

A Different Way of Sitting: American Patent Folding Chairs of the 19th Century

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Volume 74-75, 2012

URI: https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/mcr74_75art04

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Publisher(s)

National Museums of Canada

ISSN

0316-1854 (print)

0000-0000 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Batley, T. (2012). A Different Way of Sitting: American Patent Folding Chairs of the 19th Century. *Material Culture Review*, 74-75, 57-69.

Article abstract

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TANIA BATLEY

A Different Way of Sitting: American Patent Folding Chairs of the 19th Century

Résumé

Au 19e siècle, le salon américain était le lieu central des signifiants sociaux et économiques de la classe moyenne en émergence. L'évolution de l'usage du salon au sein de l'intérieur domestique, l'industrialisation et son impact sur le rôle des femmes de la classe moyenne, couplés à la réforme du design, créèrent les conditions idéales pour que la chaise pliante industrielle soit acceptée dans les foyers américains. Ces chaises pliantes prenaient place au centre du foyer, et elles étaient prisées pour leur design novateur et fonctionnel. Des manufactures telles que la Folding Chair Company de New Haven, Connecticut, la E. W. Vaill Chair Company de Worcester, Massachusetts, et la Luburg Manufacturing Company de Philadelphie, en Pennsylvanie, créèrent une infinité de modèles de chaises pliantes et à bascule pour les consommateurs de la classe moyenne. Adaptables, mobiles et fonctionnelles, ces chaises permettaient au consommateur de prendre diverses postures. Au moment où le marché de ces chaises pliantes s'est affaibli, les fabricants ont innové pour créer de nouveaux produits pour le consommateur de la classe moyenne.

Abstract

The 19th-century American parlour was the focus for social and economic signifiers for the emerging middle class. The evolving use of the parlour within the domestic interior, industrialization, and its impact on the role of middle-class women, coupled with design reform, created the ideal conditions for the acceptance of the patent folding chair into the American home. Patent folding chairs were placed at the centre of the home, valued for their functional and innovative design. Companies such as the New Haven Folding Chair Company of New Haven, Connecticut, E. W. Vaill Chair Company of Worcester, Massachusetts, and the Luburg Manufacturing Company of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, created an endless diversity of patent folding and rocking chairs for the middle-class consumer. Adaptable, mobile, and functional, these chairs allowed a variety of postures to suit the consumer. As the market for patent folding chairs weakened, manufacturers found innovative ways to create new products for the middle class.

A typical 21st-century perception of a 19th-century interior is one filled with uncomfortable, stiff furniture, the room overstuffed with decorative objects and mementoes to the dead. These views are reinforced by photographs from the period and the early 20th century. Extant furniture from the 19th century appears to confirm our impression that comfort, mobility, and even innovation cannot be found in these 19th-century objects. Today many are lucky enough to take

comfort and a seemingly unlimited supply of new consumer products for granted. Countless printed and online sources tell the 21st-century consumer what to buy, where to buy it, and who among the social elite owns the same consumer good. The pursuit of the latest novelty, the latest consumer product, leads to long queues outside stores and record prices at auctions. Almost without thinking, when we enter a home or look

at an image of an interior, we place economic and social signifiers on that domestic interior.

This attribution of social and economic signifiers to the domestic environment developed most strongly in the 19th century. The furnishing of the domestic interior was as much a preoccupation for the 19th-century consumer as it is for today's consumers. Yet in many 19th-century American homes, a contradiction played out in the interior, between innovation and tradition, mobility and stability. This contradiction is represented most clearly by the patent folding chair. The patent folding chair was found in many American homes and public spaces in the 19th century, and the story of how it got there and its location within the American home challenges our views about the nature of the American domestic interior as immutable.

There are three important immobile elements to the acceptance of the patent folding chair in the American home during the 19th century. These are: the changes in how rooms were used within the home, especially as relates to the parlour; the rise of industrialized society and its impact on the role of women; and, finally, design reform. Each of these elements helped create an environment ready to accept the innovative patent folding chair into the heart of the American home. The craze for patent folding chairs started in the late 1860s, continued through the 1870s, when people embraced patent rockers, and was over by the late 1880s. Patent folding chairs were to become an economic and social signifier for a growing, wealthier middle class anxious to acquire the latest consumer goods for their homes. But it was the evolving role of the parlour that was to sow the seeds for innovation and mobility within the domestic environment.

The parlour has been described as, since "colonial and early national periods[,] well established as a 'best room,' used for tea ceremonies, clergymen's calls, weddings and funerals" (McMurray 1985: 262). Historically, this room in the American home had been imbued with the most important social and economic signifiers. Architecturally, in the town or city the parlour usually faced the street or roadside and in the city row house "the parlour occupied the front part of the house, leading to a hallway ending in an imposing front door" (262). The usage of the parlour changed in the 19th century "with



the growth of cities and urban culture" and "in an urban setting, the parlour acquired additional functions and meanings, so much so that it may be regarded as an index to middle class culture in the nineteenth century" (262).

