

Furniture Styles

[Ancient Furniture](#)
[Medieval Furniture](#)
[European Furniture](#)
[English](#)
[Timeline](#)
[Tudor](#)
[Elizabethan](#)
[Jacobean](#)
[Commonwealth](#)
[Restoration](#)
[William & Mary](#)
[Queen Anne](#)
[Early Georgian](#)
[Mid Georgian](#)
[Late Georgian](#)
[Adam Furniture](#)
[Sheraton Furniture](#)
[English Neoclassicism](#)
[Resources](#)
[Regency](#)
[Early Victorian](#)
[Late Victorian](#)
[Edwardian](#)
[Country](#)
[Colonial](#)
[Designers](#)
[Pattern Books](#)
[English Decorating](#)
[English Homes](#)
[Woods](#)
[Resources](#)
[American Furniture](#)
[Asian Furniture](#)
[Contact](#)

Furniture Styles

[Furniture](#) > [European](#) > [English](#) > [Late Georgian](#) > [Adam Furniture](#)

Robert Adam Furniture & Interior Designs

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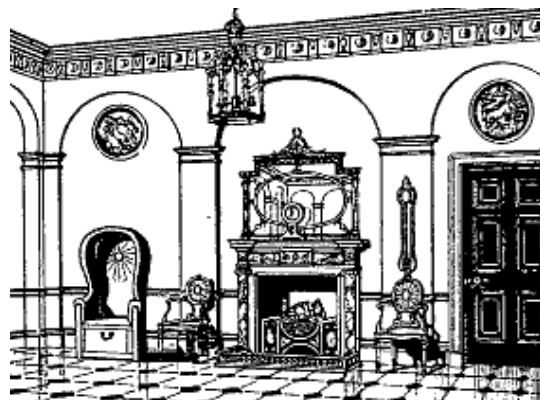
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Ad Choices

Robert Adam's name is known as much for his work in interior decoration and furniture design as for his architecture. His room arrangements, his ornamental ceilings and chimneypieces, and his furniture represent a greater unity and architectonic quality in the ensemble than is to be found in the work of his predecessors or contemporaries.

His decorative work was rich, refined, disciplined, and probably of more lasting value than his architecture. The Pompeiian influence is strongly apparent in his interiors, which are generally delicate and satisfying, though some critics call them attenuated, copying the delicacy rather than the richness of the antique. Certain it is that he had a rare feeling for perfection of detail and balance of ornament, as well as for the value of open spaces.

Adam's name must be considered along with the names of **Thomas Chippendale**, **George Hepplewhite**, and **Thomas Sheraton** in the development of English furniture styles, though he was not a cabinet-maker. He was one of the first to consider furniture fully worthy of an architect's attention, and finding nothing to fit in with his Classic interiors, he designed it to suit his walls and panels. In fact, he designed the entire equipment of many houses, down to counterpanes and work-bags.



Adam Interior

Search

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[Dining Furniture](#)
[Rustic Furniture](#)
[Wooden Furniture](#)
[Oak Furniture](#)
[Fine Furniture](#)

"Adam Furniture"

Although not principally concerned with furniture, Adam designs for tables, chairs, screens, book cases, commodes, presses, sofas were singularly able, and Chippendale was employed to carry out work for Robert Adam, at Hare wood House. The decorative motifs that made a special appeal to the Adam taste appear on the furniture, and also on carpets, fire-irons, ceilings, chimneypieces fans, urns, honeysuckle, patera and delicate wreaths all drawn from the work of the ancient Roman designers, who share with the Greeks the credit for inspiring the art of the Renaissance and the eighteenth century. The rooms decorated by Robert Adam possessed a distinction that was unmistakable; the mark of a master designer was upon everything, and that mark was intensely individual. Furniture, decoration and every detail of equipment indicated a character in common, and a highly educated, scholarly taste.

