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# OFF THE SHELF

PROJECTS SURROUNDING  
THE CHAIR COLLECTION AT  
THE FACULTY OF ARCHITECTURE

## COLOPHON

Off The Shelf:  
Projects Surrounding the Chair Collection at the Faculty of Architecture

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This publication consists of the work of several studios at the faculty of Architecture and the built environment. These studios focus on the use of the chair collection currently present at said faculty. With this publication we hope to give insight in the different projects surrounding the chair collection and the work of the program. The different sections are accompanied by short introductions by the respectable teachers or coordinators.

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# THE MUSIC OF CHAIRS

*Patrick Healy*

The 1840 essay of Edgar Allen Poe “The Philosophy of Furniture” remains one of the most provocative essays written on interior decoration, and it has variously been read as ironic, ambivalent, and in some cases simply polemical; an essay wherein Poe vents his spleen on the jejune and tasteless productions of the contemporary American interior decoration.<sup>1</sup> The tone of the writing is swingeing, taking the view that American taste is a play ground for the parvenu rivalry of the ‘aristocracy of dollars’ and inevitably confuses display with affect. The sole test of merit, in such a scheme, of any decorative item, or an ensemble decoration of a room, is its cost.

Poe introduces in his critique of the contemporary scene a failure which he designates with the lack of what he characterises by the concept of ‘keeping’: by which he means a notion of unity of composition, such as one finds in paintings. The so-called well-furnished apartment - a recent descriptive term - which he jokingly traces to Appalachia - is offensive to the eye, because of its lack of ‘keeping’. As in the painting so for the room, the proposition of Poe reads, in a way, like a new version of the principle *ut pictura poesis*.

Clearly Poe rails against what he calls the open and undue precision in rooms, by which he considers them utterly spoiled. The essay develops into an exercise in critical research, with Poe pointing to what he takes as defects born of perversion of taste, and an ideal towards which the interior should aspire. Significantly, his ideal is not based on historical precedent. Further, it can be added that Poe sets himself against the ‘Transcendentalists’, specifically the nature worship of Emerson, insisting resolutely that architecture and human making is fundamentally different to natural and organic developments.

The principal defects he lists for decoration are ‘glare’ and ‘glitter’, the chief result he requires for his concept of a room with its furniture, hangings, objects and ornamental items, is ‘repose’. Such acquiescence depends on lighting and proper disposition of various elements in the room. Poe will, in a neat turn, ask his readers to consider a gentleman on his sofa sketching the room in which he relaxes - of course the model of modest taste is his own room in which he releases both phantasmic and prescriptive considerations. His criticism of glare speaks of a kind of irritability and enervation in which Poe rescues the physiological significance of the aesthetic away from an abstract, general culture of taste.

*(1) The essay was first published in the Boston's Gentleman's Magazine, in 1840 and later republished as "House of Furniture" in the Broadway Journal, May 1845. There is a pdf online available, and I have availed of this for ease of reference. The Argand lamp was patented in 1780 by the Swiss chemist Argand, and Thomas Jefferson suggested it gave off the light of 6 or seven candles.*

His preference is for an Argand lamp against the introduction of cut glass types that are the result of a weak invention and importantly ‘mar a world of good effect in the furniture subjected to its influence’. The small note of animism sounded here, belong to the whole later development of Poe’s granting to material objects and spaces an uncanny life of their own. This is dramatically captured in the essay by his claim: “the soul of the apartment is the carpet”.

Part of his criticism against glitter is focused on an over use of mirrors where he tellingly notes that the surfaces of mirrors are continuous, flat, colourless and unrelieved surfaces. The leading feature of glass is glitter, and he reserves his most dismissive comment on the glass prism cut chandeliers with gas light and without shade which are the high note of false taste, and in their size, a preposterous folly. The flicker of light is, to his mind, a distraction for children and idiots.

With formal furniture, curtains are out of place, and it is the use of the carpet which grants the tone and key to creating through the plush and objects of the room the possibility of repose. Here the carpet is to be of an arabesque pattern, a pattern that is seen as creating stillness and peace. The imagined room is 30 feet in length and twenty-five in breadth. On this oblong plan Poe pitches his idea of a ‘shape affording the best (ordinary) opportunities for the adjustment of furniture. He allows of one small circular mirror, and as to chairs, seats or sofas: ‘two large low sofas of rosewood and crimson silk, gold-flowered, form the only seats, with the exception of the two light conversation chairs, also of rosewood”. The room as reconstructed in the Edgar Allen Poe National Historic Site in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, seems not to have understood the meaning of conversation chairs.