But there was in the formation of the parlour an inherited contradiction between the refined nature of the parlour (home) and the new industrialized culture (outside the home). Bushman suggests the contradiction arose because "parlours were borrowed from another culture, from royal courts and aristocratic drawing rooms and did not grow organically from the everyday experiences of the ordinary people who inhabited them" (1992: 264). This contradiction meant that the middle classes "introduced into their houses a culture that was alien to their ordinary lives, a culture that valued polish and repose and repudiated work in contrast to the homely middle class regard for industry and efficiency" (264). The physical location of the parlour, at the front of the house, and the adoption or imitation of aristocratic practices of refinement in the domestic environment, created the ideal conditions for the parlour to become firmly established as the locus for social and economic signifiers for the American middle class.

Other changes also had an impact on the middle class in America—in particular, the role of women. American women's role within the domestic environment during the 19th century was changing rapidly because of industrialization. The developing industrial society was one where "masculinity was linked with production of goods, wage earning, enterprise, competition and conquest; femininity was marked by familial

Fig. 1
The uncomfortable seating, the knick-knacks, the mementoes to the dead. Our opinion of the 19th-century parlour is skewed by photos from the early 20th century. Postcard, unidentified family. America ca. 1901-1905. Author's own collection.



Fig. 2
Patent folding chairs were to become a popular addition to the American home during the 19th century. Their popularity was extolled in the domestic manuals and magazines aimed at women. Here the mother is seated in the folding chair. Unidentified family photograph. America ca.1880-1900. Author's own collection.

focus, reproduction, nurturance, volunteerism and domesticity” (Robertson 1997: 75). As men and work moved out of the home, the family home became the dominion of women, a refuge from the workplace and the pursuit of business. As men became less involved in the appearance of the house, there developed “an elaborate ideology of separate spheres” in which “men and women” were held as “inherently different, each with their proper area of influence” (Gordon 1996: 285). Under this ideology of separate spheres and the gendered areas of influence it created, “it was considered appropriate that women be in the home and be concerned with appearance for they were (according to the ideology) by nature domestic beings” (285).¹

The development of differentiated gender roles both inside and outside the home, influenced the relationship between women and the domestic interiors. Beverly Gordon argues that from the mid-19th century into the early 20th there formed such a strong “connection between women and their houses in western middle class culture that it helped shape the perception of both” (282). The connection between the two became so strong that “a simile—women and interiors were like one another—was transformed into a synonym” (282).² This linking through gender roles of women with the interior of the home helped foster an environment in which women (and the home) became representatives of male success within capitalist society. The domestic environment was transformed increasingly into a signifier for economic success and served also as a mode of gender control for the middle class.

Rapid industrialization and urbanization of society in the 19th century also fostered social change that measured success in new ways. One new method of measuring success can be seen in the belief in “proper appearance,” to the extent that it “became ever-more important as the outward sign of achievement” (Gordon 1996: 283). This belief extended down the social ladder so that “individuals on nearly every step of the social ladder had to be vigilantly concerned with and conscious of their presentation of self” (283). The importance of the presentation of self became even more meaningful as America’s population expanded in size and increasingly moved into the cities.³ Printed material in particular was to codify the social and economic signifiers for the middle class. These signifiers can be seen most clearly in the printed material targeted at the female consumer.

The close identification of women with the domestic interior was reinforced and can be seen in the many domestic manuals, magazines, and etiquette manuals aimed at women from mid-century onwards. Here women were anointed with the responsibility of creating within the home the appropriate, tasteful, public, and private face of the family. Henry T. Williams and Mrs. C. Jones highlighted the importance of taste in their 1878 guide *Beautiful Homes: or Hints on House Furnishings*:

Household taste is but a synonym for household culture and she is a wise woman who surrounds those she loves with objects of beauty; for she may safely rely on the influences (so intangible) which the beautiful (both in nature and art) ever exerts in a moral, intellectual, spiritual and social point of view. (Williams and Jones 1878: 4)

Beyond this creation of the cult of domesticity, the allocation of gender roles continued further into the physical layout of the American home.

Within the home, rooms were designated as representative of specific male or female spheres of influence. The dining room, library, and study were considered the male areas of influence, and the bedroom, kitchen, and parlour were considered the female areas of influence. If the family were wealthy enough, they could afford to maintain their public face with their parlour and their private face with their family living or sitting room. However, for many middle-class

families in urban settings, having a parlour and a separate living or sitting room would not have been an option. Smaller dwellings would require a degree of flexibility and even mobility in the objects chosen for the domestic interior. The lack of physical space meant that rooms would have to have multiple uses and purposes. For this urban middle class, the room within the home that was used as the family living room would have to double as a parlour for visitors and social functions. Furniture within these rooms would also need to be flexible in terms of being multi-purpose and moveable. At the same time, the furnishings of these smaller dwellings had to reflect the societal agreed norms of “proper appearance” as discussed earlier. But there was still one final element to the acceptance of the patent folding chair into the American home—design reform.

Increasing consumerism and numerous new consumer goods, often of poor quality, produced for the new middle-class consumers, raised concerns that were reflected in the design reformers’ manifestoes from the mid-century onwards. Originating in England, the ideas of design reform crossed the Atlantic to America where the large urban centres were increasingly filled with new immigrants and a middle class eager to present through their homes the perceived proper appearance and correct taste. Design reform did not advocate for patent products since it was largely concerned with raising the value of design as presented by the best craftsmen in the field. However, design reform movements did place design ideas before the public, advocate for a change to a more informal style of living, stress the specialization of rooms within the home, and highlight functionality of design over decorative detail.

