Our Egyptian Furniture

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Egypt is undoubtedly the pleasantest antiquity-producing country in the world to excavate in, if for no other reason (and there are other reasons) than that the dry climate and soil preserve materials which have almost always disappeared in less favored lands.

One of the ancient materials found in Egypt, and seldom anywhere else, is wood. And if wooden objects are nevertheless comparatively rare it is because wood itself was a rare and valuable commodity. Ever since the earliest dynastic period the narrow strip of fertile land along the Nile has been reserved for crops, with here and there at the edge of the river or canal a clump of palms, “their heads in the sun and their feet in the water,” and here and there an acacia, tamarisk, sycamore fig, or willow. Rich noblemen might boast of the trees on their estates—one listed about four hundred and fifty, most of which must have been watered by hand. But on the whole what trees the Egyptians had were prized for their fruit or shade, and only a few produced usable wood. Of these the very hard acacia was the best, although it provided only small planks. Tamarisk and sycamore fig were the cheaper native woods. The fibrous trunk of the palm was useless for carpentry, although in ancient times (as today) it was split for roofing. Otherwise the use of wood in building was limited to such elements as doors and columns.

The wood most widely used for fine carpentry was cedar, which was not native but had to be imported from what is now Syria and Lebanon. Small pieces of cedar have been found among the contents of jars buried in the prehistoric period, about 4000 B.C. These must have been articles of trade, probably valued for their sweet smell and passed from hand to hand until they found an owner who could afford to take them with him to the next world.

It is not known exactly when cedar was first imported in quantity, but about 2600 B.C. Snefru, the first king of the IV Dynasty, “brought forty ships filled with cedar from Lebanon.” The leader of a later expedition wrote, “I went above the clouds to the forest preserve and brought away timbers a hundred feet long. When I brought them down from God’s Land to the plain the procession reached back to the forest preserve. I sailed on the Great Green [our “Blue Mediterranean”] with a favorable breeze, landing in Egypt.” Over eleven hundred years separate the two inscriptions, and it is easy to understand why only a few of the cedars of Lebanon remain today after thirty-five further centuries of deforestation.

Coniferous woods (pieces of cypress and pine have been found, like cedar, in pre-
historic burials) were not the only ones imported. We can imagine that the Egyptian was always wood-conscious, and that Egyptian travelers and traders were on the lookout for unusual varieties. Birch bark dating from the neolithic period has been found in the Fayyum and is thought to have originated in northern Persia. In the New Kingdom birch-bark decoration was often applied to bows and staves (examples are to be seen in our galleries). Another imported wood, box, an almost grainless, extremely tough hardwood, came from what is now Turkey. Ebony was brought from the south.

Although the Egyptians were importing wood at an early date, their climate was hot and dusty, and they were not interested in cluttering their homes with unnecessary furniture. What they did have, however, they invented; and their designs are still in use today, even when they have been modified for mass production in materials they did not know. Among the articles of furniture introduced by the Egyptians were stools, chairs, beds, tables, and boxes or chests of various sizes, the last more important in ancient times than today, as there were no cupboards or chests of drawers. Light furniture of reeds, rushes, and palm fronds often replaced wooden furniture, even in rich homes. Great wickerwork baskets and pottery crocks and jars big enough to introduce soldiers into enemy cities on occasion (a stratagem ascribed to a general of Tuthmosis III) were more normally used for storage.

Now let us consider some of the constructions employed by the Egyptian carpenter and the tools at his disposal. Since suitable wood was scarce and expensive, every scrap had to be utilized, and to the best advantage; and when metal tools, which made fine craftsmanship possible, became available at the beginning of the historic period, carpenters quickly developed an extraordinary skill in joinery. For instance, a royal coffin of about 2680 B.C. (the beginning of the III Dynasty) was made of plywood, the six layers arranged with the grain running in alternate directions for strength and to prevent warping. Each layer, only an eighth of an inch thick, was a patchwork of pieces carefully doweled together, since none was as long or as high as the finished coffin. A combination of miter and square joints strengthened by square stays was used at the corners. The outside of the coffin was carved in a reedlike ribbed pattern, originally covered with sheet gold.

In our own collection is a coffin of about the same time, its construction simpler but equally up to date (Figure 2). The boards forming the sides, ends, and floor are set into
grooves in the “two-by-fours” that form the frame, the corners being strengthened by wooden pegs. The lid is made, like the sides, by inserting boards—this time arched—into the grooved endpieces. This coffin is also interesting because, as the eternal home of the soul, it reproduces the form of the early northern Egyptian house with its curved roof resting on supporting bundles of bound reeds. Such reed-and-rush structures are still to be found in the marsh region of Iraq (Figure 3); they are probably also reflected in the ribbed decoration of the royal coffin described above.

