The Campeche Chair in The Metropolitan Museum of Art

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In Memory of James Parker

In November 1819 Thomas Jefferson wrote to Thomas Bolling Robertson of New Orleans to thank him for the gift of a Campeche armchair. "Age, its infirmities and frequent illnesses," observed Jefferson, "have rendered indulgence in that easy kind of chair truly acceptable." He was sufficiently captivated to have copies produced in his joinery, and visitors to Monticello, his home near Charlottesville, Virginia, can view at least one example of this manufacture. The finest Campeche in Virginia is presently found in the James Madison Museum in Orange, near Montpellier, Madison's estate (Figure 1). It is noteworthy for its ornate leather seat embossed with a stylized Spanish Habsburg double-headed eagle, string-inlaid crest rail, carved arms and finials, cabriole armrest supports, and curule construction—a rare constellation of features suggestive of Mexican origin. Jefferson and Madison were neighbors and friends, and the tradition that Madison received his chair from his predecessor as president is probably reliable.

The Campeche chair, or "boutaque," in Louisiana patois, is characterized by a lateral nonfolding curule base and embossed leather or cane reclining back and seat. It takes its name from the Mexican port city on the Yucatán Peninsula, better known for its trade in logwood (Haematoxylon campechianum). In America the chair also came to be called by the anglicized name "Campeachy." Sparsely distributed throughout the southeastern United States, principally in Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, and Virginia, it is also common in Latin America. There is a concentration of nineteenth-century Campeche chairs in Louisiana, to which they were first exported from New Spain. Numerous early-nineteenth-century inward foreign cargo manifests document shipments of boutaque chairs from Campeche, Mexico, to the port of New Orleans (Figure 2).

The earliest known depiction of a Campeche appears in a pencil drawing entitled Scene on Board "L'Alera," by Anne-Marguérite-Henriette Rouillé de Marigny, Baroness Hyde de Neuville, the wife of the French minister to Washington, who was noted for her illustrations of early American landscapes (Figure 3). Dated October 1806, the sketch was completed by the baroness en route to the United States. It shows a young girl sleeping in a Campeche aboard ship. Another representation appears in a watercolor by the famous British-born architect and engineer Benjamin Henry Boneval Latrobe, who sailed to New Orleans from Baltimore in late 1818 to complete a commission for a waterworks (Figure 4). He annotated the sketch "View from the window of my Chamber at Tremoulet's hotel New Orleans. The distant houses are in the suburb of St. Mary. The house of which the roof occupies the center of the view is the Gouvernment house. The opening beyond the flat roof is Jefferson street." Occupying a caned Campeche at the center of the picture is a gentleman wearing a toque blanche and smoking a cigar while attended by a waistcoated servant.

The American Campeche chair is a relic of late-eighteenth-century and early-nineteenth-century plantation culture that flourished in the Old South. In Southern homes it remains an exotic curiosity, redolent of ancient origins, its curved form gracing traditional interiors with other period furnishings, such as Louisiana inlaid armoires and American Classical tables, chairs, and sofas. It stands as a reminder that Louisiana, once briefly a Spanish possession, still bears important traces of that heritage.

The Flower-Basket Chairs

In 2000 The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Department of American Decorative Arts, acquired a Campeche chair (Figure 5). Pivotal in this essay on the Campeche form, the Metropolitan Museum chair
is related to other important specimens in American collections and abroad.

Between its back stiles is a melon-shaped crest rail with wedge-shaped panels of figured mahogany veneer that radiate outward from a center point at the bottom (Figure 6). The crest has a distinctive neoclassical marquetry patera of a basket containing a bouquet of an Oriental poppy, daffodils, a rosebud with leaves, and palm foliage. Outlining the top is an arc of parquetry banding consisting of alternating light and dark squares set in a herringbone pattern. Curved arms set flat-wise and through-tenoned into the back stiles extend to the front rail of the chair, where they terminate in squared-off ends that point outward (Figure 7). On the top of each arm are figured mahogany veneers and a parquetry band of checkered squares (largely lost) surrounding the perimeter. Other features include acorn-shaped finials with decorative ring turnings repeated

Figure 1. Campeche armchair. Probably Mexican, ca. 1820. Mahogany, embossed leather, brass tacks; 98 x 54.6 x 50.2 cm. Collection of the James Madison Museum, Orange, Virginia (photo: James Madison Museum)

Figure 2. Report and manifest of the cargo taken on board the Jenny at Campeche, dated April 21, 1808. The goods included four "Boutaques," or Campeche chairs. Records of Customhouses in the United States, New Orleans, Louisiana, Records of the Bureau of Customs, National Archives, Washington, D.C. (photo: National Archives)
on the urn-shaped armrest supports and stretchers, and a sling-shaped seat upholstered with its original punchwork leather secured to the frame with gilt brass tacks.

The leather is decorated with horizontal guilloche bands, stars, and abstract fleurs-de-lis. Punched in the middle of the seat is an inverted triangle with a whimsical zoomorphic design at its center. Mortise-and-tenon and half-lap joints secure the frame and join the arms to it. The armrest supports are secured to the seat with sliding dovetail joints. The stretchers are tenoned through the legs and fixed in place with a small wedge of wood hammered in the ends of the circular tenons.

The Metropolitan Museum’s chair was originally owned by James Colles (1788–1883), who established himself in the lucrative mercantile trade of New Orleans, where he moved from New York City in 1818. Emily Johnston de Forest (1851–1942), his granddaughter and the wife of former Metropolitan Museum of Art president Robert W. de Forest, wrote of his arrival in New Orleans in James Colles (1788–1883): Life and Letters:

New Orleans, upon the purchase of Louisiana in 1803, had become a kind of Eldorado; there was a great rush from all over the country to take advantage of the new opportunities which were opened up there. Cotton and sugar were then released from the Spanish tariff and became very valuable assets. The glamour lasted several years. James, according to the Family Bible, "arrived at New Orleans in Brig
Figure 5. Campeche armchair. Probably Mexican, ca. 1820. Mahogany (*Swietenia macrophylla*) and mahogany veneer, light and dark wood inlay, embossed leather, gilt brass tacks; 99.1 x 68.3 x 69.9 cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Department of American Decorative Arts, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Douglas Williams, 2000 (2000.451)
'Casket' from New York, in November 1818." The understanding between J. C. and his new associate [David Rogers] evidently was that Colles should spend the winters there and go to New York each summer for necessary purchases. At first they had many trials and losses; men who "skipped" without even paying their board bills, or gave orders for more goods without paying for the previous consignment, or sent perishable goods which spoiled before they reached New Orleans.13