Authors such as Charles Locke Eastlake became hugely influential in advocating the principles of design reform to the public. Charles Locke Eastlake’s *Hints on Household Taste in Furniture, Upholstery and Other Details* was first published in England and republished in America from 1872 in several editions. Eastlake described the importance of design reform to furniture: “to fulfil the first and most essential principles of good design, every article of furniture, should, at the first glance, proclaim its real purpose” (1986 [1878]: 76). This was essential because “every article of manufacture

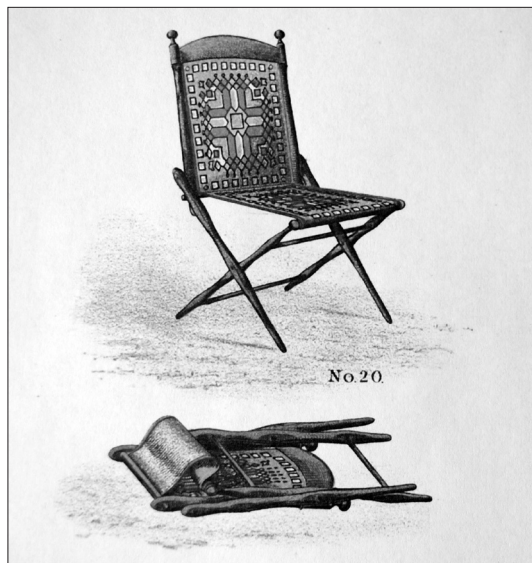


Fig. 3
New Haven Folding Chair Company style No. 20. Note how the mobility of the chair is stressed with the depiction of the chair folded. 1873 New Haven Folding Chair Company Illustrated Catalogue of Folding Chairs and Reversible Body Carriages. University of Michigan.

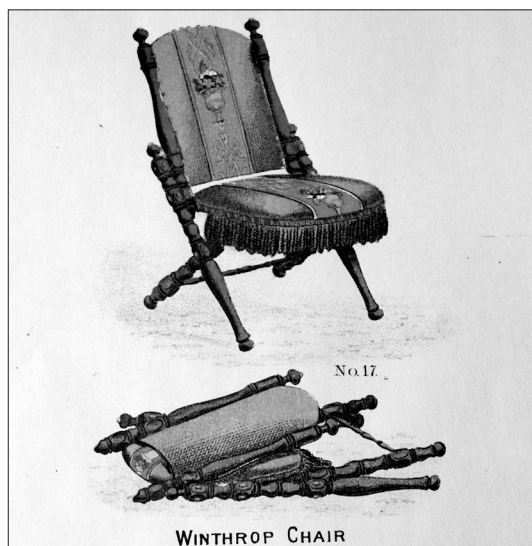


Fig. 4
New Haven Folding Chair Company style No. 17. More luxurious versions of folding chairs were developed for the American home, making these acceptable for the parlours. 1873 New Haven Folding Chair Company Illustrated Catalogue of Folding Chairs and Reversible Body Carriages. University of Michigan.

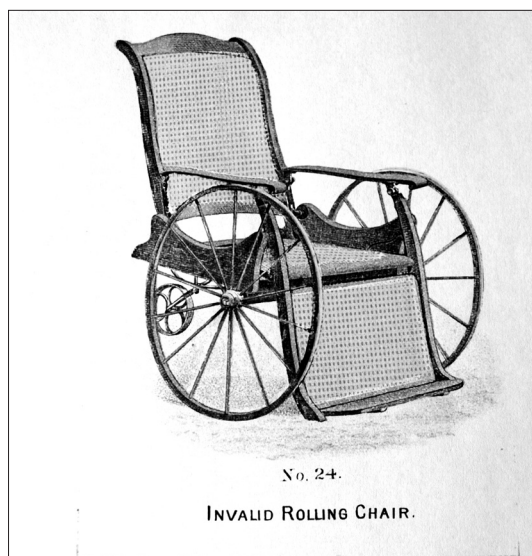


Fig. 5
New Haven Folding chair company had only one patent for an “invalid rolling chair” in 1878. This patent was to be a financially successful business for a patent folding chair manufacturer. 1873 New Haven Folding Chair Company Illustrated Catalogue of Folding Chairs and Reversible Body Carriages. University of Michigan.

which is capable of decorative treatment should indicate, by its general design, the purpose to which it will be applied and should never be allowed to convey a false notion of that purpose” (82). Functional furniture design over decorative detail was to impact directly the evolving nature of furniture for the domestic interior. As design reform evolved, it advocated for new ways of living in the home.

