

## The Chair: Considered Transcription

February 20, 2025

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Hi, welcome. This is Gary Rogowski for Splinters. Thank you very much for joining me. Today's chat, intriguing one for me. It is called The Chair: Considered. I will ask you a simple favor. Consider the chair. What, you ask? It's a chair. What's special about a chair? It's just a chair. Okay.

I beg to differ. On one level for us all, the chair is the most symbolic piece of furniture in our homes. Almost as important as your mirror. Show me your favorite chair and I could weave a whole tale about you. A chair can say as much about your taste, your need for status or opulence as any item, maybe even including your car. The chair is also a piece we tend to take for granted. Most of us sit in one throughout the day or perhaps several chairs throughout the day. And then we go home to sit and relax in what? Another chair.

Put one chair all alone in a room and you sense something, do you not? All there by itself. Possibility, perhaps emptiness or loneliness, a single chair. But that chair in the center of an empty room has potential. Put two chairs facing each other in that same empty room and things have changed. To me, two chairs facing one another suggest dialogue, intimacy or confrontation. You choose. How do you see two chairs in a room?

There was a performance artist, Maria Abramowicz, who made a living out of sitting in the Museum of Modern Art in New York City in a performance piece called The Artist is Present. And she sat in a chair in a big room and visitors to the museum could sign up and sit across from her for as long as they like. This lasted a few minutes because she just stared at the sitter across from her. I saw the performance, I didn't buy in, but the tension of the idea of two facing chairs I thought was perfect. Was the artist a muted mirror, a seer, or a blank slate on which we wrote our own story? And there are other interpretations.

Two chairs set onto a stage and we can have a play. Nothing else is required in the way of scenery. Put these two chairs facing one another and we have a dialogue. Place two couches facing each other in that same space and most of us think of a waiting room with the doctors or dentists. But two chairs facing each other suggests a dialogue. Two chairs back-to-back say something completely different. They become symbols. No matter their shape or engineering or comfort, they speak of tension, disagreement, a riff. What went wrong? Place them facing away and we have conflict. Chairs are the only pieces of furniture I can think of that do this in such an outsized way. Set two tables next to one another and someone will ask, 'Where's the chairs?' Nothing in furniture is as symbolic as the chair is for us.

It was this way from the first. Chairs didn't used to be made for everyone. Only the kings and queens, the pharaohs, the rulers could sit on a chair. And they weren't chairs so much as thrones, symbols of power, icons of the kingdom. Don't get caught sitting in the king's chair. If the others in the room or chamber or castle got to sit at all, they sat on benches or footstools. So chairs were first symbolic of power. Think as

well as the faculty chair in a university, the chairman of the board in a corporation, the first chair in the orchestra.

Chairs have occupied this special place in our mind and in most cultures, if not all, for some time. But as the centuries went by, the idea of the home being something other than a place where you and your horse and cattle and chickens slept, the idea of a domestic place came into being. And according to some historians, the idea of comfort grew from the sense of a home. This was a place that was safe, a place that was warm and secure and comfortable. Chairs started to get built for the middle-class burgers and merchants and sea captains who wanted to spend their evenings resting their weary bones, but not on the ground any longer, raised up off the earth in comfort. That's how they wanted to sit. Thus, the bench that they used to rest on grew a back and longer legs. Styles of chairs started to grow from the Greek Klismos chair, which was taken from the pharaohs, to the thick plank seat of a Windsor chair and onto the stuffed and upholstered wing chair. And then in the 20th century, the advent of Danish modern chair design. Mothers could calm their babies in a rocking chair, or we could sit on thin, spindly bent pieces of a cafe chair discussing the world and its vagaries. We could fold up a metal and fabric chair and take it to the beach or a picnic in the park, or roll away in a wheelchair on our way out of surgery. Chairs became as common to us as doors or dinner plates or windows to us.

The chair, right underneath you, unnoticed. And now for centuries, unnoticed, unless you're a woodworker.