Even older than these coffins are ivory legs from furniture of kings of the I Dynasty, of which the wooden parts have been lost; they illustrate the mortise-and-tenon joint (Figure 1), one of the earliest constructions and one that always remained a favorite. The miter joint, already mentioned, was another favorite. The furniture of Queen Hetep-heres of the early IV Dynasty shows mitering as well as dovetailing, and seven different types of miter joints have been identified in Tut-ankh-Amun’s furniture of the XVIII Dynasty. Other joints in use included the tongue-and-groove and butterfly.

Furniture was often strengthened by angular or curved pieces of wood, which were perhaps grown into the proper shapes on purpose. Although copper nails were used to fasten wood and metal together as early as the I Dynasty, Tut-ankh-Amun’s carpenters were the first to use metal nails in woodwork. Four of these nails are in our collection, two of solid gold and two of silver with gold heads. The “nails” in the earlier furniture of Queen Hetep-heres are actually wooden pegs disguised with gold heads.

Inlaying with ivory and woods of different colors is known from the tomb of an official of the I Dynasty. Veneering of fine over less valuable wood was often practiced; thick veneer was pegged on, thinner glued. Our own most extensive example of veneering is again a coffin, this one of the XII Dynasty, made of cedar of a rather run-of-the-mill quality but covered with other cedar so fine that it was decided not to hide its beauty with the usual painted decoration.

2. Coffin, I-I Dynasty, about 2686 B.C. Tamarisk, height 23 inches. Gift of Egyptian Research Account, 12.187.54

3. A present-day mudhif, or resthouse, Iraq; made of bound and interwoven reeds and rushes. From The Marsh Arabs, by Wilfred Thesiger (London, 1964), pl. 94
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, for the tools remained simple. They consisted of saw, adze (Figure 11), axe, chisel, and reamer (mortising chisel) (Figure 5), all of whose copper (later bronze) blades were set in wooden handles. In addition there were squares (Figure 12), wooden mallets (Figure 4), bow drills with granite caps (Figure 8), sandstone rubbers (which did the work of our planes), and stone polishers. The use of the lathe has been suggested but is unlikely.

In an ancient model of the carpenters’ shop on the estate of Meket-Re, the Chancellor and Great Steward of King Montu-hotpe II (2060-2010 B.C.), many of these tools are seen in use (Figure 6). The model itself is of sycamore. The twelve busy little carpenters and the handles of their tools are of cedar, the blades copper. Extra tools were kept in the big chest, and at the back of the court, under the protecting roof, there is a forge for reshaping blunted blades. Three men are clustered here, one keeping the fire hot with a blowpipe (Figure 7). A post in the center of the court steadies a timber that is being sawn into planks. A workman straddles a plank into which he is cutting mortises with a reamer and mallet. The rest of the men are sitting against the walls dressing timbers with adzes or planing them with sandstone rubbers. In addition to tools of the types the men are using, the storage chest contained axes, chisels, and bow drills.

The cabinetmakers painted on the walls of the tomb of Rekh-mi-Re, the Vizier of Thutmosis III, six hundred years later, work with equal enthusiasm (Figures 9, 10) at the making of chairs, beds, chests, openwork shrines, and a wooden column. They follow principles laid down by Rekh-mi-Re himself, “a noble who guides the hands of his workmen, making furniture of ivory and ebony, aromatic wood and redwood, and true cedar from the summit of the mountain slopes of Lebanon.” In another two hundred years, however — about 1250 B.C. — Egyptian officials were complaining that things were not what they used to be. Although time has not dealt kindly with his tomb, one can still make out the Sculptor Ipy of the reign of Ramesses II, entrusted with supervising the manufacture of temple furniture, as he comes upon a disgraceful scene of sloth in the workshops. A carpenter sits dreaming on the steps of the shrine on which he should be working, another is being hurriedly awakened by a companion, still another is having his eyes painted, while the feverish zeal with which the rest scramble about, banging with mallets and slapping on paint, shows that they have heard the warning cry, “Look out — he’s coming!”

The first piece of domestic furniture we can see actually in use is the stool with rectangular frame. It is found over and over again on early cylinder seals. These seals, short and fat, usually of black steatite (soapstone), are peculiar to the earliest dynastic period. The inscriptions they bear — among the first exam-
Carpenters’ shop from the tomb of Meket-Re, Thebes, XI Dynasty, about 2000 B.C. Sycamore and cedar, length 26 inches. Egyptian Expedition, Rogers Fund. Cairo Museum

Man from carpenters’ shop

6. Carpenters’ shop from the tomb of Meket-Re, Thebes, XI Dynasty, about 2000 B.C. Sycamore and cedar, length 26 inches. Egyptian Expedition, Rogers Fund. Cairo Museum

7. Man from carpenters’ shop

pies of writing—often give the name and title of some priest or official, followed by a group of signs that represent the deceased seated on a stool behind a pile of offerings (Figures 13, 14). For the stool, or the chair, has always been the mark of an important personage: it raises him above the level of his inferiors. (Country people in Egypt and other parts of the Near East are still happy squatting on the ground for long periods in a position that seems impossible to us.) This sign, scarcely changing, remained the determinative for person of rank in Egyptian hieroglyphic writing.