There must be no brilliant effects, the emphasis on the arabesque pattern for the carpet, the Argand lamp, all point to the over-riding emphasis on atmosphere, and a painterly sensitivity to a unity of tone and composition. In such an interior, furniture can lead a life of ease and dignity. The visual world tends to the sombre and muted, it inclines one might say more to the values of the sublime, than the beautiful. When the essay was republished in 1845 it was re-entitled “The House of Furniture” Indeed for Poe the room plan was there to facilitate the life of the furniture. The graceful hanging shelves of two or three hundred ‘magnificently bound volumes’ all would he believe contribute to a magic radiance. It is in that very last phrase Poe’s connection to a much older aesthetic principle can be seen.

Written at the very cusp of the development of objects for mass production - one could even say the production of the masses - Poe’s essay would still

stand as a challenge to the later ideas of the streamlined and the functional. What the later modern development shares with Poe is, however, the notion of a functionality directed towards a democracy of taste. It can be argued that in shifting the values of the interior to the question of user affect, and attempting to make a prescriptive argument for a generalised pleasure in the object world, Poe has broken with normative/historicising precedent.

The questions of shape, colour, size and posture, the play on the imagination, and senses belong to a different direction within the aesthetic readings developed in the Eighteenth century. Perhaps the simplest pointer is Herder's reading of Baumgarten, *Aesthetica*, where Herder reads the issue of a 'science of the sensible', Baumgarten's definition of the aim of the new philosophical discipline, as a search within the *fundus animae*, the dark sensuality that preceded intuition and concepts.<sup>2</sup> It is a reading with some considerable consequence for design education, a task in which Poe is clearly engaged.

Seventy years or so later a new visual culture will emerge in which the issue of furniture, and specifically chairs has a key role to play in understanding what is at stake. By a kind of unexpected overlap, in the same period as *De Stijl* (founded 1917) and in which the Red-Blue armchair of beechwood laths and pine planks held together by wooden pegs is made as a prototype by Gerrit Rietveld and Bauhaus developing the emphasis on taste and mass production, simplicity of materials, experimentation with new material - tubular steel, plywood, Gisela Richter is delivering her immense scholarly reflections on *Ancient Furniture*, and working out elements of the timeless truth about developments in design. It would make an interesting montage to set her thinking against the contemporary developments by Rietveld, Muthesius, Behrens, Gropius, etc. By a sleight of hand one might construe a quarrel of the ancients and moderns, but what is more fascinating is to see how thinking about relations of formal and functionalist categories, determines and limits both sides of this imaginary debate.

*(2) A discussion of this point can be found in John T. Hamilton, Soliciting Darkness, Harvard Studies in Comparative Literature 47, Harvard University Press, 2004. p. 213 and 246 ff. Hamilton uses the argument to enrich a reading of Pindar and the creation something from a 'dark origin'. The issue of the senses and sensuality can be traced to the long discussions in Cicero's *Academica* 111, a neglected source for the reading of Baumgarten and 18th century 'sensualists'.*

Published in 1926 by the Clarendon Press, Oxford, Richter's *Ancient Furniture* remains one of the best works written on the subject. Her treatment of chairs focused on what she took to be the unjustly neglected area of ancient furniture in general. The text artfully re-inscribes both the argument of the influence of Egyptian art on that of the Greeks, but also remains faithful to a central tenet of Wincklemann inspired art historical research, namely the notion of a developmental phase which goes from archaic, to classical and then 'decays'. The question of surviving artefacts haunts the text, as literary evidence, and depictions, representations from vases, and on coins supply the chief source of information.

The developmental model has, as its real aim, the desire to define what makes for a 'classical' chair, and thus point towards the issues which furniture design share with other technai of the classical period which effectively co-incides with the image of Periclean Athens.

