

**The diversity of chairs designs through distinct civilizations
in some selected models**

Sarah Fathy Ahmed Fahmy

Lecturer - Interior design and furniture department,
Faculty of Applied Arts, Damietta University, Egypt

Abstract

Furniture design appeared due to the emergence of pre-historic communities with the first need to stability. Chairs are considered an essential element in interior design, and its design depends on its function, the space in which it will be placed, and to be in harmony with the surroundings. Some of the furniture units of various eras had been implemented in an aesthetic style and a great skill. They have returned to the artworks and deserved to occupy their distinctive place in the museums as artistic pieces.

The problem of research lies in imitating some furniture designers of designs from previous civilizations without knowing the reasons for their appearance, and so it does not fit or correspond to the current era. Plus the lack of definition in some designers of the variety and creativity of chairs in different civilizations, which are the bases of the change in the design of chairs over time from the ancient Egyptian civilization up to the twentieth century.

This paper aims to benefit from the aesthetic and functional values of chairs across different civilizations to enrich the design thought of the designers, by presenting the different chairs designs as an applied product as it is considered the cultural image that expresses the different ages.

The methodology of this research is according to the historical method by presenting some of the varied designs of chairs across different civilizations. It is expected in this paper that shedding light on the creative methods of chairs designs and ornaments will positively reflect on the furniture designers and their creative ideas in particular and on society in general.

Key words: Chairs, Civilizations, furniture design

تنوع تصميم المقاعد عبر أبرز الحضارات المختلفة من خلال بعض النماذج المختاره

د/سارة فتحى أحمد فهمى

مدرس بقسم التصميم الداخلى و الأثاث - كلية الفنون التطبيقية - جامعة دمياط- مصر

• ملخص البحث (باللغة العربية)

يرجع ظهور الأثاث إلى عصر ما قبل التاريخ مع إنتقال المجتمعات الأولى إلى الإستقرار، و تعد المقاعد عنصراً أساسياً فى التصميم الداخلى ويعتمد تصميمه على وظيفته وعلى الفراغ الذى سيوضع فيه وتتأسقه مع المكان. لقد نُفذت بعض وحدات الأثاث فى العصور المختلفة بأسلوب جمالى ومهارة فائقة فعدت من الأعمال الفنية البديعة وإستحقت أن تحتل مكانتها المميزة فى المتاحف لكونها قطعاً فنية.

تكمن مشكلة البحث فى تقليد بعض مصممي الأثاث لتصميمات من حضارات سابقة دون الإلمام بأسباب ظهورها وبالتالي قد لا تتناسب أو تتوافق مع العصر الحالى ، بالإضافة إلى القصور لدى بعض المصممين بمدى تنوع وإبداع الأثاث فى الحضارات المختلفة والتي تعتبر الأساس فى تغير تصميم الأثاث وخاصة المقاعد عبر الزمن من الحضارة المصرية القديمة وصولاً للقرن العشرين.

يهدف هذا البحث إلى الإستفادة من القيم الجمالية والتشكيلية للأثاث عبر الحضارات المختلفة لإثراء الفكر التصميمى لدى المصممين ، من خلال عرض تصميمات المقاعد المختلفة كمنتج تطبيقى يعكس الصورة الثقافية الحضارية المعبره عن الفترات الزمنية المختلفة.

تقوم الدراسة داخل البحث وفق المنهج التاريخى من خلال عرض لبعض التصميمات المتنوعه للمقاعد عبر الحضارات المختلفة ، كما أنه من المتوقع من هذا البحث أن إلقاء الضوء على تنوع الأساليب الإبداعية لطرز الأثاث وأنماطه سينعكس بشكل إيجابى على مصمم الأثاث و فكره الإبداعى بشكل خاص وعلى المجتمع بشكل عام.

Problem of Research:

1- Imitating some furniture designers of designs from previous civilizations without knowing the reasons for their appearance and so does not fit or correspond to the current era.

