

Ancient greek furniture: source of inspiration for the designers and manufacturers of modern times

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Abstract: Although the Greeks borrowed the original design of their furniture during the Classical era from the culture of Egyptians and other surrounding peoples, the furniture styles were transformed by Greeks and these Greek furniture styles influenced and continue to influence furniture styles into the modern centuries. The Greek furniture tended to be round, curved, of softer style, more ornamental, comfortable, supportive to the body, symmetrical and functional than the styles of Egyptian furniture. The ancient history of furniture came to us principally from the art records left to us by the earlier society and specifically, the knowledge came from numerous configurations that were found on Greek vases, sculptures, inscriptions, tombstones, coins, reliefs in the Parthenon, paintings in pottery, relief carvings and other illustrated examples depicted in Greek art. In this study the main and most popular forms and styles of ancient Greek furniture of Classical and Hellenistic era, that have been recorded, such as stools (Bathron, Diphros Okladias, Thronos, footstools), tables, kline (a banquet couch), chairs (klismos), chests etc. are presented and analyzed. Valuable information is also recorded about their construction, the materials and types of connection used in furniture construction, as well as, the tools and machinery being used by the craftsmen. Principal goal of this study is to examine the significance of these unique pieces of furniture for the daily life of that times, the evolution of the architecture and designs of ancient Greek furniture through the ages, the inspiration of the modern designers and manufacturers by them and the reappearance of ancient Greek forms and designs in modern artefacts.

Keywords: ancient, Greek, furniture, kline, klismos, stool

1 Introduction

Referring to the ancient Greek furniture our knowledge is mainly derived from scenes depicted in early art forms, such as pottery decorations, frescos, friezes, numerous configurations, found on Greek vases, sculptures, inscriptions, tombstones, coins, medals, relief carvings in the Parthenon and other illustrated examples of Greek art, that depict daily life in Greek homes, and this has given us an accurate idea of early Greek furniture designs (Benazir 2012). Although much ancient art survives from the earliest civilizations, ancient furniture was mostly wooden, and unfortunately has long since rotted away. Therefore, no indoor ancient Greek furniture has survived to present. Yet, these depictions in paintings, sculptures, and reliefs of what furniture was, are considered by historians to be valid (Whitham 1997).

The Greek history of furniture can be traced back to the heritage of Egyptian furniture. Ancient Greek civilization was at its zenith during the Classical era, from 499 BC to 79 BC. Although the Greeks borrowed the original design of their furniture during the Classical era from the culture of Egyptians and other surrounding peoples, the furniture styles were transformed by Greeks. Characteristic of Egyptian furniture was a stiff, rectangular, and unflattering shape (Benazir 2012). However, the Greeks and later the Romans began influencing the design of the furniture, and these pieces took on ornamental qualities more

indicative of these cultures instead of the original Egyptian culture. Lines became softer, much use was made of subtle and elegant curves, and more attention was given to comfort (Benazir 2012). Additionally, although Greek furniture tended to be beautiful and at times ornate, the Greeks paid special attention their furniture to be comfortable and functional. Greeks also used materials and sophisticated crafting techniques for the perfection of the specific furniture forms based on daily needs and culture. From the evidences available, it is clear that the Greeks tended to base furniture ornament on architectural decoration, and the general symmetry and regularity of the whole design. Unlike Egypt, Greece had enough timber for furniture making, which contributed in the furniture development (Benazir 2012). Curved backrests, padded arm rests and the appearance of elaborate upholstery reflected a fashion that was to transcend the classical designs, as chair makers begin to adapt their designs to the idiosyncrasies of the human body.

