
The it chair

Fashion and the public, both fickle, love the new, so it is curious that a chair designed some 250 years ago has suddenly become the "it" accessory in many trendsetting houses. Furnishings do not have publicists or agents, but they do have shelter magazines. If you read any of them, chances are you have seen the so-called Frances Elkins or loop chair many times in the last few years.[1] Venerable decorators such as Albert Hadley and Richard Keith Langham have featured it, and so have younger stars such as Celerie Kemble (see Fig. 1) and Miles Redd.

James Shearron, of the architecture firm Bories and Shearron, has become the chair's unofficial biographer, eager to trace it back to its birth in the last third of the eighteenth century

The legendary decorator Frances Elkins made it popular in the 1930s, but her so-called loop chair, which is having another moment in the sun, goes back to the eighteenth century as a surviving set of examples attests

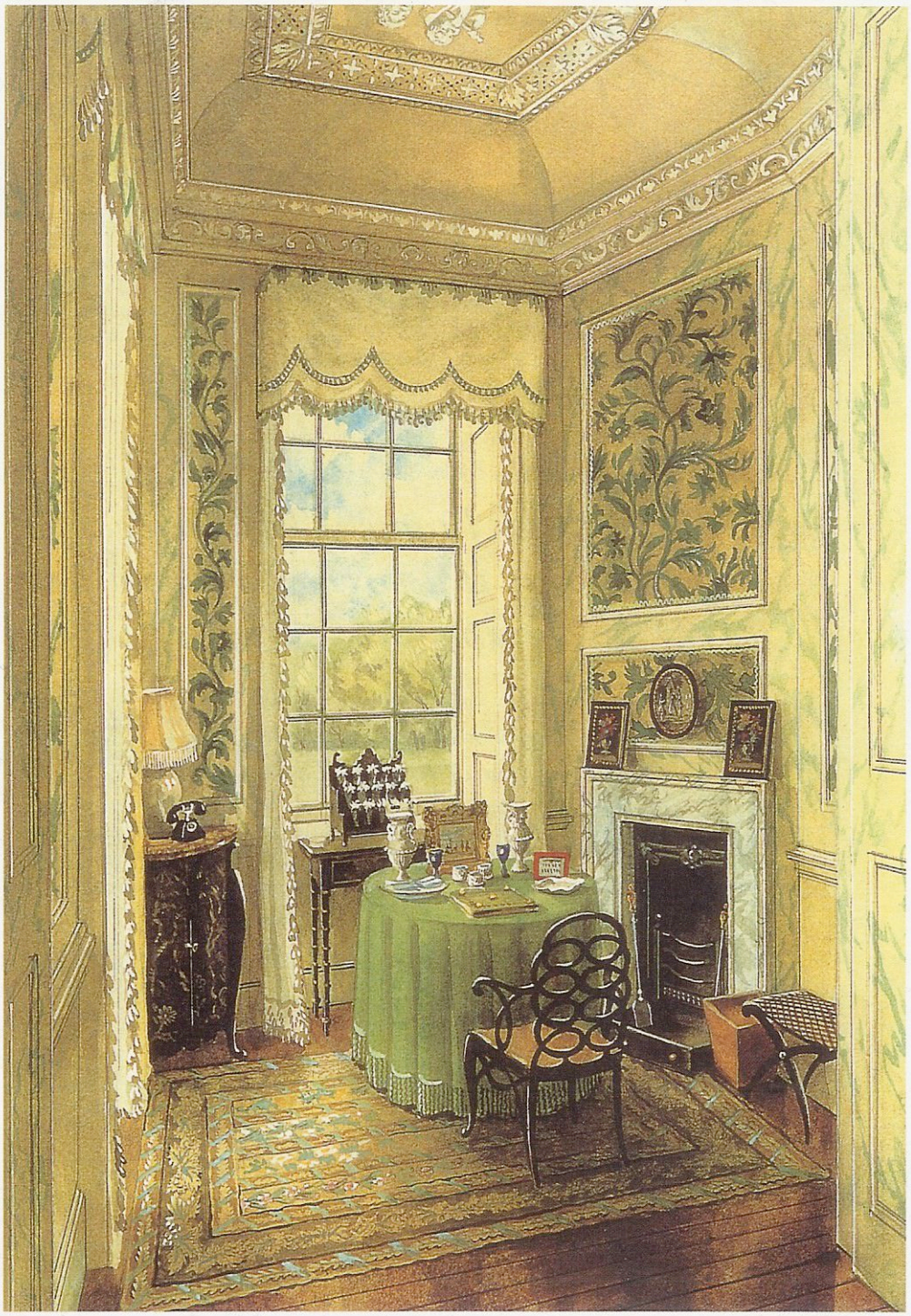
and in so doing dispel the myth that it originated with the 1930s decorator Frances Elkins. Shearron says he has been obsessed with the chair ever since he photocopied a page showing it in Percy Macquoid and Ralph Edwards's *Dictionary of English Furniture, from the Middle Ages to the Late Georgian Period* in the Lake Forest Library in Illinois sometime in the 1970s.