2- The lack of definition in some designers of the variety and creativity of chairs in different civilizations, which are the bases of the change in the design of chairs over time from the ancient Egyptian civilization until the twentieth century.

Aim of Research:

1- The purpose of this paper is to benefit from the aesthetic and functional values of chairs across different civilizations to enrich the design thought of the designers, by presenting the different chairs designs as an applied product as it is considered the cultural image that expresses the different ages.

2- The reason for knowing this history is that a skilled designer can apply it to the appropriate situation, identify pieces for interiors and if needed create particular theme for the style.

Introduction:

Through history ancient chairs, in its simplest description, is something designed to support human activities such as sleeping (beds), eating (tables) and storage or seating. Most chairs were

moveable (3100 – 2500 BC) and made of stone. [12]

Furniture (noun) : the movable articles or the fittings required for a particular task or function that are used to make a room or building suitable for living or working in ,such as chairs ,tables ,desks, beds..etc. [24]

Chairs history is a fascinating subject. Just seeing how the range of designs of chairs grew with the increased knowledge of the craftsmen making it, that increased again as new materials and techniques became available to use.

Chairs style were mainly for the ruling monarch of the country and the conditions of the era and availability of construction materials and tools to work with. Chairs design was also affected by the knowledge of the designers or craftsmen, overseas trade or incentives and the economic conditions of the country. [22]

The chair, as a design, had to be seen as set apart from that of other chairs. Through history humans had required something to sit on. The changing spirit of the arts had sculpted the symbolic nature of the chair. Plus its many functional uses, the chair had maintained its primary role in society, to provide

a seat, but more specifically, in the home and the office environment. [26]

Ancient Egyptian civilization

Ancient Egyptian royalty, sat on couches with carved ivory legs, had wooden beds and jewellery boxes. Queen Hetepheres had an elegant unique armchair. [12]



Figure (1): Ancient Egyptian armchair [12]



Figure (2): Ancient Egyptian Ebony chair inlaid with Ivory

Ancient Egyptian coffins show us that their carpenters knew how to make joints, dovetails, and halving joints. [12]

The high standard of excellence maintained by Egyptian carpenters

was due to patience, care, skill, and training ,and the demands of a discriminating clientele but not to elaborate equipment. [11]



Figure (3): Ancient Egyptian Royal chair [9]

This chair’s large seat area created the space for the sitting postures to include a folded leg position. The footstool still accompanied some of these chairs; however, the inclusion of multiple sitting postures suggests that the Egyptians adopted various sitting positions within one design.



Figure (4):Sitting positions

Early Egyptian chairs with lower back support may also be identified as a stool with added low back support. The backrest was purposely added to support the lower five segments of the back, namely the lumbar. The higher

backed chairs would confine the upper portion of the back while the lower backrests allowed a full 60-degree rotation at the pivot above the pelvis. [26]

The carpenters and cabinetmakers were kept busy manufacturing the ordinary household chairs designs were very artistic, the legs of the tables and chairs being carved in imitation of those of lions or goats, or sometimes like the necks and heads of geese.

The chairs were made of interlaced thongs of leather, or upholstered in skins painted with flowers, or dyed. Various woods were used, and the expensive articles were beautifully inlaid with costly woods of a different color, or with ivory. Ebony and ivory was a favorite combination. [1]

Mesopotamia

(حضارة بلاد الرافدين - بين النهرين)

The Mesopotamian Empire developed at the same time as the Egyptians. There was interaction between the two societies; this is documented by the similarity of some of the excavated chairs. It is known that stools, and some chairs, were in use around 3100-2370 BCE, as evident in the remains of pottery and seals excavated in 1968. However beyond their archaeological findings there is little record of this period. [26]



Figure (5): Chair of Darius, King of Persia

Ancient Greek

An early reference to Greek chairs describes coverlids of dyed wool, tapestries, carpets, and other accessories, which had formed part of the contents of a great man's residence centuries before the period which we recognize as the "meridian" of Greek art. [6]



Figure(6):Ancient Greek chair[25]

Although the Greeks borrowed the original design of their chairs during the Classical era from the culture of Egyptians and other surrounding peoples, the chairs designs were transformed by Greeks, and these Greek chairs designs affected and continue to influence chairs designs into the modern centuries. The Greek

chairs tended to be round, curved, of softer style, more ornamental, comfortable, supportive to the body, symmetrical and functional.

