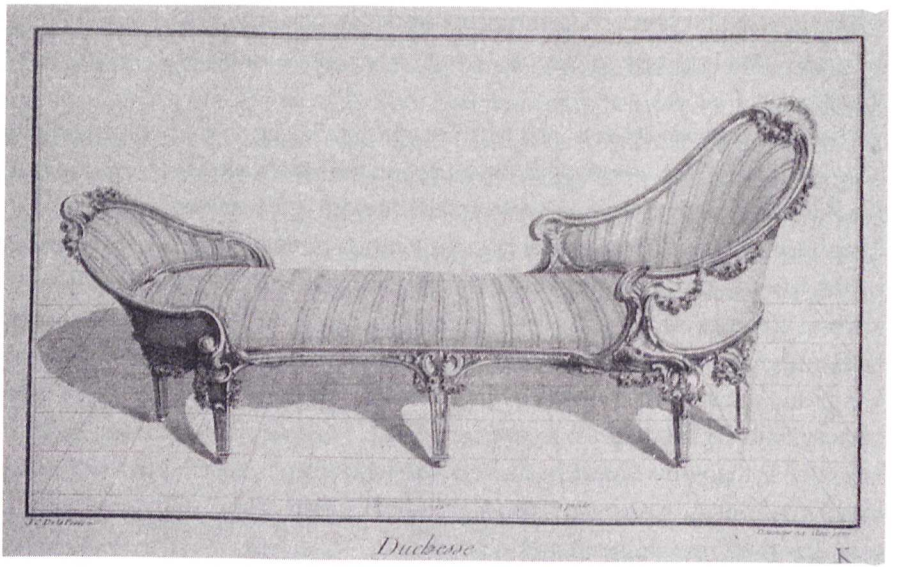
chair, so that the head could be tilted back for washing.) The hairdressing armchair was invented in the 1690s for the court's darling, the Duchesse de Bourgogne.

The most popular seats, however, were among the most capacious armchairs ever imagined. The easiest seats of all began with the *fauteuil en confessional*, the confessional armchair, a wide armchair with wraparound wings said to have been inspired by the chairs favored by priests, who could lean their heads on the wing when hearing confession. In the early 1720s, the confessional's first cousin, Madame Victoire's not-so-little little weakness, the *bergère*, or shepherdess, appeared. The *bergère* had wraparound arms rather than wraparound wings and a seat deep enough so that one could begin to stretch out one's legs. (A *bergère* is depicted on the lower right in the figure on page 123.) Roubo pronounced it the perfect vehicle for a lady of fashion: "Some ladies' ensembles positively demand this model; this is the only way that they can be comfortably seated without wrinkling their outfit."

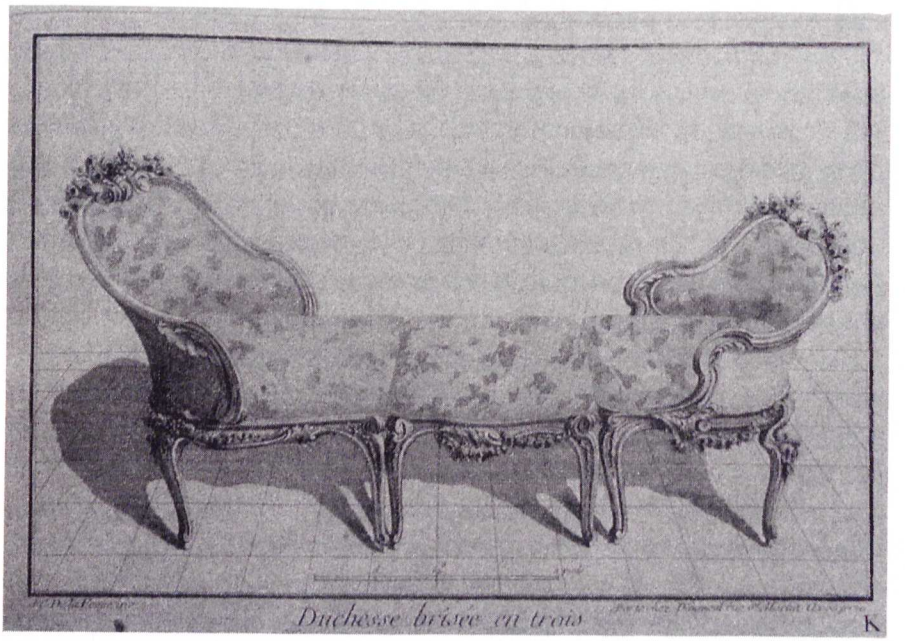
And indeed, the century's most fashionable women favored the *bergère*. The most celebrated actress of the 1720s, Charlotte Desmares, was an early fan. Her three-bedroom home was tiny by the standards of the age, but she still found room for eleven *bergères*. As for the Marquise de Pompadour, well, she was as much a *bergère* fanatic as her lover's daughter: she had fourteen in the ex–Hôtel d'Evreux in Paris; no fewer than thirty-six in the Château de Ménars in the Loire valley—and three more still on order when she died.

These extrawide, wraparound models could be little worlds unto themselves, where people read and dreamed and spent their most private moments. In 1764, when the Marquise de Pompadour died in her bedroom at Versailles after a long, debilitating illness, she was sitting in her favorite confessional armchair; she had been suffering too much in her last days to lie down on a bed or even to stretch out a bit on a *bergère*.

