

Upholding upholstery (1600–1775)

Although traditional cabinetmakers and upholsterers are rare, there are still a few operating today. Their specialisation in the provision of authentic upholstered antique restoration and reproductions services is greatly appreciated and adds value to both antiques and fine furniture. These particular skills are well described by Karin Walton in her chapter 'Upholstery from 1660 to 1900' in the landmark 1980 publication, *World furniture*.

The X frame chair was probably the first upholstered chair and was in use up until the second quarter of the 17th century. It had fabric nailed tightly to the frame, sometimes supplemented by padding, and commonly used with a down cushion. These chairs held the status of throne chairs and can be seen in early paintings depicting Mary Tudor and James I.



Fig 1

The ever-popular farthingdale chair had a stuffed seat and often a padded back. Conventionally, leather coverings were used, particularly during the Commonwealth period and for institutional use in colleges. Other types of original covers in needle or Turkey work still exist today. Turkey work, otherwise known as set work, remained popular into the first quarter of the 18th century. It took its name from the Turkish carpets that it imitated. Such carpets have been known to Europe since the crusades. Expensive as these items were, they were more often found on tables and cupboards, than on the floor. Being hard wearing, they were also used as chair coverings. Turkey work was recorded in English parliamentary documents as becoming more popular than caned chairs. When leather was used as a chair covering, it was usually plain (see fig 1) however embossed and gilded leather could be found on grander chairs (figs 2 and 3).



Fig 3

Fig 2

The Restoration saw new and widespread popularity for upholstered furniture and other decorative arts. Charles II, during his exile in France and Holland, enjoyed furniture upholstered in rich silk fabrics. Upon his return to England, the aristocracy set about importing these luxuries, a fashion encouraged by the emigration from France to England of Huguenot craftsmen fleeing Louis XIV's persecution of protestants.

Cane made chairs more resilient, hence comfortable and affordable (fig 4); the seats of these chairs would often be supplemented with a



Fig 4

thin squab or cushion. Woollen cloth was commonly used in upholstery, with wealthier homes opting for rich silks, sometimes brocaded with metal thread.

A feature of 17th century upholstery is the lavish use of trimmings, such as fringes, tassels and tassels on fringes. Another type of trimming took the form of an elaborate band of wire interwoven with silk and ornamented with parchment stripes or rosettes, similarly bound; this form of decoration was common on beds. These embellishments were brought from France, a country that tended to the fashion in such matters. The silks were also imported mainly from France and from Italy, a country that had long fostered trade with the Orient. Italians began to produce damasks and velvets in the 12th century that competed with those from the Orient. Genoa, Lucca, Florence and Venice were all noted for the high quality of their silks. French silk weavers led the field in the 18th century and Italian furnishing velvets were rarely surpassed.



Fig 5

Frequently used upholstery silks included the damask—usually a single coloured fabric in which the pattern is created by alternating the weaves, brocade—a fabric into which are woven small areas of pattern, originally in gold or silver thread, but later in other coloured silks (fig 5) and velvet.

Although the coverings were lavish, the stuffing of chairs was still primitive: usually curled horsehair or variations and mixtures. To support the weight of the sitter, narrow webbing strips were interlaced across the seat frame. Horsehair would be heaped onto a piece of linen tacked above the webbing and a second square of linen was fastened over the top of the hair to hold it all in place. This was the basis of all traditional upholstery although a number of refinements, including shaping of the stuffing, were adopted in the 18th century.

It was the desire for comfort in the late 17th century that led to the adoption of new types of furniture such as sofas and daybeds. The winged easy chair was another innovation, appearing around 1680, gaining popularity in the Queen Anne period.

There is a long history of needlework upholstery and several famous women—among them Bess of Hardwick and Mrs Delany—were prolific in this art. While many upper class women produced chair

covers, the larger sets were most probably the work of professional needlewomen.