Greek furniture was typically constructed out of wood, though it might also be made of stone, marble or metal, such as bronze, iron, gold and silver. Oak, maple, beech, cedar, olive, boxwood, yew, citrus, Ligaria, fir, lime and willow, as well as imported species such as ebony were the main wood species used and common structural materials. Marble and bronze were used in conjunction with wood or to replace it, while laid ivory, ebony, and precious stones were lavished on the finest wooden pieces, which sometimes had feet of silver (Benazir 2012). Greeks used the technique of wood veneering, with expensive types of wood in order to make the object appear more costly. They connected the wooden elements with mortise and tenon joinery, and also with lashings, pegs, metal nails, and glue. Wood was shaped by carving, steam treatment, and the lathe. The tools that were used were the ax, the plane, gouge or various chisels, hammer, lathe, the ruler, the spirit level and the plumb line. The furniture is known to have been decorated with ivory, tortoise shell, glass, gold or other precious materials. The designs were inspired and derived from the plant and animal world inlays, painting, adjectives, or woodwork. Sometimes, the ends of molded parts had animal heads (swans, Rams etc.) or zoomorphic feet legs. The protection (polishing) was implemented with cedar and juniper oil.

From the archaeological remains, mainly during the 7th to 4th century BC, we have samples of furniture and utensils, which in the history of art have been recognized as ancient Greek and have common typology, and great artistic cultural value. The main types of furniture that were used in ancient Greece were: stools, couches, small tables, chests, and chairs. The development of their form, especially during the 5th to 4th century BC, yielded artifacts, demonstrating that the arts of furniture construction and brass foundry were developed, simultaneously with the applied and fine arts, to an extent sufficient enough to express the lifestyle, the spirit, the “moderation” and the harmony that the ancient Greek civilization is characterized by.

In this study the main and most popular forms and styles of ancient Greek furniture of Classical and Hellenistic era that have been recorded, are presented and analyzed. Principal goal of this study is to examine the significance of these unique pieces of furniture for the daily life of those times, the evolution of the architecture and designs of ancient Greek furniture through the ages, the inspiration of the modern designers and manufacturers by them and the reappearance of ancient Greek forms and designs in modern artefacts.

2 Most popular ancient Greek furniture types

Archaeological evidence of excavated houses indicates modestly furnished interiors with only the necessary amount of wooden furniture used in everyday life (Andrianou 2009). The main artforms by the sixth century B.C., of highly developed style that were found and

predominated during the ancient period in Greece of the fourth and fifth centuries B.C. are presented hereupon.

2.1 Thronos

The modern word “throne” is derived from the ancient Greek ‘thronos’ (Greek singular word: θρόνος), which was a seat designated for deities or individuals of high status or honor. The throne chair was always reserved for the use of the most important person present. It was illustrated in pictorial art forms as the seat of gods, goddesses, and royalty. A lofty seat, it was depicted with a footstool and was among the most elaborate of all Greek furniture forms. It often borrowed features from Egyptian models, using animal feet and motifs such as a winged animal or sphinx, a snake or a horse’s head shaped in the back (Benazir 2012). The colossal chryselephantine statue of Zeus at Olympia, constructed by Phidias and lost in antiquity, featured the god Zeus seated on an elaborate throne, which was decorated with gold, precious stones, ebony and ivory.

2.2 Stool or Diphros

The stool was used by Greeks of all the layers and it was constructed in a variety of configurations. The main styles of stools of ancient Greece that have survived through reliefs are the following. The first type looks more like a small table. The typical stool consisted of a flat top and four straight legs, a stool known as ‘bathron’. There was no back support and the bottom was hard and uncompromising (Whitham 1997). This stool form with the four turned legs, sometimes joined by stretchers, supporting a rectangular seat, was borrowed from the Egyptians. Sometimes, a design of three legs was used in the construction of this stool. The stool developed in a form, termed ‘diphros’, often had four perpendicular legs and a rectangular seat, often with a cushion or rug for padding. Another stool became known as ‘diphros Okladias’, in which the legs cross, as in the modern stool with a tripod base. It consisted of three animal legs pointed inwards, ending with lion paws. These lightweight stools, sometimes quite elaborate in design, could fold to allow easy transport. These were used both indoors and outdoors. Greek classical chairs had curved backs and legs, and were often elegantly upholstered and covered with fleece to increase the comfort.