Colles enjoyed a successful career in New Orleans, becoming a director of the Bank of the United States in 1832. He remained until 1836, when he permanently relocated his family to a house he built in Morristown, New Jersey. In her biography of Colles, De Forest mentions favorite belongings of her grandfather that he collected in New Orleans and Europe. Among them is the "old Spanish chair" obtained sometime after his arrival in 1818:

After all this excitement was over we can imagine James Colles settling down to the leisurely habits which were his in later life, sitting, not in one of the high back chairs, but in the comfortable leather covered Spanish chair which he so loved and which probably had been brought from Mexico and bought by him in New Orleans. Here he smoked cigars, of which he never removed the ash, but let it besprinkle his coat and vest as it would. Here he read the "London Times, Weekly Edition," to which he had subscribed after his return home so that he might be kept in touch with things foreign.14

A photograph of about 1875 shows this chair on the
piazza of the family's Morristown home (Figure 8). Later, nine replicas were painstakingly executed for Colles's children and grandchildren by New York cabinetmaker and restorer Ernest F. Hagen (1830–1913), who had special tools made with which to reproduce the intricate patterns on the leather upholstery (Figure 9). Emily de Forest inherited the original chair from her mother. Its aged appearance owes in part to many years of use, both indoors and on the porch of the De Forests' Cold Spring Harbor home on Long Island.

In the same period when James Colles obtained his Campeche, cotton planter James Jackson (d. 1840), builder of the Forks of Cypress, a peripteral manse in Florence, Alabama, purchased an almost identical chair in New Orleans (Figure 10). The Jackson chair remains in the collection of James's great-grandson Admiral Alexander Jackson Jr., of Orange, Virginia. Despite the loss of its original leather upholstery, it matches the Metropolitan Museum's chair in details of construction, marquetry, and parquetry (with minor variations in wood color and parquetry banding), suggesting that the two came from the same workshop; its better-preserved features give an impression of the original appearance of the Museum's chair. Subtle differences in ornament and tool marks on the frames of the chairs reflect hand craftsmanship rather than group manufacture. The marquetry patera seen on the Jackson crest rail is identical to that of the Metropolitan's Campeche, although the crest has a narrower parquetry border that accommodates only half of the herringbone design seen on the Metropolitan's
Figure 10. Campeche armchair. Probably Mexican, ca. 1820. Mahogany and mahogany veneer, light and dark wood inlay, replaced leather seat, brass tacks; 99.1 x 68.3 x 69.9 cm. Collection of Admiral Alexander Jackson Jr., Orange, Virginia (photo: The Museum of Early Southern Decorative Arts, Winston-Salem, North Carolina)

Figure 11. Detail of the Campeche armchair in Figure 10, showing the crest rail (photo: The Museum of Early Southern Decorative Arts, Winston-Salem, North Carolina)

Figure 12. Detail of the Campeche armchair in Figure 10, showing the arms and armrest supports (photo: The Museum of Early Southern Decorative Arts, Winston-Salem, North Carolina)
Although portions veneers crest seat similar terminations Metropolitan hereinafter illustrated a dark pieces nance there of chair crest (compare Figures 6, 11). The arms of both pieces are supported by turned elements in the shape of a neoclassical urn and column (compare Figures 7, 12). On top of the arms the same figured mahogany veneers and parquetry bands of sequential light and dark squares follow the outline of the arms’ inner and outer curves.

Though both of these Campeche chairs inlaid with a flower-basket design were purchased in New Orleans, there has been no evidence to suggest their provenance until now. Another example from Campeche, illustrated by Carlos de Ovando in Artes de México—hereinafter called the Ovando chair—is sufficiently similar to suggest a Mexican source (Figure 13). Although its dimensions are not available, the Ovando seat exhibits very similar proportions to those of the Metropolitan and Jackson chairs. Physical characteristics common to all three include the melon-shaped crest rail with marquetry bouquet of flowers and border of inlaid bands, the curved shape of the arms terminating in squared-off ends, and the fine ring turnings decorating the armrest supports. The lower portions of the Ovando chair’s armrest supports appear to be attached to the seat rails with a sliding dovetail joint in similar fashion to the Metropolitan and Jackson pieces.

Distinguishing features of the Ovando chair are bulb-shaped armrest supports, massive stretchers, pike-tipped finials, and embossed leather seat, all typical of Mexican furniture. It is inlaid more ornately as well, not only on the arms and crest rail but also on its finial bases and arched legs. Although the inlay materials cannot be determined from the photograph, they may be ivory, bone, mother-of-pearl, or tortoiseshell. Its elliptical marquetry patera is surrounded by a parquetry border of alternating light and dark squares; the patera contains a bountiful bouquet (with a blooming rose, daffodils, and palm foliage) but no basket. Beneath the bouquet appears a letter or pair of initials, possibly “CW,” underscored by a row of beading or a zigzag line.

Another important aspect of the Ovando chair is its Mexican eagle—embossed leather seat. Two Campeches in Louisiana collections have similar seats embossed with American eagles (see Figure 37). Unlike the abstractly patterned leather on the Metropolitan Museum’s Campeche, the Ovando seat is decorated around its edges with a vinelike scroll interspersed with small flowers. In a square in the middle of the back is a Mexican eagle, easily distinguished from an American eagle: instead of shield, olive branch, and arrows, the Mexican bird carries a serpent in its mouth and stands on a nopal, or prickly-pear cactus.

James Madison’s Campeche chair (Figure 1) may be understood as part of the same stylistic grouping as the flower-basket chairs. Closely resembling them in proportion and construction, the Madison chair has a demilune crest rail with single-band border, unembellished patera, and carved finials. Its wavy arms terminate in carved, folded-under scrolls of which the blunt, squared-off ends of the flower-basket chairs’ arms may be derivations. The Madison Campeche is upholstered with a patterned leather seat, as are the Ovando and Metropolitan chairs. These resemblances raise the possibility that the Madison chair may also be from Mexico. Indeed, it may be the original chair purchased in New Orleans in 1819 by Thomas Bolling Robertson for Jefferson and hence the Virginia prototype copied at the Monticello joinery.

