

## Gothic Furniture Design: Before and After Pugin

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Augustus Welby Northmore Pugin (1812-1852) was the most passionate master of the "Gothic Revival" in England in the nineteenth century. The term "Gothic Revival" is fundamentally applied to the Gothic architectural style in the Victorian Age, but culturally, it includes not only architecture but also earlier romantic literature like Horace Walpole's "Gothic Romance", and such movements as picturesque landscape gardening represented in English garden designs of William Kent. This is a long and pervasive cultural movement which developed in the Romantic period (1790-1830) and flowered through the long Victorian period.

Before Pugin, it was the age of Neoclassicism in England, though there were early Gothic Revival architects, like Sir Roger Newdigate (1719-1806) who was in charge of the construction of Arbury Hall in Warwickshire. This is a former Augustinian monastery restored by him and the father of the English novelist, George Eliot, used to be a butler in this mansion house. As for furniture, the Chippendales contributed much to furniture production, especially Thomas Chippendale II (1718-1779) who was the most famous and prolific furniture designer and cabinet maker of the age. He made much use of imported mahogany from Cuba and India from the 1720's onward. This period is generally termed "the age of later mahogany" or "the later Georgian style". Mahogany was an elegant and expensive wood in those days,

beginning to be much used in various forms of furniture, from French rococo through gothic to the next chinoiserie style. He also published the very influential Gentleman and Cabinet-Maker's Director (1754, 1755, 1762), by which he is nowadays recognized as "essentially a collector and talented modifier of already existing styles, notably rococo" (NEB: 3-244). But the rococo style imported from France didn't remain popular in England as long as it did in France. Elegant and refined as rococo is, British furniture designers and makers slowly started to return to the classical, traditional and native style of essential British furniture.

The most important figure in this Neoclassical field, Robert Adam (1728-92), an architect and interior designer among the four famous Adam brothers, went on a grand tour of Italy for four years in 1754 and was much influenced by classical models in art, afterwards applying this to architecture resulting in the evolution of "Palladian Neoclassicism in England into the airy, light elegant style that bears his name" (NEB:1-77). With furniture too, his style is neoclassical, refined and elegant, with much use of satinwood as well as mahogany, as beautifully exhibited in the Kenwood and Harewood Houses.

George Hepplewhite (-1786) and Thomas Sheraton (1751-1806) were also Neoclassical furniture designers much influenced by Adam. Hepplewhite was especially noted for chairs with shield-backs, heart-backs and

camel-backs. Simplicity, elegance and utility are characteristics of his designs. After his death, his wife published Cabinet-Maker and Upholsterer's Guide (1788). Sheraton, on the other hand, designed smaller and more useful furniture, like extension-style dining tables, which were very useful and practical for urban life in the industrial cities with their growing populations. He generally pursued and aimed for the lightness and delicacy in furniture. His furniture is well presented in his Cabinet-Maker's and Upholsterer's Drawing Book (1719).

The next style, Regency, which lasted through the long reigns of George III and IV, produced much furniture affordable to the rising middle class after the Industrial Revolution. Thomas Hope (1769-1831) and George Smith are representatives of this style. According to Mario Praz (1987: 152), "The vigorous archeological trends in England were best personified by gifted Thomas Hope" who wrote both In Household Furniture and Interior Decoration (1807) which demonstrates the Empire English or Regency Style, and an exotic novel, Anastasius, a Don Juan; the prose in this work might well have been envied by George Gordon, Lord Byron.

While Neoclassicism was dominant in England in those days, the Gothic style gradually began to gain popularity in design and architecture and to become accepted in literature. Horace Walpole (1717-1797), the third son of Robert Walpole and builder of Strawberry Hill, the first Gothic Revival house, wrote the first gothic novel, The Castle of Otranto (1764). To say nothing of the story itself, Strawberry Hill, which is characterized by its irregularity and asymmetry, in this novel becomes the center of attention. William Beckford (1761-1844), the writer of another Gothic novel, Vathek (1787), built Fonthill Abbey, also designed by James

Wyatt (1764-1813). Both novelists, though dilettantes, were forerunners of the Gothic Revival and built their Gothic houses by following their own fertile but unusual imaginations, without depending on orthodox building theory. They had only to satisfy their own visual desires as they welled up from their imaginations. As C. Brooks points out, "Gothic fiction's divorce from Neoclassicism is here most absolute, because rationality itself is abandoned" (1999: 114). Imagination released from reason was encouraging both the Romantic writings and the Gothic buildings of the forthcoming new age. According to K. Clark, the Romantic movement in literature and its own standard of criticism had already been established and accepted by Pugin's time.

