

Part 1 / The past and the present of the Windsor Chair

A chair called the “Windsor Chair”

A long time ago, I learnt from a book “The new theory and basics of the modern chair*” that modern chairs evolved from four origins: the “Shaker Chair” , the “Windsor Chair” , the “Ming Chair” and the “Thornet Chair” . Interestingly, these four chair types have been redesigned repeatedly all over the world over time and space. It intrigued me personally to see how these original chair designs have evolved over this long period of time, and why they survived over hundreds of years without disappearing.

Among those four chair types, it is obvious that the Windsor Chair, produced by ordinary British people since the late seventeenth century, has many more parts in comparison with the other three. It also requires rather troublesome machining, for example, to manipulate the holes, all at different angles. It is indeed mysterious and is worth paying attention to how this kind of chair with many parts and manufacturing processes could survive to the present day, avoiding extinction.

In recent times, designers have basically created their designs based on “Modern Design” : it started from the Bauhaus in 1919 with characteristics of rationality and simplicity, and at the very least we could say that all of us have been unconsciously influenced by it. The Windsor Chair was born a long time before the Bauhaus period; however, we can see it is very much a rational design using available techniques dating back to the 1700’ s such as the fabrication of spindles using a foot-lathe, or a seat with a hand axe. Also, we could say that the Windsor Chair was the first to be mass-produced, introducing a new concept: division of labour. It led to a new way of thinking in modern design, with each component being produced by its own specialised craftsman: one for the foot-lathe work, one for making the seat, another for final assembly, etc.

However, despite improvements and the mechanisation of manufacturing techniques, and also a larger choice of materials, all allowing cheaper, sturdy chair production with less components, why then is this style of chair still being produced? Why didn’ t this chair become extinct after the debut of Thornet’ s bentwood chair in the 1800’ s, and after seeing the ideas of the Bauhaus dominate the world? On the contrary, the Windsor Chair has continued its own evolution since then, and we can note for example some variations in the forms of the chair back. I can’ t explain it except that this chair must have “something” which will never be dissimulated: something more than functionality or logic. I think that it must be, in fact, something rather fundamental, beyond the concept of modern design.

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