**The Development of the Curule Chair**

The Campeche form is a modern version of the curule-base chair, which is itself descended from the X-frame folding stool of ancient Egypt. According
Figure 14. Folding stool. Egyptian, ca. 1550–1500 B.C. Leather, wood (cypress or acacia), bronze; h. 35.6 cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Rogers Fund, 1912 (12.182.58)

Figure 15. Tutankhamun’s throne. Egyptian, Thebes, ca. 1336–1327 B.C. Ebony, ivory, semiprecious stones or glass, gold mounts; h. 102 cm. Egyptian Museum, Cairo (T.T.351) (photo: Harry Burton, The Metropolitan Museum of Art)

Figure 16. Black-figured neck-amphora. Greek, Medea Group, ca. 520 B.C. Terracotta, h. 31.2–31.9 cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Fletcher Fund, 1956 (56.171.21)

to Ole Wanscher’s classic study *Sella curulis, the Folding Stool: An Ancient Symbol of Dignity,* the X-frame folding seat appeared first in the ancient Near East and was later adopted and refined in Egypt. Similar forms emerged elsewhere, though most did not develop the S-curve configuration that typifies the curule base. Though the X-frame may originally have lent itself to folding and portability, Wanscher explains that not all X-frames folded.

In Egyptian culture, the humble X-frame seat came to function in an official and ceremonial capacity. It was associated with persons of status—priests, scribes, and the architects who oversaw the building of pyramids and temples. Examples of Egyptian X-frame furniture have been preserved by the dry climate of underground tombs. One wooden folding stool of about 1550 to 1500 B.C. and probably from the site of Rifa retains its original leather seat and has bronze rivets that hold the crossed legs together (Figure 14).

Eventually, the X-frame served as the stylistic foundation for pharaoh’s throne. An impressive example, the ebony seat of Tutankhamun (Figure 15), is richly embellished with gold mounts and inlay of ivory, lapis lazuli, and other semiprecious stones or glass. The X-frame design qualifies the aristocratic image of this
magnificent throne by evoking its utilitarian origins, an ambiguity shared by its latter-day descendant, the American Campeche chair.

To the Egyptian folding X-frame, the Greeks added more elaborately carved and curved legs, characteristically inverted lion’s and S-curved legs. No original Greek folding stools or fragments have survived, but extant reliefs and vase paintings provide information about them. A black-figured neck-amphora of about 520 B.C. in the Metropolitan Museum depicts Herakles gripping Triton, the fishtailed son of Poseidon and Amphitrite, in a stranglehold (Figure 16). In this ren-
dering, Nereus sits nearby on a lion-legged campstool based on the X-frame form. The Greeks’ progression from rectilinear to curved base was probably driven by aesthetic considerations rather than any technical requirements of construction or use, though the curved base increased the X-frame’s weight-bearing capacity. It is also important to mention an Assyrian relief of about 690–620 B.C. from the Palace of Sennacherib, now in the collection of the British Museum (Figure 17). The panel shows, among other spoils from a Chaldean conquest, a table that establishes the existence of S-curved legs even before their appearance in Greek art.

The Romans, who seem to have inherited the curule base from the Etruscans, disseminated their sella curulis, or magistrate’s chair, throughout the empire. The sella curulis, another descendant of the pristine Egyptian cross-frame, likewise carried the symbolism of rank and authority. It was featured, for example, on Roman coins and medals. The reverse of a Roman sestertius (Figure 18) has a profile of Emperor Nero (r. A.D. 54–68) seated on a sella curulis, thereby emphasizing his supremacy.

The sella curulis was imported into Byzantine culture, where it continued to function as a sign of political puissance. Evidence that it evolved early into full chair format is supplied by a relief on a Roman sarcophagus of about A.D. 300, with Greek inscriptions, found near the port of Ostia (Figure 19). A Greek physician wearing a himation is shown sitting on a small chair with curule base. Bleeding basin, instrument case, surgical tools, and scrolls identify his profession. His seat is an ingenious combination of curule base and upright back support, similar to the Campeche chair minus the reclining back. Another chiseled interpretation of the sella curulis, also with a back, appears on a Roman-Iberian funerary stele from the province of Burgos, Spain (Figure 20).

A seventh-century Early Christian ivory relief of Saint Peter dictating the Gospel to Saint Mark (Figure 21) also may be seen as a step in the development of the Campeche form. The backrest of Saint Peter’s cathedra (see note 38) suggests fabrication from one piece of wood that extends through the seat into the front leg, joined to a second piece that forms part of the seat and the rear leg. These two pieces form a curule-base chair, the earliest depiction we have found of such an ensemble. Another curule-base cathedra, also with dolphin-shaped armrests, appears in the Carrand Diptych, in the Bargello, Florence (Figure 22).

By the Renaissance, two curule-base chair types existed in Europe, both descendants of the sella curulis. The first, a more archaic cross-constructed type with laterally positioned curule-base, may be seen in The
Figure 23. Cosimo Tura (Ferrarese, ca. 1430–1495). The Circumcision, 1470s. Oil on wood, diam. 38.7 cm. The Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Boston (P1559) (photo: Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum)

Figure 24. Florentine school. Personification of Florence, reverse of a medal commemorating Cosimo de’ Medici the Elder, 1465–69. Bronze, diam. 76 mm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Bequest of Anne D. Thomson, 1923 (23.280.25)

Circumcision, a tondo by Cosimo Tura (Figure 23). The Madonna’s curule-base chair has round finials and tined legs. Another fifteenth-century example, perhaps meant to represent a sella curulis, is shown on the reverse of a commemorative Florentine medal struck in honor of Cosimo de’ Medici the Elder (1349–1464) and depicting a personification of Florence (Figure 24). The silla franca, or “French seat,” possibly a Spanish adaptation of the French perroquet, was another basic X-frame that may have been constructed with a lateral curule base. Often referred to in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Spanish inventories, the silla franca appears twice in the woodcut frontispiece of a book of sermons by Iohannis Fabri (Johann Faber, theologian [1478–1541]) entitled Sermones Fructuosissimi . . . Item, Oratio Funeris in Laudem D. Margaretae (1537). In both images a cleric is shown seated in such a chair, indicating that its magisterial uses were religious as well as temporal (Figure 25).

Figure 25. Frontispiece of Iohannis Fabri, Sermones Fructuosissimi . . . Item, Oratio Funeris in Laudem D. Margaretae (1537). Among the illustrations are two that show a cleric seated in a silla franca (photo: L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah)

Figure 27. Hip-joint armchair (sillón de cadera). Spanish, Granada, ca. 1500. Walnut, ivory, bone, mother-of-pearl, tin; 95.3 x 68.6 cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Fletcher Fund, 1945 (45.60.40a).