The scale of fashion's favorites raised a question that gave eighteenth-century furniture mavens pause: When is a chair no longer a chair? Roubo expounded in all seriousness on such fine points of contemporary furniture design as the line separating *bergère* and chaise longue and the difference between a simple chaise longue and another of the era's darlings, the *duchesse* (page 112, top). (Answers: A *bergère* turns into a chaise longue when the seat is 3½ to 5 feet long, long enough to stretch out one's legs completely on it; when the seat is more than 5 feet long and "there is a footboard 12 to 15 inches high rounded and lower than the headboard" at the other end, voilà: you have a *duchesse*.) *Duchesses*, by the way, could also be *brisée*, or broken—that is, divided into two or three sections (page 112, bottom). To outsiders, the new world of the armchair surely



The duchesse *was a sort of cross between an armchair and a daybed on which it was possible to stretch out one's legs fully and still have good support for the back.*



The duchesse *could also be sectional. This made for greater versatility: the sections could be moved around easily; a* duchesse *could provide seating for two if extra guests arrived.*

seemed wildly arcane. In 1755, the most popular paper of the day published a complaint from someone newly arrived in Paris from the provinces: there were so many new words to designate "all the latest fashions in furniture" of which he was ignorant that he felt he no longer knew his own language.

Only a few years after the invention of comfort armchairs, chair makers began to make the chair no longer a chair in a second way: they doubled it up. They thus happened upon one of the great inventions in design history—seating for two, or the sofa. For the first and perhaps only time in the history of furniture, it is possible to follow step by step the creation of an object with an essential place in the modern home. In barely a decade, furniture designers went through four prototypes for the new seating (the two that won out are still with us today) and tried out names for it.

The sofa was the most original product of the burst of creativity generated by the creation of the Gobelins design studio and of the first jewel-box châteaux. Within months of the Porcelain Trianon's completion, on July 20, 1671, a most striking *lit de repos*, or daybed, was ready. Painted in lavender and white, upholstered in lavender, white, and the color of the moment, the golden yellow hue known as *aurore* (dawn), it was obviously tailor-made for the tiny pastel palace. It was also obviously intended for the lady of the house, the *lit de repos* queen, the Marquise de Montespan (see page 25). Finally, it was just as obviously a new departure for the daybed, since it had not the usual one but two headboards. Someone had clearly seen that two could share the daybed's comfort.

Immediately after Louis XIV's remarriage, royal furniture makers took the new design to the next level. In late 1683 and in 1684, they delivered (one was earmarked for the king's private bedroom at Versailles, another for his new wife) three pieces with a strange new name, *lits de repos en canapé*, *canapé*-style daybeds. These had headrests at each end as well as "a tall backrest in the middle." The headrests were no longer in bare wood, as was the case with daybeds, but were upholstered both inside and out with the same crimson velvet used on the removable padding and the mattress and bolsters characteristic of daybeds. These were pieces thus midway between the daybed and the sofa. In 1685, when the design-forward heir to the throne ordered one covered in blue velvet for his private suite at Versailles, the name had been shortened to *canapé*.

Canapé is said to derive from the Latin word for the mosquito netting around a bed; the new term was thus a variant on the *lit à canapé*, a bed draped with curtains as a bed might be draped with mosquito netting. (A bed canopy is depicted on the far left, rear, of the figure on page 123.) (By 1787, someone

had come up with the concept of putting a delicacy such as caviar or an anchovy on a bit of bread and decided that the bread resembled a sofa's cushions; those little nibbles passed around ever since at parties were thus called *sur canapé*, on a sofa, or just *canapés*.)

This 1686 engraving is the earliest image to depict a new kind of furniture: the sofa. This low-backed model, reminiscent of a bench with padding and upholstery, was highly popular during the first decade or so of the sofa's existence. The engraving also shows off the kind of previously unheard-of behavior that the sofa immediately encouraged: the lady clearly sees its expansive surface as an invitation to stretch out and prop up her legs—and to show off her outfit's expanses of lovely fabric.

By the time the new furniture had been named, it had progressed well beyond the daybed phase (see page 114). This, the earliest surviving image of a *canapé*, depicts the low-backed, benchlike seat that was initially one of the most popular models. Note that this is the original upholstered furniture: every surface is fabric covered. Note in particular the way the lady stretches out a leg and drapes one arm over the back. The original furniture ad campaign was right on the mark: it showed off a phenomenon documented in numerous contemporary correspondences, the *canapé*'s extraordinary ability to encourage those who lived in the age of magnificence to throw off formality and adopt instead carefree, casual poses, posture unheard of before the sofa came on the scene.

A second term, written either *sopha* or *sofa*, from the Arab word for cushion, was in use by 1688. In September of that year, the Prince de Conti ordered one from a craftsman named Grémont, who described himself as "a specialist in armchairs and sophas." The prince was a logical client for innovative comfort furniture. His suite at Versailles was considered particularly "beautiful"; he was "passionately in love" with Madame la Duchesse, already famous for her own furniture, and on the best of terms with his sister-in-law, the Princesse de Conti, she of the great bathrooms to come.

We don't know what the Prince de Conti's sofa looked like; by 1688, two very different models were being referred to by that term. The first is probably best described as a double-wide version of those oversize comfort armchairs (see page 116). (For most of the eighteenth century in England, where it was called "double Windsor chairs without a division," the chair-back model dominated the quite limited sofa production. In France, it soon evolved into the more elegant form of the sofa on page 106.) Like those armchairs, this model is above all large and clumsy. Unlike those armchairs, however, it was never associated with status and magnificence. Instead, once the sofa was invented, it was presented in terms never before associated with comfort: casual is the new sexy. Once she sits on a *canapé*, the images proclaimed, even the grandest lady becomes carefree and at ease. Once she sits on a sofa, the lady becomes, well, just plain easy.

Niece of Louis XIV's mentor and minister, Cardinal Mazarin, the Duchesse de Bouillon was also the mother of the Comte d'Evreux. (At the time of his marriage, she coined the phrase *my little bar of gold* to refer to his bride, Crozat's daughter.) She was a great fashionista; people said that everything she put on looked great on her. And, finally, it was common knowledge that she had had many, many lovers.

