

COUNTRY LIFE

EVERY WEEK

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Country-house treasures

Extraordinary stories from our great houses



The Royal Mews: a village for horses
Queen of Arts: Marie Antoinette's beautiful world
How to make fuchsia sorbet and penny-bun soup

Take five: chairs from 18th-century France

FURNITURE wasn't simply furniture in 18th-century France. At a time when courtiers aspired to become living works of art, every piece had to favour 'alluring self-presentation and elegant communication,' as Harold Koda writes in *Dangerous Liaisons: Fashion and Furniture in the Eighteenth Century*. This was especially true for chairs and armchairs, which were 'a pedestal for the body,' yet also put people one brief move away from the unforgivable blunder of clumsiness. There was an astounding number of different seats, each with specific functions or positioning that affected its shape. Here are a few:

1. Chaise voyeuse: made for watching card games, it had a padded front top, where sitters could rest their arms and a normal seat for men, who straddled it, or a very low one for women, who knelt on it. The French court was filled with inveterate gamblers, including Marie Antoinette—'The public know that the identical games, strictly prohibited to them by the laws of Paris, are played nightly and to excess by the Queen,' wrote a concerned diplomat to her mother, Austrian Empress Maria Theresa—and, in 1786, six *voyeuses* and 30 side chairs were acquired for Louis XVI's Salon des Jeux.

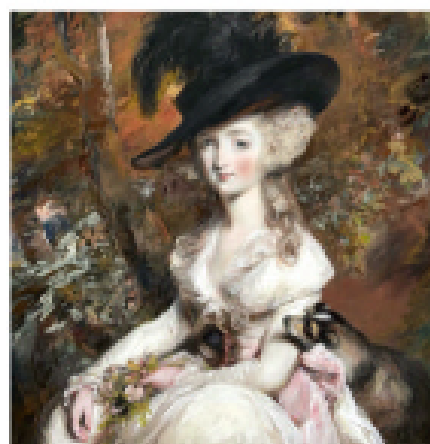
2. Fauteuil (or chaise) de toilette: Flamboyant poufs were all the rage in late-18th-century France, elaborate confections in which hair (real and false) was stiffened with pomade, piled up and decorated to create exquisite vignettes—in 1778, Marie Antoinette sported on her head a miniature of French frigate *Belle Poule*. Even before that, however, the complicated *toilette* of French courtiers called for easy access to hair. Thus, hairdressing chairs had low backs and, often, swivelling seats.

3. Chaise à la reine: Designed to be set against a wall, these flat-backed side chairs

were most popular during Louis XV's reign, but, in February 1784, a pair (now at the Met in New York in the US) was made for the boudoir of Marie Antoinette at the Château des Tuileries. Each had hot-air-balloon shaped finials in honour of the first manned hydrogen-powered flight that had taken off from the Jardin des Tuileries in Paris the previous December.

4. Fauteuil en cabriolet: these relatively light armchairs were easy to move and, with a concave back designed to fit the shape of the human body, rather more comfortable than earlier models, making them ideal for clustering at the centre of a room to encourage pleasant conversation. Their flared, outwardly turned arms also helped accommodate the massive women's gowns that had made sitting a challenge throughout the century, particularly at court, where the fashion persisted far longer than in the rest of the country. No wonder, then, that, by the 1770s, *fauteuil en cabriolets* had become 'the most fashionable seats,' according to cabinetmaker André Jacob Roubo.

5. Chaise percée: Not quite a chair, this was a portable loo, which, although older in origin, soared to new decorative heights in the 18th century, when even scatological business had to be carried out in splendour. Marie Antoinette gave one as a present to the Princess of Lamballe: it was 'covered in crimson damask, nailed with gilt nails on fine gold braid, the wood carved and gilded'



WEIRD & WONDERFUL

TAKE a little gin, add a pinch of caramel and hey presto, here is the recipe for a great portrait. Georgian painter Daniel Gardner was famous for making his own colours, reveals art dealer Alexander Clayton-Payne: 'William Whitley, in *Artists and their Friends in England, 1700–*

1799, explained that [Gardner] used "brandy, or spirits of wine, mixed with crayons scraped to dust with a knife, [to] make drawings that look a great deal more like oil coloured pictures than those made with water-colours". One such is the portrait of Charlotte Mary Peters (née Morrison, pictured). It was

painted at about the time of her marriage, in 1785, to Henry, a financier and the son of Bank of England governor George Peters. Charlotte is wearing a *robe en chemise* of the kind that Marie Antoinette had made fashionable—albeit at a cost to her reputation (www.alexanderclaytonpayne.com). 



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