Design reform authors that followed Eastlake reflected a move to a more informal style of living in the home. Consumers were encouraged by authors such as Clarence Cook in *The House Beautiful: Essays on Beds and Tables, Stools and Candlestick* (1881) to move away from the “ceremonial deserts” that a parlour represented and toward using a living room as “an important agent in the education of life” (Cook 1995 [1881]: 45). Cook advocated that the living room “ought to represent the culture of the family, what is their taste, what feeling they have for art,” and that within that room the furniture “sh[ould] be the best designed and best made that we can afford” (45). Prescriptive and moral in tone, Cook’s book was typical of the move to a more informal style of presentation of the home and the merging of the public and private face of the family. This merging of public and private within the domestic interior would be of particular significance to those members of the middle class living in the American cities and country, unable to afford separate rooms for public interactions.⁴ As the parlour changed into a sitting/living room in many middle-class homes, the design reformers unintentionally highlighted again the inherited contradiction of parlour culture in the 19th century.

Printed material such as these reform-minded books, along with the advice and domestic management manuals, did not change the contradiction between an imported parlour culture and the realities of capitalist society. Rather than “repudiat[ing] gentility altogether,” they “showed how to achieve it at a moderate cost without sacrificing comfort.” Furthermore, “they aimed toward a more modest and fitting gentility, purged of fashion and pretence and so made suitable for ordinary people” (Bushman 1992: 270). This aim can be seen in the movement to the creation of a living room: “parlour reformers wished to shift the parlour from a

palace of entertainment toward a room for living one’s leisure moments” (270). Parlour culture has been described as “one of the great domestic movements of the nineteenth century” (273). The unintended effect of this movement was that “in making parlours for themselves, great masses of people laid claim to cultural power never accessible before” and that “in making parlours in their houses, the people implicitly claimed the right to live like rulers” (273). Design reform had elevated the domestic interior and its furnishings to become the social and economic signifier for the middle class. Parlours were for leisure, cultural, and public interactions what the aristocratic “salons” had been in previous centuries. Having a parlour, or as close to one as economic resources would allow, allowed the middle class to separate more decisively the domestic environment from the work environment. Such a separation had only been possible in previous centuries for the economic and social elite. Effectively, the industrialized middle class were creating a viable alternative to traditional sources of power within society.

A growing industrialized and urbanized society, a wealthy middle class, the cult of domesticity, the evolving nature of the parlour and design reform, created the ideal conditions for the patent folding chair to become a popular addition to the American home from the late 1860s onwards. Objects for the home were now laden with social and economic signifiers. Developments such as increasing commercialization, better distribution chains, marketing, and consumer credit made these social and economic signifiers available to the American public in increasing numbers. In this environment, patent folding furniture met the need for an innovative, functional product, at a price that was within economic reach of the new consumers.⁵

Simple patent folding chairs had been in production in the United States since the early 1860s. The turmoil of the American Civil War from 1861 to 1865 provided a boon to the production of patent folding chairs. Armies on the move needed compact, easily transported furniture and some of these products would have returned home with the troops.⁶ After the American Civil War a new market of the middle-class consumer opened up for the patent folding chair companies. Typical of the manufacturers of

patent folding chairs were the aforementioned New Haven Folding Chair Company, the E.W. Vaill Company, and the Luburg Manufacturing Company.

New Haven Folding Chair started in 1862 and in 1864 added Company to its name (McKinney 1882: 106). While it is unclear what product the company was making in those early years, it is likely that they were already producing a simple form of folding stool or chair. The New Haven Folding Chair Company was assigned its first patent, No. 52,488 in February 1866 for a “folding chair.” The patent was for “improvements in the manufactures of that class of folding chairs which are composed of cross-legs” and related to “obtain[ing] a larger and more convenient seat” and making the chair more stable and comfortable (Dann 1866). This simple folding chair must have been popular because in 1867 the company was assigned another patent, No. 70,323, for an “improved folding chair,” again by Isaac N. Dann (Dann 1867). Interestingly, this patent was for a chair with a seat made in a variety of materials, such as wood, iron, or rattan. The patent related to the mechanism that allowed the rigid seat to fold over the legs to make a compact area for storage. The use of a new material in a simple folding chair indicates how new materials were part of the innovations the patent process stimulated.⁷ Diversification, though, was the basis for the future success of the company.

From the 1870s the New Haven Folding Chair Company diversified into new patent products for the consumer. A patent was assigned in 1872, No. 127,404, for an “improvement in children’s carriages,” which allowed the carriage to turn more easily and reverse without disturbing the child (Atwater 1872). Regular manufacture of children’s carriages was overtaken, though, by a move into the production of wheelchairs or “rolling chairs,” as they were called in the 19th century. The business only had one patent for a development in this area and the 1878 patent, No. 205,059, was related to “that class of perambulators which are in chair form and constructed so that the chair may be adjusted to reclining positions for the convenience or comfort of the occupant” (Dann and Kelsey 1878). The patent invention used springs under the seat and a pivot and lever mechanism attached to the side of the chair. The lever mechanism was

operated with a simple movement, to elevate or lower the footrest and so raise or lower the chair back. This patent feature of reclining the back and raising the footrest appeared frequently in advertisements for the rolling chairs and was obviously considered a selling point. Between its first patent in 1866 and the last in 1881, the New Haven Folding Chair company acquired sixteen patents. Of these, fourteen were for folding chairs, all related to technical improvements to the folding mechanism. However, it was this diversification into the area of wheelchairs that was to bring growing commercial success. With the sole wheelchair patent product the company had reached a new market: that of the invalid cared for in the home.