The book followed Macquoid's pioneering four-volume *A History of English Furniture,* which appeared from 1904 to 1908. In order to include so many images in his *History,* Macquoid had cultivated an extensive network of fellow collectors, among them "Frank Green, Esq.," who was identified as the owner of

Fig. 1. Palm Beach dining room with chairs in the Palm Beach line created by Mimi McMakin for Laneventure, 2007, from Celerie Kemble, *To Your Taste: Creating Modern Rooms with a Traditional Twist* (Clarkson Potter, New York, 2008), p. 126. *Photograph by Zach DeSart.*

Fig. 2. Drawing room in the house of Edward Burgess Hudson (1854–1936) at 15 Queen Anne's Gate, London, in a photograph of the 1920s. *Photograph by courtesy of Country Life.*

By Shax Riegler



This page: Fig. 3. The writing room at Ditchley Park by Alexandre Sérébriakoff (1907–1995), 1950. Signed and dated "A. Serebriakoff 1950" at lower right and inscribed "Dytchley" at lower left (not visible). Gouache, watercolor, brush and colored inks on paper.

Facing page: Fig. 4. Painted beechwood arm- and side chair, English, c. 1770, in Percy Macquoid, *A History of English Furniture* (1904–1908; reprint Bracken, London, 1988), vol. 4, Fig. 869. The chairs are from a set that includes four other side chairs.

the "Painted Beechwood Chairs" shown in the fourth volume (see Fig. 4). Macquoid dated them to "about 1768, for the dipped seat was introduced about that time" and judged them "more ingenious than beautiful."[2] This somewhat unflattering description is the first reference in print to the chairs under discussion here.

Green (c. 1861–1954), a wealthy industrialist, was an interesting figure who between 1897 and 1930 restored the Treasurer's House in York, England, furnishing its rooms in a variety of historical styles before donating it to the National Trust.[3] It would be fascinating to find out how the chairs came into his possession, but he did not have them for long. Sometime before 1924 they ended up in the collection of Edward Burgess Hudson, the founder of *Country Life,* where Macquoid was a columnist. Two can be seen in a photograph from the *Country Life* archives of Hudson's drawing room at 15 Queen Anne's Gate, London, taken in the early 1920s (Fig. 2).

One of the chairs, again credited to Hudson's ownership, is pictured in Macquoid and Edwards's three-volume *Dictionary of English Furniture.* The caption describes it as an "Armchair of painted wood with back and legs formed of loopings; the dipped seat points to a date of ca. 1765."[4] The writers clearly still did not take the chair very seriously, commenting, "The capricious taste of the time led to the production of many eccentric designs, like the example of ingenious looping shown in figure 118, made by one of Chippendale's contemporaries in beech to satisfy a demand for fantastic novelties."[5]

Without sales figures, of course, it is hard to quantify the popularity of Macquoid and Edwards's books. Even so, something of the *Dictionary*'s influence can be gleaned from the fact that revised editions were issued in 1954 and, as the *Shorter Dictionary of English Furniture,* in 1964. Even Macquoid's *History* made additional appearances, reprinted in 1972, 1987, and 1988. The loop chair appears in all versions.

These are the kinds of books that dealers, collectors, architects, and decorators covet. One influential decorator who must have had the first edition of the *Dictionary* was Elkins. From the 1930s until her death in 1953, she created sumptuous interiors from California to New York. She is especially remembered for her collaborations with her erudite brother, the architect David Adler (1882–1949), in Chicago and its suburbs. Her signature style was a mix of eighteenth-century antiques with the work of contemporary designers such as Jean-Michel Frank (1815–1941) and Alberto Giacometti (1901–1966). Elkins also designed furniture herself and had antique forms copied by her team of craftsmen in California.[6] Her version of the loop chair appeared in two projects from the early 1930s—on the "living porch" of the residence of Evelyn Marshall Field (1888–1979) in Muttontown, New York,[7] and in the Lake Forest living room of Mr. and Mrs. Leslie Wheeler (Fig. 5).

