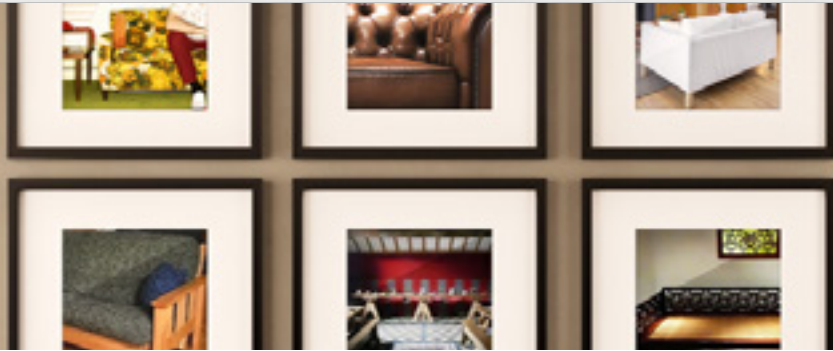




The History Of The Couch

Written by Rob Jones



Contents

<i>Couch potatoes. Couch surfing.</i>	
<i>And Even Getting “Off Of The Couch”</i>	3
<i>The Numb Ages: Life Before The Sofa</i>	4
<i>Comfort And The Church</i>	5
<i>Upholstery And The Renaissance</i>	6
<i>Lord Chesterfield</i>	7
<i>Louis XIV And Louis XV</i>	8
<i>The Rise Of The Living Room</i>	9
<i>Victorian And Edwardian Couches</i>	11
<i>Modernism And The Couch</i>	13
<i>Adaptable Couches And Alternates For Faster Moving Cultures</i>	14
<i>The Couch Is A Cultural Symbol</i>	15
<i>Resources And Links</i>	16
<i>Other Relevant Resources and Articles</i>	16



Couch potatoes. Couch surfing. And Even Getting “Off Of The Couch”.

These are all familiar ideas in our culture that are connected with the idea of comfort. That is what a home is supposed to be, right? It’s supposed to be comfortable. The couch therefore is more than just a piece of furniture. It really is a cultural symbol for what our homes mean to us.

We spend time both alone and with friends and family on the couch. We have friends over and watch B-movies, or BBC costume dramas, or whatever it is we watch, on couches. They are our refuge when we get home after a long day. “I just want to get home, and throw myself down on the couch!”, we say. Sometimes, we spend too much time on the couch. But even when we climb mountains, swim across lakes, wrestle alligators, and leap tall buildings in a single bound, our couch is waiting for us when we’re done, ready for a rest, and for a much-needed dose of comfort.

So, given that the couch is such a central part of our lives, often taken for granted because it is so important, where did this magnificent invention even come from? Well, let’s find out. And perhaps at the end, we can unravel some of the cultural and mystical symbolism of the couch while we’re at it.



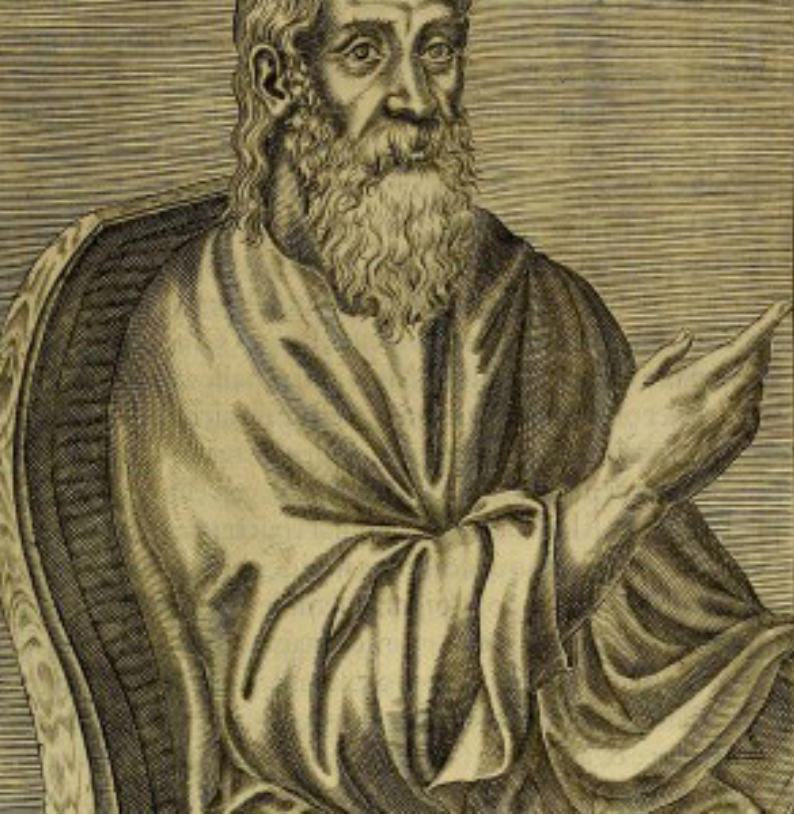
The Great Hall in Barley Hall, York, restored to replicate its appearance in around 1483. Note the lack of comfy-ness, even for the head of the table.

