

## Seats as Symbols: Chairs as Cultural Universals



- Grade level 1 or 2
- Subject area/s Language Arts, Social Studies, Visual Art
- GPS/Common Core Standards SS1H1, SS1E1, SS2H1 b; ELACC2SL2, ELACC2RI3; VA1MC.3 b, VA1MC.3d, VA1PR1, VA2CU.1, VA2CU.2c, VA2C.1
- Objective The student will be able to compare and contrast different examples of chairs and make inferences about the cultures from which they originated.
- Materials
  - ✓ Handout (attached, printed double-sided)
  - ✓ Scissors
  - ✓ Glue (optional)
  - ✓ Blank paper (optional)
  - ✓ More images of chairs (optional)
- Instructions
  - Discuss the idea of cultural universals (ideas or phenomena that is common to virtually every culture or society), and what we can learn by comparing them. (See resources for online reference)
  - In small groups or as a class, use the image cards (below) or scroll through the images of chairs online (See resources).
  - Instruct students to cut out cards and words below
  - Without turning them over, have students organize cards by category, individually or in pairs. Instruct students to use the descriptive words as guidelines, if you'd like
  - Discuss what makes the chairs similar or different. How did students group them and why?
  - Have students try to arrange the chairs from oldest to newest. (If desired, have one student per pair glue the cards to a piece of paper as a form of assessment, allowing the other student's cards to be free to examine the back)
  - Discuss findings as a class. What clues did students use to gauge each chair's age?
  - Talk about who might have used these chairs. (Use info on the back as another resource.)
  - Encourage students to consider the chairs they use at school. Why

do they look the way they do? How would they improve them?

- Evaluation Informally assess each student's ability to guess the chronology of the chairs and their verbal explanation
- Accommodations
  - Read descriptive words together and discuss their meaning, providing special attention to those who need further explanations
  - Print only the front of the handout if the information on the back is too advanced or overwhelming for some
  - Provide pre-cut pieces for those who might need assistance
  - For visually impaired students, instruct a partner to describe the chairs to them, using the provided adjectives if desired
- Extensions
  - Add more chairs, perhaps from cultures or time periods your class is currently studying
  - Have students design their own chair for a specific purpose, time period or environment
  - Allow students to add more descriptive words to describe the chairs
- Resources
  - List of cultural universals  
[http://www.learner.org/libraries/connectarts68/07\\_culture\\_pt1/07pdfs/CulturalUniversals.pdf](http://www.learner.org/libraries/connectarts68/07_culture_pt1/07pdfs/CulturalUniversals.pdf)
  - Slideshow of images from *The Art of Seating*  
<http://www.columbiamuseum.org/exhibitions/art-of-seating/about>

# The Art of Seating: Cultural Universals



**boring**

**complicated**

**colorful**

**simple**

**fancy**

**comfortable**

**weird**

**new**

**old**

**beautiful**

**curvy**

**shiny**

# ■ *The Art of Seating: Cultural Universals*

<p>1935</p> <p>Sling seat lounge chair designed by Warren McArthur, New York.</p> <p>Aluminum and rubber.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ Made from hollow aluminum tubes</li><li>▪ Easy to make lots of them</li><li>▪ Part of the International style – wanted to make things look the same everywhere in the world</li></ul>	<p>1971</p> <p>High Stool designed by Frank Gehry, California.</p> <p>Cardboard and wood.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ stool, not a chair – you sit on the top</li><li>▪ designed by an architect who was experimenting with different materials like cardboard</li><li>▪ these chairs started to get Frank Gehry recognized – now he’s a very famous architect (he’s still building today)</li></ul>	<p>1850</p> <p>Arm chair designed by Thomas E. Warren</p> <p>Iron, wood, metal, velvet.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ made to be comfortable – padding, arm rests, head rest</li><li>▪ used in an office – has wheels and a revolving seat</li><li>▪ the fancy velvet fabric was to make it look old and formal</li></ul>
<p>1840</p> <p>Shaker chair, designed by New Lebanon Shaker Community, New York. Wood and tape.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ simple design</li><li>▪ made by hand, not a machine</li><li>▪ high quality</li><li>▪ made from wood and natural materials (not metal or manmade materials)</li></ul>	<p>1890</p> <p>Texas Longhorn Chair, designed by Wenzel Friedrich, Texas.</p> <p>Ivory, silk, and brass.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ armrests are made from horns from actual steers! (they were usually thrown away)</li><li>▪ the country was doing very well and people had a lot more money in this time period – they could afford to buy fancy furniture like this</li></ul>	<p>1895</p> <p>McKinley chair designed by David Wolcott Kendall, Michigan.</p> <p>Oak and cane.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ President McKinley chose to put one of these chairs in the White House</li><li>▪ early example of arts and crafts movement, which was about making things by hand (not in factories) and not using extra decoration</li></ul>