The stools on the seals are seen either from the side (Figure 13), or from the top (Figure 14) in what was to become a characteristic Egyptian mode of illustration: the representation of each separate part of the whole in its most recognizable aspect. Many of these early seals show a feature retained in pictures of stools throughout the dynastic period and much exaggerated in late times: the frames end in projections shaped like papyrus umbels, suggesting that the first Egyptian furniture was of wickerwork, and that the frames were made of bundles of reeds bound together.

Sometimes the legs of the stools shown on the seals were carved in the form of bulls’ legs, like the actual example of Figure 1. Presumably the user was expected to derive some of the strength of the bull (and, in the case of the ivory legs, probably also of the elephant) from furniture embellished in this way. And when the legs of lions began to replace those of bulls, about the end of the III Dynasty, the idea was similar: the sitter was to share the characteristic qualities of the King of Beasts. The spool-like supports under the animal hooves or paws were originally placed there, perhaps, to raise them above the sandy floor and to increase their importance by separating them from the ground. Known as casters, even
8. Bow drill, xx-xxI1 Dynasty, about 1200-800 B.C. Granite cap, bronze bit, wood (restored), leather (restored). Length of bow 28 inches. *Egyptian Expedition, Rogers Fund, 12.180.3*

9. A bow drill in use. Facsimile (detail) of a wall painting in the tomb of Rekhmi-Re, Thebes, xvIII Dynasty, about 1450 B.C. Width 16 inches. *Egyptian Expedition, Rogers Fund, 31.6.29*

Though rigid, they were always present with animal feet. In the early period they were more or less cylindrical; they then increased in diameter toward the bottom; from the New Kingdom on they tended rather to taper toward the ground.

Although, as one might expect, stools were made before chairs, there is a picture of a royal throne of about the same period as the cylinder seals, Narmer, the first king of Egypt, dedicated a giant mace head — symbolizing the weapon with which he had conquered his enemies and united Upper and Lower Egypt — in the temple at Hierakopolis. One of the scenes carved on its surface pictures Narmer seated on a canopy-sheltered throne mounted on a high, stepped dais (Figure 15). The throne seems to be a rectangular block scooped out to fit the king’s posterior and offer support for his back. But possibly he is really shown suspended, as it were, above curving arms, and this, accordingly, would be one of the first examples of the Egyptian artist’s reluctance to conceal any part of an object by another closer to the spectator. There is no indication of the material of the throne, but the dais, to judge by its Egyptian name, was of wood. We shall return to thrones later. Narmer’s is mentioned now simply to show that a royal seat, of normal height with a back and possibly arms, was represented as early as the stools of commoners.

The Museum’s Egyptian Expedition found many stools, later in date than those so far discussed but not very different. The majority are low, with flat seats of woven rushes (Figure 16). These low seats were more comfortable to a people accustomed to sitting on the ground than we should find them (Figure 17). One has legs of what we should call a more normal height, a downcurved frame, and a leather seat (Figure 18). Two of our stools, of a different type, fold for convenience in carrying; they are held at the crossings by bronze rivets and washers. One ends in graceful ducks’ heads inlaid with ebony and ivory (Figure 19). The other, were it not safely locked up in a case, would certainly be picked up by some visitor on her way to a Gallery Talk (Figure 20). A rarer type, not represented in our collection, is the three-legged stool nowadays associated with milkmaids. However, the one illustrated (Figure 21) belonged to a king—Tut-ankh-Amun, whose tomb, found in 1922, yielded the largest and most elaborate collection of Egyptian furniture known.

The canine feet of this stool are unique. The legs are reinforced with elaborate “rungs” in a hieroglyphic design that represents the union of the two ancient kingdoms of Upper and Lower Egypt. This design had long been shown on the sides of seats represented in certain ceremonies — rectangular blocks with architectural and heraldic decoration. Such representations occur in Figures 50 and 52, but no actual examples can be shown, since these seats or thrones were apparently purely symbolic. They recall the architectural form of the ecclesiastical throne used in Christian churches today.

As a device, both meaningful and decorative, under a chair-shaped throne, the union hieroglyph is first found in the magnificent diorite statue of King Chephren of the IV Dynasty.
in the Cairo Museum. But apparently not until the reign of Tuthmosis IV in the XVIII Dynasty was it realized that such rungs actually gave strength, and not until the time of Tut-an-kh-Amun did a simplified version regularly appear in the furniture of common people as well as kings. The anonymous official and his wife shown in our little statue group of the XIX Dynasty (Figure 22) are seated on characteristic stools of the time; one such stool, with a seat made of slats of contrasting woods, was found in the tomb of Tut-an-kh-Amun.