[15]



Figure (7): Greek seat backless stool, which must have been found in every Greek home

Ancient Roman

During the later days of the Roman Empire, gold and silver became so plentiful that they were used for the utensils for cooking and other household purposes.

With the fall of Rome the classic period of art may be said to have practically come to an end. The panoramic conflicts of dynasties and races and the struggles of rival beliefs, resulting in the gradual formation of a fresh order of society, notably affected the chairs as well as the architecture of the Byzantine and succeeding periods. [4]



Figure (8): Ancient Roman chair

Handbooks on Roman chairs, and works discussing the interior of Roman houses, often state that Roman residences were sparsely furnished. A Roman house contained only the most necessary items of chairs.



Figure (9): Ancient Roman wooden chair

Looking at Roman Chairs one can differentiate categories along lines of function and the use of material. Roman chairs can be roughly divided into three main categories: metal, especially bronze; stone, especially marble; and wood. Other materials are much rarer, and often restricted to a particular area. [14]

Islamic civilization

Islam developed in a nomadic Arab culture that valued poetry and oral tradition. The faith's fundamental basis is the message of God that was given to and relayed by the Prophet Muhammad, and that is preserved in the Qur'an.

Scrolling ornaments of plant and floral motifs were part of the visual vocabulary Islamic art they became so identified with Islamic art that in the West, although too much can be made of the influence of this environment on art, it is perhaps natural that images of paradise reflect a lush world, full of flowers and fragrance, and well watered by cooling streams and that these would be considered beautiful as ornament. [13]



Figure (10):Folding stool from “Elkretlya House”

Repeating geometric ornaments express and embody unity within diversity and the harmony that governs all things. They satisfy the Islamic principles of *tawhid* (the unity of all things) and *mizan* (order and balance) and in so doing, they reflect the perfection of God's creation. [13]



Figure (11): Folding seat with geometric ornaments



Figure (12):Reading Holly Quran chair “ Sultan Barkouk” Mamlukan Era

While geometric ornamentation may have reached a pinnacle in the Islamic world, Islamic artist appropriated key elements from the classical tradition, and then elaborated upon them to invent a new form of decoration that stressed the importance of unity, logic, and order. Essential to this unique style were the contributions made by Islamic mathematicians, astronomers, and other scientists, whose ideas and technical advances are indirectly reflected in the artistic tradition.

The basic instruments for constructing geometric designs were a compass and ruler. The circle became the foundation for Islamic pattern, in part a consequence of refinements made to the compass by Arabic astronomers and cartographers. The circle is often an organizing element underlying vegetal designs; it plays an important role in calligraphy, which the Arabs defined as “the geometry of the line”; and it structures all the complex Islamic ornaments using geometric shapes. [10]



Figure (13): Islamic geometric ornament

Medieval (middle ages)

The history of chairs is so thoroughly a part of the history of the manners and customs of different peoples, that one can only understand and appreciate the several changes in style, sometimes gradual and sometimes rapid, by reference to certain historical events and influences by which such changes were affected. Thus, we had during the space of time known as the Middle Ages, a stretch of some 1,000 years, dating from the fall of Rome itself, in

A.D. 476, to the capture of Constantinople by the Turks in 1453, an historical panorama of striking incidents and great social changes bearing upon our subject. It was a turbulent and violent period, which saw the completion of Rome’s downfall.