It's thus clear why someone trying to market the novel piece of furniture as the trendiest and sexiest seat in town would have picked the duchess as a poster child. In the late seventeenth century, engravers were eager to show off the

This engraving shows off a late-seventeenth-century sofa style that enjoyed great but short-lived popularity in France—more a double-wide, extremely high-backed armchair than what we think of as a sofa.

way furniture was evolving in Paris: they kept returning to the image of the sofa as seating so irresistible that it was positively dangerous (see page 117). Madame de *** clasps her hands in the classic gesture of repentance; she has cast off her jewels and strewn them carelessly on the floor. Yet she does not kneel to renounce her past; a very modern Mary Magdalene, she clings still to

This image of the double armchair–style sofa, also from the late seventeenth century, is a particularly over-the-top depiction of the excessive taste for comfort that the sofa allegedly inspired in its early proponents. The image suggests that sofas are so addictive, they can be the undoing of any woman.

the comfort of her luxurious sofa. Her appealingly disheveled hair flows over her shoulders; the folds of her glamorous gown fall in studied negligence. Like Madame Victoire, she knows that the sofa has been and will be the ruin of her, and she's still not prepared to give it up.

Madame Victoire was joking, of course, as presumably were the engravers of these over-the-top sofa scenes. (These engravings were not real portraits; engravers simply chose a prominent figure whose reputation fit the bill.) Once invented, however, the off-color image clung to the sofa all through the eighteenth century. Countless French novels featured the sofa rather than the perhaps more obvious candidate, the bed, as the ideal piece of furniture for seduction. Every time you read that a female character is positioned on a sofa, well, you just know that her virtue will be eminently reproachable. Was all this hype grounded in any reality? In correspondences and memoirs from the period, in the commentary of keen-eyed observers of the contemporary scene from Saint-Simon to Dufort de Cheverny, in that of the architects and furniture designers most in touch with their clients' desires, I found not a single remark to back up the sofa's sexy image. There is no evidence to suggest that any real-life woman—from the Duchesse de Bouillon to the Marquise de Pomadour—was sofa-mad because it provided the perfect opportunity to strike a come-hither pose. Some people, however, were obviously taken in by the image.

The English quickly decided that the sofa was a dangerous thing best avoided. In 1745, Horace Walpole joked about the sofa's reputation for being the ruin of all those who gave in to its cushions and curves and characterized sitting on a sofa as "lolling in a *péché-mortel*"—a mortal sin. Walpole's correspondent, Horace Mann, replied that he had "no clear idea" of what such a sinfully luxurious sofa was like and added: "You know we [English] are always some years behindhand"—behindhand in this case because they had steered clear of seating comfort. In 1770, Mrs. Delany—prolific correspondent and chronicler of life in eighteenth-century England—remarked that when an important guest was expected, "all the comfortable sofas . . . were banished for the day, and . . . chairs set in prim form around the room." The mere sight of a well-cushioned sofa could threaten a family's good standing.

Now back to reality, that of the nascent furniture industry. The sofa quickly got itself sorted out; designers created far more sophisticated models. In the late 1680s, furniture makers began experimenting with a new technology that eventually made these new models possible. In 1691, still another prototype was delivered to Versailles for the private suite of the sofa's most loyal backer, Monseigneur. It was described as a *canapé à dossier et bras chantournés*, a sofa with back and armrests that have been *chantournés*. Images soon popped up to

This 1696 engraving may be the earliest image of a sofa that looks like the models in use ever since. The sofa is cushioned and upholstered on all surfaces; it features an intricately carved frame. In a mere decade, the sofa had evolved from a rather primitive design into a sophisticated piece of furniture.

show off the sofa's new beginning (see above). The Princesse de Rohan—a fabulously wealthy heiress who in 1696 was already the widow of one prince and recently remarried to a second one, none of which had stopped her from acquiring a string of lovers as long as the Duchesse de Bouillon's—was still

another sexy poster child for the sofa. Her alleged portrait, however, is more concerned with the furniture she's posed on than with her louche life.

With one hand, the princess indicates the model's most remarkable innovation: it has a frame produced not by turning, as had been the case with earlier sofas (see pages 106 and 114), but by carving or sculpting. Like Monseigneur's sofa, it was *chantourné*, a new word meaning scrollwork or fretwork. Sometime around 1680, a curved saw was invented; it then became possible to decorate furniture with the elaborately swirling curves and scallops that would soon be the mark of the modern style, the rococo. The new technology was perhaps the innovation most essential to the modern concept of furniture. From then on, what had been hidden under the fabric could become as important as the fabric itself. Almost as soon as frames began to swirl as they do on the princess's sofa, the grand cabinet and other showstoppers of the age of magnificence disappeared, and the age of seat furniture began.

With her other hand, the princess gestures toward a second innovation: the armrests. Once elaborately carved frames were introduced, serious attention was paid for the first time to another element essential to seating comfort, support for the arms. The modern name, *accotoir*, or armrest, was created just after the word *chantourné*. In just thirteen years, French sofa makers had learned how to make the first piece of furniture worthy of the age of comfort: upholstered all over—front, sides, and back; padded all over; with support in all the right places.

In 1701, as part of the "youthful look" he wanted for the Ménagerie, Louis XIV chose the first sofa in a royal château referred to not as a *lit en canapé* or as a *canapé*, but as a sofa; he chose a sofa that had it all—an elaborately carved frame, a comfortable backrest, armrests. It also featured the most sumptuous fabric on any early sofa: crimson damask whose leaf design was overembroidered with gold thread. That fabric called attention to the last frontier in furniture comfort: upholstery and padding.