The Numb Ages: Life Before The Sofa

In its many forms, our homes as we imagine them today simply would not be complete with the sofa. But, of course, they haven't always been a fixture in the home. I like to call this time-before era of sofa-less homes as "The Numb Ages", when bottoms surely must have grown numb in sitting on un-cushioned seats. The Romans and Greeks knew a lot about a lot; philosophy, architecture, engineering, and civics. But, they tended to sit on stone, bronze, and wood when they came home after a hard day. They would decorate their furniture with colored stone, glass, and metal, and use steaming techniques to shape their furniture. These must have made for some striking pieces. But, c'mon. It must have been hard on the old posterior!

In the medieval period, there weren't even any living rooms in the average home as we know them today. What they had was common rooms, which were tables which were angled around a common fire. Entire households would gather here; extended family, employees, and guests all. Where did they sit? On wooden benches, mostly.

Their station at the table would depend on their status. But, everyone's buns got numb no matter where in the hierarchy they sat, I'm guessing. Comfort in the average home was not really a priority in the same way it is today.



Clement of Alexandria; a key Greek philosopher who influenced Origen, who would in turn help to establish Christian theological thought around the concepts of body, soul, and spirit. Origen's work would shape perception around the idea of human physical comfort, and indirectly the furniture and decor of the times. Meanwhile, Clement looks pretty comfortable here in his contoured chair.

Comfort And The Church

A significant force through the ages that affected the development of comfort in the average home that is embodied in the humble couch of today was the church. Developing out of a clever cocktail of Greco-Roman philosophy and Hebrew theology, much of Christian doctrine at the time (and in some cases, [enduring today!](#)) was the idea that our spirits and our bodies were diametrically opposed, with our souls being pulled in both directions. The body pulled us toward the sinful and the sensual and the earthly, it was believed. The body disallowed our spirits from communing with the divine, which was the direction our spirits (or more precisely, The Spirit) encouraged us to take. Very crudely speaking, this meant that physical comfort was a thing to keep an eye on, avoid, or actively work against for many people in the hopes of being closer to God instead.

As a result, those wooden benches and austere furniture selection in church buildings (if there was anything to sit down on at all!) and in the average homes of parishioners would remain a fixture for a long time. Too much comfort meant a closer tie to the body and lesser one to the spirit, the driving force that moves us toward being better people. Come to think of it, there really is some truth to that in a sense, I suppose. I'm talking to you, couch potatoes! This of course is just another way of saying that I'm talking to myself, of course.



Austerity when it came to furnishings can also be extended to the far-east, this piece dating from the Ming era (1368–1644). Yet, there is a certain aesthetic quality here, too that makes it pretty elegant.

It should be said though that even if the Greeks and Romans lent this idea to what became Christian doctrine, couches were used even in the ancient world, sometimes at the dinner table, when one could eat and recline. They also used pillows in the more affluent homes to see to the numbness problem. But, as far as couches as we know them today with springiness and softness underneath us as we watch Netflix was not really a thing. It would take centuries before an innovation would come in to change the way that humanity experienced seating close to the way we expect it to be today. That innovation would be ...