It was the age of monasteries and convents, of religious persecutions and of heroic struggles of the Christian Church. It was the age of feudalism, chivalry, and war; but, towards the close, a time of comparative civilization and progress, of darkness giving way to the light which followed; the night of the middle ages preceding the dawn of the Renaissance. [6]



Figure (14): Medieval chair



Figure (15): Another Middle Ages chair

Gothic

Gothic period design was affected by Roman and Medieval architecture. Its initial design period was 1150 to 1550, but saw a revival in the 19th century by the Victorians. [22]

Gothic design was the first true ecclesiastical style and was symbolic of the triumph of the Catholic Church over paganism in Europe. [3]



Figure (16): Gothic chair



Figure (17): Seat inspired by Catholic Church

Renaissance Era

The creation of chairs was probably an outcome of an evolutionary adaptation to life on Earth.

The upright position caused man to seek for more comfortable solutions allowing changing position. So, it can be said that the history of the chairs developed with the process of human evolution.



Figure (18): Renaissance chair

With the development of the civilization, one can observe more and more attention to the detail. The appearance of new tools such as water saws in the fourteenth century allowed for cutting thin boards, which could alter the forms of chairs from heavy to more delicate. [7]

The change of the perception of the world in the fifteenth century also left its mark on chairs.

17th century

The 17th century was the century that lasted from January 1, 1601, to December 31, 1700, in the Gregorian calendar. It falls into the Early Modern period of Europe and in that continent whose impact on the world was increasing, and was characterized by Baroque cultural movement. [19]

Interior design trends were constantly changing; seasonal colors, popular ornaments and interesting shapes. [27]



Figure (19): Baroque chair (1560-1700)

The Baroque style consists chiefly of an exaggerated, emphasized fullness of size, scale, and proportion. It is not necessarily over-rich in ornament, although lavish carving is typical. [20]



Figure (20): Victorian baroque chair

18th century

Until almost as late as William iii.'s accession, the stool was probably the more usual seat for meals. Its continental forms were also introduced into this country, but the increased numbers and varieties of chairs, home-manufactured and imported, from the days of the Restoration secured the preeminence of the chair henceforth. Many as were the forms of the chair made in England from 1688 to 1727, the more decorative varieties may be conveniently divided into two main groups: Those with pierced, scrolled, deep rails usually cane-seated and with turned or scrolled legs ; a type continued from the days of the Stuarts ; and those with sinuously outlined, hoop and splat backs, the especial products of the period these latter usually upon cabriole legs. [4]

Rococo: also referred to as "Late Baroque" is an 18th century style which developed as Baroque artists gave up their symmetry and became increasingly more ornate, florid, and playful. [12]



Figure (21): Chippendale chairs
(1714-1779)^[27]

- Thomas Chippendale was first not able to give his name to chairs style.
- He was both designer and master craftsman.
- Carving was the main type of decoration, favorite designs like lions' paws, shells, acanthus, acorns, roses, dolphins, and scrolls.
- Graceful and well-proportioned.



Figure (22): Queen Anne carved Armchair (1740-1760) ^[21]

- Made in Philadelphia,
- Materials solid walnut.
- Cabriole legs, clean lines
- Scrolling arms and solid back.

19th century: Neo-classical chairs and art movements

The Aesthetic Movement was a 19th century movement that emphasized aesthetic values over moral or social themes in literature, fine art, the decorative arts, and interior design. It belongs to the anti-Victorian reaction and had post-Romantic roots, and as such anticipates modernism. It took place in the late Victorian period from around 1868 to 1901. ^[12]

- Arts and Crafts
- Art Nouveau
- Bauhaus
- Art Deco

In 1980s interior design, the bright colors and Asian influences of the 1960s and 1970s no longer represented the general current fashion. ^[5]



Figure (23): Mies Van Der Rohe chair

Bauhaus, a style of the early 1900's, takes its name from the Design School. This minimalist style had had a great effect on contemporary architecture and chairs design.



Figure (24):Le Corbusier chair

The architects, Marcel Breuer and Mies van der Rohe, mostly in the 1920s, became a symbol of contemporary life. Bauhaus chairs were characterized by its clean lines, economy of means and understanding of the nature of materials. [12]

- **Bauhaus (1920 – 1934)**

Bauhaus is the common term for an art and architecture school in Germany that operated from 1919 to 1933.