All right, I think I've established for you the importance, in my mind, of the chair in our history. How does a woodworker look at this item of furniture? Most of them understand its importance in a portfolio, but feel its challenge, its peculiarity. If a piece of furniture is form, if any piece of furniture is form, capital F, set before us, the chair's form is mostly air. Draw an imaginary rectangular box around your chest of drawers, or blanket chest, or writing desk, and each fills up a certain volume of space. Well, the chair does that as well, except when you remove all that isn't chair, there's very little left. It is comprised primarily of negative space. And this is mostly true, of course, of our wooden frame chairs, the cafe chairs, library chairs, captain's chairs, dining chairs, reading chairs, sitting room chairs. Oh, goodness. The list goes on. We have a lot of these chairs.

And for these stick chairs, like Michelangelo and his David, we need to remove all that is not chair in order to reveal our design. But wood, unlike stone, is not strong in every direction. And although stacked laminated chunks of wood have been shaped and sculpted, they are not what one would consider a movable object, a piece that could be moved to different parts of the room with ease. This is one of the advantages of a well-designed chair. It will be engineered to be strong, yet lightweight, comfortable, and beautiful. And these requirements must be met in order to be truly successful as a design for living for people. The chair needs to be sturdy, it needs to be comfortable, and it needs to be pleasing to the eye. One needs to spy a chair in a room and be drawn to its line or shapes or form and want to sit in it. You want to plant your butt in it. 'That's a good-looking chair.' I want to sit in it. See how it feels. We want to feel secure and we want to relax in its embrace.

So we expect a lot from a chair. The design of a chair then sits in this three-cornered idea. And when you put too much emphasis on one corner, like aesthetics, the engineering can become incredibly difficult. I knew one designer who only used to make pencil sketches or watercolors of his chairs and then hand them off to his team to figure out how to do the impossible. Most of us don't have a team of engineers at our disposal. So we woodworkers rely on steam bending parts or laminating layers of wood together to

create beautiful yet strong and sinuous shapes. Our joinery has to be clever, taking advantage of wood strength and compression, and most tensile requirements. Compression is when you're pushing on a piece. Tensile strength is when you're trying to pull it apart. And wood is pretty good being pulled apart on the end grain. And then glue helps us hold things together. That's joinery.

But how does the designer deal with a chair's nemesis? That demon, that demigod of the devil, that enemy called Racking. For the chair gets dragged with an occupant across a floor or up to the dining table, carrying its load, a chair's rotund occupant will tip back on its two rear legs while the chair rails try to hold this Falstaff up in cantilevered tension. We kick our chair legs. The vacuum runs into them. We stack them on top of one another in the corner. We sit in a dozen different positions in a single chair, moving our butt around, first resting on an arm while the dog leans on the other, scooching back, then forward, throwing a leg over an armrest. Picking one up with a, you know, single arm, we ask a lot of our chairs.

The chair is the subject of a great deal of punishment, it turns out, and surviving for any length of time means the chair maker has to be clever and use joinery that can withstand this onslaught while being strong and able to last. What is comfortable to one six-foot sitter may not come close to satisfying the needs of a smaller person. Comfort, and comfort done without pillows. Yes, you can make any chair comfortable, just throw enough pillows on it. But without pillows, it is very hard to accomplish. And various jigs for back angles and shapes and curves and conforming or ignoring our talkative backs. All these jigs have been made. I've had several. And in the end, you just say, you know, these aren't worth it. They just don't do it. But comfort is in the back of the beholder.