The stool, no matter how it is embellished, remains a raised seat without back or arms. But as early as the II Dynasty, officials as well as kings seemed to feel the need of a support behind them, and the world's first chairs were born. In the beginning the support was low, just enough to keep a cushionlike pad of linen in place. A stela of the XI Dynasty (Figure 25) shows this early form. Soon, however, the chair as we know it now appeared— with a back of medium height or higher, and with or without arms. But the backs of Egyptian chairs were never in one with the legs as ours usually are: the chair remained fundamentally a stool to which a separate back had been joined.

The best early record of "modern" chairs comes from the tomb of Hesi-Re ("Praised by Re"), who, among his other accomplishments, was Chief Doctor and Dentist to King Djoser of the III Dynasty. Along one wall are pictures of his furniture, of which he was evidently very proud: his beds, gaming boards, chests, stools, and chairs, all beautifully made of wood whose grain is carefully delineated—cedar and pine from Syria, ebony from the south, and other fine hardwoods. One low chair (Figure 23) has bull legs mortised into the frame of the seat and lashed in place with thongs. The legs are shown in profile while the back, a rectangular frame with one cross-piece, is shown from the front. Another has a similar back and straight legs of the height preferred today, strengthened with braces of bent wood. A nearby stool has legs of the same type; stools like this are often shown in official sculptures of the period. The chairs are ranged along a wall as they might be in a modern waiting room, but this was no ordinary furniture. It was not only the god who praised the good doctor: these were certainly presents from the king himself, one of Hesi-Re's grateful patients.

Queen Hetep-heres owned the first truly elegant furniture that may be examined in detail: it has been reconstructed with confidence even though the original wood had disintegrated when the queen's tomb was found by the expedition of Harvard University and the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Hetep-heres had two armchairs of about the same dimensions, both with lion legs, the front ones slightly taller than those at the back so that

10. A straightedge in use. Facsimile (detail) of a wall painting in the tomb of Rekh-mi-Re. Width 16½ inches. Egyptian Expedition, Rogers Fund, 31.6.12

11. Adze, xviii Dynasty, about 1500 B.C. Tamarisk handle, bronze blade, leather binding. Length 11 inches. Egyptian Expedition, Rogers Fund, 25.3.117

12. Square, xi Dynasty, about 2000 B.C. Pine, long side 6 inches. Egyptian Expedition, Rogers Fund, 20.3.90
the seats slope down from about eleven inches in front to ten behind. Although low, the seats are wide and deep, about twenty-eight by twenty-six inches, suggesting that Hetep-heres sat curled up like the little girl (of a later period) shown in Figure 34. The arms of the simpler chair (Figure 24) are about sixteen inches high by twenty long. Its seat and back were left plain, but the arms, legs, and frame were covered with gold, applied after the parts were assembled, and worked into the carving. The frame was mortised, the joints being further strengthened by leather ties and wooden pins, hidden by the gold sheathing. The arms were supported by stylized representations of papyrus reeds (of which the prototype of such a chair was probably made), dowelled together and to the seat and back.

The queen’s second chair, which also included rush and reed patterns in its decoration, was more elaborately embellished. It had similar gold-covered legs and frame, but the back and arms, sheathed in gold, were inlaid with faience.

The backs and arms of Hetep-heres’ chairs were of medium height, but low chairs with high backs and arms that came up to the owner’s armpits were well known in her time. The more important officials liked to be portrayed conducting their business in such chairs, their knees drawn up to their chins and one arm thrown over the arm of the chair—and very uncomfortable they look, as in Figure 48. At this time, the Old Kingdom, the arms of chairs were normally rectangular, and they still were when the King’s Favorite, Kawiyet, sat having her hair done (Figure 26) at the beginning of the Middle Kingdom, shortly before 2000 B.C.

In the New Kingdom the chairs of commoners were apparently always armless, but by the middle of the XVIII Dynasty there appeared a type of royal chair with rather low arms, sloping down from the back and rounded in front. A lion’s head might be placed over each of the front legs so that, viewed from the side, the owner seems to be sitting on the back of a rather emaciated lion. Lions’ heads in this position are first seen on the statue of Chephren mentioned above. A hieroglyph in the pyramid of Pepy I of the VI Dynasty implies that his “shining throne” had lions’ heads, and Aashyet of the XI Dynasty, one of Kawiyet’s rivals in the affections of their king, is shown seated on an armless, low-backed chair with this decoration (Figure 27). However, the idea, like that of the symbolic rungs, did not really catch on until the XVIII Dynasty.

Our own two complete chairs, both of the XVIII Dynasty and from Thebes, are armless. The back of one (Figure 29) consists of a rectangular frame into which five plain slats are set, the center one extending down through both frame and seat for reinforcement (Figure 28). Angle braces, cut from forked branches, strengthen the joining of seat and back, legs and seat. The seat itself, of interwoven linen string, has been restored, but enough ancient string survived—twelve strands to the hole—to show its construction.