From the start, the sofa's many surfaces were covered with fabric, but at first—in those "big comfort armchairs," for example—the stuffing underneath was hardly plush and was attached in primitive fashion. The period during which designers were trying out prototypes for the sofa coincides exactly with the invention of the first sophisticated upholstery techniques. The sofa—by far the largest piece of furniture in the upholsterer's repertory—was the incentive that pushed that craft into the modern age.

Until the seventeenth century, if you wanted to make a seat more comfortable, you simply put a cushion on it. During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, upholsterers became less and less concerned with wall hangings and bed

Jean-François de Troy's *The Declaration of Love* shows off a number of the innovations of the age of comfort—from well-designed seating to less constricting dress—as well as showing how such innovations increased comfort and well-being.

Arthur Devis's portrait of an English couple, Mr. and Mrs. Bull, depicts a way of living in the home radically opposed to that being developed in France. Everything from the furniture to the interior decoration to the couple's bearing is stiff and formal; their fine possessions seem merely a proof of their wealth and status rather than conveniences that improve their lives.

This is one in a set of twelve armchairs made in the first decade of the eighteenth century for Pierre Crozat, who had risen from modest origins to become one of the wealthiest men in France. The chair still features its original upholstery in red morocco leather, with strips of leather in a contrasting shade applied to the surface to form a wavy pattern that echoes the soft curves in the intricately carved frame. The armchair is a perfect transition piece between seventeenth- and eighteenth-century seating: its frame retains traces of the earlier period's angularity but is beginning to curve in the style of the new century.

This portrait of Queen Maria Leszczyńska, painted by Louis Toqué in 1740, depicts her in a highly formal context. She stands in a public reception space, wearing the tightly confining court dress that women of the day (the queen among them) found so uncomfortable.

This portrait of the Marquise de Pompadour, painted by François Boucher in 1756, shows her half reclining on well-padded seating, relaxing in the privacy afforded by a small interior room with her favorite books and the kind of tiny writing desk she kept in almost every room in every one of her residences.

This painting by de Troy is often called *Reading in a Salon* or *Reading from Molière*. A group of friends has gathered together in one of the new, more intimate reception spaces. They have arranged their armchairs (a particularly low model fashionable in the 1720s) near the fire to gather around as one of them reads aloud. This is the kind of relaxed sociability that smaller, more private rooms were designed to facilitate.

This is perhaps the earliest surviving French high-fashion dress. The style was known as a flying dress, probably because the loose cut allowed the fabric to move so easily that the dress seemed to float along as women walked. It features the fashionable pagoda sleeves, shorter on the inside and pleated to curve around the elbow. The dress is depicted from the back to show off the pleats that added fullness and helped the fabric "fly."

This *tableau de mode*, or fashion painting, by de Troy, now known as *The Garter*, shows off the harmonious style of décor favored by the original interior decorators, the use of exotic textiles as wall hangings, and the way a well-positioned large mirror added depth to a small room.

This chintz was folk art come to France: Indians with hookahs, humanoid monkeys, wild animals, and mythic beasts all coexist in their own peaceable kingdom.

Many interior rooms at Versailles were covered—furniture, curtains, bedclothes, even the walls—in Indian cotton with a red background.

For the European market, Indian designers played up the exotic touches in their textiles—they even painted the elephants blue.

The multicolored fabric is an Indian textile made for the European market about 1700; the blue-and-white fabric is a French update from about 2000.

Here, Indian designers were trying to blend in, by imitating the lacy motifs and sprigs of flowers found in French silk patterns of the early eighteenth century.

And here, twentieth-century French designers have updated the eighteenth-century Indian version of French silks.

hangings and more concerned with covering furniture. At the same moment, he detachable cushion or mattress was gradually replaced by fabric attached to urniture. Until the very end of the seventeenth century, however, upholstery remained firmly rooted in the age of magnificence. What was then considered a fabulous upholstery job consisted of the most ostentatiously expensive fabric positively loaded down with every kind of lavish trim—fringe (often two kinds—a very wide and a very narrow fringe on the same piece), braid, tassels, the whole nine yards. Yet when it came to padding—well, the upholsterer merely put extremely shallow padding on the seat and nailed a cover over it. Chair backs were simply covered with fabric, since there was no way to hold padding in place.

Prior to 1670, fixed upholstery was exceedingly rare. Then, in a few short decades, every technique on which the upholsterer's craft has since been based was invented by French craftsmen; this was still another area over which the French reigned supreme. (There was one exception: springs were not really used before the nineteenth century. Some experts think that Madame Victoire's *bergère* may have been the earliest sprung chair.) Seat padding was laid on wide webbing like that still seen today; back padding was attached to canvas; down was used for seats, springier horsehair for backs—and more sophisticated stitching techniques kept it all firmly in place.

Just as the sofa came fully into its own, French upholsterers initiated the golden age of padding. They rounded it in all the perfect spots, because this was more comfortable, because this provided additional support, and because this made padding match the new curves then taking over the frames of seat furniture. On seats and backs, stuffing was built up to form a kind of dome. (In England, in contrast, throughout the eighteenth century padding remained firm and so shallow that it was, at most, only very slightly domed. Prior to the nineteenth century, there was very little upholstered furniture of any kind in this country.) French padding was also rounded on all edges to suit the curvilinear furniture. (English stuffing was squared off and seemed to match English furniture's more severe lines.)

Finally, between 1700 and 1715, truly fancy upholstery techniques were imagined. As soon as the armrest received its modern name, new ways of upholstering and padding this tricky spot were devised. And, cleverest of all, a special *châssis*, or stretcher, was invented so that upholstery could be attached no longer to the frame of the chair itself, but to a frame within the frame; it was usually kept in place with turn buttons. The technique was used not only for slip seats, but also for the back and armrests.