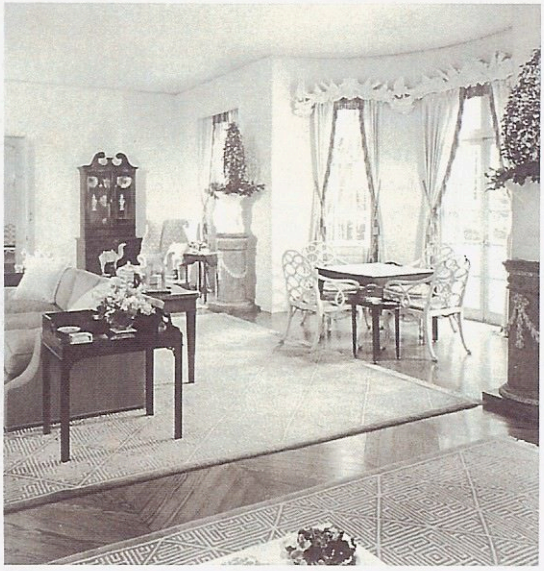
> The copies are usually chunky *and inelegant, nothing like the delicacy of Elkins's version, and definitely a far cry from the originals*

Shearron, who grew up in Lake Forest and loves Elkins's work, has combed through periodicals in search of it. Although there are literally dozens of loop chairs out there listed as "vintage" Frances Elkins, he thinks the two sets of four made for Field and Wheeler are probably the only ones she had made. "I've seen every photograph of her work and they don't show up in any other projects," he reports.

"That's the amazing thing about the chairs," Shearron continues. "They've had a remarkable impact even though these pictures have only been seen a few times." Mrs. Field's porch was published just once, in *Vogue* in August 1936. And it seems that the Wheeler living room only reached a wide audience when the Art Institute of Chicago published a monograph on Adler in 1970 that showed some of the collaborations with his sister.[8] That book, the essential source on Adler (and Elkins) for three decades, exerted a huge influence on a generation of interior designers. "Everyone had that book," Shearron says. "And I know that this room really inspired a lot of people. I think designers had copies of the chair made at the time. But the copies are usually chunky and inelegant, nothing like the delicacy of Elkins's version, and definitely a far cry from the originals. They all lack the beauty of the signature dipped seat, which Elkins was careful to retain."

Insider knowledge went mainstream when Stephen Salny's extremely popular monograph on Elkins's interiors reintroduced her to a whole new generation in 2005. The recent explosion of popularity of the loop chair seems to stem from that moment. "There were a lot of copies of the chair around," Shearron says, "and, suddenly, antiques dealers were all attributing them to Elkins." In addition to vintage versions, several manufacturers began making new copies (see Fig. 6).

Salny had, in fact, pointed out that the chair was copied from an eighteenth-century design, though he did not provide any more information than that. Celerie Kemble used a version of the chairs created by her mother Mimi McMakin in a Palm Beach dining room shown in her recent book (Fig. 1). "Every-



one knows they owe someone for this design," Kemble concedes. "But it's such a great chair. It's a friendly, sit-and-stay-awhile design."

The decorator Miles Redd says he bought five loop chairs on Houston Street in New York a few years ago. Two of them are now in his entry hall. "These were probably made in the 1960s or 1970s," he says. "They were definitely not of the best quality and were in terrible shape. At first, I thought it was some funky anonymous mid-century modern design, but I guess it is timeless."

In the meantime, the original chairs continued on an odyssey of their own. Although the later editions of the *Dictionary* still credit Hudson, who died in 1936, as the owner, his set had actually been sold in the mid-1930s to Ronald and Nancy Tree (later Lancaster), who had acquired Ditchley Park, a grand early eighteenth-century house in Oxfordshire.[9] Two of the chairs—an armchair and a side chair respectively—can be seen in watercolors of the writing room and yellow bedroom at Ditchley Park by the Russian artist Alexandre Sérébriakoff (see Fig. 3).[10] The Trees' London address was 28 Queen Anne's Gate, just a few doors away from Hudson at number 15, so they may well have acquired the set from him or his estate.