The second chair was found by our Expedition at the tomb of Ra-mose and Hat-nufer, the parents of Sen-ne-mut, the Steward of Amun, and Queen Hat-shepsut’s favorite. Sen-ne-mut was a self-made man, and thanks to his position at court he was able to furnish the old folks with an ample burial with material drawn from the storehouses of the god and the queen. We can imagine him with his haughty aquiline face (Figure 31) as he made his selections: the furnishings must be fine but unostentatious, right in every way for the parents of such a man. The chair he chose (Figure 32) is of the same type as our first example, but two woods were used: box and ebony, held together with pegs of the same materials and a
resinous glue. An attractive feature is the openwork panel composed of hieroglyphs signifying welfare on either side of a figure of the household god Bes. The cord seat is the original.

Other chairs were found in our excavations at Thebes, but in such fragmentary condition that they could not be reconstructed. One, similar in shape to Figure 32, was of cypress inlaid with box, ebony, and ivory. A second, of a dark reddish hardwood veneered with ebony and ivory, seems to have had a back that was slightly curved from side to side; its remaining leg gives a seat height of fourteen and a half inches. This chair must have resembled those shown on a stela of the XVIII Dynasty (Figure 34), where we see a design for backs that had been tried tentatively as early as the XII Dynasty. The back is set into the seat just above the front of the rear legs, its top joining the tops of three vertical slats set into the back of the legs and frame. The construction shows clearly in an actual chair that belonged to Tut-ankh-Amun (Figure 35). Our chair was earlier, however, dating from about 1520 B.C., and resembled the chairs of the stela in being without rungs. Tut-ankh-Amun’s has rungs of the symbolic design discussed earlier.

At first sight Tut-ankh-Amun’s chair may not seem designed for relaxation, but we have only to look at the scene on the golden back of the famous throne from his tomb (Figure 33) to see that this is not necessarily so. Here the king, attended by his wife, lolls on a chair exactly like the ones just discussed, shielded from its uncomfortable bareness by a cushion that appears to be about five inches thick. Such upholstered chairs were still in fashion a hundred and fifty years later; they were among the rich furnishings represented on the walls of the tomb of Rameses III, where painted designs on the cushions suggest that they were covered with tapestry. (Tut-ankh-Amun’s cushion still retains traces of a diaper pattern.) Few actual cushions have been preserved, but one comes from the tomb of Tut-ankh-Amun’s great-grandparents, Tjuyu and Yuya. It is squarish, of a double thickness of linen stuffed with pigeon feathers; in the center is a little pink rectangle bordered with strips of yellow, pink, and white. It was made to fit the seat of the chair near which it was found, one of three in the tomb that were of the royal type with sloping arms.

The finest of these three chairs had been contributed to the burial of Tjuyu and Yuya

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16. Stool, xvii Dynasty, about 1600 B.C. Tamarisk with rush seat, one leg replaced anciently. Height 5½ inches. Carnarvon excavations, gift of Lord Carnarvon, 14.10.3

17. Model figure from the tomb of Meket-Re. Egyptian Expedition, Rogers Fund. Cairo Museum
18. Stool, xvii Dynasty, about 1600 B.C. Zizouf wood, leather seat (restored), height 15½ inches. Carnarvon excavations, gift of Lord Carnarvon, 14.10.4

19. Folding stool, xvii Dynasty, about 1400 B.C. Acacia, inlaid with ebony and ivory, height (open) 13 inches. Rogers Fund, 12.182.49

20. Folding stool, xii Dynasty, 1991-1786 B.C. Acacia, leather seat, height (open) 14 inches. Rogers Fund, 12.182.58

21. Stool from the tomb of Tutankhamun, xviii Dynasty, about 1355 B.C. Cairo Museum

by their granddaughter, Princess Sit-Amun, who, like her mother Teye, became a queen (and was probably the mother of Tut-ankh-Amun). Sit-Amun’s chair is unique in having portraits of Teye where one might have expected lion knobs. But her contemporaries must often have regarded that formidable lady with the respect usually reserved for a lioness with cubs—and here she is perhaps to be thought of as protecting her daughter.

Teye and Sit-Amun are not the only queens who have used this chair. When the tomb was found in 1905 its contents were sent to the Cairo Museum. On the final day of packing, when only the chair remained, an old lady leaning on a cane appeared at the entrance to the tomb and insisted on going down to see it. The excavators, J. E. Quibell and Joseph Lindon Smith, apologized for not being able to offer a seat, but saying, “Why, there is a chair which will do for me nicely,” she sat down on the priceless antiquity. “The anticipated catastrophe did not take place,” Smith wrote later. “The visitor turned to [her companion] and said, ‘I see now where the Empire style came from. Behold these carved heads.’” And suddenly they recognized her. It was the former Empress Eugénie, revisiting Egypt thirty-five years after her royal journey to the opening of the Suez Canal.

Now, having traced the development of stool and chair, let us catch up with other kinds of furniture.

