

# Analyzing the Use of Historical Chairs in Modern Media

*Alissa L. Johnson<sup>1</sup>, Darby Huber<sup>2</sup>, and Anna Ruth Gatlin, PhD.<sup>3,\*</sup>*

<sup>1</sup> Second-Degree Undergraduate Student, College of Human Sciences, Auburn University

<sup>2</sup> Undergraduate Student, College of Human Sciences, Auburn University

<sup>3</sup> Assistant Professor, College of Human Sciences, Auburn University

Certain artifacts, symbols, philosophies, and other similar items and ideologies have persisted across the rise and fall of different cultures. However, one thing that has impacted humankind's history and a portion of its creation is the design of their residences, workplaces, and entertainment spaces. None has affected these the deepest or the longest than interior furniture pieces' creation and changing structure. What seems like an insignificant piece to a room, or a place to rest your legs or a bag, is more complex regarding its creation and features than a superficial glance allows. This is evident by their repeated use in highly acclaimed movies and TV Shows, gracing the silver screen by being seemingly silent in the background. Upon closer analysis of the structures, materials, historical background, and suggested implementation in modern movies and TV shows, their significance and the meaning they provide as a representation of a feeling or a culture is revealed.

The first step in the analysis process was to learn the chairs that have impacted the design history in a particular way. Whether by the types of materials used, how the chair was produced, or even how the chair reacted to a specific social movement, it provided the basis for looking for pieces of furniture in the media. These furniture options could then be further narrowed down to a select few after later analysis of different media types to see which furniture pieces appeared more frequently than others.

An example of a chair frequently seen in the media upon later analysis was the Barcelona Chair from the Barcelona furniture collection, created and built by Mies van der Rohe and Lily Reich in 1929. While looking like an average, rectilinear leather chair that sits low to the ground, this chair carries more weight than meets the eye. The chair was a component of the site of the Ger-

man Exhibition for the Barcelona Exposition of 1929, otherwise known as The World's Fair of 1929. Mies and Reich were asked personally by the leaders of Germany to put together a collection of modern furniture to represent Germany for the exhibition; a set of furniture that would be fit to" receive a king...the chair had to be monumental." [6]

While receiving applause for the collection during the exhibition, the chair was later manufactured and patented by Knoll International INC. in 1929 and has been produced since. Featured in shows like Cobra Kai, Suits, and much more, it is easy to see why the modern lines and clean looks were so well used upon further inspection. After further consideration, the chair represents power with its robust shape and durable materials. It was not constructed to be a dainty side piece but to be the place fit for royalty to sit. Its size adds even more to this factor of an imposing ruler with a broad base of almost 3 feet wide. By looking through this lens of having the materials carrying through the meaning of a piece of furniture, it becomes clear why the Barcelona chair fits specific situations. And in the words of Mies, it is no wonder why "you couldn't use a kitchen chair." [5, 6]

Carrying on with this theme is another popular furniture piece that was repeated in many historical adaptations, the curule chair. This chair, constructed originally in ancient Egypt but found its closest modern relative in the ancient Romans, was a wooden chair with a rush or woven seat used by the highest-ranking government officials in their respective eras. Later adaptations were found in the Italian Renaissance and the Empire style popular in Western Europe and North America. The chair derives its name from the Greek word for chariot, "cirrus," which was most associated with its use of magistrates and represented a place of judgment. [1]

---

\* Corresponding author: gatliar@auburn.edu

Looking through a more historical lens, we could derive the use of this chair in media like *The Crown*, *Bridgerton*, and *Downton Abbey*. While the chair not only provides an accurate historical representation of furniture that would have been available during that time, but the chair also itself carries a meaning of power, wealth, and justice. This hypothesis is confirmed by what shows the chair is depicted in and what characters are typically seen in the scene with the chair; powerful men either in the dominion of a nation, a corporation, or their estates. [4]

Other furniture types seen less often but depicted in media varied from a historical re-adaptation to a modern film or show that wanted to portray a particular emotion about the character. Such chairs were the Wassily chair constructed in the Modernist movement by Marcel Breuer, the Eames Lounge Chair by Charles and Ray Eames, the Windsor chair of the Georgian and Federalist design movements, and the Klismos chair, which the ancient Greeks built in the 4th Century BC. All these furniture pieces, like the ones previously described, used their structure, materials, and history behind them to convey their use in modern media, whether to convey the accuracy of a film or to reveal a hidden personality trait of a particular character. [2, 3, 7]

