

**Key Transitions in  
European and American Design Styles**

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Design history reflects cultural shifts, political change, and evolving aesthetic values, and often influences beliefs and viewpoints. Several key transitions can be seen through furniture and architectural styles in Europe and early America, particularly in the movement from Rococo to Neoclassicism during the changing leadership of the French monarchy and Napoleon's regime, as well as the transition from colonial to post-revolutionary American design.

In France, the transitional phase leading into Rococo is known as the Regency period, during which a regent managed Louis XV's rule until he reached maturity. This transitional era emerged after the death of Louis XIV and marked a shift away from the heavy, formal Baroque style toward lighter, more fluid forms. The style emphasized "comfort and enjoyment," including "pleasure, fantasy, and gaiety," and "reflects the taste of nobility, not of the king" (Harwood, 222). As royal control began to loosen and aristocratic influence grew during the Regency, design became more focused on personal expression and comfort. Furniture from this period began to introduce curved lines and more relaxed ornamentation, setting the stage for the fully developed Rococo style seen later under Louis XV. This period "marked the transition from the formal Louis XIV style to the more playful Louis XV style" (McEwan, 3/12/26), incorporating Baroque elements while becoming more delicate and asymmetrical, as seen in forms such as the *fauteuil*, a lower-backed chair with wider seats and gentle curves (Fig. 1). The shift toward comfort and expression in France set the stage for the other regions to develop their own interpretations of evolving design.

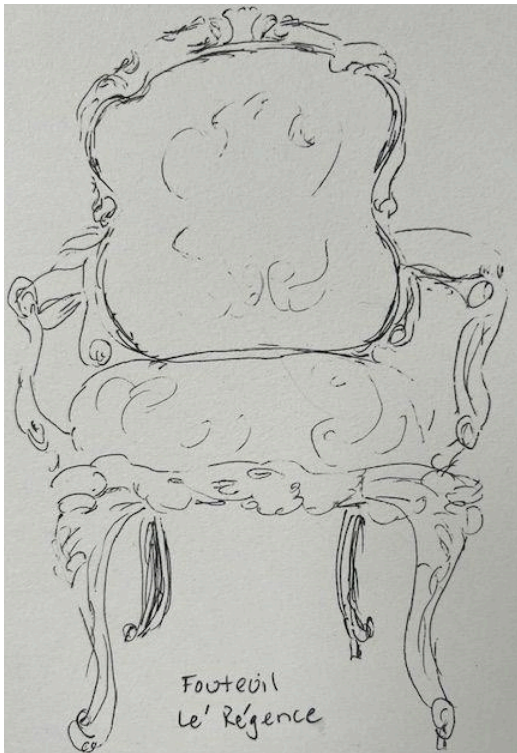


Fig. 1 illustrates a Regency fauteuil, characterized by its light, curvilinear form, cabriole legs, and minimal ornamentation, reflecting the transition away from the heavier Baroque style toward increased comfort and elegance. Sketch by Michelle Young.



Fig. 2 depicts a French Empire fauteuil, showing a more rigid and structured form with heavier proportions and applied ornamentation, reflecting the return to classical influence and emphasis on power and grandeur. Sketch by Michelle Young.

After Rococo and the Neoclassical shift, the French Empire style represented a dramatic return to classical influence, but with a bold and monumental character. Unlike earlier Neoclassical styles that emphasized restraint, Empire furniture was grand,

symmetrical, and highly decorative. Its design reflected power and authority, often incorporating motifs such as eagles, columns, and laurel wreaths. The inclusion of Egyptian elements in Empire design can be directly traced to Napoleon's military campaigns in Egypt, which exposed French designers to ancient Egyptian art and symbolism (Fig. 2). The style intent was purely for Napoleon's glorification. He "calls for writers and artists to create an image of him as a man of destiny, a modern Caesar, a hero who has earned the right to rule France (Harwood 317). As seen in Figures 1 and 2, the transition from the light, asymmetrical qualities of the Regency style to the heavier, more structured forms of the Empire style reflects broader cultural shifts toward authority and control under Napoleon. This visual shift reflects the political movement from aristocratic leisure during the Regency to imperial authority under Napoleon. This made the design not just decorative, but also a reflection of political identity. In contrast to France's emphasis on imperial power and monumentality, English design evolved through phases that emphasized refinement, craftsmanship, and growing global influence.

The Queen Anne style developed in the early 18th century, but continued to influence furniture design into the later Georgian period. The Queen Anne chair was characterized by cabriole legs and relatively simple, solid back splats, emphasizing elegance and restraint. This contrasts with the Chippendale style of the Georgian period, which features thicker cabriole legs and more ornate, intricately carved back splats. Chippendale furniture reflects a more decorative and expressive approach, often incorporating Gothic and Asian influences. This evolution reflects the growth of

global trade and the British Empire, which introduced new materials, techniques, and stylistic influences from Asia and other regions.

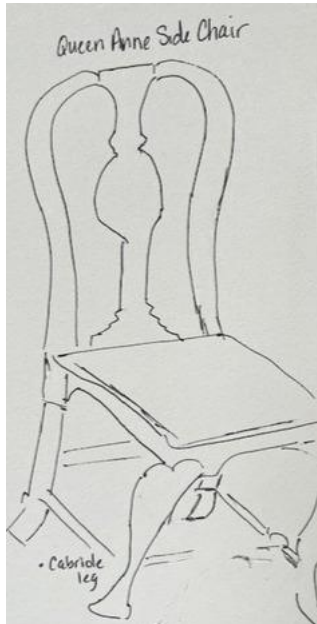


Fig. 3 illustrates a Queen Anne side chair, characterized by its cabriole legs and simple, solid back splat, reflecting the style's emphasis on elegance, restraint, and smooth, curvilinear forms. Sketch by Michelle Young.