Today we should probably say that our minimum requirements were a chair, a bed, and a table. But as we have seen, the Egyptians were happy sitting on the ground, and the majority simply lay down to sleep on a mat or, if they were rather more affluent, on a pad of folded sheets. What they did need, however, was a prop for the head. Not only did every Egyptian use a headrest in this world, he needed one for the next. Some of the funerary headrests are of fine but impractical materials such as ivory or alabaster. The headrest for everyday, or rather everynight, use was of wood and consisted fundamentally of three parts, a curved “pillow,” a vertical shaft, and a horizontal base, usually separate pieces dowelled together. Of the many headrests in our collection, two are illustrated (Figures 37, 38). The Egyptians slept on their sides (Figure 36), and the headrests were about shoulder height. A member of our staff tried one—once—and maintained that it was comfortable.

Djoser’s doctor, Hesi-Re, had a variety of headrests, kept neatly in a special case. He also had nine or ten beds that illustrate well the development of this article of furniture. First, the original rectangular floor covering was put into a frame that was raised from the ground at the head end (Figure 42); then legs, shorter than those at the head, were placed under the foot; then a footboard appeared at the bottom of the bed to prevent the occu-
pant from slipping down. The legs were of two kinds, plain, tapering toward the ground, and strengthened by curved braces, or, as on early chairs, bull legs attached by mortise and tenon and thongs. The “springs” of these beds consisted of a rectangle of leather laced to the frame. The mattresses would have been pads of folded sheets tied in place.

Eventually, as was the case with chairs, beds were made with lion legs, and interlaced cord replaced the leather “springs.” By the XVIII Dynasty the legs at head and foot were regularly of the same height, but although the frame was now horizontal, or even curved down gracefully toward the center, the footboard was retained (Figure 43). The Egyptians were proud of their beds and considered them a mark of civilization. An expatriate of the XII Dynasty, returning home after an absence of many years, exclaimed, “And I slept on a bed again!”

In our collection are a couch of the I Dynasty – actually it is more a commodious stool – and several beds. The couch (Figure 39) has the familiar bull legs, and its frame shows the slots that once held the lacing of the leather springs. One of our beds, also originally of the earlier dynastic period since it has the bull legs and slotted frame, was reused in the Middle Kingdom, at which time the old leather was replaced with a mesh of fiber cords. It is illustrated as it might have been made up (Figure 40).

Our little traveling bed (Figure 41), a model or perhaps a toy, was made about 1450 B.C. It is of tamarisk painted white, with black where a real bed would have had metal reinforcements; and it doubles back on painted wooden hinges that are like some real bronze ones our Expedition found among a copper-smith’s effects. A hundred years later Tutankh-Amun had a traveling bed that folded into three sections on two sets of hinges.

Our third present-day requirement, a table, would probably have puzzled the Egyptian. Tables of wood were apparently rare and were seldom included in funerary equipment, and large tables of any material were unknown. Guests at parties had their own little side tables, usually of wicker or consisting of a pottery stand with a wicker tray on top.

We have one complete wooden table (Figure 46). It is made of numerous small pieces of acacia cleverly pegged together, and inlaid on top and along the edges of the legs with box. A second table, somewhat larger and more elaborately inlaid, was too fragmentary to reconstruct.

To judge by tomb paintings and the actual furnishings of Tutankh-Amun’s tomb, chests on legs were not uncommon in fine homes, and these, obviously, could have done some service as tables. There are none of these chest-tables in our collection, but we do have a number of heavy-duty storage chests, among them two that belonged to Ra-mose and Hā-
23. Furniture of Hesi-Re, III Dynasty, about 2660 B.C. Drawing from Excavations at Saqqara; The Tomb of Hesy, by J. E. Quibell (Cairo, 1913), pl. xx


26. Sarcophagus of Kawiyet (detail), about 2050 B.C. Limestone. Cairo Museum

27. Sarcophagus of Aashyet (detail), about 2050 B.C. Limestone. Egyptian Expedition, Rogers Fund. Cairo Museum
nufer. One of these, made of sycamore, is a plain rectangular box with a flat lid (Figure 44). Its corners are dovetailed, its lid and floor strengthened with battens. The other, of pine, stands on four short legs and has a double-pitched lid (Figure 45). Both chests are painted white inside and outside. When found, their lids had been secured by lashing together the knobs at the top and end and sealing the knots. They contained Hat-nufer's supply of household linen: fifty-five folded sheets measuring in length from fourteen to fifty-four feet.

As well as storing his household equipment tidily, the Egyptian had to safeguard his small personal effects. We have several fine caskets for jewelry and cosmetics, among them that of Kemu-ny, who was Chamberlain and Butler to King Amun-em-het IV, about 1795 B.C. Made of carefully joined pieces of cedar, it is veneered with ebony and ivory, and inlaid with black and ivory-colored pastes (Figure 47). The upper section has compartments for a mirror and odds and ends. The drawer below is fitted to take eight oil jars. To secure the contents, two little bronze pegs at the back of the lid were slid into corresponding holes in the box, a silver bolt was slid into place inside the front of the drawer, and the silver knobs were lashed together and sealed.