Figure 28. Giulio Romano (Italian, 1492/99–1546). Alexander the Great Concedes His Throne to a Soldier, ca. 1530–34. Pen and brown ink over traces of black chalk; 26.8 x 33.5 cm. Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, Maitland F. Griggs, B.A. 1896 and Everett V. Meeks, B.A. 1901 Funds (1976.91) (photo: Yale University Art Gallery).
The second Renaissance type is a chair with a front-placed curule, called in Spanish a silla de cadera ("hip-joint" chair). Wanscher says that the radical shift of the curule from the sides to the front of the seat was a medieval (Carolingian) development. These chairs were upholstered with patterned leather or fabrics such as velvet, and the frames were sometimes decorated with carving and inlay. A portrait by Gerlach Fliche of Thomas Cranmer (1489–1556), archbishop of Canterbury under Henry VIII, shows the prelate seated on a silla de cadera exquisitely inlaid with kaleidoscopic stars and a diaper pattern on the inside and outside of the arms (Figure 26). The Metropolitan Museum of Art possesses a chair quite similar to the one in the painting (Figure 27). Giulio Romano's depiction of the form as a throne in Alexander the Great Concedes His Throne to a Soldier of about 1530 also suggests its close association with official rank and high social status (Figure 28). Another sixteenth-century Italian (?) chair with a front-placed curule in the Metropolitan Museum (Figure 29) is elaborately inlaid with an Islamic star motif and has curved and tined legs similar to those on some X-frame chairs from antiquity.

Both the silla de cadera and the silla francesa were brought to the New World by the Spanish conquistadors. During his conquest of Mexico (1519–21), Hernán Cortés gave gifts to the Aztecs, among them a curule-base chair. The transfer of this type of chair to the Americas as a symbol of burgeoning Spanish hegemony parallels the spread of the sella curulis throughout the Roman-Byzantine Empire. Mexican furniture historian Antonio Francisco Garabana has observed:

The furniture commonly used in XVI Century Mexico was Spanish in style, but as adapted by native craftsmen, it acquired individual characteristics. Popular at the beginning of the colonial era were bargueños, chests, beds, benches, chairs, tables, braziers, trunks, boxes, and carved frames. The codices [early colonial written texts] give us an idea of the forms of this furniture, little of which has survived. The folding hip-chair was among the gifts that Cortés sent Moctezuma [emperor of the Aztecs] from San Juan de Ulúa. It is probably the most ancient type of Spanish chair of which we have examples, and it was often pictured in the codices.

Abelardo Carrillo y Gariel describes in greater detail the occasion on which Cortés sent a silla de cadera to Montezuma as a symbol of Spanish might.

Easter Sunday of the year 1519 was a historic day in the chronology of [Mexican] household furniture since on that day while Cortés was in San Juan de Ulúa, the emissaries of the king of Mexico [Montezuma] went to bring him supplies and rich presents. Later, Cortés ordered to be brought, together with other objects, a hip-joint armchair with painted engravings... and later told Tendile [Montezuma's governor] to send such a chair for Montezuma to sit in when he went to see and speak with him. This chair then is the first European piece of furniture to arrive in these parts. But one should not forget that these hip-joint chairs, whose individuality is typified by having backs and arms in their characteristic form, were luxury furniture. Even Cortés, who knew how to flaunt his power, liked to be seen seated in one of these chairs as a fabulous celebrity. That is how Andrés de Duero and his companions found him when they went to kiss his hands after the defeat of Pánfilo de Narváez such that when he received them he was "seated in a hip-joint chair in long robes of an orange-like color with his arms [weaponry] beneath accompanied by us," wrote Bernal Díaz de Castillo. These chairs were merchandise for importation to the Americas of the 1500s and were brought all the way from the peninsula to these regions by the vessels of the Carrera de las Indias. That is how it is
deduced that in signaling the number of tons and the class of cargo these types of vessels could carry, among them are mentioned sheets of steel, wrought iron, barrels of olives, bottles of vinegar, oil, ham, etc., and included “twenty hip-joint chairs unassembled and in crates, one ton.”

A sixteenth-century codex illustration (Figure 30) shows Cortés grandly seated in a hip-joint chair.

The sixteenth-century engraver and publisher Théodore de Bry included illustrations of the sillon de cadera in New World settings in the sixth volume of his Naturalis ac Moralis Indiae Occidentalis Historiae (1596). De Bry based his detailed depictions on the accounts of Ondegardus, who wrote about Peru; of Ioannes de Touar, the head of the Mexican church, who wrote about Mexico; and of Viceroy Don Martín Henríques, who drew upon ancient Indian annals. His text and illustrations were intended to appeal to a European public curious about the Spanish discoveries and conquests. That De Bry included many images of the sillon de cadera in his evocative visual descriptions of events in the history of the conqueror of Peru, Fran-
Theodore de Bry (Flemish, 1528–1598). Engraving. Pizarro in Hispaniam navigat. & ejus Regionis, quam detexerat, Praefecturam impetrat (reproduced from Théodore de Bry, Conquistadores, Aztecs, and Incas [Amsterdam, 1980])

This indicates, not surprisingly, that the native American peoples adopted Spanish furniture designs.

The Campeche chair may have originated from modifications of two forms, the silla francesa and sillon de cadera. According to Carrillo y Gariel: “Spanish chairs of the 1500s were an extension of Italian chairs, particularly the kinds known today as Savonarola and Dantesque. But because the French chair was lighter and more comfortable, it was soon preferred, even in New Spain. One of the characteristics of the chairs used in New Spain in the sixteenth century, according to the codices, was that the arches formed by the legs were almost always lateral.”46 Carrillo y Gariel adds that “chairs of this kind have inherited their shape from the scissor chairs, but they are not foldable. The fully developed arms extend from the back, which is now quite high on these big chairs.”47 This could be a description of the Campeche chair. While the exact source of their design is uncertain, Campeche chairs and related versions may be found in many places that the Spanish colonized.