Upholstery And The Renaissance

The idea of taking soft materials and stuffing them into fabric and animal skins to make something comfy to sit on wasn't that new an idea. As mentioned, they had pillows in the ancient world. But, when it came to whole pieces of furniture, with all of those elements integrated into one piece of furniture, the important area of upholstery emerged. Upholstery became a fixture in interior design toward the end of Elizabethan period (1558-1603), and developing for centuries after in England. During this time, the trade of the upholsterer was coupled with all things fabric, including wall hangings, rugs and other floor coverings, draperies, and linens.

It's important to note that this was also during the renaissance, a time when popular thinking was moving past some of the austere teachings of the church. It was a time when the physical properties of our world were beginning to be explored, and when traditions of all kinds were being challenged. So, as one of the many results of this, the hard stone and wood of the medieval gothic period, informed by that body-soul-spirit idea, began to soften a bit, sometimes literally.

Once again, we see that the values of a society have tremendous effects on what gets produced, on how things are consumed, and on how things look in general. If the idea of comfort was no longer seen as negative, then it followed that comfort should be introduced in the average home. That meant nicer seating, including early versions of couches, and certainly including more and more upholstered furniture. It meant something else, too; that new trends could be set for new kinds of rooms.



Phillip Stanhope, 4th Earl of Chesterfield. He opened up the options for the immortal question of “would you like to take a seat?”



The Chesterfield; classic design that endures today, but has its origins in the Restoration period in England when seating had to be adapted to the voluminous dress of both women and men of the time.

Lord Chesterfield

One striking figure in the history of the sofa has to be Lord Phillip Stanhope, The Fourth Earl Of Chesterfield (1694 – 1773). As well as being a politician, writer, and artistic patron (Voltaire was his boy!), Lord Chesterfield was a trendsetter, and even today lives on as the guy who christened a distinct piece of furniture that bears his name. One of his mandates in the creation of this piece of furniture was to create something for a lot of people to sit on together, without wrinkling their clothes as a result. Lord Chesterfield was a fashion plate, as well as an innovator.

The chesterfield was created during the period known as the Restoration, after a period of back to the church austerity in Britain under puritan and English republican Oliver Cromwell.

When Cromwell died, his austere republic died with him and the royal line was restored under King Charles II – hence, The Restoration. Among other things that came back was the flamboyant and even decadent costuming and interior designs that involved vibrant colors and flowing fabrics to contrast the black, white, grey, and not that comfortable Cromwellian era.

This is yet another example of how the values of the day shaped the world in which those values were held. And Lord Chesterfield was right there in innovation mode, creating a leather couch with distinctly buttoned upholstery, rolled arms, and equal back and arm height.

This design allowed the well-dressed to sit comfortably, to maintain their poise and their manners, and to walk away afterward comfortably and with dignity no matter how many layers they were wearing, which was usually a lot. Because all of the nobility was dressed this way, the chesterfield took off as a piece of furniture that everyone who was anyone had to have. It is a fabulous design, sure. But, it had practical value as well. As such, it’s still a fixture today in the homes of many.



Nicolas de Largillière 's depiction of Louis XIV (seated resplendently in the chair that bears his name), and little Louis XV, his great grandson and successor.

Louis XIV And Louis XV

When we're talking about furniture, artistry, and comfort during mid to late 1600s and beyond into the 1700s though, we really need to slide across the English Channel to France. It was here that Louis XIV and his successor Louis XV made something of a revolution (I choose that word meaningfully, folks ...) when it came to comfy seating.

You've all heard of the [Louis XIV chair](#), of course and the famous chaise lounge which is practically an icon of the time. It was practically the sofa of its day when it came to being a cultural symbol for comfort and for design. But, the sofa itself began to develop during this time as well, when gatherings of nobility into the great-rooms of the king's court required the right furnishings to make them all comfortable.

