The Development of the English Chair Splat

The Influence of Chinese Chair Design on English Rattan Chairs, 1660-1700

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1. Background
In the second half of the 17th century, the London chair industry saw a surge in demand for medium-to-low cost furniture, in part as a result of the great fire of London in 1666 that destroyed many buildings and possessions contained within. Beech and walnut chairs with woven seats and back sections, employing rattan imported from south-east Asia, became very popular from this time in England and other European countries, notably France and the Netherlands. In response to a lack of in-depth analysis of this historical design development, two related studies preceding this current study have focussed on 1) the link between Ming-style woven seats and English rattan seated chairs and armchairs from around 1660 and 2) the establishment of rattan weaving in Chinese furniture making before and during the Ming dynasty.

2. Research Objectives
This study will address the initial introduction and development of the chair splat in English furniture in the second half of the 17th century. A splat is herein defined as an uninterrupted central plane of wood running from the rear of the seat to the chair top-rail and is independent from the back uprights (in most cases twist-turned or banister columns). A woven splat is similarly an uninterrupted central panel of woven material set within a frame that is independent from the back uprights. Specifically, this study looks at the possible roots of European chair splats and woven splats, which were aspects of chair design that made an immediate and sudden appearance alongside the introduction of weaved rattan seats. Popular chair forms evident in England during the 17th century typically lack any form of central splat, preferring instead a back rest that is tenoned directly to the back uprights.

The probable inspiration for European rattan chair seats, Ming-style chairs and armchairs, are further examined with the aim of establishing a chronological framework that demonstrates more formally the likely manner of introduction of the Chinese curved splat into European chair design. While it is generally accepted that European chair splats were informed by their Chinese counterparts, little research has been conducted beyond this assertion.

3. Research Methods
For the analysis of the structural development of the splat and woven splat of early English rattan seated chairs, a field survey of 17th century English rattan seated chairs and armchairs was made from four collections in the UK: The Victoria and Albert Museum, The Lady Lever Gallery, The Geffrye Museum and Temple Newsam House. Published sources concerning Chinese painting and literature dating up to and during the Ming dynasty was used to demonstrate chair splat development before it informed Euro- pean chair design in the 17th century.

4. Discussion and Analysis
4.1 Early English woven splat.
Prior to the uptake of rattan seated chairs with woven rattan backs in English furniture design, no consistent use of a splat or woven splat appears to have been in evidence in this country. Initial use of rattan as a woven splat appears to have seen it stretched right across the entire central panel, between two slats of wood that sat between twist-turned columns. Later developments that seem to have become popular from around the 1680’s or 90’s include a double woven splat, often appearing on armchairs, and the slim woven splat that appeared on tall back chairs and armchairs, as demonstrated in Figure 1.

Fig. 1 Two adaptations of woven splat dating from the latter decades of the 17th century. A: Double woven splat between spiral columns and B: slim single woven splat between turned columns
Traditional chair designs popular in England during the middle of the 17th century usually employed a back rest that stretched between both back uprights with no interruption. Five traditional English chair types made of oak that were probably still in popular use during the middle of the 17th century are shown in Figure 2 [1]. These include: A) Upholders’ turkeywork backstool; B) Joined leather backstool; C) Joined caqueteuse armchair; D) Joined armchair; E) “Turned-all-over” armchair.

The introduction of the splat and woven splat therefore represents a significant and dramatic shift in chair form that indicates an external foreign influence.

4.2 The development of Chinese splats and woven splats

Pictorial evidence of woven splats (the exact material used is obviously unknown) dates from the 12th century onwards. While the weaving style is different from the hujiaoyan style introduced into Europe there is sufficient evidence to suggest that the use of strips of natural grasses or palms, such as bamboo or rattan, had a culture of continued use from at least the 12th century onwards. This culture was established in China by the Ming dynasty, with woven material found attached to the back rests of a variety of chair types, although perhaps most notably on the “drunken lord’s chair” with reclining back rest [2]. The use of a woven splat, as opposed to seat back, may have fallen out of use in the Ming dynasty. Pictorial sources indicate, however, that the use of the woven splat prior to the Ming dynasty was probably not employed on hard wood chairs, as evidenced by the chair form commonly found in pictorial examples. Thus there may be a case to argue that lower quality chairs with woven splats were in existence in Ming dynasty China, but this lower associated value, coupled with a softer type of wood, has led to greater rate of deterioration in comparison with expensively crafted hard wood armchairs.

The representation of the central splat and its evolution into the curved variations that are commonly associated with Ming-style Chinese chairs and armchairs can be convincingly traced through pictorial and literary sources, predominantly in the form of wood-block prints such as that shown in Figure 3. While other design forms and motifs associated with Chinese furniture began to inform some aspects of European chair design from the last decades of the 17th century - such as seat height for example - the curved C-splat only began to appear consistently in England during the early decades of the 18th century, on chair designs that are commonly referred to as Queen Anne.

5. Conclusions

(1) Woven rattan splats coincide with the introduction of rattan into English chair seat construction. One possible source of inspiration for this adoption was Chinese woven splats of an earlier period.

(2) The hard, curved splat that is normally associated with Ming and Qing chair design was adopted into English and European chairs in the early stages of the 18th century. This is just one of a group of chair forms that made the transition from East to West as a result of regular European trade in East and South East Asia.

(3) The reason woven splats were initially adopted in preference to the popular curved splat was most likely due to the difficulty and expense involved in reproducing the refined curvature of this chair form; evidenced by the delay in the form’s adoption and the different construction techniques used in the European version.

Notes and References

1) Image source: Chinnery V., Oak Furniture The British Tradition. Antique Collectors’ Club, 1979