The Egyptians had one piece of furniture, however, that would not be included in any modern list - the litter. Wheeled vehicles were unknown in Egypt until about 1680 B.C., and even after they were introduced, chiefly in the form of chariots, the Nile remained the highway, and no one would have considered driving farther than necessary on a hot, dusty road. Those who could afford it were carried down to their dahabiyehs on the river, out to visit friends, or to church. This was already true in the I Dynasty, at least for those of supreme importance. In Figure 15 a carrying chair is placed in front of the enthroned Narmer. "Carrying stool" might be a better term, because it would seem that a separate construction composed of a floor and a shelter of woven rushes was simply lifted onto a stool or couch of the usual design, the papyrus-shaped knobs at the front and back of the frame acting as handles for the bearers.
Early in the IV Dynasty Hetep-heres’ litter, of hardwood embellished with gold, was placed in her tomb to make life in the next world more pleasant. It is shaped like a legless armchair resting on two poles, the seat extended forward and surrounded by a low railing.

There is no actual example of a litter in our collection, but the unfinished decoration of the outer room of our tomb of Peri-nebi depicts an example of the V Dynasty. The great man, seated in his litter, inspects the produce of his estates (Figure 48). A canopy is stretched over his head; presumably, curtains at the four sides could have been let down or rolled up as required. Peri-nebi’s wife squats facing him in the sun outside. She would eventually have been painted the pale flesh color considered suitable for women, who were supposed to lead sheltered lives. Peri-nebi himself has already been given the traditional weather-beaten brick-red of a man who must always be out and about.

Toward the end of the XVIII Dynasty the simple litter developed into a combined carrying chair and throne in which victorious pharaohs sometimes appeared to their people. A wall painting from the end of the dynasty shows an example in which a lion with naturally carved body forms the seat and legs while a second, smaller lion forms the arm. A later example shows a chair with lion arms but a frame of the usual type. In still another version it is the arms that are of the usual type while lions form the seat and legs, as in a little bronze that once held the figure of a king or god (Figure 49).

Thrones have been mentioned several times. It was the decoration that differentiated Egyptian thrones from chairs, even from chairs used only by members of the royal family. The decorative elements might be used structurally, but all were symbolic—the hieroglyphs meaning union, the lions and sphinxes...
33. Tut-ankh-Amun seated upon a cushioned chair. Detail from the back of his throne, gold, inlaid with silver, semiprecious stones, and colored pastes. Cairo Museum

34. Stela of Nen-waf (detail), XVIII Dynasty, about 1450 B.C. Limestone, painted, height 5½ inches. Rogers Fund, 12.182.3

35. Chair from the tomb of Tut-ankh-Amun. Cairo Museum
representing the might of the king, the bound enemies beneath his feet. Even the colors were symbolic—gold, the indestructible material of which gods were made, and the red, blue, and green of life and resurrection.

The most important piece of furniture in our collection—even though it is only a fragment—is the panel from the left arm of a throne of Tuthmosis IV (1425-1417 B.C.). Of cedar, once overlaid with gold, it and its mate (which is in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston) came from a throne like those of Tuthmosis and his son, Amenophis III, which are represented in several Theban tombs. Today Tutan-kh-Amun’s throne and these two panels are all that is left of these once splendid symbols of royalty.

The scene carved on the outside of our panel (Figure 51) shows Tuthmosis as a winged sphinx trampling on African enemies and “crushing all foreign lands.” The god Horus, as a falcon, stretches his wings protectively overhead, and a sign for life, with human arms, holds a symbol of divine royalty, a sun-shade, behind the sphinx. The design on the Boston panel is almost identical, except that the sphinx strikes down Asiatic enemies and the king’s throne name, Men-kheper-Re, appears rather than his personal one, Tuthmosis, which is on ours.

The inside of our panel (Figure 52) shows an allegory of some ceremony probably connected with the king’s coronation. Tuthmosis, in human form, is seated on a throne of the architectural type supported by the runglike symbols of union. Before him stands Weret-hekau (“Great of Magic”), a lion-headed goddess associated with royal crowns. Behind him stands Thoth, the ibis-headed god of wisdom bringing “millions of years, life, well-being, and eternity” to Tuthmosis, his namesake.