Pugin's father, A. C. Pugin (c.1769-1832), was a French immigrant architect who fled from the French Revolution and was employed by John Nash (1752-1835) for his ability in draughting. Nash was in those days the greatest architect and London City planner under George IV and, according to K. Clark, hated the Gothic style, because he was quite ignorant of what he thought of as a troublesome style. So A. C. Pugin was to study Gothic design and became an authority on it, working on the interior of Windsor Castle. His son, A. W. N. Pugin, also began to work with his father and for the first time at the age of only fifteen designed furniture for the Royal Household at Windsor Castle, thus establishing his career as an architect and designer with a strong passion for the Gothic style. He began to take an interest in architecture but it was in 1835, at the age of twenty-three, that he converted to the Roman Catholic Church, after he was inspired by a love for the Gothic by his father.

Religion was much more essential, not to

say indispensable, to him than art or artcraft. For him, architecture must be religious. The true style of the Catholic church architecture was Gothic because of its verticality, accuracy, and faithfulness of design. This was his eternal architectural principle for his Gothic designs.

Before his conversion, the Roman Catholic Church was very small and weak around the end of the Eighteenth Century but the 'Catholic Emancipation' declared by the British Parliament in 1829 increased the number of Catholic believers, including Irish immigrants into England because of the famine and the Church made great contributions to charity to relieve their plight. This must have required many Roman Catholic parish churches for the poor and their faith in England, whose many designs Pugin commissioned.

Pugin and Sir Charles Barry were appointed as designers of the New Palace of Westminster after the chapel and most of the buildings were destroyed by fire in 1834. This was a practical opportunity for him to rebuild and redesign it with Gothic decorations and sculptures, which Nathaniel Hawthorne later praised as "gravely gorgeous." It was completed in 1852.

Pugin's most important book on architecture was The True Principles of Pointed or Christian Architecture (1841). In this he put emphasis on 'Truth' which was symbolized by 'spiritual beliefs' and 'the quality of design'. His idea was that they "had produced artistic brilliance during the Gothic period" (Aldrich 1994: 152).

Similarly, E. Panofsky, in his Gothic Architecture and Scholasticism also defines the High Gothic cathedral as follows (1957: 44-45).

...the High Gothic cathedral aimed, first

of all, at "totality" and therefore tended to approximate, by synthesis as well as elimination, one perfect and final solution; ...the High Gothic cathedral sought to embody the whole of Christian knowledge, theological, moral, natural, and historical, with everything in its place and that which no longer found its place, suppressed.

Gothic churches are architectures through which the invisible idea of God, the Christian view of the ideal world, is symbolized. Panofsky emphasizes the religious totality of the Gothic.

Further, Pugin's contemporaries, G. E. Street, William Butterfield and William Burges are High Victorian Gothic architects and all of them tried to make modern the Gothic, but it was John Ruskin (1819-1900), the great Victorian author, artist, critic, social revolutionist and conservationist: he was by far most influenced by Pugin; though Protestant, not Catholic, he succeeded in making popular the Gothic. As a result of travelling through Italy, he produced the essay 'The Nature of Gothic' in the seventh chapter of his The Stones of Venice (Morris 1989: 119).

I believe that the characteristic or moral element of Gothic are the following, placed in the order of their importance:

1. Savageness.
2. Changefulness.
3. Naturalism.
4. Grotesqueness.
5. Rigidity.
6. Redundance.

These characters are here expressed as belonging to the building; as belonging to the builder, they would be expressed thus:

1. Savageness or Rudeness.
2. Love of Change.
3. Love of Nature.

4. Disturbed Imagination.
5. Obstinacy.
6. Generosity.

Here Ruskin is admiring the Gothic rather than the classical, pursuing the salvation of the soul in the Gothic arising from “savageness”, a German tribal spirit – wild Nature, which, though formerly considered to be a defect of the Gothic, began to be regarded as beautiful, or further, a proper aesthetic. This is represented in the totality of ornamental design and structure created by the nameless artisans who laboured on the great cathedrals in the Medieval Age, which was to be praised and imitated by William Morris in ‘The Arts and Crafts Movement’. Pugin had already expressed his idea of the artistic totality of nature in True Principle (Atterbury & Wainwright 1994: 136).