Covers worked in the first thirty years of the 18th century were very distinctive with their centred pictorial scene often taken from published engravings. These were worked in fine detail in tent stitch with both wools and silks. A border of flowers was worked in wool in either cross or tent stitch. Knotting was another favourite pastime, worked with a shuttle similar to that used in tating and producing a length of knotted thread. Young women had more things to occupy themselves with by the middle of the 18th century and so needlework furnishings declined. Additionally, the arrival of rococo taste saw a new popularity in all-over floral designs worked in large cross stitch.

State rooms were usually adorned with silk damask upholstered furniture in the first half of the 18th century. Strong colours such as blue, red and green were used. Silk damasks were the most expensive with cheaper substitutes of mixed damasks of silk and wool and all wool damasks. All wool damasks were used for wall and bed hangings, window curtains and chair covers. Silk velvets were less fashionable than they had been and woollen velvets, or plush, were obviously considered good substitutes. A cut woollen velvet called 'caffony' was also used. Strongly coloured red, green and gold woollen velvets simulated the silk velvets.

Unfortunately, the more economical woollen velvets have not survived the years or moths, but names such as harrateen, moreen, camlet, cheney, calamanco, darnix, linseywollsey, tammy and paragon are recorded in inventories of these times. Tammy is a lining; cheney, darnix, linsey and paragon were more suited to bed hangings than seat furniture; camlet was generally made from silk and wool and was used extensively for curtaining, wall hangings and cushion covers; harrateen and moreen were favourite furnishing fabrics being used particularly on beds, but also on seat furniture. The modern practice of covering all 18th century chairs in damask or velvet is not consistent with currently available evidence.

Although the basic components—webbing, linen, curled horsehair and linen—had not changed, there was a period from around 1750, where it was more usual to give shape to the stuffing. The front edge of the seat—which is usually the first to wear thin—was strengthened with the use of an extra roll of stuffing. The loose hair in the centre of the seat or back was often stitched with long stitches which could be done either invisibly, below the cover fabric, or visibly. The edge of the thread would be brought through the fabric and the finishing end would receive a small tuft of silk. Tufting was the forerunner of later buttoning and—by arranging the tufts in alternate rows—it could be used to achieve a decorative effect. Not all upholstery was fixed to the frame of the chair. There were also loose, 'drop in' seats, upholstered on a separate frame and then dropped into a rabbet or groove (figs 4 and 6).

Certain furniture designers would suggest in their publications the best upholstery covers to use. Thomas Chippendale advised that French chairs should be covered with Spanish leather, damask,



Fig 6

tapestry or needlework and actually included such designs in his drawings. Hair cloth, or horsehair—woven with a horsehair weft—was popular around the late 1750s as a very hard-wearing cover among all ranks of wealthier society, being used in both royal palaces and middle class homes. Black was the most common colour of horse hair, but red and green were also used and some weaves were plain, whilst others were striped or even checked.

The function of the room in which the furniture would be located usually dictated the choice of upholstery cover fabric. Saloon and drawing room seating was decorated with damask and needlework, whereas haircloth and leather were more suited to libraries and dining parlours. Fabric was not considered suitable for dining, as it was believed that it would absorb and retain the smell of food (fig 7).



Fig 7

The knowledge of academic researchers as well as traditional upholsterers can and arguably should be drawn on to maximise authenticity and value of antiques. In the desire for difference and novelty the past, again, offers ideas for contemporary decorators and designers ■

Gary Olsson
G N OLSSON ANTIQUE RESTORATIONS
AND REPRODUCTIONS
07 3888 1549

G. N. Olsson

Mastercraftsmen ~ Furniture Makers

Authentic

Antique Restorations and Reproductions

Investments

Custom Manufacture of Corporate Executive Furniture

Heirlooms

Classic Fine Furniture

Queries &
Appointments
07 3888 1549

393 Narangba Rd, Brisbane
Fax: 07 3888 5330
Email: gnolsson@workin4u.com.au
www.workin4u.com.au/gnolsson