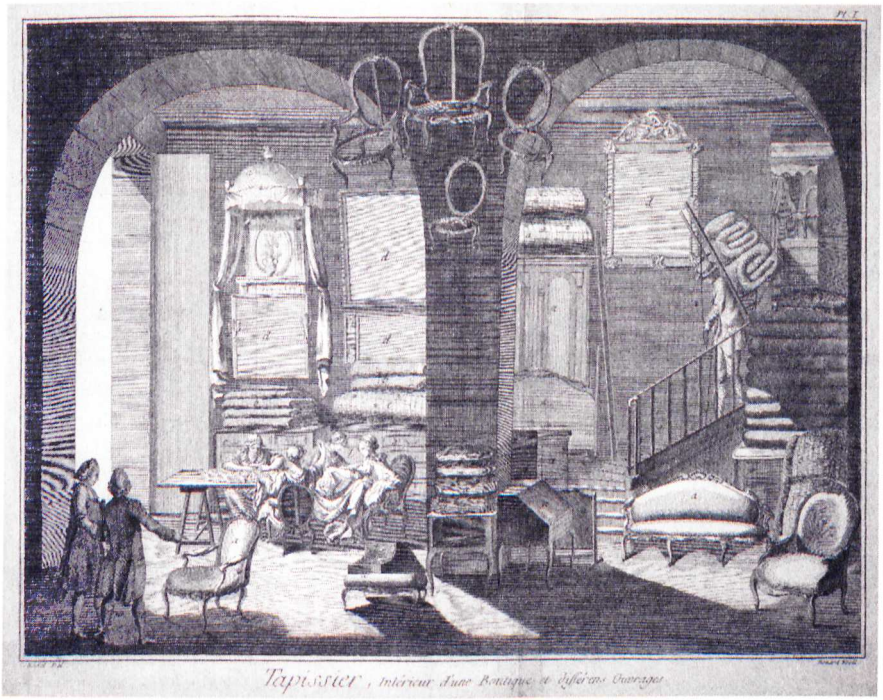
The process, known as upholstery *en châssis*, was tailor-made for a society

that liked its comfort elegant. Suddenly, upholstery could be changed almost instantly, and seat furniture could keep up with fashion seasons. *Châssis* upholstery came on the scene just as *nouveaux riches* began pouring money into interior decoration. Soon, wealthy Parisian clients had winter upholstery and summer upholstery, all in the latest colors and patterns. A decade later, the practice had become common all over France. In the mid–eighteenth century, at Versailles and in the finest homes, upholstery was changed four times a year. By then, the French silk industry was turning out four collections a year: seat furniture had taken on fashion rhythms; its upholstery could be adjusted to match its owners' latest outfits. (The new practice never really caught on in England.)

Improved covering techniques allowed furniture makers to increase significantly the surface available for carving and make far more elaborate frames. They also funneled vastly increased profits into the textile industry. Those seasonal upholstery changes naturally required many additional yards of expensive material as well as increased labor costs. In 1770, when the master upholsterer Bimont published the original guide to "the art of upholstery," he provided technical tips but above all a great deal of highly detailed information on the prices of various upholstery fabrics and on how much fabric was needed to cover each of the many kinds of chairs and sofas that had by then proliferated in French homes.

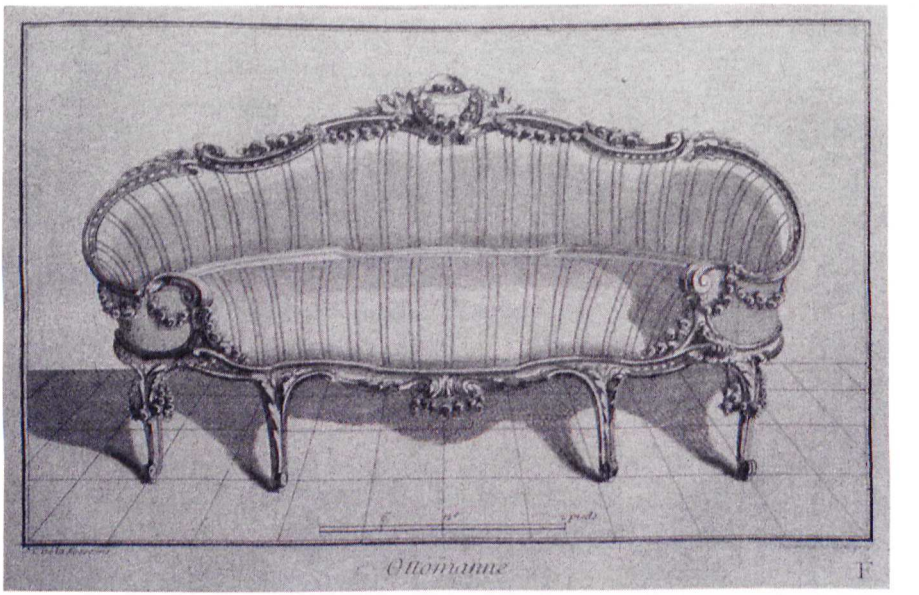
As a result of this period of experimentation, and perhaps because of all those highly profitable sales, the upholsterer first gained true professional status, and upholsterers vastly expanded their functions. In the 1692 edition of his insider's guide to Paris, Nicolas de Blégny included for the first time the addresses of the best Parisian *tapissiers* (upholsterers); he described them as selling "the most magnificent furniture": upholsterers had begun to buy furniture from cabinetmakers and sell it to clients, along with the fabric and the cost of their labor (see page 123). This illustration from the *Encyclopédie* showed off the upholsterer's new prominence and the furniture he sold. At the top and the bottom far right, we see the *bergère*, with and without covering. Note the trendy *cabriolet* backs on all chairs, as well as the rounded edges on all upholstery. Note also the nicely domed padding on the sofa.