Caregiving has been described as having “dominated women’s lives throughout the 19th century” and began “as early as girlhood, extending into middle and old age” (Abel 2000: 37). As Emily Abel discusses, there were “few formal facilities to relieve women of these responsibilities,” and of the 120 hospitals in existence in America in 1873, “most were custodial institutions serving the deserving poor” (40). These female caregivers were also “given little help from health care professionals” because doctors were expensive and often not easily accessible in areas outside the larger cities (Abel 2000: 40). Caregiving was carried out in the home and encompassed caring for children, husbands, the elderly, or relatives. Despite women’s roles as caregivers, medical supply advertising was not tailored to the female caregiver.

The advertising that the New Haven Folding Company produced for its rolling chairs also did not target women as the end purchaser. The company directed its advertising at the medical community. Typical is an advertisement in the 1886 *Medical and Surgical Directory of the United States* which described the company as the “manufacturers of invalid reclining chairs on wheels” in which the “occupant can lie down or sit erect in it” (New Heaven Folding Chair Company 1886). The company’s marketing to the medical community reflected the increasing status of the medical profession toward the end of the 19th century. Yet, despite the advertisements aimed at the medical community, it cannot be in doubt that the majority of the purchase decisions for the wheelchair would have been made by women, given their role as the main caregiver.

Fig. 6 (Left)

E.W. Vaill specialized in “carpet designs” with his patent folding chairs and patent rockers. Note the imagery of the domestic hearth on the upholstery. E. W. Vaill chair ca.1880s. P.J. Carlino. Private Collection.



Fig. 7 (Right)

These styles of chairs were popular for combining innovation through the patent process while appearing traditional through the use of carpet upholstery. E. W. Vaill chair ca.1880s. P.J. Carlino. Private Collection.



The aesthetic and functional style of the chair, its combination of mobility and stability, would have made it acceptable in the American home. Both inside and outside the domestic environment, the patent wheelchair would have made the user visible and mobile. Competitors to the New Haven Folding Chair Company created different patent products for the middle-class consumer.

The E. W. Vaill Patent Folding Chair Company also used the American patent process. The company took out thirty-five patents, largely concerned with improving the folding mechanism of its chairs. Unlike its competitor, this company created almost exclusively patent folding chairs and stools. Commercial success came to the E. W. Vaill Company through its large variety of upholstery designs for patent folding chairs. One style of upholstery design that the company specialized in was called, in its catalogue, “carpet design.” This carpet design upholstery was a densely woven pictorial textile, which closely resembled carpet in look and feel. This upholstery textile was hardwearing, and the pictorial designs offered varied from animals to famous landmarks. These carpet design patent folding chairs were such a large

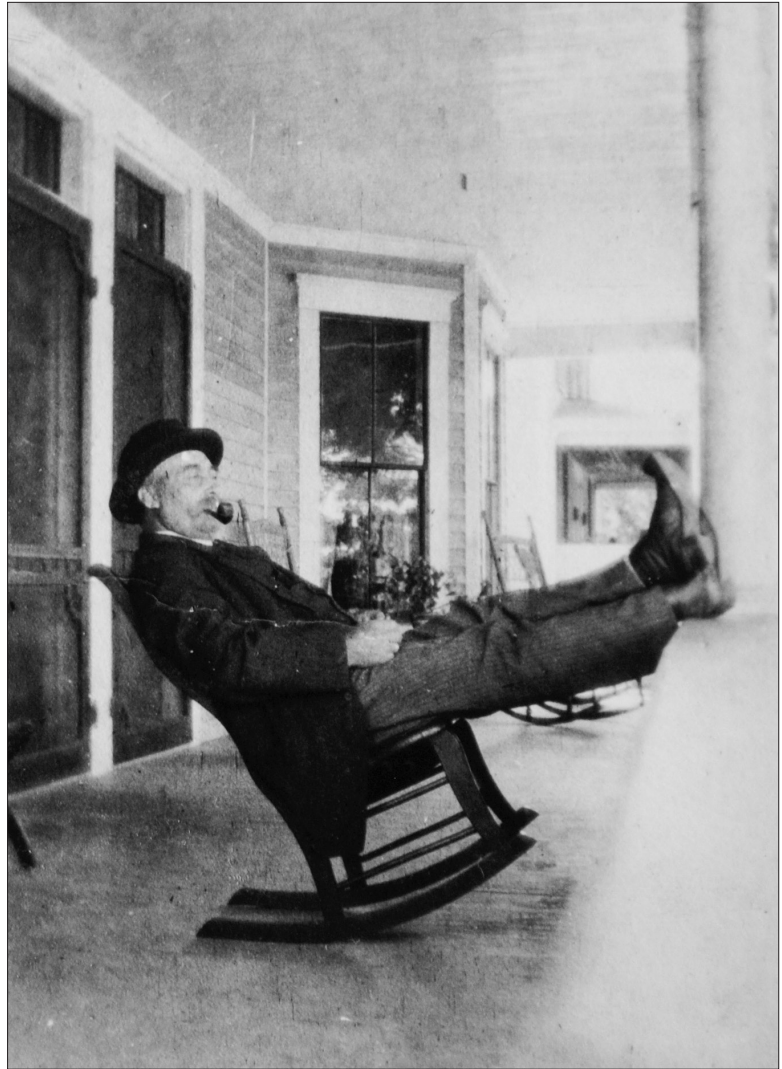
part of the business that by 1887 the company catalogue boldly stated: “in carpet designs I defy competition” (Vaill 1887: 1). This style of folding chair can be interpreted as a visual short-hand in the domestic interior for a more expensive chair. The carpet design upholstery made the patent folding chair look more expensive and luxuriously upholstered. At the same time, the pictorial design of the carpet upholstery represented the cultural sophistication of the consumer. Under this interpretation, a carpet design of a famous landmark on the chair indicated travel and worldliness, whereas a carpet design of animals or interiors indicated domestic tranquility.