It is important to note that contemporary texts do not refer to sixteenth-century Spanish armchairs as butacas, but rather as sillones or sillas. Coined in the seventeenth century as a colloquial term for chairs made in the Americas, the word butaca was brought back to Spain and entered the Castilian lexicon.48

A New Chair for a New World: The March Chair

Neither the sillon de cadera nor the silla francesa had an ergonomic sling seat, the quintessential feature of the Campeche chair. The combination of a sling seat
and a curule base—a refinement of the reclining X-frame—was made possible by the innovative use of a half-lap joint where the front leg and upper seat rail are connected to the back leg and lower seat rail to form a curved frame. Reclining X-frame chairs were widespread by the time of the Renaissance; there are several sixteenth-century examples at the monastery-palace of Philip II at El Escorial, near Madrid, including a leather-upholstered Spanish one and two Chinese imports with yoke backs. The sling seat may have been devised by Spanish colonial craftsmen who, in collaboration with native people in the New World, produced a harmonious convergence of Continental and indigenous styles.

Although its existence is recorded in ivory and stone carvings, no example of a sling-seat chair with a side-placed curule earlier than the eighteenth century survives. The oldest extant example of such a form is traceable to Spain, and it bears an ornate guadamacil (tooled leather) seat (Figure 32). This sophisticated chair has been recorded in the March collection on Majorca, in the Balearic Islands. Luis M. Feduchi describes it as a “[s]ill6n de influencia Francesa” (“armchair from the last third of the seventeenth century. An uncommon type of Spanish workmanship. The carving is influenced by French work”). It is a remarkable hybrid, combining design elements drawn from many sources: ancient Roman (curule base), Renaissance (egg-and-dart and acanthus motifs carved on the demilune crest rail), Baroque (Rococo details), and Hispano-Moresque (the patterned leather and the finials). Baroque influence is manifest in the elaborately carved, shell-shaped crest rail and sloped curvilinear arms. These details imply that a more accurate date for the March chair would be early-to-mid-eighteenth century.

Figure 32. Butaca, ca. 1730. Materials and dimensions unrecorded (reproduced from Rafael Doménech Galíssá and Luis Pérez Bueno, Antique Spanish Furniture, trans. Grace Hardendorff Burr [Barcelona, 1921; 1st Eng. ed., New York, 1965], fig. 29, as in March collection, Palma de Mallorca)

Figure 33. Campeche armchair (boutaque). Probably American, Louisiana, early nineteenth century. Cherry wood, leather; 88.3 x 64.8 x 71.1 cm. Collection of Peter W. Patout, New Orleans, Louisiana (photo: Gary M. Gittelson, New Orleans)
In an article of August 1927 in the *Magazine Antiques* Joan Sacs wrote of the March chair, “[A]lthough it could well enough be assigned to the eighteenth century, [it] is a hybrid type never to disappear from the repertory of Spanish chairs. It is guadamacil.”54 In the picture caption, Sacs explained, “Back and seat in stamped leather. This type of chair covers a considerable period of time.”55 Her identification of the leather as Spanish guadamacil and her assertion that the form of the March chair had been in use in Spain for a lengthy period point to the conclusion that the March chair is Spanish and that therefore the roots of the Campeche chair design brought to Louisiana from Mexico lie in Spain. Chairs, however, were brought back and forth between the New World and Spain, and the March chair is perhaps the product of European influences on colonial craftsmanship.56 The latest compendium of the decorative arts in Spain, volume 45 of *Summa artis: Historia general del arte*, asserts that the March chair originated on the Caribbean coast.57 It is remarkably similar in its finials, wavy arms, demilune crest rail, and reclining seat to a Campeche chair in a New Orleans collection, implying that the form may have originated in the New World (Figure 33).58

The close similarities between the March chair and the cathedra of Saint Peter in the Early Christian ivory relief (Figure 21) demonstrate that the curule-base chair has weathered many centuries of stylistic change, surviving on account of the adaptability of its design. Traces of aesthetic contributions from vastly different cultures—the Renaissance-style carvings and the embossed Hispano-Moresque leather—are conjoined gracefully in the March chair’s simple wood structure. The Greek klismos,59 by contrast, was never adopted by another culture or ornamented in such a way and became extinct, only to be revived centuries later in the neoclassical period.

A German engraving titled *Creolentanz zu Cumana* (Creoles Dancing in Cumana) shows that the Campeche form existed in the nineteenth century in Venezuela (Figure 34).60 At the left two harp players recline in butacas as they pluck the strings of their instruments, while nearby figures entertain a seated couple by singing and dancing. Although the X-frame chair was a symbol of lofty status beginning in antiquity, here it is the musicians who occupy curule-base chairs, which have been modified by the addition of a reclining back. The higher social standing of the man and woman seated at the right is evident in their dress and bearing. Their elegant, upright, straight-legged chairs seem suited to them, just as the reclining curule-base Campeches are to the musicians. Although the engraving indicates that the Campeche chair was used for informal seating, its versatility transcended social boundaries. It is, however, associated with a tropical climate, such as exists in the Caribbean islands, Latin America, and the southern United States, where great heat invites recumbent posture.

Figure 34. *Creolentanz zu Cumana*, nineteenth century. Engraving. 10.2 x 12.4 cm (reproduction courtesy of Carlos F. Duarte, Caracas, Venezuela; printed source unknown)
Figure 35. "Campeachy" armchair. Probably New Orleans, Louisiana (frame), and Mexico (upholstery), ca. 1825. Mahogany, wood inlay, leather seat, brass tacks; 110.5 x 73.7 x 80 cm. Collection of the Louisiana State Museum, New Orleans (1997.001.01) (photo: Sotheby's, New York)

New Orleans

Transplanted from Latin America into the plantation society of the United States, the Campeche chair, a descendant of the movable thrones of kings, emperors, and conquerers, entered into a new cultural landscape. Having lost its association with political power, it became a comfortable seat for the bourgeois planter. Two plantation-house inventories, taken in 1835 at Traveller's Rest, Nashville, Tennessee, and in 1848 at Oak Alley, Vacherie, Louisiana, document the use of these chairs in Southern households. An 1848 inventory of the Roman and Kernion New Orleans warehouse contains the line "[u]ne boutaque estimée une piastre," followed by a declared value of one American dollar.

A Campeche chair of about 1820 in the collection of the Louisiana State Museum at the Old Mint in New Orleans (Figure 35), probably crafted in Louisiana, may be seen as a derivative of the Mexican flower-basket group, to which the Metropolitan Museum's Campeche belongs. The central motif of the inlay in the circular reserve of the melon-shaped crest rail is a bird, possibly a heron, shown catching a fish (Figure 36). Arched quarter-fans punctuate either side of the crest rail, and a crudely worked (or damaged) diamond-inlaid crest spans its edge. The workmanship of the crest rail is not particularly fine, and its overall shape lacks the crisp, well-proportioned outlines of the flower-basket chairs' crest rails, although it recalls them in overall style and composition.

