

Furniture

The earliest evidence of true furniture is found in the Egyptian society that existed some five thousand years ago. The exceptional circumstances of survival in royal tombs have given us famous examples of furniture. It is apparent that beds, chairs, stools, tables and storage boxes had all been created by 3000 BC, and there is no doubt that a skilled workforce existed in Egypt.

The only local timbers – acacia, sycamore, fig and tamarisk – were supplemented by imported woods, such as cedar, cypress ebony, and juniper. The shortage of timbers resulted either in the use of veneer or a build up of smaller pieces of wood.

Beds were developed from crude frames lashed together, to sophisticated jointed frames and proper suspensions of leather thongs. Since the early Dynastic Period at least there existed beds with wooden frames on legs, onto which strips of leather or cloth were fastened. These frames were put together using tenons and mortises. They were supported on short legs, usually in the form of a bull's foot. The legs, at first shaped like cattle legs and later more and more like lion paws, were of unequal length, the bed sloping slightly from head towards the foot end, where there often was a foot support.

The Middle Kingdom carpenters had the leadership to invent kind of beds that can be folded and they supported frames of some beds with angular pillars which is formed from two parts were fastened with dowels. Beds in the new kingdom were similar to those of the Middle Kingdom in terms of shape and construction, though surpassed in the manufacture and types of good timber used in the construction of their parts. Beds were often supplied with a separate head-rest, as headboards were unknown.

Chairs were known since the Early Dynastic Period at least. Sometimes they were covered with cloth or leather, were made of carved wood like this chair (on the right) from the tomb of Tutankhamen. They were much lower than today's chairs, with their seats sometimes only 25 cm high.

Chairs were derived from backless stools, initially having framed chair with carved bull's legs to the front, and then developing to armchairs by the fourth dynasty (c.2600–2500 BC). In the second half of the Old Kingdom, chairs with arms and backs began appearing. The most well-known example of an Egyptian chair is Tutankhamun's gold throne, both as a model of furniture-making and also as the embodiment of the

symbolic authority of the chair. On a more mundane level, stools remained popular, often designed with braced struts and a white paint finish. Folding stools were also used: they often had hide seat, and cross-frames decorated as carved duck's heads inlaid with ivory. The three-legged stools and folding stools were dated to New Kingdom period.

Armchairs, with or without cushions were reserved for the rich and powerful. Generally speaking, the higher ranked an individual was, the taller and more sumptuous was the chair he sat on and the greater the honour. On state occasions the pharaoh sat on a throne, often with a little footstool in front of it.

Tables were rarely used. Even scribes, more affluent than the average Egyptian, did not write their scrolls sitting at a table, but generally squatted on the floor, holding a wooden board, on which the papyrus was spread, with one hand and writing with the other. Tables were usually small, hardly more than stands for food or offerings. Gaming boards were mounted onto legged frames to create the earliest example of games tables.

Boxes were made of wood, ivory or the like. Being expensive items - more difficult to build and therefore costlier than baskets - they were made for the wealthy and were often elaborately decorated with drawings or inlays. Their construction could be quite sophisticated. From the Middle Kingdom we know of a box covered with veneer which had sliding lids. Most boxes, whether of wood, papyrus or reed, were rectangular with short feet. Some were fitted with divisions for toiletries, jewellery and the like. The selection of materials began in the locality and was extended to other sources.

The lids of a few of these chests were hinged, but mostly the cover was completely removed when the chest was opened. Flanges or pegs glued to the lids and inserted into appropriate holes in the chests' walls kept them in place. In order to lock the chests strings were tied to knobs on the lid and chest and sealed with clay seals.

Hinges were used from the eighteenth dynasty (1575–1300 BC) as a replacement for wooden pivots in chests, but locks were rare.

Naturally the furniture produced during New Kingdom period is on a similarly luxurious scale, and is also evidence of greater woodworking