Perhaps no one had more to gain from the sofa's meteoric rise to prominence than the upholsterer. The two decades following the invention of the *châssis* method witnessed the most spectacular invention of new types of seat furniture of the entire age of comfort. And—surprise, surprise—the models then invented required nearly twice as much fabric as those in existence in 1700. When you factor in changing the upholstery twice and even four times a year, well, you can see why the rush was on to create new kinds of plush seating.



In the eighteenth century, upholsterers also sold furniture. This image depicts an upholsterer's shop. A wide variety of sofas and armchairs is for sale; many feature the curving, cabriolet *back that Thomas Jefferson—as well as many others—found so comfortable. The century's favorite big armchair, the* bergère, *is prominently displayed.*

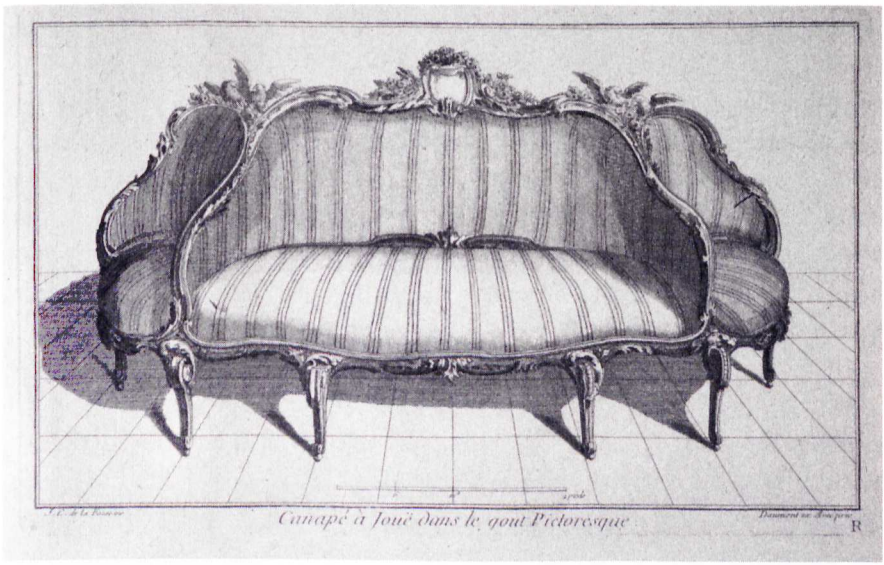
Among the biggest fabric guzzlers then imagined are some of the greatest sofas of all time. The two most popular models were created in the first decade of the nouveau riche decorating boom: the *ottomane* and the *canapé à confidents*, or confidante. The ottoman was the first of a long line of models with exotic names—it was followed, among others, by the sultana and the turquoise; by midcentury, in the Château de Ménars the Marquise de Pompadour had the ultimate in exotic overkill, an *ottomane à la turque*, or Turkish ottoman. Heaven knows how the word later came to be downgraded to refer to an overgrown footstool, for the original ottomans were very big affairs indeed: average ones were 6½ to 7 feet long, and they could extend to 10 feet (see page 124). The ottoman was distinguished by its rounded ends, upholstered, but of course, on both sides. The total package, Bimont explained, required roughly twice the fabric needed to cover a less exotic model.



In the eighteenth century, sofas whose frame was completely rounded, arms as well as back, were known as ottomanes. *The exotic, Turkish-sounding name conjured up an image of exotic comfort. In the nineteenth century, the ottoman was gradually reincarnated as an oversize footrest.*

As for the confidante (also called a *canapé à joue*, or sofa with cheeks), well, the concept that justified its invention (at each end, someone could snuggle up to one of the cheeks and trade secrets with a confidante seated on one of the end seats) masked its other function as a true cash cow for upholsterers: a confidante was like a sofa and two armchairs all rolled into one (see page 125). And on and on it went, as one model after another appeared in those trendy shops. In 1769, Roubo did his best to explain exactly how an ottoman was different from a *veilleuse*, or vigilant sofa, and a Turkish vigilant from a paphose (see page 126), before pronouncing that many models mere marketing devices and railing against "the greed of furniture makers and merchants" for trying to convince clients that they had come up with something really new.

Nothing, however, reined in sofamania, which by Roubo's day was already nearly a century old. In May 1690, less than two years after the sofa hit Paris, the Marquise de Sévigné's daughter had managed to have one delivered to her home in the far reaches of Provence. Her proud mother exclaimed that it was "a piece of furniture worthy of Versailles!" "Sofa" was first mentioned in a dictionary in 1691, and the following year the word was featured in a spoof of