Figure (25):Bauhaus chair



Figure (26):Gerritt Rietveld chairs

- **Art Deco (1910 – 1940)**

Art Deco was a popular design movement from 1920 until 1939, affecting the decorative arts such as

architecture, interior design, and industrial design, as well as the visual arts such as fashion, painting, the graphic arts, and film. This movement was, in a sense, a fusion of many different designs and movements of the early 20th century, including Constructivism, Cubism, Modernism, Bauhaus, Art Nouveau, and Futurism. Its popularity peaked during the Roaring Twenties.

Although many design movements had political or philosophical roots or intentions, Art Deco was unique. At the time, this style was seen as elegant, functional, and ultra modern as well.



Figure (27): Art Deco chair

20th century: Modern Era



Figure (28): Tulip chair designed by Eero Saarinen 1955–1956

Mid-century modern is a term that describes mid-20th century developments in interior, product, and graphic design, architecture, and urban development from roughly 1933 to 1965. [18]



Figure (29): Icons of 20th century chairs

- Chairs production is one of the promising industrial fields in Egypt. Most Egyptian chairs production depends on producing the famous English or French designs. In the last 30 years many Egyptian chairs designers tried to design modern designs.

- Most of them achieved local success, but it is still difficult to be successful at the global level.

- Modern chairs may be designed according to any theory or any methodology and these chairs may reflect any historical values or relate to any ancient civilization, but the main challenge is how to present this specific chair and how

its ideas will be suitable to a modern global life.

- It is positive if many Egyptian chairs designers like designing a type of chairs which is derived from their Egyptian cultural heritages, especially that most of the Egyptians are still interested in this kind of chairs, but it is more important to work hard to present these new modern creations in international chairs exhibitions to get more feedback to improve this unique kind of work. [2]

Analysis for some chairs distinctive motifs through different civilizations:[25]