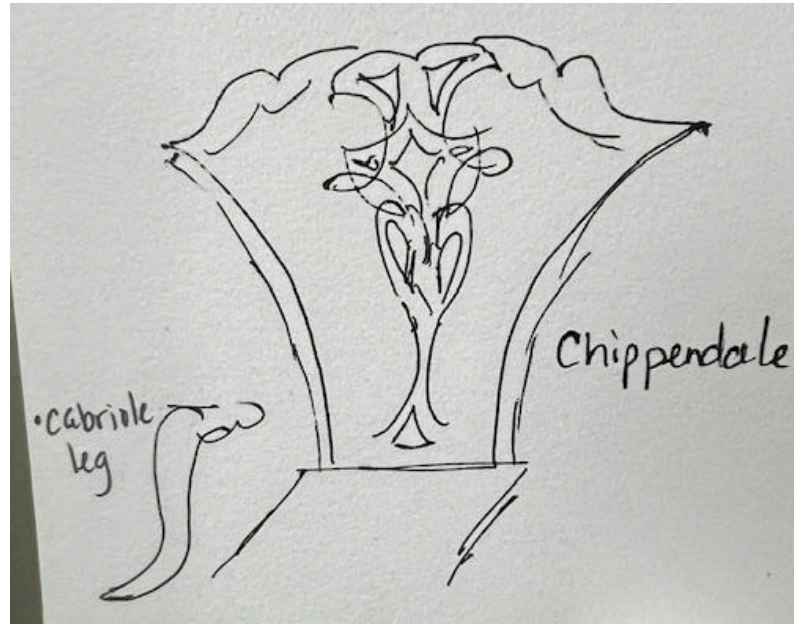


Fig. 4 depicts a Chippendale chair, distinguished by its thicker cabriole legs and ornately carved, pierced back splat, demonstrating a more decorative and expressive approach to furniture design. Sketch by Michelle Young.

As the period progressed and trade routes expanded, Britain adopted design elements from other cultures. This was driven by imperial expansion and growing global trade

during the height of the British Empire. This interest in exoticism is exemplified by the Royal Pavilion at Brighton. The Pavilion reflects the adventurous and outward-looking nature of the growing British Empire. Motifs from the Far East, including China, Japan, and India, were combined and reinterpreted within a European context (McEwan, 3/26/26). Examples of these influences can be seen in the onion domes, horseshoe arches, and minarets (Fig. 6). Its theatrical and ornamental character highlights the diversity and experimentation that defined late Regency design. While England explored refinement and global influence, across the Atlantic, design would take on a new identity shaped by independence.



Fig. 6 illustrates the Royal Pavilion's blend of non-Western architectural forms adapted into a highly stylized European design (Harwood, 340).

While England explored both refinement and exotic influences during this period, across the Atlantic, architectural styles in the American colonies and early United States reflected both continuity and change. Leading up to the Revolutionary War, the dominant architectural style in the British colonies was Georgian, which emphasized symmetry, proportion, and classical order. However, after the Revolution, the newly

independent nation adopted the Federal style, which maintained classical influences while becoming lighter and more refined, with more nationalistic elements. This transition was influenced by a broader shift away from British identity toward a distinctly American aesthetic, emphasizing democracy, order, and rationality (Fig. 5).

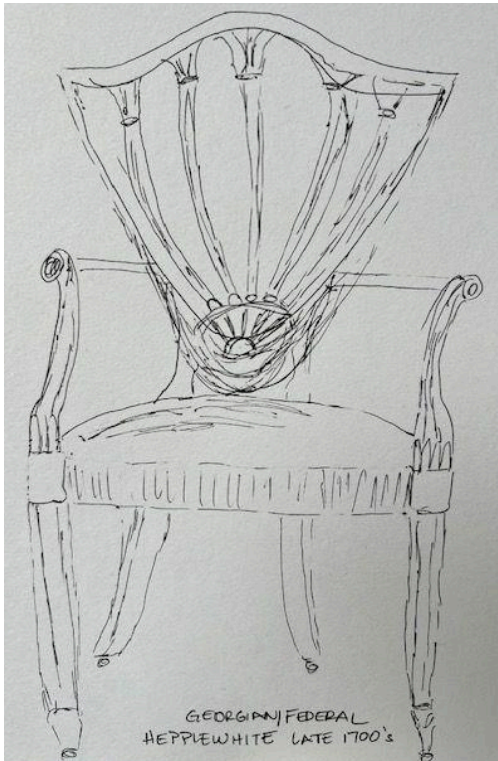


Fig. 5 reflects the refined symmetry and classical restraint characteristic of the Federal Style. Sketch by Michelle Young.

Although design often reflects dramatic shifts and can at times be difficult to understand, it is important to consider the historical and cultural context in which it was created. People respond to the conditions of their time as they seek to make sense of a changing and often uncertain world. These responses are evident in the evolution of design and the transitions discussed. Ultimately, design serves as both a reflection of

its time and a tool for influencing how people experience and respond to the world around them.

## Works Cited

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### AI Statement:

“I acknowledge the utilization of ChatGPT, a language model developed by OpenAI, in the preparation of this assignment. The ChatGPT tool was employed in the following manner(s) within this assignment: organization of material, and grammatical correction to tighten a few phrases.”

This paper was written by the student. Artificial intelligence tools were used for editing, organization, and clarity of expression. All concepts, ideas, interpretations, and conclusions are the student’s own.