The location in the domestic interior for these styles of patent folding chairs was clearly stated by the E. W. Vaill Company. An advert from 1881 stated that these chairs were “adapted for the Parlor, Drawing-Room, Library, Veranda, Church, Concert Hall, Lecture Room, Seaside and ShipBoard” (Vaill 1881: 197). Significantly, a patent folding chair was being presented as acceptable for both inside and outside the American home. The patent folding chair had become an object that merged qualities of function and design, tradition and modernity, and ultimately

inside and outside. These advertisements suggest an increasing flexibility in the American domestic interior, blurring the boundaries of inside and outside and at the same time extending the importance of maintaining public and private face. Printed sources, aside from manufacturers' catalogues, also advocated for these new patent products.

The success of patent folding chairs as a new innovative product for the home was echoed in the domestic manuals aimed at women. Patent folding furniture was included in the design schemes for rooms and emphatically placed in the parlour. Discussing the arrangement of furniture in the parlour, *Beautiful Homes: or Hints on House Furnishings* suggested that "the regular suite of four or five chairs occupy the corners and spaces between furniture around the room" and then that one should "arrange a few of the lighter more fanciful varieties about the tables, around the stove or grate and if space permits, in the center of the room" (Williams and Jones 1878: 223). Suggestions as to the style of chair suitable for such a purpose were described in the following way: "for these occasional chairs, as they are now called, no form is more pleasing and appropriate than the many varieties of the old 'camp stool' of which we have such an infinite number of patterns and styles" (223). Furthermore, these were recommended to the reader because they were "light and graceful and admirably adapted to the use here named, as they can so easily be folded and transported from place to place" (223). The women of the house could add their own personal touch to these chairs because "the prettiest cover for the backs and seats of these chairs, is embroidered or braided cloth or canvas and here is opened a wide field for the genius and taste of the ladies of the family" (223). The visual impact of these innovative patent products was not the only consideration offered by these domestic manuals.

Domestic manuals and interior books, by recommending patent folding chairs for the parlour, did not advocate that these chairs be permanent fixtures in the room, but that their versatility lay in their ability to be moved easily. Moreover, many of these patent chairs should be simple in design and not as heavily upholstered as other pieces of furniture in the room. This advice suggests that the innovative, functional,



and mobile quality of the patent folding chairs was the main incentive for its purchase. This placement of patent folding chairs in the parlour belies the modern interpretation of the 19th-century American parlour being filled solely with heavy, stiff, unwieldy furniture. One can speculate that these light, moveable pieces of furniture were valued as useful, innovative products that allowed the room to be used for uses beyond its physical limitations. Under these conditions, the domestic manuals were ranking patent furniture and patent folding chairs in particular as among the new social and economic signifiers of the time, and targeting women as the main consumer of the product.

The placement of the patent folding chair in the 19th-century American parlour, as clearly indicated by advertising, raises questions about

Fig. 8
Tilting was considered a male posture, even if done in a rocking chair. Photograph. Unidentified man. America ca. 1880. Author's own collection.

our assumptions of how Americans used their furniture, particularly in terms of posture. Kenneth Ames has written eloquently about the relationship between Americans and their furniture or between “posture and power,” as he describes the interaction. For Ames, seating was designed to “allow or suppress a variety of postures” (Ames 1992: 189). He contrasts the formality of posture required with the parlour suite, common from the 1850s onward, and the postures of tilting and rocking facilitated by other forms of seating found both inside and outside the home. He saw the seating in the American parlour as equivalent to “on-stage behavior” (195). Posture for Ames was also gendered, both inside and outside the home.

Ames identifies the posture of tilting as male and the posture of rocking as “domesticated, civilized, feminized” (216). He suggests that tilting was a posture in which men indulged outside the home, such as the tavern, while rocking was associated with the nursing of children and as a comfort to the elderly (216). He relates the popularity of the rocking chair in the American home to the popularity of patent platform rockers as a way to assert differences in male and female postures inside and outside the home.

This interpretation of the importance of posture in the home is reflected in the popularity of the patent rocker. By 1878, the patent platform rocker was considered an essential part of the parlour, and women were exhorted “to purchase one of the patent rocking-chairs for her sitting-room at least, for she will find it money well spent” (William and Jones 1878: 226). The identification of women with their furniture continued as contemporary commentators wrote: “it is an unhappy house, indeed, where the housewife is without her natural solace the rocking chair” (Modern Chairs 1893: 30). Sentiments such as these clearly indicate the connection between gender in the furnishing of the interior and the gender of posture.