The most common form of Greek seat was the backless stool, which must have been found in every Greek home. The Parthenon frieze displays numerous examples of diphros, upon which the gods are seated. Both fixed and folding stools were popular from early times. Later these evolved into chairs for everyday use, since previously chairs were only used for ceremonial occasions.

Footstools are often depicted on vase paintings and funerary stelai, accompanying thrones or beds. The footstool, which was used for access to couches and other high furniture, was known as the ‘Theyns’ (Whitham 1997). Klismos and thronos could be accompanied by footstools. They might have been used also for hygienic reasons, so that the feet of the seated persons would not touch the ground (Andrianou 2009). There are three types of footstools, those with plain straight legs, with curved legs, and those shaped like boxes that would have sat directly on the ground.

2.3 Couch – Kline

Greeks think that comfort is the primary factor that should be taken into consideration in furniture construction and adapt during the Early Greek Era (750 - 475 BC) the chair for more comfortable support and develop furniture to suit their bodies in recline.

Couches, or klines, were used for reclining, eating in a reclined position, and sleeping. It is a quite tall piece of furniture. Men lounge together, each with his own couch, that were placed around the walls, eating from low tables that support their food (Benazir 2012).

Kline is derived from the Greek word “klino” (cause to lean), while kline is the furniture where one reclines (Greek singular word: κλίνη). It was constructed with the horizontal reclining area at table height, rather than low and at an incline. The headrest was often curved to support pillows and no foot rest was used (Benazir 2012). The kline was rectangular and supported on four legs, two of which could be longer than the other, providing support for an armrest or headboard. It had a headboard that could be used as a backrest while sitting. Precious metals like gold and bronze were lavished in these typical Greek furniture. Later, couches with back and sometimes with sides became the prototypes of the sofas (Yildiz 2011).

There were klines with animal legs, with “turned” legs, and with “rectangular” legs (Wikipedia 2013). They were made entirely of wood, but often had bronze legs cast in animal styles. Headboards were often decorated with bronze mounts and then inlaid with silver (Yildiz 2011). Klines were elegantly upholstered.

2.4 Table

Ancient Greeks used tables mainly for eating. Tables were low and mostly movable, credences and drinking tables being often three-legged and made of bronze. Most ancient tables, contrary to other furniture, were made with 3 rather than 4 legs to create a better sense of balance. These tables could be made of bronze or marble, but typically of wood. This type of table was the most common up until the 4th Century BC when square topped tables were replaced with round tops (Whitham 1997). Nevertheless, the most common wood type table was rectangular and stood on three legs. There were two legs at one end, the third being in the centre of the other end (Benazir 2012). Tables could have circular tops, and four legs or even one central leg instead of three. Images indicate that tables could range in style from the highly ornate to the relatively unadorned. So, the tables of the ancient Greece, as seen on the paintings are usually small with rectangular tops, supported on three legs, mostly simple and sometimes carved in animal forms (Yildiz 2011). In depictions of banquets, it appears as though each participant would have utilized a single table, rather than a collective use of a larger piece. On such occasions, tables would have been moved according to someone’s desire. Greek tables often appear in depictions alongside klines and could perhaps fit underneath.

2.5 Chest

Various types and sizes of chests were used for storage. These intricate and decorative chests were the only means for storing clothing because shelves were generally not used for that purpose and cupboards came into usage during the Hellenistic period (Whitham 1997). Jewelry, valuables and fruits were hidden alongside the clothing for protection. Chests were prized pieces of furniture, and would often be passed down from one generation to another (Benazir 2012).

Early Greek chests from the 6th and 7th centuries BC were made with elongated square posts and roof-like lids (Giannelli 1970). They were made of wood, bronze and ivory in varieties of designs, configurations, sizes. They usually had gabled lids and some painted

with flowers and figures or elaborately decorated with inlay and bronze or silver mounts. This tradition continued until the 5th Century BC when chests began to become more ornate and have flat lids to them. Greek chests had painted or inlaid panel sides, legs that ended on lion-paw feet and hinged lids (Yildiz 2011).