In the late 1940s Tree and his second wife, Marietta, moved to New York, bringing furnishings from Ditchley Park with them. Most of this material was sold at auction at Sotheby Parke Bernet in October 1976, and two loop chairs grace the catalogue's cover.[11] Although the buyer of the chairs at that sale remains a mystery, they subsequently passed through the English antiques firm Mallett and are now in a private American collection, according to Lanto Synge, Mallett's chief executive.[12] Synge included them in two books, *Mallet's Great English Furniture* and *Mallet Millennium: Fine Antique Furniture and Works of Art* (see Fig. 7).[13] Regarding the apparently delicate structure, he wrote, "Beechwood frames of this design would normally be very frail so the chairmaker has used a form of lamination to give strength to his woodwork."[14]

"It was like an early version of plywood," Synge said in a recent conversation. "I've never seen anything like them before or since. They have some similarities with other japanned or lacquered furniture—sort of chinoiserie, sort of rococo with Chinese ornament, but they're completely unique. They're also completely unique in the fact of their survival."

Peter Lang, the head of Sotheby's English furniture department, agrees. "They are a strange survival especially because they are so fragile looking," he says. "They seem to be designed in the same spirit as the whimsical summer house furniture of the period—fancifully painted pieces in exotic styles or pieces carved to look as though they are made of tree branches. The lines of the legs are particularly graceful and fluid. But there doesn't seem to be an exact matching design in any of the pattern books published in the second half of the eighteenth century."

The Bories and Shearron firm has been consulting with several fine furniture craftsmen in an attempt to produce a historically accurate version. But such accuracy does not come cheap. One chairmaker estimated that it could cost as much as twelve thousand dollars to make the first copy. "As shocked as I was," Shearron says, "I'm now even more intrigued to realize what an interesting and rare example of skilled craftsmanship this chair must have been."

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[1] See, for example, *House Beautiful*, April 2008, p. 194, and September 2008, p. 58; *Elle Décor*, December 2008, p. 133; and *Domino*, June–July 2006, cover, and June–July 2008, p. 114. [2] Percy Macquoid, *A History of English Furniture, including The Age of Oak, The Age of Walnut, The Age of Mahogany, The Age of Satinwood* (1904–1908; reprint Bracken, London, 1988), pp. 383–384. [3] See www.nationaltrust.org.uk/main/w-treasurershouseyork. [4] Percy Macquoid and Ralph Edwards, *Dictionary of English Furniture, from the Middle Ages to the Late Georgian Period* (Country Life, London, and Charles Scribner's Sons, New York, 1924–1927), vol. 1, p. 245, Fig. 118. [5] Ibid, p. 239. [6] Stephen M. Salny, *Frances Elkins: Interior Design* (W. W. Norton, New York, 2005), p. 14. [7] A photograph of Evelyn Marshall Field's living porch originally published in *Vogue* in 1936 is reproduced ibid., p. 144. [8] Richard Pratt, *David Adler* (M. Evans, New York, 1970), p. 187, Pl. 150. [9] According to Martin Wood, *Nancy Lancaster: English Country House Style* (Frances Lincoln, London, 2005), p, 189, n. 30, the Trees acquired five side chairs and one armchair from Hudson. [10] Ibid., pp. 60, 74–77. [11] *The Property from the Collection of Mrs. Marietta Peabody Tree and the Late Ronald Tree*, Sotheby Parke Bernet, New York, October 8 and 9, 1976, Lot 312. The set consisted of one arm- and five side chairs. [12] Mallett had a sixth side chair made to match the set. [13] Lanto Synge, *Mallet's Great English Furniture* (Barrie and Jenkins, London, 1991), p. 69, Fig. 67. [14] Ibid., p. 70.

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Facing page: Fig. 5. View of the living room in the house of Mr. and Mrs. Leslie Wheeler, Lake Forest, Illinois, with four loop chairs designed by Frances Elkins (1888–1953), in a photograph taken by Ezra Stoller (1915–2004) in 1934. © *Ezra Stoller/IPNstock.*

Fig. 6. Advertisement for Downtown's recent interpretation of the loop chair. *Photograph by courtesy of Downtown, Los Angeles.*

This page: Fig. 7. Colorplate 66 in Lanto Synge, *Mallett Millennium: Fine Antique Furniture and Works of Art* (Mallett, London, and Antique Collectors' Club, Woodbridge, 1999), showing two of the five side chairs from the set made in England, c. 1770 (see Fig. 4).