Not all commentators on furniture design found a rocking chair a cause to celebrate. Some thought the rocking chair “objectionable as it curse[d] [their] places of summer resort, seaside and mountain,” and that it was in fact “the contrivance of an idiot or devil” (A Lay Sermon On Chairs 1889: 142). In the commentary, the anonymous author laments the poverty of chair

design apparent in the design of the American rocking chair. This lack of design is contrasted with the upholstered chairs usually found in the home. A closer reading of the commentary piece does suggest that the author is really objecting to the cheapness and plainness of the rocking chair and the informality that this promotes. Love or hate the rocking chair, the chair represents the different types of posture that could be found inside and outside the home. One posture, though, does appear to defy gender stereotypes: the posture of reclining.

Neither Ames nor other authors mention the posture of reclining in their discussions of how Americans interacted with their domestic furniture. Many patent chairs, often with folding mechanisms, also included a reclining function and were also marketed as an essential item for the American parlour. A typical example would be that of the patent reclining chair produced by Luburg Manufacturing Company. The “Luburg chair” was described as having more than fifty changes of position and as “combining a parlor, library, smoking, reclining or invalid chair, lounge bed or couch” (Luburg Manufacturing Company 1887: 190). It was also advertised as “a handsome wedding, birthday or holiday present” (109). This advertisement suggests that a chair that reclined was considered acceptable for the most public arena of the American home. Perhaps here, this form of reclining chair had become the alternative to the “recamier” found in the homes of the wealthy. Reclining chairs such as these do not appear to have been aimed solely at male consumers, though for appearances’ sake women would not have reclined in these chairs in public in the parlour. These chairs were marketed for their functionality and mobility over their gender specific sphere of influence. There is, though, a clear distinction to be made here between those reclining chairs whose main concern was comfort and those that served a medical purpose.⁸ Innovation and posture aside, the domestic market for patent folding chairs was evolving.

By the end of the 19th century, the market had changed dramatically. The direction that the three previously discussed patent chair companies took indicated that the fashion had come to an end. By 1889, the E. W. Vaill Patent Folding Chair Company was insolvent and was placed

into liquidation in 1891. The *Worcester Daily Spy*, a local Worcester, Massachusetts newspaper, described the demise of the business: “Mr. Vaill was at one time a large manufacturer of folding chairs in this city. He held valuable patents and did a profitable business. He continued the business after the demand folding chairs had ceased and in consequence failed” (A Business failure 1891: 8). The two other patent folding chair companies had responded differently to the changing market.

The Luburg Manufacturing Company and the New Haven Folding Chair Company both responded to the changes in lifestyle that heralded the end of the 19th century and beginning of the 20th. The American middle-class consumer of the early 20th century now had new interests in healthy outdoor activities, and these were accompanied by a change in the role of women outside the home. Single American women were entering the workforce in increasing numbers and a single woman could leave the home for a career instead of just for marriage.⁹ Increasing interest in leisure time meant that many more middle-class families were taking holidays, at home and abroad. Outdoor pursuits for men and women—tennis, croquet, and golf—were seen as beneficial in terms of health. Interest was growing in health and exercise, and the bicycle became a new craze. These patent furniture manufacturers responded to the changing market in innovative and unexpected ways.

The Luburg Manufacturing Company responded to changes in middle-class interest from inside to outside the home by moving into bicycle manufacturing, as well as continuing to produce patent furniture. Their advertisement for bicycles stated: “We are the people. At least that’s what they all tell us. Who would not get a ‘big head’ with such a line of Safeties as we have to offer?” (Luburg Manufacturing Company 1892: 17). The New Haven Folding Chair Company also moved into bicycle manufacture. In June 1895, the company was reported to “have taken steps to commence the manufacture of bicycles in addition to its other business” and was to “begin making bicycles for next season’s trade,” and that “between 4,000 and 5,000 machines of the latest pattern w[ould] be completed and w[ould] be put on the market at that time” (New Bicycle Company 1895: 8). By 1897, the company was

one of the largest exhibitors at the New York cycle show at Madison Square Garden with five different styles of wheel and a tandem bicycle (New Haven Exhibit 1897: 1).¹⁰ The demand for rocking chairs, though, showed no signs of abating.

While by the end of the 19th century the demand for patent folding chairs had come to an end, the rocking chair was still popular and resonated as a signifier of domesticity into the early 20th century. The rocking chair was eulogized in popular music. A popular song from 1905 was “Just a Little Rocking Chair and You.” The song includes a line in the chorus that states: “I just want two things in all this wide, wide world, just a little rocking chair and you” (Fitzgibbon, Drislane, and Morse 1905).¹¹ This popular song was recorded in 1905 by a male vocalist and in 1906 by a female vocalist. The lyrics of the song were also printed on postcards, ready to send to loved ones.