I designed my second chair. My first chair was a complete disaster. But my second chair, I designed it just with my back in mind. I was having such back trouble. And so if you sit in it today, you'll go, oh, it's uncomfortable for me, or it'll hit you just right. And you'll say, oh, this is great. So the chair is in the back of the beholder. And with all these different requirements to satisfy, to do well at chair making, it is no wonder that many famous woodworkers avoided the whole experience. There are no Krenov chairs. He didn't make chairs. Mackintosh chairs are eye-catching, but painful, very straight. Beautiful, striking, not comfortable. Frank Lloyd Wright should have been arrested for what he called a chair. Instruments of torture, were they, however well they blended into his backgrounds or rested at a table. I visited his Oak Park home, toured that place, and his dining chairs there were all tall back and severely vertical so his children couldn't turn around to see what dish was coming from the kitchen.

It's a hard thing to do to design a chair. Kaare Klint one of the most influential of Danish chair designers, was asked by a friend who came over to a studio what he was doing, what he was working on. And Klint replied, "I'm working on this chair design." And it could have been in the modeling phase or the prototyping phase. I don't remember what. But a year later, the same friend returned to Klint's studio and asked him, "Well, what are you working on now?" And Klint replied, "Why the chair? Of course."

It takes years of efforts to design and prototype and build a chair. And my friend Brian Boggs, chair maker extraordinaire, took four years to develop his Ladderback design, which was a design that had been around for 100 years before he started to fool around with it. A hundred years. And he decided to make the ladderback chair better. But it took him four years of trying and prototyping and thinking about things. It is a process. It is a long process. Replete with failure. As Brian told me, "If you're not failing, you're not designing."

And so we have come to why I have brought this all up.

In my Online Mastery Program, I have my students in their fifth term, the second year, their fifth term. I have my students design and build a share in about 12 weeks or so. It is a ridiculously short amount of time to find an idea one likes to play around with and work on it, making it somewhat your own, and then working out the details of the engineering and comfort and assembly and finish. Do you design from the footprint up or do you design from the seat out? What's the principal view? If it's a dining chair, it's really from the seat above. It's nothing except the back of the chair and the seat above. The front legs are gone most of the time. On the other hand, a reading chair is put up against the wall. The front of the chair is the most important view. Do you design from the side? Do you design from the top? Does that design work no matter how you approach it?

I'm going to mention this briefly, but the Hans Wegner chair, another Danish chair designer, the Hans Wegner Y Chair, is one of those ideas that is so successful you see it in almost every architectural magazine somewhere and it's not about the chair. It's just the chair everyone puts in place to fit into a modernist household or a Danish furniture household or any number of ideas and are talking about color and there's those why chairs because they're so right. That chair is right and it's based on an idea from a Chinese chair. It's fascinating.

And I have my students try and design this chair in 12 weeks. The first chair they will show at our critique will, in truth, be only a prototype, even if it's all finished. They will build a suitable prototype. They will build a model. The share they bring to the critique will really be a prototype in truth, first version. And if they've done well, they might return to build more of these chairs. Maybe they'll build a whole dining room set, changing an angle here or there, taking some wood off in a spot. It is a surgical practice is chair design.

And in truth, it's usually everyone's favorite design project in the program, building this chair, because it's so hard to do and so much fun to do. It's so challenging. And so to all my Mastery students, I can only say, "I'm sorry. You're welcome."

It is great fun to be challenged and rise up to meet this challenge. Design is a vocabulary, a mountain to climb, and a roller coaster ride sometimes. Engages us on a level that some of the tasks we perform in woodworking do not. But design work is great fun. And so I offer this to you all. Consider the Online Mastery Program. My goodness, we are in our 25th year of that program. So I've been talking about chairs for quite some time with folks. And there are some remarkable designs. Check out our website, <https://northwestwoodworking.com>. You will see the Online Mastery student gallery and see some of their chair designs. It's quite stunning. It's quite stunning.

So for more information on chairs, other projects in the Online Mastery Program, please drop me a note studio (at) northwestwoodworking.com. I'm happy to respond to your questions. And please check out the website, again, <https://northwestwoodworking.com>. Support me on Kofi.com, <https://kofi.com>, and check out some of my musings on Substack @Garyrogowski. Fun stuff. Take care of yourselves. Adios.