The leather upholstery, almost certainly of Mexican
workmanship, is embellished with a blossoming-vine pattern around its perimeter. The pattern is nearly identical to that on the Ovando chair (see Figure 13), except that it is embossed with an American rather than a Mexican eagle at the center of the back (Figure 37). The decorative inlays of the crest rail are subtly echoed on the lower register of its upholstered seat by a motif consisting of four quarter-fans (one at each corner of a square) and a central roundel. This pattern is frequently found on Mexican furniture and the leather of numerous boutique chairs in Louisiana.

Thomas Jefferson’s use and reproduction of the Campeche chair at Monticello signal the arrival of the form in Virginia, the northernmost border of plantation society, and may have been a springboard for the production of the form in the furniture-making centers of Philadelphia and New York. Campeche chairs from Mexico inspired the manufacture of “Spanish chairs” altered to reflect the prevailing American Classical taste. The Philadelphia Cabinet and Chair Maker’s Union Book of Prices for Manufacturing Cabinet Ware of 1828 records “[a] plain Spanish Chair, arm 7/8 stuff, supported by turned stumps, three turned stretchers, plain straight top rail—two dollars and twenty-five cents.” This suggests that the Campeche chair owned by Franklin Bache (1792–1864), Benjamin Franklin’s great-grandson, was made in Philadelphia (Figure 38). No references to “Spanish chairs” appear in any New York price book known to this writer, although in 1839 “[Number] 558 six Spanish chairs” was described in the Judges’ Reports of the Twelfth Annual Fair of the American Institute of the City of New York as “entitled to notice.” The judges were known for their appreciation of innovative design. In October 1844, the “Judges on Cabinet Furniture” of the Fourteenth Annual Fair described entry number 1513, consisting of “2 Cottage chairs, one Spanish,” as “objects of ordinary manufacture.”

Designs of Furniture, published by the London cabinetmakers and upholsterers William Smee and Sons in 1830, advertised a “Rosewood Spanish Lounge Chair Frame” and on castors. The caption explains that these chairs were also available in mahogany, either “stuff’d ready for covering” or

Figure 38. “Campechy” armchair. Probably Philadelphia, ca. 1830. Mahogany, leather; 95.3 x 58.1 x 78.7 cm. Private collection (photo: Winterthur Museum)

“stuff’d in morocco leather” (Figure 39). These upholstered forms illustrate how the Campeche chair was adapted to meet Victorian requirements with the addition of padded seats and arms. A more extensive listing of the prices for “A Spanish Chair” and “A Cross Side Spanish Chair,” accompanied by an illustration (Plate Three), appears in the Third Supplement to the London Chair-Makers’ Book of Prices of 1844 (Figures 40, 41).  

**The Barcelona Chair**

Ludwig Mies van der Rohe may have been inspired by nineteenth-century “Spanish chair” design literature, such as that quoted above, when he executed a commission to build the German Pavilion for the 1929 Barcelona International Exhibition. Rather than rely upon German structural precedents, the architect fashioned his pavilion according to the newly estab-
lished principles of modernism, emphasizing function over indulgent artifice. His celebrated MR 90 Barcelona Chair represents the latest moment in the metamorphosis of the ancient X-frame form (Figure 42). The proximate source of Mies van der Rohe’s inspiration for the Barcelona chair is unknown. When asked about it in the early 1960s, he explained, “I knew that King Alfonso XIII would be visiting the pavilion at the opening of the World Fair, so I designed the Barcelona chair for a King.” It may well be that Mies was aware of the role of the X-frame as a throne in pharaonic Egypt. The chair’s leather seat (originally white, with matching stool) was more likely a subtle homage to Spain.

THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM’S CAMPECHE CHAIR

The Metropolitan Museum Campeche belongs to a set of distinctive flower-basket chairs of apparent Mexican origin. The Campeche form may be seen as the penultimate link in a chain of design that stretches back in history. A simple, agrarian folding stool came to assume lineaments of power and authority as its form was adapted and refined in successive civilizations. Transplanted by Cortés and others to the New World, it flourished, eventually winning the admiration of planters, businessmen, and statesmen. Grafting a more relaxed and modern sling seat onto the curule base resulted in a substantial contribution to American furniture.

APPENDIX: THOMAS JEFFERSON’S CORRESPONDENCE ON THE SUBJECT OF CAMPECHE CHAIRS

At the time of his correspondence with Thomas Jefferson cited below Thomas Bolling Robertson was attorney general of Louisiana. A Virginia native, he had served as secretary of the Territory of New Orleans (1807) and as Louisiana’s first representative in the House (1819). On August 2, 1819, he wrote to Jefferson, who was then living in retirement at Monticello:

Since I was sent to this country by you in the year 1807 as Secretary of the territory of New Orleans I have held several important offices and have traveled a great deal. As a servant of the public I have acquired no name, but am content as I have escaped censure, and am willing to believe that I desired neither the one nor the other. I continued in Congress until ill health and a certain insipidity of wants induced me to retire. I am now again in New Orleans. I hold the appointment of Attorney General and pursue my professional avocation with industry. My travels have been confined principally to our frontier states and territories but in the recess of Congress of 1815 I crossed the Atlantic and visited England and France. The period was singularly interesting and I transmit to you a small volume of letters written to my father from Paris during my short residence in that city. If you think it worthwhile to cast your eye over it I hope you will give it the advantage of an agreeable attitude while seated in your Campeachy chair. Many years ago you asked me to send you a few of these chairs; embargo, war, the infrequency of communication between N. O. and the ports of Virginia and my being in Congress prevented me from complying with your request. Meeting with two some weeks ago on the Levee and hearing that there was a vessel then up for Richmond I had them put on board; one I sent to my father and the other to you, two men on earth whom I most highly respect. I hope it may answer your expectations; if you wish for more I can now at any time procure and forward them to you. I heard with much concern of your having received some personal injury at the fire (?) which happened at Monticello some months ago. I hope you have recovered, and that you now enjoy your usual good health. Be pleased to remember me to Mr. Randolph and his family and receive the assurances with which I am respectfully and faithfully your obedient servant

Thos. B. Robertson

On November 7, 1819, Jefferson replied:

I have to thank you for the copy of your letters from Paris. I had read most of them in the newspapers, but have read them all again with additional pleasure. They contain the expressions of reason and of genuine Americanism revolted at the servility of the European character so degraded by their slavish forms of government. Accept my thanks also for the Campeachy chair which you have been so kind as to send to me, the arrival of which in Richmond is announced to me in a letter from your father. Age, its infirmities and frequent illnesses have rendered indulgence in that easy kind of chair truly acceptable. I learned with great regret your intention of retiring from Congress. . . .