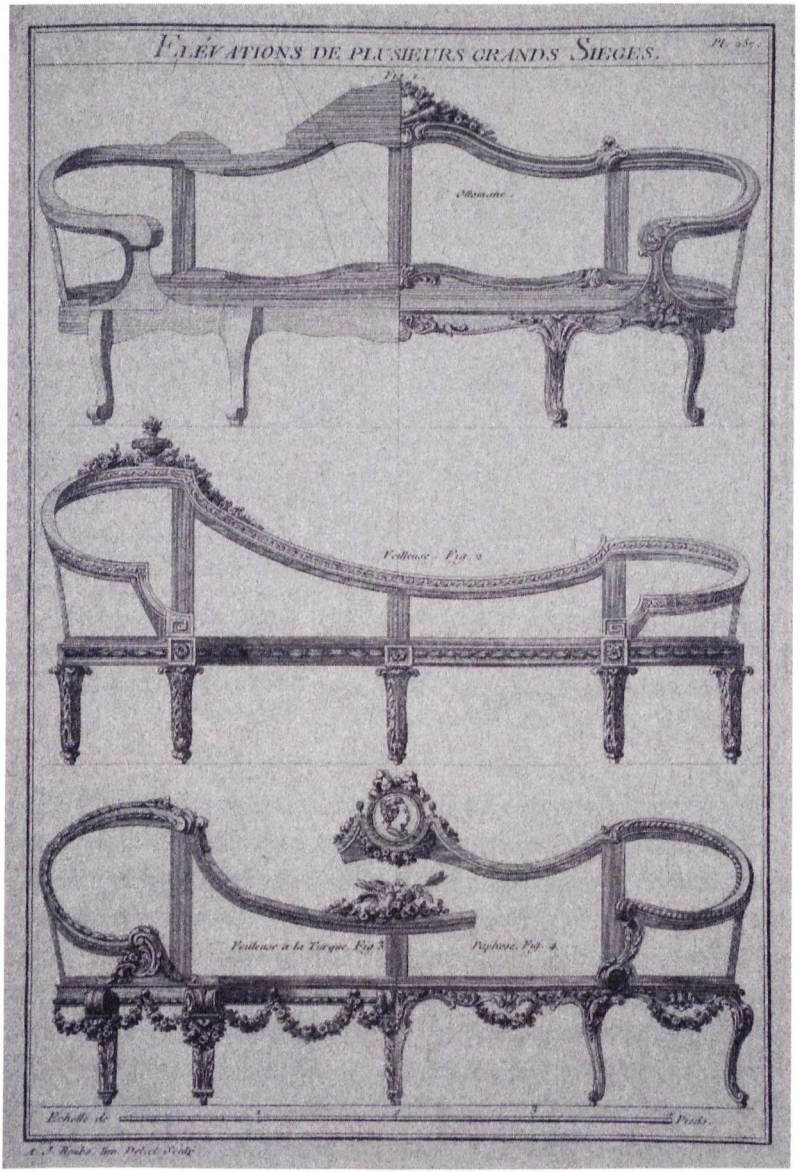


This 1768 engraving introduced a kind of sofa that soon became hugely popular. It featured joues *(literally "cheeks"), wings at each end that turned it into a combination of a sofa and a pair of armchairs. It became known as a confidante, since two people could draw in close to the wings and share secrets.*

the French love of all things luxe and trendy, *Des Mots à la mode* (*Fashionable Words*). When the Maréchal d'Humières died in 1694—after he had managed to pass on the family name and fortune to the beloved daughter, who used her new wealth to build, for instance, the original modern bathroom—he passed on to her as well one of the earliest sofas; it was ornately carved in walnut.

In 1695, the sofa craze had spread beyond French borders. Daniel Cronström, posted to the Swedish embassy in Paris as a sort of cultural attaché, reported to Stockholm all the latest sofa news from Paris. Ready-made ones were already for sale; the new furniture was so hot, however, that he couldn't lay his hands on two matching sofas. The French had gone sofa-mad, and "there's hardly a room in Paris without one." Six months later, Cronström's self-described "sofa campaign" had paid off, and he announced proudly that he was shipping off to Stockholm a matched pair "in a most singular design."

Throughout the eighteenth century, the passion for a well-cushioned life continued unchecked. The first pieces designed by the royal furniture makers for the future Louis XV, in 1718 when he was only eight, included two sofas covered in a yellow damask with a leaf design overembroidered with silver thread. In 1725, Charlotte Desmares had seven sofas, two of which were



Master furniture designer Roubo used this engraving to show potential clients the distinguishing features of several popular kinds of sofas—the veilleuse, *for example, was rounded like the* ottomane, *but higher on one end. (Its frame often featured a carved representation of a flame, since the word* veilleuse *also designated a night-light.)*

described as big, in her small home. Madame la Duchesse, an early champion of the sofa, understood its potential to make even the grandest space cozier and more inviting. Many of the Palais Bourbon's signature rooms featured rounded corners—its salon, its formal bedroom, its gallery, even the rooms in its bathing suite. All through her very big house, the woman described as "always the life of the party" helped transform those rooms into settings for intimate entertaining by positioning sofas—a total of thirty-six, in fact—whose curves complemented those of her curvilinear rooms. And when she redid the Hôtel d'Evreux, the Marquise de Pompadour put in six sofas, five ottomans, two chaises longues, and one small ottoman.

Sofas were indeed found, as the Swedish envoy remarked, "in every room of the house." Their function, however, changed with the type of room. Those *canapés* lined up (sometimes three in a row) in great public spaces such as salons were proof of the home owner's casual good taste, but it's not clear that they were very much used. Sofas in dining rooms were probably above all decorative. Madame la Duchesse had one, covered in jonquil velvet, made to fill one wall of hers; it was "cornered" for an exact fit. (If the two sides of the corner were not identical, the sofa was cut asymmetrically.) In Blondel's vision, the perfect, two-tubbed bathroom was equipped with a pair of sofas.

Elsewhere, sofas were used to help promote interior life. For reading rooms and the smallest of all small rooms, designed by Blondel and christened "sofa," Roubo championed models with rounded ends such as the ottoman and the *veilleuse* for "reading comfortably in front of a fire." He also suggested positioning a pair opposite each other for companionate reading or relaxed conversation.