Beginning with a study of the throne, Richter points to the ideological significance of Middle Eastern prototypes of this artefact, as it is synonymous with royal power. In some ways the throne is a homage to the idea of the quadrilateral view of the block, such as seen in Demeter at Lykosoura, and as mentioned in Pausanias, in Book V, 11.2, where lithic massiveness and divine authority are bounded in the unified block of both throne and footstool. It could have been further argued that there is within the idea of the seated God or Goddess a *nec plus ultra* of power. Gods seated reign from on high. The supreme God, so exhaustively studied by A.B.Cook in his vast work Zeus, is described with the formula, *hupatos* and many other terms designating elevated, on high, one might even translate as 'sublime' and as Aeschylus remarks, in his play the Suppliants he Zeus does not acknowledge the power of anyone seated above him. Olympians in assembly sit on seats. Martin West has pointed to the importance of this 'height' can be found in the name of Ugaritic Baal, and Hebrew divine designation as *eli*, 'elyon etc. as high, seated on high, established in the heavens.<sup>3</sup> What is most interesting to observe is that in post Periclean Athens, the valuable information supplied by the seated figures on grave reliefs and stelae point to a wholly different relationship to social and divine relations. It is as if in humanising the Gods, making them take on human body proportions the Greeks are indeed left with figures in intimate spatial niches engaged in simply humble gestures and their sculptures of farewell pivot so much around the human seated figure, away from the free-standing kouros, the divine/human radiant being.

Richter's text follows from the throne with reflections on the most common kind of seating furniture namely the *klismos*. The choice is made for the *klismos* as it reflects a popularisation of the usage of the chair, it refers often to domestic contexts, even when shown in funeral stelae, and in the absence of surviving examples, remains one of the best figured chairs of Greek invention. A good example of the *klismos* can be seen on the tombstone of the shoe maker, cobbler, Xanthippos, dated to 430-20 b.c.e. which shows a seated bearded figure holding up for inspection a shoe last. (British Museum, main floor, room 19). As mentioned, Richter sees a development from the throne- heavy- to the refined, the light and graceful of which the *klismos* is the best example, ultimately to decay, perhaps one could say the Pergamene style. She finds a direct analogy for this in development of colonial American furniture, specifically citing a direct analogy with what happens in the design of chairs from the 17th century with their sturdy arms and legs, to the

(3) Martin West, *The East Face of Helicon*, Clarendon Press Oxford, 1997, especially discussion at p.114.

ultimate refinement of the Shearton chairs, which are compared to the best Greek productions.

The burden of her analysis is to define the design principle of the klismos, which is seen as the ordinary lightweight chair, which as a rule is entirely undecorated, and its beauty, Richter argues, lies solely in its proportion and line. It is the comfort chair par excellence, and has no Assyrian or Egyptian prototype. Where in the early throne, legs would often terminate in animal feet, the favourite motif of the early klismos is the swan.

Most of the surviving visual representations date from the mid-5th century b.c.e We often see the klismos shown with its curved backrest, and the concave curling legs front and back in reverse symmetry, echoing limbs, viewed in profile, as is often the case on the attic grave stelae give the curvature of the splayed legs and the curving back rail a delicate inflection, which must depend on the same optical refinements as have been discovered for the column entasis, and the treatment of the stylobate again in the first case viewed however elliptically, and in the second, from the side. The gentle swelling of the narrow concave backrest, between uprights of the open chair back, and the legs are often carved from a single piece of wood. The level of joinery is not dissimilar to what one finds in the best Japanese work, especially in the shelving of cabinet, where again the wood is often planed with a slight curve to create an optical illusion.

The klismos also plays with different kinds of surface and texture, with leather, or animal pelts being used for upholstering the seat. Formally one can see that the silhouette is itself tuned to the shape and proportion of the human body. Again as with the development of temple architecture the notion of *rhythmos*, is a kind of tense harmonic in which dissonance is co-existent with consonance, a kind of tension such as one finds in the drawn bow. Of course one also can see that the problem of something generic, and yet specifically registered for individual use, crosses the functional/formalist axis, or as it is sometimes treated, dichotomy. Where one interprets the sweeping line of the chair as a single curve - the back ends and curved horizontal board at height of shoulders, there is inevitably an ergonomic translation, from an ideal body to the variable of human use. The back board is often supported by two stiles and a cross stave, as the stiles and rear legs are made of one piece - the emphasis on construction, simplicity, comfort needs to be explained in a rigorous aesthetic, where the avoidance of right angles, and the continuous inflection of the curve responds to the actual *rhythmos*, or perceived harmonics of a balanced body, itself an ideal construct, and one which craftsmen perfect over long years of experimentation.



Given the generic and schematic demands of creating such a somatically keyed object the invention of the klismos, is nevertheless a unicum. Not only that, but it can be seen after its invention as a kind of musical theme and variation, the variations often to be construed as the search for a perfection, an interplay between the real/ideal biune principle, understood as tensed and toned dynamic, in relation to weight, posture, shape, and even colour.