On the eve of his retirement from the presidency, Jefferson had ordered two “Campeachy hammocks” from William Brown, collector of customs for the District of Mississippi, in New Orleans. Jefferson made a duplicate of the letter he sent to Brown on August 18, 1808, from Monticello (Figure 43):

Mrs. Trist, who is now here and in good health, informs me that the Campeachy hamock, made of some vegetable substance netted, is commonly to be had at New Orleans. [H]aving no mercantile corre-
spondent there I take the liberty of asking you to procure me a couple of them and to address them to New York, Philadelphia, or any port in the Chesapeake, to the care of the Collector, being so good as to note to me the cost which shall be remitted. [A]ccept my salutations and assurances of esteem.

Thomas Jefferson

The word “hammock” also appears on cargo manifests of ships from Campeche; whether it refers to a traditional hammock or the sling-seated Campeche chair upholstered with hammock-like netting is not known. “Hammocks” are recorded as a separate item from armchairs on a number of cargo manifests examined by this author; they must have also been a popular import (see Figure 2). Whether Jefferson intended to order hammocks from Campeche or mistakenly referred to Campeche chairs in this letter as “hammocks” is uncertain. Though unlikely, his phrase “made of some vegetable substance netted” may have referred to caning or rush seating. Jefferson had encountered caned chairs in Europe and in America and owned some.

Brown responded to Jefferson’s request in a letter from New Orleans dated October 10, 1808 (Figure 44):
which I pray your acceptance of . . . in the Schooner Sampson . . . . 78

The receipt for this purchase, from Gilbert H. Smith to William Brown dated October 6, 1808, appears among Jefferson's papers (Figure 45). It lists "One Bundle, One Small Trunk, and one barrel-pacans."79 That no "armchair" or "boutaque" (see note 5) is mentioned on the receipt suggests that Jefferson perhaps did mistakenly order hammocks from New Orleans in 1808, and not chairs as previously thought. Hammocks could have been rolled up into the "one bundle" listed on the purchase receipt.

Martha Jefferson Randolph wrote to her father on February 17, 1809, regarding the whereabouts of the hammocks:

Mrs. Trist wrote to beg I would ask you if some hammocks that William Brown had sent her directed to you had arrived. There were three of them, one for yourself, one for Mr. Randolph and a third for her. There was also a barrel of Peccans. The hammocks were from Campeachy and were sent in the month of October so William Brown wrote to Mrs. Trist, directed to you, but she never heard of their arrival. If I have time to write by Isaac Coles to Botidoux will you be so good as to let me know? This is written in the midst of the children with never less than three talking to me at once which is sufficient apology for the many inaccuracies in it for they really distract me with their noise and incessant questions.80

Jefferson answered from Washington, D.C., on February 27, 1809:

The schooner Sampson, Capt. Smith with the Campeachy hammocks &c. owned in this place, left N. Orleans for this destination about the 6th of October, as the Captain's receipt, forwarded to me shews: and has never been heard of since. No doubt remains here of her being lost with every person and thing on board her. Mr. Coles will leave this about the 9th of March. Consequently if you will write to Botedour by the return of post, it will find him here, as it will myself.81

Jefferson acknowledged the disappearance of the hammocks in a letter written at Monticello to William Brown on May 22, 1809:

My own situation and the active occupations to which it has given occasion must be my apology for this late acknowledgement of the receipt of your favor of Oct. 10 informing me you had been so kind as to send me some articles on the Schooner Sampson Capt. Smith [T]he answer was deferred long in expectation of her arrival, and that becoming at length desperate, my removal from Washington and the preparation for it suspended for a considerable time all correspondence which could bear delay. The concern for the loss of the articles shipped is deliberated by the deeper regret for the loss of the unfortunate persons who were on the vessel. . . . I embrace this occasion too of returning you my thanks for the many attentions you have been so good as to show on the several occasions of shipments to me which have passed through your hands. . . .

Thos. Jefferson.82

As a result of these exchanges, some confusion has arisen over the date of Jefferson's first request and receipt of a Campeche chair. On August 24, 1819, he wrote a letter to Martha Jefferson Randolph from his secondary residence, Poplar Forest, requesting that a "Siesta chair" crafted by John Hemings be sent to him from Monticello:

I am much recovered from my rheumatism, altho' the swellings are not entirely abated, nor the pains quite ceased. It has been the most serious attack of that disease I ever had. While too weak to sit up all day, and afraid to increase the weakness by lying down, I long for a Siesta chair which would have admitted the medium position. I must therefore pray you to send one by Henry the one made by Johnny Hemings. If it is the one Mrs. Trist would chuse, it will be so far on it's way, if not, the wagon may bring hers when it comes at Christmas. John or Wormly should wrap it well with a straw rope, and then bow'd up in a blanket.83

That Jefferson requested a "Siesta chair" for his comfort at Poplar Forest nearly three months before he
thanked Thomas Bolling Robertson for sending him a Mexican Campeche does not necessarily indicate that the president owned a Campeche or had one replicated at his own joinery at Monticello before the arrival of Robertson’s gift. That he did has been the popular but unfounded assumption.84 In an article of 1998 on the Monticello joinery, Robert L. Self and Susan R. Stein proposed that “a campeche chair apparently made its way to Jefferson in the interim because Monticello joiners produced at least one or possibly more “Siesta” chairs before the chair from Robertson arrived”.85 However, there is no evidence to support Jefferson’s ownership of a Campeche prior to the arrival of Robertson’s shipment in 1819. The president’s use of the term “Siesta chair” in his August 24, 1819, letter is regrettably ambiguous and cannot easily be construed to denote a Campeche. It seems altogether possible that the two chairs Robertson sent to his father and Jefferson were the first Campeches to arrive in Virginia.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I wish to thank Barry Harwood and Peter M. Kenny, who advised me on my thesis on the Campeche chair for the Parsons/Cooper-Hewitt, National Design Museum Masters Program in the History of Decorative Arts. I am grateful to James David Draper, Johanna Hecht, and others in the Department of European Sculpture and Decorative Arts at The Metropolitan Museum of Art, David and Cathy Gontar, Michael Lodwick, and Daniel Rodgers for their encouragement and support during the preparation of this article.