Figure (30): Ancient Egyptian

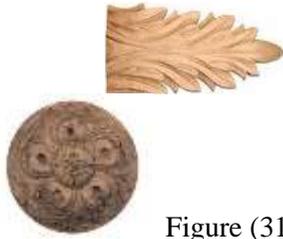


Figure (31): Ancient Greek wooden ornaments



Figure (32): Ancient Greek

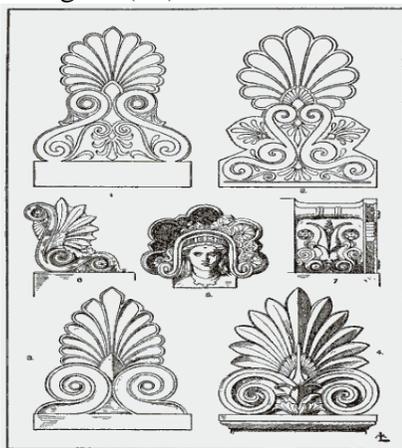


Figure (33): Ancient Roman

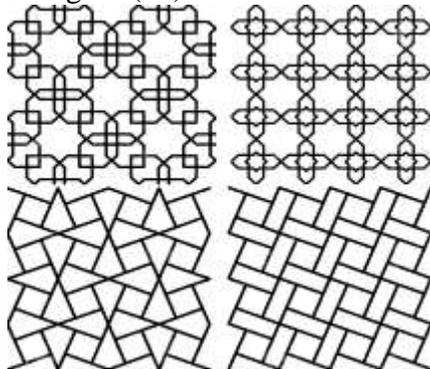


Figure (34): Islamic motifs

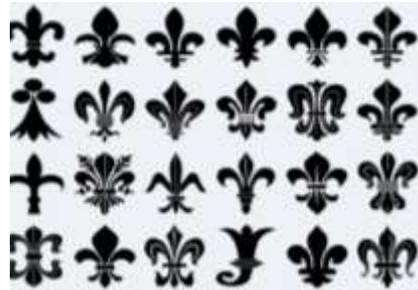


Figure (35): Medieval

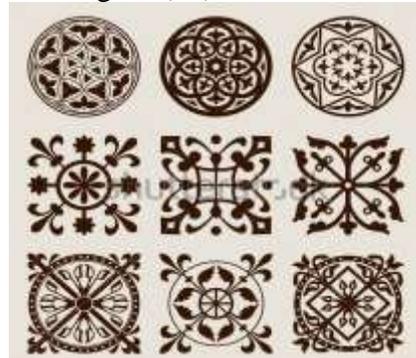


Figure (36): Gothic

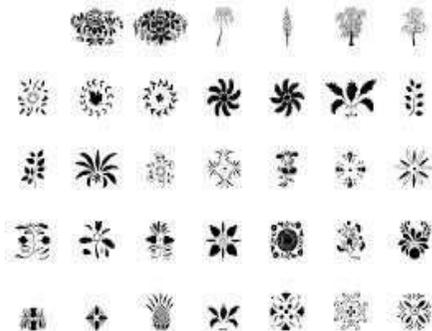


Figure (37): Renaissance



Figure (38): 17th century (Baroque)



Figure (39):18th century (Rococo)

Conclusion:

1- Designers can use to define chairs design through:

- Utility
- Function
- Form
- Aesthetic value
- Material

2- The chair design basics are:

A) Principals:

- Balance
- Contrast
- Direction
- Emphasis
- Movement
- Unity
- Pattern

B) Elements:

- Line
- Shape
- Size
- Texture
- Color
- Symbolism

3-Chronological order of historical epochs of chairs can be as following:

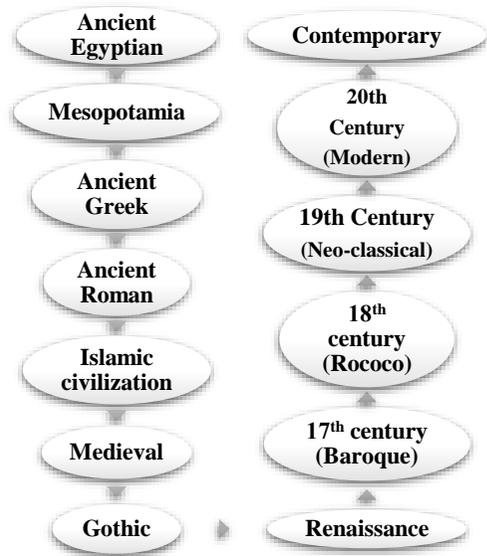


Figure (40): Chairs history chronological order of historical epochs

Results:

1- The chairs design throughout history had not been an imitation of a previous one, but the designs came in line with the circumstances and in harmony with their era, so all designers nowadays should do the same.

2- There are some important elements that had impact on chairs design through different civilizations which are:

- Religious
- Available materials
- Climate & Geography
- Political
- Inventions & Discoveries
- Economical
- Trade relations

3- The study of the history of the chair and its symbolic meaning, as well as historical attitudes about home and office environments, can provide a basis for addressing modern issues concerning the chair within environmental settings.

elements used in previous civilizations.

2- Chairs designers need to work on modern designs that are compatible with our current times and not imitating designs from previous times.

3- More researches can be done concerning various elements of furniture in different cultures.