The sofa thus came to be seen as indispensable to any dwelling in which reading and the life of the mind played a key role. Imagine Françoise de Graffigny's surprise when she visited Cirey, home to Voltaire and Emilie du Châtelet. She was astonished to find no sofas and not even "a single really comfortable armchair. I mean, they have perfectly good chairs, but they are merely fabric-covered and not at all padded." She concluded that as far as Voltaire was concerned, "apparently the body's well-being is just not his kind of voluptuousness." (Voltaire did have one of those minimally padded, by then quite old-fashioned big comfort armchairs—his was functional, with a sliding shelf added as a writing surface. He was sitting in it when he died in 1778.)

The revolution in seating of which the sofa was the centerpiece had numerous long-lasting consequences. It inaugurated the marketing of furniture and the practice of buying furniture as we now know it: those upholstery shops were the first modern furniture stores. In addition, it created the bond between

furniture and design that we now take for granted. No prior age had accorded furniture anything like the degree of importance it acquired in the age of comfort. Beginning at the turn of the eighteenth century, architects such as Mansart and Blondel not only designed furniture, they considered it essential that an architect take the placement of furniture into account when drawing up a plan, and they indicated the principal pieces on theirs. In still another interaction between behavior and design, the great furniture makers knew full well that the role furniture played in people's lives was changing dramatically and that with their designs, they were shaping the way people lived. Roubo explained that new kinds of furniture were being created every day "in an attempt to respond to all the new needs that seem to pop up as soon as [furniture makers] are able to satisfy them."

The combination of many new types of furniture, an explosion in the amount of furniture found in individual residences, and the new importance given to its placement produced a radically new look for the home. As their inhabitants were well aware, eighteenth-century French homes were completely unlike the sparsely furnished interiors decorated essentially with the occasional flashy showpiece that had previously been the norm (see color plates). One Frenchman remarked in 1755, "Our home furnishings look nothing like those of our fathers." Thanks to the changes sparked by the revolution in seat furniture, homes looked for the first time by our standards truly furnished.

The new emphasis on furniture and the fact that people were investing more of their wealth in furniture created another new type of tourism, furniture tourism, also with its guidebooks for foreign visitors. In 1749, for example, Dezallier d'Argenville singled out the Hôtel d'Evreux as a "must-see" because of "its refined and luxurious furniture." The Comte d'Evreux had certainly gone to great lengths to garner that mention in the *Architectural Digest* of the day: at the time of his death, more than half of his fortune was tied up in furniture. Like mother, like son.

Among the first homes promoted as a stop on the furniture tour was that of Pierre Crozat. Crozat's fabled gallery displayed the masterpieces of his art collection; it also showcased the first truly great furniture ever designed for an individual not to the manner born: "twelve armchairs, two sofas, two benches, four stools, upholstered in red morocco leather," according to the inventory drawn up after Crozat's death (see color plates). Many of those pieces designed in the first decade of the eighteenth century still survive. Three centuries after they were made, half of them stand proudly as the centerpiece of a room in a palatial building a stone's throw away from the site of the Crozat mansion, the Louvre

museum. The first time I visited it, I literally sank to the floor in admiration: this is no ordinary seat furniture.

The armchairs have grand proportions, suited both to the gallery's dimensions and to the aspirations of a commoner who lived on a truly regal scale. No one, however, would confuse them with the hulking big comfort armchairs of the age of magnificence. All the aspects of the evolution that Roubo saw as essential to armchair modernity are in process in them. Their backs are much lower and less rectilinear; their frames have soft, relaxed curves. The backs and sides are nicely domed with padding; the gently inclined armrests are cushioned as well. These are not yet fully eighteenth-century armchairs, but they are fully on the cusp. When visitors to Crozat's gallery at the turn of the eighteenth century encountered these easy seats, one look would have told them that a new age for seating was dawning. This furniture was clearly not simply made—it was designed. There's just the right tilt to the backs, just the right slope to the arms, just the right amount of padding. They were clearly intended to be comfortable—and to provide proper back support.

Those who enjoyed these plush seats also found themselves in the lap of design luxury. The furniture's intricate motifs were sculpted, using the *chantourné* saw, on every surface—front, sides, back, and even inside the legs—the carving is of extraordinarily high quality, and the gilding shows that off. These pieces offer definitive proof that furniture was no longer just about the fabric. And as for the morocco leather upholstery, still miraculously the original upholstery from the turn of the eighteenth century—it is almost inconceivably luxe: it is actually of two distinct shades of reddish brown, with, as the crowning touch, strips of leather edged with silk ribbon to hide the stitching applied to the surface; these were shaped to form a swirling pattern that echoes motifs in the sculpted frames. The leather upholstery seems perfect for a bachelor's home—in his gallery on the Place Vendôme, Crozat's elder, married brother had blue velvet with a floral pattern—and also gives the furniture a sporty flair.

Furniture design books and engravings of individual pieces, notably those by J. C. Delafosse that illustrate this chapter, quickly publicized the latest looks from Paris. The new way of furnishing an interior being developed in Paris thus came to be seen as an integral part of the French art of living in elegant comfort. By 1776, the Neapolitan ambassador to Versailles, the Marquis de Caraccioli, proclaimed that France had "furnished" all of Europe and "had done so admirably." As a result, he added, you could now go into the innermost rooms of homes all over Europe and inspect their furnishings; you would find that

everywhere "pomp" had been banished; in its place, "comfort reigns." (He had not traveled to England.)

And last, but surely not least, upholstered furniture and easy seats had become essential to private life as the age of comfort had defined it—to family life, to companionate moments, to the life of the mind. Think of the image of the woman in love with one of the original sofas (page 106): as she gazes at the sofa, she's holding a letter in her hand; her desk is set up for writing, and sheets are scattered all over its surface. Her beloved sofa is part of an interior designed to favor the development of an interior life, as were the rooms with paired sofas favored by Blondel and Roubo. In the eighteenth century, the interior furniture of the home and the mind's interior furnishings were thought to be interdependent.