Only a few years later, the advent of modernism changed the rocking chair’s status from one of the domestic idyll to one of being old-fashioned and suitable only for the elderly. Modernism also created changes in furniture production. The modern machine age of the 20th century was creating furniture that reflected the new materials and technology of the age. Anonymous design writers in the 1920s and 1930s describe this change as “a revolution [that] had taken place”; they go on to say, “the cabinet makers’ workshops have been closed and in other parts of the town we have created the steel furniture industry. Accuracy, efficiency, purity of shapes and lines have arisen” (The Problem of Furniture 1990: 157). Under these conditions it is perhaps hardly surprising that when the modernist age architects and designers looked back to the 19th-century American parlour, they saw only formal furniture, formal parlour culture, and rigidity and immobility.

While not arguing that all American interiors were the quaint, delightfully furnished rooms that the design reformers or domestic manuals advocated so strongly for, I argue that the patent folding chair created social and economic signifiers for the middle class. In the 19th century, the American parlour was the locus for the presentation of success to the world outside the home. Women were expected to create an ideal-

Fig. 9
The arrival of modernism in the 1920s and 1930s in America meant that the rocking chair moved from a signifier of domestic tranquility to one of old age. Photograph. Unidentified family. America ca. 1920-1929. Author's own collection.



ized space, on limited economic resources and often in limited physical spaces. The interior had to reflect the correct and proper appearance of domestic refinement as represented by the objects in the interior. Notions of comfort, innovation, and tradition were all part of important ideals for the domestic interior, and people sought after these ideals, all while still maintaining the home and caring for any sick or elderly members of the family. The patent folding chair in this context would be seen as an acceptable article of furniture for the parlour or renamed living/sitting room. Compact, moveable, and decorated in acceptable upholstery designs, such a chair could achieve the seemingly irreconcilable, the blending of mobility and stability, innovation and tradition.

The design tension between innovation and tradition is clearly seen in the adoption of patent folding furniture into the American home. These patent folding chairs were innovative in terms of posture and mobility and at the same time represented tradition in their upholstery designs and decorative details. In the 20th century, under the new design philosophy of modernism, the perceived rigidity of the 19th-century interior was rejected. But these preconceptions ignored patent folding furniture and the innovations in posture that it had created: the reclining feature,

compactness, mobility, the use of new materials, and functionality of design, all factors that modernist designers were to claim as their own.

Ironically, the design dichotomy of innovation versus tradition continued into the 20th century. The new modern style, like some patent furniture, was not accepted wholeheartedly into the American home, though it could be seen in the buildings of cities such as Chicago and New York. The American homeowner largely still favoured the revival styles and the social elite still pursued the more formal French style as their social and economic signifier. New social and economic signifiers were created with the advent of modernism and the American home again became the locus for evaluation. While women were increasingly working outside the home, the domestic environment was still seen as the main sphere for female intervention and influence, and such influence is reflected in the growth of the female interior designer during the 20th century. When modernism looked back at the 19th-century domestic interior, how easy it was to ignore the innovative, mobile, functional furniture that could be found in the American parlour, the patent folding chair, sitting with pride of place in the most important room in the American home.

Notes

1. For a discussion on the role of the American parlour and innovations that allowed for increased comfort see Grier (1988).
2. Nineteenth-century commentators also commented on the identification of female fashion with popular furniture design, drawing attention to such things as “the curious likeness between the abuses of decoration in female attire and the accepted fictions of architecture and furniture” and “the practice to imitate, by way of ornament, the appearance of various constructed portions” (Percy 1878).
3. The United States Department of Commerce, United States, Census Bureau details the increase in population as recorded in the census as follows:
1800: 5, 308,483;
1840: 17, 063, 353;
1880: 59, 189, 209. (U.S. Department of Commerce)
4. The changes in the use of the parlour can be seen clearly from the 1870s with the rise in the publication of books about activities such as drama and games to be carried out in the room. See Monroe (1875).
5. Americans dominated the production of patent furniture from mid-century onwards. By 1873 more than six hundred kinds of chairs were listed in United States patent indexes. See Hanks (1981).
6. For a discussion on the development of the folding chair, see Roth (1982).
7. Cast iron was a new product in furniture production, emerging mid-century. Seen as a product of the rapidly expanding industrial age, cast iron was soon in use as a material for inside and outside the home. Most cast iron furniture was designed for the garden, in imitation of parlour styles.
8. The importance of reclining for medical health became increasingly important with the creation of sanatorium to house the tuberculosis patients. The impact of these developments has been traced to the designs for more ergonomic chairs prevalent in the modern era. See Campbell (1999).
9. Both the typewriter and the telephone could be described as the patent products that most directly impacted the changing role of women outside the home.
10. Despite this movement into the bicycle market, the New Haven Folding Chair Company was not able to survive. Newspaper reports suggest that the move into bicycle manufacturing was an expensive investment for the company, which was facing stiff competition from chair manufacturers in the American Midwest. The company had been losing money for some time and the capital required for the production of bicycles had increased the debt, eventually pushing the company into receivership. See New Haven Chair Co. Fails (1897). The Luburg Manufacturing Company of Philadelphia appears to have survived well into the early 20th century, specializing in bicycles. More research is needed into this company and its products.
11. A 1905-1906 recording of the song can be found online at the website of the Library of Congress at <http://www.loc.gov/jukebox/recordings/detail/id/5875> (accessed March 19, 2012).

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