Recommendations:

1- Designers should be more creative with help of some

References:

- [1] A. Bothwell Gosse, “**The Civilization of the Ancient Egyptians**”, Through the eye series, Published by T. C. & E. C. JACK, Ltd., New York University.p.37
- [2] Ahmed Mohammed M. Abdelrazik, “**Cultural variables and their impact on the furniture design process in the Era of Globalization**”, Assistant Lecturer, Interior Design and Furniture Department, Faculty of Applied Arts, Helwan University ,Cairo, Egypt, PhD candidate, PHD Thesis, Industrial Design Department, Braunschweig University of Art, April 2015. p.230
- [3] Dezine Holdings Ltd , “**Styles, Periods & Design History** ”(Are you an undiscovered interior designer) ,Part 5 ,2013.p.11
- [4] Edwin Foley,“**The Book of Decorative furniture**” (its form, colour & history), fellow of the Institute of designers , Albert R.Mann ,Cornell University Library, Volume L, New York,1911.p.21,p.414
- [5] Emily A. Morris, “**The Development and effects of the Twentieth-Century Wicker Revival**”, Masters of Arts in the History of Decorative Arts thesis, The Smithsonian Associates and Corcoran College of Art and Design, 2012 p.63.
- [6] Gale and Thomson Learning, “**Illustrated History of Furniture**”, Gale Group, Inc., Book Rags, Inc., 2002.p.27
- [7] Iwona Blaszcak, Ewa Lisiecka & Agnieszka Mielnik,“ **The Aesthetic character of industrial design furniture in the Eclectism period**” ,Faculty of Humanities Sciences, Faculty of Technology of Wood, Warsaw University of Life Sciences, Annals of Warsaw University of Life Sciences – SGGW, Forestry and Wood Technology № 92: 30-35 , 2015. p.31&32
- [8] Jeff Markell , “**Designing and Building HI-FI Furniture**”, Gernsback Library, New York, Universal International and pan-American copyright conventions,1959.Furniture styles p.95.
- [9] Judy Mills, “**Historic Details for Interior design**” , Interior Designer, Program Director, Interior Design Department, Lanier Technical College.p.9

- [10] Kent Lydecker , Associate Director for Education , “**Islamic Art and Geometric Design**”,activities for learning,The Metropolitan Museum of Art,New York,2004.p.6
- [11] Nora Scott, “**Our Egyptian Furniture**” , Associate Curator of Egyptian Art, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve, and extend access to The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin.p.5
- [12] P. de Buret, “**A Devon Guild of Craftsmen**”,a devon guild of craftsmen touring exhibition.p.1,2,4 ,5
- [13] Rosamond Mack, Barry Wood, and Richard Carter, “**Islamic art and culture**, a resource for teachers, division of Education and produced by the Publishing Office, National Gallery of Art, Washington,2006.p.7
- [14] Stephan Mols , “**Ancient Roman Household Furniture and its use : from herculaneum to the rhine**” , Radboud University Nijmegen ,The Netherlands, AnMurcia, 23-24, , pages(145-160), 2007-2008.p.2
- [15] Vasiliki Kamperidou & Vasileios Vasileiou , “**Ancient greek furniture: source of inspiration for the designers and manufacturers of modern times**”, Faculty of Forestry and Natural Environment, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, XXVIth International Conference Research for Furniture Industry,2013.abstract

Internet Websites References:

- [16] [http:// www.archive.org/detail](http://www.archive.org/detail)
- [17] [http:// www.artisansofthevalley.com](http://www.artisansofthevalley.com)
- [18] [http:// www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mid-century_modern](http://www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mid-century_modern)
- [19] [http://www. en.wikipedia.org/wiki/17th_century](http://www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/17th_century)
- [20] [http://www. encyclopedia of Furniture by Joseph Aronson and History of Interior Design Furniture by Robbie G. Blakemore](http://www.encyclopediaofFurniture.com)
- [21] [http:// www.furniturestyles.net](http://www.furniturestyles.net)
- [22] [https:// www.interiordezine.com](https://www.interiordezine.com)
- [23] [https:// www.jstor.org](https://www.jstor.org)
- [24] [http:// www.oxforddictionaries.com](http://www.oxforddictionaries.com)
- [25] [https:// www.pinterest.com](https://www.pinterest.com)
- [26] [https:// www.userpages.umbc.edu](https://www.userpages.umbc.edu)
- [27] [http:// www.whiteheaddesigns.com / “The Evolution of Furniture”](http://www.whiteheaddesigns.com/)