By using the repetition of different furniture pieces in other films and dissecting the layers of meaning within the piece's construction and materials, it was viable to assume that furniture carries with it an underlying meaning and significance that impacts humans and the design of spaces long after their initial introduction into the world. The way that furniture is perceived and used in a room is, therefore, also indicative of the historical narrative that the furniture pieces carry, as well as who constructed the furniture piece and why. Through the analysis of these films, it is also clear that the individuals who selected these pieces of furniture were also aware of these facts and used the furniture pieces accordingly. It is safe to assume that furniture carries with it not just a long history of what humans could do at that time, but also how humans perceived and interacted with the world around them and how they continue to interact with it to this day.

## Statement of Research Advisor

One arm of my research is analyzing and critiquing the intersection of interior design and set design. Using the lens of the aesthetic experience of film/television, concept and symbolism, and auteur theory, I explore the mise en scene of stills captured from media. Alissa and Darby are working in this research stream, focusing on analyzing and critiquing the choice of certain chairs in cinema and television..

- Dr. Anna Ruth Gatlin, College of Human Sciences, Auburn University

## References

- [1] Encyclopædia Britannica, inc. (2023, June 16). *Curule chair*. Encyclopædia Britannica. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/curule-chair>
- [2] Encyclopædia Britannica, inc. (n.d.-a). *Klismos*. Encyclopædia Britannica. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/klismos>
- [3] Encyclopædia Britannica, inc. (n.d.-b). *Windsor Chair*. Encyclopædia Britannica. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Windsor-chair>
- [4] Furniture, / Mackinnon Fine. (2017, October 10). *The seat of power: The curule form & its origin*. The Source. <https://thesourceforantiques.wordpress.com/2017/10/10/the-seat-of-power-the-curule-form-its-origin/>
- [5] Knoll. <https://www.knoll.com/knollnewsdetail/design-deconstructed-barcelona-chair>
- [6] Ludwig Mies van der Rohe. *Barcelona Chair. Designed 1929 (this example 1953): Moma*. The Museum of Modern Art. <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/4369#:~:text=Mies%20van%20der%20Rohe%20designed,%2C%22%20according%20to%20the%20architect.>
- [7] Ray, D. (2023, July 5). *From the archive: A short history of Marcel Breuer's Wassily Chair*. ICON Magazine. <https://www.iconeye.com/design/a-brief-history-of-marcel-breuer-s-wassily-chair#:~:text=His%20Wassily%20chair%20is%20the%20most%20iconic&text=Hungarian%2DAmerican%20architect%20Marcel%20Breuer,inspired%20by%20a%20bicycle%20>

frame.

## Authors Biography



Alissa L. Johnson is a second-degree junior-year student pursuing a B.S. degree in Interior Design through the College of Consumer and Design Science at Auburn University. She has played a vital role in the identification of historical furniture pieces, identifying historical timeframes, and putting together other written research information. Alissa's previous undergraduate degree is in Exercise Physiology from West Virginia University. Alissa came to Auburn University in the Fall of 2021 and has used her passion for interior design with her research-based background knowledge to help further study historical chairs and other furniture pieces. She has a profound interest in history and how people and the designs that they create have evolved in similar but contrasting ways.



Darby Huber is a junior-year student pursuing a B.S. degree in Interior Design through the College of Consumer and Design Science at Auburn University. She has gathered the collection of visual data gained throughout the project and put together all graphic portions of the research. Her research interests lie in how design affects the world and how each interacts with it and in producing modern design ideas that cater to human behavior. Aside from interior design, her interests lie in writing, art, and graphic design.



Anna Ruth Gatlin, PhD, is an Assistant Professor of Interior Design at Auburn University. An award-winning interior designer, she also has an established record of traditional and creative scholarly contributions. Many of her creative scholarship works examine aspects of southeastern life through an autoethnographic lens, executed in heritage fiber arts techniques.