His furniture designs were executed for the firm by cabinet-makers of the period and go, quite properly, by the name of "Adam furniture". The quantity of it being relatively small, antique Adam brothers furniture is rarely to be found in America. For the most part it is **Louis XVI** in type, though with less rectangularity. In 1769 Adam made a few designs with Chinese details; in 1772 he used a lyre back, probably borrowed from France, and later employed by Sheraton and Phyfe; in 1777 he introduced an oval chair back with a touch of the Empire feeling, suggestive of Hepplewhite. In general, however, his designs were Classic and somewhat formal. As a furniture designer, perhaps, he was not the equal of Hepplewhite, Sheraton, or **Duncan Phyfe**, but he paved the way for them and they owed him the greatest possible debt.

Adam Chairs & Sofas

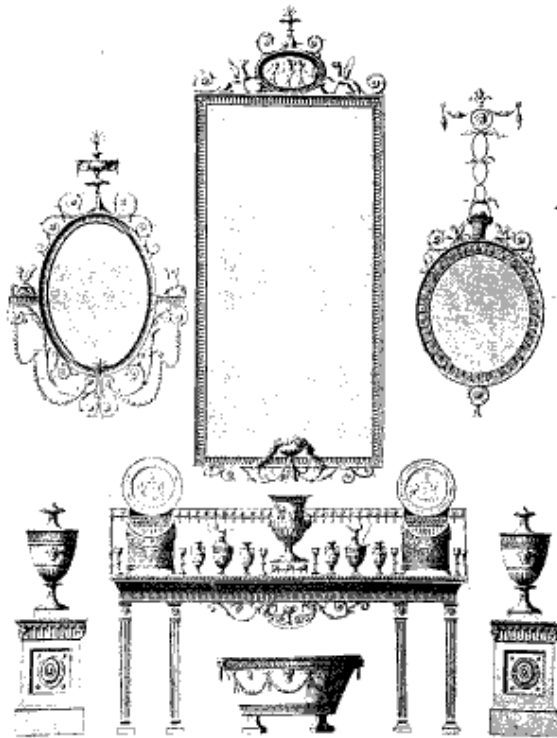
Adam's chairs were simple and chaste, lacking something of the grace that distinguished Sheraton's. They were generally small and fine, with backs low and narrow, and with arms but slightly upholstered, if at all. The legs for the most part were straight, the cabriole leg being entirely abandoned by Adam. Often they showed a Classic, sweeping curve. His sofas were delicate in appearance, with an inclination to Classic effects, and he designed a graceful but frail and comfortless couch with straight arms and no back.

Adam Dining Furniture

For his dining rooms Adam designed a serving table flanked by urns on pedestals, which was later developed into the sideboard by Shearer and Hepplewhite. He designed also bookcases, commodes, brackets, clock cases, candelabra, mirror frames, console tables, and numerous other pieces, generally adapting Classical forms to modern uses more successfully than any previous English designer. He designed also carriages, plate, and other household fittings, and a famous sedan chair for Queen Charlotte.

Mahogany & Satinwood

Adam followed the fashion of his day in the use of **mahogany**, but he was most fond of using **satinwood**, a new material which he did much to introduce to popular favour, and which was well adapted to his style.



Adam Mirrors

Decoration

As a distinct departure from Chippendale's work, Adam used little carving and what he did use was fine and in low relief. He used little inlay until about 1770, when he began to employ colour, gilding, marquetry, and even ormolu ornaments. His favourite form of decoration, however, was painting, and he may be said to have introduced a new idea in furniture : colour value. He borrowed his idea for painted furniture from France, and he had his work done by the best talent available.

Painted furniture and exquisite inlays of fine woods for the embellishment of his designs were developed by Robert Adam; furniture was painted to imitate marble, including in some of the houses for which he was responsible. His painted furniture involved the painting of white wood in a usually soft colour, and then the application of decoration in the form of flowers and panels, scrolls and figures.

He did not originate this practice. Pergolesi, Angelica Kauffmann and Cipriani are names familiar to the student of late eighteenth-century decoration, and together with Piranesi and Zucchi (the husband of Angelica Kauffmann) these artists decorated the walls and ceilings of Adam rooms, and also decorated many of the cabinets, chairs and tables of the period, not only the painted pieces, but furniture made in satinwood.

See also our [Robert Adam biography](#).