The King held court at the Palace of Versailles, with a [strict schedule of duties](#) which he sometimes shirked because, I guess, he was the King. But, the point is, this era was the exact opposite of The Numb Ages. The palace was the European epicenter for furniture fashion, and for furniture makers to be patronized (probably in the old and the new sense of that word!), and to innovate, too. After all, when nobles with lots of money to spend want to sit around on something comfortable, that is certainly a market opportunity. The result was chaise lounges, settees and love seats (one sexy piece of furniture, that!), and the canapé, which is kind of like a smaller cabriole couch, and all in the neo-classical aesthetics of the time.

Along with that, this emphasis on innovation when it came to furniture in general reinforced the idea that furniture could and absolutely should be artistically realized as well as being comfortable. Importantly, it made furniture into something that was tied to the identities and statuses of homeowners, reflecting the kinds of activities which were most important to them while at home.

This idea would eventually would pass from the nobility and down into the (increasingly dissatisfied at the time!) masses. And if Louis XIV and Louis XV thought that they had started a revolution where furniture and comfort was concerned, they couldn't have foreseen another sort of revolution that would be visited upon King Louis XVI of France in 1789. Hint: it involved guillotines.



A restored “Federal-era” settee (circa 1810-15), which is a variety of love seat couch, this one on loan to the Cincinnati Art Museum from the National Society of the Colonial Dames of America in the State of Ohio

The Rise Of The Living Room

The parlor. The lounge. The front room. Or, in most common North American parlance; the living room. The idea of a common area for families, members of the community, and even employees to gather is very, very well established since the dawn of civilization. But, when it comes to the couch, the rise of the living room is parallel to the rise of the single family home, filtering down from the design of noble houses. The couch has become a defining characteristic to the living room as we know it. Even in this, the couch and the living room which it defines went through several stages of development.

The living rooms of the Georgian (1714-1836) and Victorian period (1837-1900), or rather “drawing rooms” were like reception areas for the household, where members would gather for conversation. The modern living room was developed out of the model set by the upper classes, governments, and even royalty, as a place to “withdraw” once the business of the day, or large gatherings of visitors, was over. It was a place to relax, and to find that enduring goal of comfort at home.



The “parlor” of the 1830s. Instead of Netflix, they had live music. And when they were done, they needed a place to sit down that would allow for the hang of their clothing. This was the reason the couch or sofa came into being in the first place.



The camel back sofa. The ship of the Federal style and “French style” parlor, or living room.

Values and priorities seem to always always start at the top and trickle down. So as mentioned, that spread to the way the average home was laid out as well, with the living room being a place to spend time when meals were finished and daily business was concluded. Activities in living rooms included drinking coffee, smoking pipes, having a chat, [reading aloud](#) to each other, or playing music together.

As far as styles went, the cabriole couch would be informed by the chesterfield, and the camel back sofa with its distinctive “humps” would reflect the ornate aesthetics that hearkened to that neo-gothic style which was all the rage when Queen Vic was on the throne. The invention of the coil spring for furniture (it had been around since the 1500s as a component in locks) in the 1850s helped to add to the comfort quotient, too.

The Victorian era fainting couch in a distinctive rococo style , with an open-ended design that allowed for reclining whilst in a swoon. This one is from Bernheimer House, Port Gibson, Mississippi.



Victorian And Edwardian Couches

Just like we saw with Lord Chesterfield’s innovations with furniture, the Victorian couch was designed to be in conjunction with the social mores of the time and of the clothing people wore, too. As absurd as it is to consider today, many women of the time were prone to what was called (and you’ll bear with me here ...) female hysteria. This was a term for the frequent fainting spells suffered by many women, along with a bunch of other “symptoms” that would be laughed out of a doctor’s office today, frankly. The couch was considered to be a necessary addition to the Victorian drawing room, or even fainting room where a woman of “tender dispositions” and “easily offended sensibilities” could recline when they needed to, and be revived.

Of course looking back to that time, this had less to do with the personalities or character of these women, and most likely more to do with their socially-defined wardrobes. I’m talking about corsets, people. I’m not referring to the fun ones that people wear for cosplay and burlesque today. These were the kind that were worn all of the time underneath other heavy layers, and leading to restricted breathing. Sexist overtones about socially imposed gender issues aside for a second, having a couch nearby was handy under these conditions.