The motif belongs inevitably to the sacred birds of Apollo about which Socrates dreamt when in prison awaiting execution, and the shape of the lyre as told in the story of the Homeric Hymn to Hermes. Something of the curve and graceful movement of the swans' neck, to mix a metaphor, belongs to the great *linea serpentina* which Hogarth mentions in his text on the Analysis of beauty, the play of curve and counter curve, the metamorphosis of wood into animal form, the delicate tapering, still retains in the chair the *charis* and graceful demands of the older social imaginings. From Homer it is clear people sit on chairs, they do not recline in company, this reclining belong to the later elite development of symposiasts and their fellow bibblers, to whom no doubt the almost contemporary words of the prophet Amos might have applied, 'Woe to those who lie on their couches'. That there was such view reminds us how either a formalist or functionalist interpretation as Neer has pointed out in his work on Greek sculpture often 'purge artworks of narrative or ideological significance', although it is hard to see how in scholarship which reflects its own time as much as it reaches for an understanding of the past, the Fetichismus of Luxuswaren can be bypassed in speaking of objects which for the most part are already enshrined in museum and high cultural contexts.<sup>4</sup>

Poe has wished, however ironically, to point to a taste which could flourish in a modest everyday way. Rather than viewing spatial construction or the viewers' or inhabitants' visual emphasis as primary, he appeals to the entire nervous system, and all the senses. There is no need here for an inflationary rhetoric, the very everydayness of the object opens up a sense of wonder, when one comes to consider it more closely. Indeed it was something that Hegel admired in Dutch art: the capacity to wrest beauty from ordinary things. Nevertheless the creation of that beauty, however nested within social demands for use and convenience, remains an enigmatic process. There is doubtless in the best of design objects an inexplicable attraction, a kind of lighnet of desire and longing, which is not simply a product of a consumer objects surplus value, as this can be seen, as Irene Winter has shown in her study of the most ancient texts, a kind of surrender to the shimmering of things.<sup>5</sup>

Poe's glare and glitter belong to new forms of harsh lighting and cold surfaces,

(4) Richard Neer, *The Emergence of the Classical Style in Greek Sculpture*, The University of Chicago Press, 2010.

(5) Irene Winter, *On Art in the Ancient Near East*, 2 vols. Brill, Leiden, 2010.

it is technically fraught, the idea of the luminous appearance is celebrated in Greek poetry as appreciation of elegant sheen, the beauty that can be found in the violet eyelids of a girl in Sappho's poetry, or in the gracile gesture of those nymphs, another Greek invention, who populate river banks, dell and glen. In the poesis, with its sense of human making, there was a source of charis (grace) and wonder, charis understood as a free act of grace, and it made a well wrought work, itself 'a wonder to behold', as the Homeric expression has it, a thauma idesthai, such as the robotic golden tripods fashioned by Hephaistos.

In the rhythmos of the poetic line and the built form, the shaped object, there is a tuneful melisma, which we often fail as much to see as to hear. In some sense the genuine source of measure and scale is the capacity of human senses to create an order which does not exclude any order, the gift of the work is a source of wonder which in the concluding lines Pindar Pythian 8 is most beautifully expressed when he speaks of the epiphany of such wonder and beauty even in the fragile fated penumbra of our all too rapid lives:

*(6) For discussion of Pindar see Boris Maslov, Pindar and the Emergence of Literature, Cambridge University Press, 2015, these lines are rendered by Hölderlin from the Greek as:*

*Tagwesen. Was aber ist einer? was aber ist  
einer nicht?  
Der Schatten Traum, sind Menschen. Aber  
wenn der Glanz  
Der gottgegebene kommt,  
Leuchtend Licht ist bei den Männern  
Und liebliches Leben.*

*The question of translation here remains one of considerable import in Heideggers engagement with both poets, where in a reading of the hymns of Pindar, Heidegger suggest that the turn to the foreign, of Greek art, poetics and poetics as making, is a journey of the uncanny, which advances the idea of going home through the unheimlich and in that sense 'poetically man dwells'. In the case of both Poe and Richter one is dealing with a supplementary form of the imaginary in order to situate the object world, in terms of value and meaning, in that sense the rhythm of things belongs to manifestation intrinsically. A new ontology of objects is needed to avoid turning even the virtual into an epiphenomenon.*

*a shadow in a dream, man  
but when a Zeus given  
brightness comes, a shining  
light rests upon men, and a  
lifespan sweet as honey.<sup>6</sup>*