2.6 Chair (klismos)

The most characteristically Greek furniture form was the klismos chair. Prior the Greek klismos, chairs had hard stiff backs and arms, while klismos (Greek singular word: κλισμός), is a less extravagant piece of furniture, an elegant Greek chair with a curved backrest and legs. The klismos, as a graceful, symmetrical chair which became a prototype of designs that reappeared throughout the centuries of chair design that follow was essentially plain, with legs curving out from the seat and a back support consisting of a simple rectangular panel curved inward from sides to center. The chair acquired a broad horizontal back slat at the top that encircled the shoulders of the seated person, establishing a fixed form of the classic chair. They offered a new type of support for the back than the straight back, or slanted back chairs of earlier times (Whitham 1997). Due to its light weight is easily moveable.



Figure 1. 2 Scene from the Parthenon East frieze, which depict seated gods (447-433 BCE) (left), Greek klismos, a scene in Grave Stele of Hegeso, ca. 420 BCE.(right) (Wikipedia 2013)

The klismos was made with 17 delicately curved back and legs (Benazir 2012). These features allowed the sitter to be in a freer and more natural position; the backs of these chairs, referred to as Stiles, were designed to the curvature of the back for comfort and extended to the shoulders. The klismos, like most other furniture, was made of wood and not ornately decorated. In order to increase the comfort, cushions and animal skins were usually placed on the klismos. Characterized by simplicity and the elegant curved lines, especially the splayed legs, the klismos was one of the first forms to be reintroduced in the late Eighteenth, Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries. Its smooth and flowing shape inspired cultures that followed to revive the concept (Benazir 2012).

2.7 Benches

The use of benches on which to sit became a common part of Greek culture, used in schools and theatres and by philosophers and their audiences. The benches sometimes had perpendicular backrests, but this was not common. Greeks were also accustomed to sitting on the ground, mainly because the person who spoke would be in a higher chair, apart from the audience.

3 Modern Furniture Influenced by the ancient Greek Furniture Styles

Greek classical furniture like chairs, stools, couches and tables of this time have remained an inspiration to furniture designers of the late 18th and early 19th centuries, determining form and functional use patterns by Western cultures. More specifically, archaeological finds fired the imagination of the world, and the simple, elegant lines of ancient Greek's furniture inspired the cabinet makers of the day to move away from earlier, heavier and more ornate styles to imitate ancient Greek and Roman designs. This gave rise to the neoclassical style of furniture, which is much sought after by antique collectors of today. Early Greek furniture design has influenced the world of interior decorating and in today's market one can find a wide variety of Greek inspired furniture. To this day these ancient classical forms continue to provide a basis for modern western architecture and furniture design. For instance, the kline was the precursor for our contemporary couch (for reclining, eating or sleeping of all things) and the simple, elegant klismos, with its concave back, square seat and sabre legs, remains one of the world's most popular and most reproduced chairs. Greek motifs have been the subject of numerous revivals and continue to be in fashion.

There are several Greek furniture construction companies that create the New Greek furniture, based on the ancient Greek ones. They have managed to record and study the types and morphological features of ancient Greek furniture, approached the classical spirit and designed all the furniture known from the archaic and classical period. Thus, these new furniture are constructed according to standards, while they retain the grandeur of the ancient design forms, providing several new models of ancient Greek furniture in the international market.

4 Conclusions

Greek furniture styles influenced and continue to influence furniture styles into the modern centuries. The Greek furniture tended to be round, curved, of softer style, more ornamental, comfortable, supportive to the body, symmetrical and functional than the styles of Egyptian furniture. The Greeks spared much time to form these complicated designs of furniture and this made their furniture technology unique. The designs of the ancient furniture inspired the modern manufacturers, therefore ancient Greek forms reappear the last decades in modern artefacts and apparently, the effect that ancient Greek furniture has had on culture and aesthetics of contemporary life has been great.

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