An Arts & Crafts-era settee. Note the minimalism of the design that reacted against the curls and filigrees of rococo design, and which would eventually come to inform modernist furniture as well. A big influence on arts and crafts and modernism was the rise of mass produced furniture, where micro-detailed scrollwork and carving wasn't feasible.

This social movement to do with women's fashions and aesthetics would endure into the Edwardian period as well, which was great for furniture makers, if not so great for women of the time. It would be in the 1920s when things began to turn around for women's fashions. The concept of comfort has many facets depending on who you are. That endures to a lesser degree even now, of course. But, that's a whole other story.

In the meantime, the couch would endure as a mainstay, complete with the designs that came out of these earlier eras. These include Rococo couches with their curly-cue wood carving designs, Mission style furniture with its appealing ninety-degree angle minimalism for country living, and eventually evolving into new aesthetics of the early to mid-20th century.

These would demonstrate a value more toward angular lines in their couches. Maybe this was because cultures were beginning to move away from the ornate fancies of the neo-gothic design of the late 1800s inspired by nature, and embrace the more rational aesthetics that were driven by industry. It's hard to say. So, maybe we should talk a bit about Modernism, huh?



An example of the simplicity of modernism and the couch; lots of straight lines and not a lot of detailed decoration.



Even if patterning in the 60s and 70s became big and obvious, the modernist approach of simple geometric lines remained in place. Detailed imagery in the patterning was largely gone, unless it was geometric or impressionistic, or even groovily psychedelic. And color palettes tended to skew toward orange, green, and gold.

Modernism And The Couch

Modernism was a stark change from the fanciful designs of the pre-Great War (aka “World War I”) world, although the roots of modernism started well before then. The movement reduced elements of design into its essentials, and found beauty in those elements in an of themselves, rather than making it all about what they were meant to represent in reality. So, gone were the delicate carvings of animals and angel’s wings. They were replaced by the geometric patterning, monochromatic colors, and unified lines that presented forms at their most basic.

This filtered down to nearly all aspects of life from visual art, to literature, to music, to architecture, and to furniture making, too. Along side those

artistic movements, the development of modern materials like laminated plywood, plastics, and fiberglass enabled these aesthetics to actually become manufactured products. The roots of modernism can certainly be seen even today, during a time when designers are mining the past to inspire the future. Even that isn’t a new approach.

So when it came to the couch, it was the basic forms that were concentrated upon, with the more “realistic” details in the design (i.e. pictures of stuff incorporated into the carvings, the detailed images on fabric, etc) left out in favor of letting that basic form be the defining feature. This has had a tremendous influence on how we look at couches today as the focal point of a room, or at

least the primary vantage point from which to view the focal point. It’s also allowed designers to concentrate on the comfort aspect once again, that even if a couch is plain white or black, or some monochromatic color, it serves its purpose because it is a practical form without the artistry side of things getting in the way.

The art becomes a part of the whole instead, rather than screaming: “THIS IS ART!” That’s what Modernism attempted throughout the 20th century, and does quite well today. The Davenport, the sectional couches of the Mid-century period, and the divan (a backless sofa or couch) all came out of this approach.

The futon; an adaptable piece of furniture for an increasingly transient population. The futon as we know it in North America is based on an original design from Japan, incorporating two elements; the wooden frame, and the large and flat pillow-like mattress that can be adapted into a sofa, or into a bed depending on the need. What would students and those living in bachelor apartments do without it?



Adaptable Couches And Alternates For Faster Moving Cultures

Furniture is made for people. That seems like a pretty obvious thing to say, maybe. But, as we've seen from the history of the couch, it really is the values and issues of the times where people are concerned that has a significant bearing on how they have evolved both practically and aesthetically. The courts of France during Louis XIV and Louis XV reigns needed furniture to accommodate all of the sitting around they had to do. The same went for Lord Chesterfield, a man of wealth and taste as the song says, who needed a central piece of furniture to allow for voluminous attire that was true to their decadent times.