...the smallest detail should have a meaning or serve a purpose ...there should be no features about a building [or its furniture] which are not necessary for convenience, construction, or propriety. ...moreover the architects of the Middle ages were the first who turned the natural proprieties of the various materials to their full account, and made their mechanism a vehicle for their art.

Craftmanship becomes a key aesthetic value and criterion for Ruskin and Morris, in contrast to the shoddy mass-produced goods available with industrialization. Ruskin’s notion that “There is no wealth but life” in Unto This Last (1877) affirms the Gothic view of life in the sick and materialistic Victorian Age.

Pugin designed much furniture, and the style varies according to its usage and pur-

pose. In 1835, he published Gothic Furniture in the Style of the Fifteenth Century, a collection of his Gothic furniture designs. Generally, his furniture for churches has a grand perpendicular style with a solemn religious beauty or sublimity, which shows “Pugin’s affinity to French and Flemish Flamboyant Gothic design” (Aldrich 1994: 173). Much of his domestic furniture designed for other houses was elaborate in style, while the pieces designed for his own house are simple in style. This anticipates the arrival of elegant curving lines of nouveau design or the simpler straight lines of art deco. His simpler designs were quite popular and were much copied and reproduced by other domestic furniture makers like Grace, Myers, Gillow and Holland, who were Pugin’s main furniture firms.

Some characteristics of Pugin’s furniture are summarised as follows:

- generally massive and brutal style mainly made of oak
- the Jacobean style produced at his own firm at Covent Garden (1829~1831)
- ‘unreformed’ Gothic with sophisticated new designs often made of rosewood nearer to the former ‘Regency style’
- the Tudor style as seen in his Gothic Furniture (1835)
- the ‘Reformed Gothic’ style; the much plainer Gothic style after 1835 and handed down to B. Talbert and Gillow
  - simplicity as in medieval monastic furniture
- the use of various curved and X-shaped structural devices for chairs and tables
- elaborate curving and veneering with polychromatic marquetry for several country houses especially after 1840 (Cooper 1998: 100/Gere & Whiteway 1994: 41-42)

Bruce Talbert (1838-1881), a Pugin follower, was one of designers of the Reformed Gothic, the newly fashionable Gothic style, in the 1870's, and his furniture is generally "less ecclesiastical and a bit more domesticated" (Andrews 1992: 29) than Pugin's and was usually produced at Gillows & Co. His excellent 'Pericles' Gothic cabinet, for example, made of oak and fruitwood with marquetry inlay and brass hinges, now in a private collection, won a Grand Prix at the Paris Exhibition in 1867. There is a Shakespearean Pericles scene on the pediment, which conveys a rather ceremonial theatricality and dramatic atmosphere. It is really a fine work of art, but much more domestic and less rigid than Pugin's. This was a new development in Master Pugin's design which is sure to suit future furniture collectors. This is almost a turning point in furniture design. After the 1870's, a striking Modernism in furniture began to flourish, giving birth to the designs of William de Morgan, William Morris, the founder of the 'Arts and Crafts Movement', T. E. Collcutt and Frank Lloyd Wright, etc. This subsumes 'the Aesthetic Movement' in furniture with its spindled galleries, decorative boards and bevelled mirrors; further, art nouveau display cabinets or sideboards with much decorative inlay of floral motifs, and the art deco style cabinets with straight lines are also a part of this trend. These elaborate and skillful designs and styles were much influenced by Pugin.

For Pugin the European world was based upon the Christian faith, but after the Renaissance it was replaced by Neoclassicism which he expressed in Contrasts (1841) as a decline, or more emphatically, "a heresy". In reality, he brought Gothic architecture and design back to life from the dominant Neoclassicism by creating various kinds of furniture design,

shortening his life through overwork. His life was certainly short lasting only forty years, but thereby he lived at the beginning of a time of great social and technological change. The movement he began continued under the reigns of four monarchs: George III, George IV, William IV, and Victoria. But Pugin's Gothic passion was full of the Christian principle which created simple, ornamental, and aesthetic furniture. This is a British heritage and will be sure to become an essential basis of design today and in the future.

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