To see what the complete throne looks like, we turn to scenes from tombs of the next reign: those of Kha-em-het, Overseer of the Granaries of Upper and Lower Egypt, of an Overseer of the Royal Nurses (the name of the tomb’s owner has been lost), and of Onen, the brother of Queen Teye. In all of these Amenophis III, Tuthmosis’ son, wearing full regalia, is enthroned upon the stepped dais under a canopy that has not changed essentially since Narmer’s time. In the first (Figure 53), carved panels similar to ours are set into the arms; in the second (Frontispiece) the panels are decorated with golden rosettes. The spaces under both these seats are filled with union symbols; large figures of bound African and Asiatic captives are added in Kha-em-het’s relief, and carved lions once guarded the steps leading up to the badly damaged dais. This relief was originally painted. The scene in
39. Couch frame, 1 Dynasty, 3100-2890 B.C. Acacia, length 37½ inches. Gift of Egyptian Research Account, 12.187.52

40. Bed, Early Dynastic period, about 3000-2700 B.C., reused in Middle Kingdom, about 2000-1880 B.C. Wood, length 63 inches. Funds from various donors, 86.1.39

41. Folding bed, a model or toy, XVIII Dynasty, about 1450 B.C. Tamarisk, painted, linen “springs” restored, length 12 inches. Rogers Fund, 20.2.13

42. Beds of Hesi-Re. Drawings from Excavations at Saqqara; The Tomb of Hesy, pls. xix, xx
43. Funeral procession (detail) of Ra-mose, Governor of Thebes, xviii Dynasty, about 1380 B.C. His bed has a mattress of folded sheets held in place by four red bands. Facsimile of painting in Ra-mose’s tomb, Egyptian Expedition, Rogers Fund, 30.4.37

44, 45. Hat-nufer’s linen chests, xviii Dynasty, about 1500 B.C. Upper: sycamore, painted, length 29½ inches. Lower: pine, painted, length 27½ inches. Egyptian Expedition, Rogers Fund, 36.3.55, 56

46. Table, xvii–xviii Dynasty, about 1567 B.C. Acacia, inlaid with box, length 25 inches. Carnarvon excavations, gift of Lord Carnarvon, 14.10.5
Onen’s tomb (not illustrated here) was in paint alone; the arm panel of Amenophis’ throne shows sphinx, fan, and Libyan, Nubian, and Syrian enemies, as well as the winged cobra or uraeus that appears on the panel of Kha-em-het’s relief. Bound with a halter of lotus and papyrus, captives from foreign lands form a dado around the dais on which the throne rests. Captives also appear on the stool under the king’s feet, recalling the words of the Psalmist: “... until I make thine enemies thy footstool.”

This scene was painted with all the colors of the Egyptian palette; the original throne may have been inlaid with faience, like Hetepheres’ chair, or embellished with gold, silver, semiprecious stones, and pastes, like Tut-ankh-Amun’s throne. The arms of this throne, two generations later, are of a somewhat different design, for in place of sphinxes and enemies the king’s title appears in large openwork hieroglyphs under the wings of divine uraei. They resemble the winged divinities, this time falcons, that form the entire arms of a symbolic throne of Amenophis carved on a carnelian bracelet plaque that probably belonged to his queen, Teye (Figure 50). Accompanied by two of their daughters, the king and queen are apparently being carried in some procession. The thrones represented in the tombs of Kha-em-het and Onen, however, rest securely on daises from which slender lotus and papyrus columns rise to support canopies decorated with all the splendor of the East.

The frontispiece shows the complete pavilion with its triple colonnade, each series of columns supporting its own canopy, with cornices of crowned golden uraei and hanging bunches of glass grapes. With his mother standing behind him, Amenophis the Magnificent, wearing his Blue Crown, sits upon a throne of green and gold, his knees flanked by green and gold lions’ heads. Once steps led up to the dais, which is guarded by another row of golden uraei. At ground level, far below the pharaoh, conquered enemies praise him and beg for mercy.

Four hundred years later King Solomon “made a porch for the throne where he might judge, even the porch of judgment: and it was covered with cedar from one side of the floor to the other. ... Moreover, the king made a great throne of ivory and overlaid it with pure gold. And there were six steps to the throne, with a footstool of gold, which were fastened to the throne, and stays on each side of the sitting place, and two lions standing on the stays: and twelve lions stood there on the one side and on the other upon the six steps. There was not the like made in any kingdom.”

There was.

Note

48. Drawing (detail) of decoration in the tomb of Peri-nebi, V Dynasty, about 2400 B.C. Tomb, gift of Edward S. Harkness, 13.183.3

51, 52. Arm panel of throne of Tuthmosis IV, from his tomb, Thebes, XVIII Dynasty, about 1420 B.C. Cedar, height 9¾ inches. Left: outer surface. Right: inner surface. Theodore M. Davis excavations, bequest of Theodore M. Davis, 30.8.45
49. Model throne for statuette of divinity. Late Dynastic period, 664-332 B.C. Bronze, height 13⁄4 inches. Gift of Susette and Marie Khayat, 64.308

50. Bracelet plaque, XVIII Dynasty, about 1400 B.C. Carnelian, length 23⁄4 inches. Carnarvon Collection, gift of Edward S. Harkness, 26.7.1339
53. Amenophis III enthroned. Relief in the tomb of Kha-em-het, Thebes, XVIII Dynasty, about 1400 B.C.