And in our era, the fold-out couch, pull-out bed, or "sofa bed"; friend to unemployed-brothers-in-law-who-just-need-a-place-to-crash everywhere, is kind of the equivalent. The same goes for the futon, which was a mainstay in temporary accommodations throughout my university career. That's because it made things practical, and adaptable to all kinds of spaces especially if those spaces are not likely to remain ours for very long. But, this is also an illustration of just how central to modern life the couch has become in our lives, especially as the world is moving so much faster, and that people are so [much more transient](#) now than they were in generations past. In that sense, I think the couch is more useful and even important in our lives than it ever was.



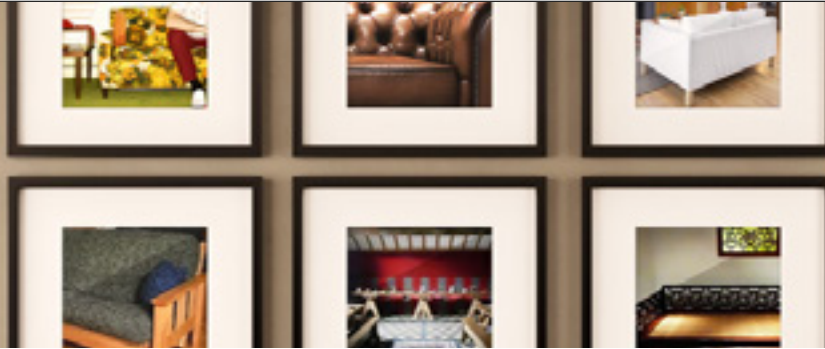
The Couch Is A Cultural Symbol

Think about this. The couch is our ultimate symbol of comfort, maybe even more than our beds are. It is our refuge. It is our central interior base for hominess and togetherness. Think of all the TV shows that center around couches when it comes to where the action unfolds; *The Simpsons* and *Friends* practically used the couch as a visual totem for family connections and, well, friendship. And that's just me as a generation Xer talking. I'm sure there are scads of more up to date examples of modern [couch shows](#) that communicate this very thing.

That the couch has had a long history of being central to the values of the eras in which it was incorporated says a lot about how important it's been. But, it also says a lot about how the basic values of home haven't really changed all that much when you get right down to it.

The couch means you're home. It means you're safe. It means that you can relax and be yourself with the ones you love, or the movie you love, or the game you love, or all of those.

What's more important than all of that?



Resources And Links

http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/hous/hd_hous.htm

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DtNlmuJ5O4U>

<http://www.crivoice.org/bodysoul.html>

<http://www.oldandsold.com/articles05/upholstery1.shtml>

http://royalfurniture.org/decor_005.html

<http://www.londongallery.net/en/content/8-history-of-chesterfield>

<http://en.chateauversailles.fr/history/versailles-during-the-centuries/living-at-the-court/a-day-in-the-life-of-louis-xiv>

<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/57558>

<https://www.homestratosphere.com/types-of-sofas/>

https://www.onekingslane.com/info/home/the-history-of-upholstery/#.VHZwazHF_kQ

https://www.onekingslane.com/info/home/a-guide-to-types-and-styles-of-sofas-settees/#.VHZMdjHF_kR

Other Relevant Resources And Articles From BuildDirect Blog: Life At Home

<http://blog.builddirect.com/furniture-matters-the-couch/>

<http://blog.builddirect.com/european-and-north-american-furniture-style-history/>

<http://blog.builddirect.com/7-convertible-furniture-ideas-that-never-caught-on/>

<http://blog.builddirect.com/adjustable-furniture-and-storage-to-maximize-space/>

<http://blog.builddirect.com/4-indicators-that-vintage-furniture-is-making-a-comeback/>

<http://blog.builddirect.com/4-best-furniture-pieces-for-small-apartments/>

<http://blog.builddirect.com/how-to-mix-and-match-antique-furniture-in-modern-spaces/>

<http://blog.builddirect.com/a-better-choice-danish-modern-furniture/>

<http://blog.builddirect.com/the-great-pieces-of-furniture-in-art/>

<http://blog.builddirect.com/tag/furniture-matters-series/>