NOTES


2. Today there are six “Campechy” chairs in the Monticello collection. Each is historically connected to Monticello in some way, either by construction or by provenance. On the basis of the use of indigenous Virginia wood (white ash) and construction details, Monticello historians infer that two of the chairs—known as Jefferson–Cocke II and Jefferson–Trist—were made at the joinery by John Hemings (1776–ca.1830). Jefferson–Cocke II is a replica of the Campeche chair in the James Madison Museum, Orange, Virginia (Figure 1). Jefferson–Trist, which has a scalloped crest rail, is connected to Poplar Forest, Jefferson’s second home, near Lynchburg, Virginia, and may have been sent there; it has an identical counterpart, yet to be documented, in a private collection; see Robert L. Self and Susan R. Stein, “The Collaboration of Thomas Jefferson and John Hemings: Furniture Attributed to the Monticello Joinery,” Winterthur Portfolio 35 (winter 1998), pp. 231–48. Two others, one with an elongated back discovered in the Mathews County, Virginia, courthouse and one with twelve inlaid stars (known as Jefferson–Blattermann), were probably locally made yet have construction details that link them to the Monticello joinery. The fifth and sixth examples are unrelated to the joinery but have a significant family connection. One has a frame with a half-round crest rail that is completely upholstered from bottom to top, and the other is a later nineteenth-century example with modern cloth upholstery and on casters.

3. See the discussion below of the flower-basket chairs, exemplified by the Ovando chair (Figure 13). The leather seat of the Madison chair bears a Mexican version of the Spanish Habsburgs’
omnipresent emblem, the double-headed eagle. I am grateful to Devon M. Thein of the Antonio Ratti Textile Center, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, whose knowledge of lace led to this insight.

4. That Madison received his Campeche chair from Jefferson is based on local oral tradition, but his use of it at Montpelier is recorded in the 1850s memoir of Mary Cutts, a frequent visitor there: "Statuary beautifully chased occupied the mantel, Mr. Madison's favorite seat was a campeachy chair; the sofas were covered with crimson damask"; Mary E. E. Cutts, Memoir, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington D.C., p. 40.

5. Butaca is a Spanish word for armchair, spelled variously as butaca, butaque, and butaquito. The word butaca came into use in the seventeenth century. Venezuelan furniture historian Carlos F. Duarte (Un asiento venezolano llamado butaca [Caracas, 1999], p. 6) explains that both the word itself and a type of Venezuelan four-legged reclining armchair of that name originated in the province of Cumaná among the Cumanagotos Indians, who used several other words as well for chair, including putaca and ture. Duarte, who has thoroughly researched the etymology of the word, informs us that:

In 1683 Friar Manuel de Yaguez published a vocabulary of the Cumanagota language compiled by Father Matias Ruiz Blanco, who himself published it again in 1690. In both publications [Ruiz Blanco] cited many words used by the Cumanagotos Indians to designate "chair": yapano, chamano, naca, and putaca. Previously, in 1680, Father Francisco de Taushe had assembled other vocabularies of the Chaimas, Cumanagotos, and other Indians from the province of Cumaná and had cited the words apanarto and zapún—undoubtedly variations of yapano—to designate the common chair, chamano, a little leather seat, and ture, a little wood chair. Among all these words, only ture and putaca were incorporated into the Castilian language in Venezuela. The word butaca later evolved into butaca. On the island of Margarita and in eastern Venezuela (as well as on the islands of Puerto Rico and Santo Domingo) the word ture designates a kind of reclining chair made of vanegua (a type of tanned calf hide). On the plains of Monagas and on the banks of the Orinoco River the chair is called turete. During the first half of the seventeenth century, many years before the appearance of the previously mentioned publications [by Yaguez and Taushe], the word butaca was already part of the ordinary speech throughout Venezuela. Furthermore, this term already had two derivatives, butaque and butaquillo, which are mentioned in several estate documents from this time in Caracas.

(translated by Jaime Lopez Pestaña)

According to Duarte, not only the word but the Spanish colonial Venezuelan butaca is denoted were inspired by indigenous X-frame forms with reclining seats. In accord with Duarte's explanation, the Diccionario de la lengua española (Madrid, 1970), p. 211, defines butaca as "Del cumanagoto putaca, asiento. 1. Silla de brazos con el respaldo inclinado hacia atrás. 2. luneta, butaca de teatro." ("From the Cumanagoto word putaca: 1. Reclining armchair. 2. 'luneta,' one of the chairs set up in rows in a theater").

In Louisiana the Campeche is often called a boutaque chair, and was so described in nineteenth-century cargo manifests (see Figure 2). The misnomer "bootjack" has appeared in some liter-
1704. The people of Campeche produced expert captains, boatswains, sailing masters, sail makers, carpenters, and crew members and sent forth many great vessels from their shipyards. Some of these ships later traveled to the port of New Orleans, where logwood was sold by the hundreds of tons. Some ships contained other goods, including Campeche chairs. In this way, the form reached New Orleans, where it came into popular use. Numerous nineteenth-century cargo manifests show that the chairs were shipped to New Orleans nearly exclusively from Campeche, where some may still be found today.

In 1777 the king of Spain bestowed upon the settlement the title of Ciudad de San Francisco de Campeche, officially declaring it a city. In 1821 Campeche declared its allegiance to Mexico, at last breaking its ties to Spain. In 1857 it took a stand against the government of Yucatán, of which it was a dependency. The insurrection was successful, and in 1863 Campeche’s statehood was ratified by President Benito Juárez; Piña Chan, “Calidez en el tiempo,” p. 87.

There is no evidence that Campeche chairs made their way up the East Coast from any American port other than New Orleans, though the merchants of New York and Newport, Rhode Island, had long conducted a flourishing trade in logwood with the Mexican cities on the Bay of Campeche. This natural resource, as Marcus Rediker (Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea: Merchant Seamen, Pirates and the Anglo-American Maritime World, 1700–1750 [New York, 1993], p. 66) observes, the Yankees “then remitted to Europe in exchange for dry goods. These latter, and many other items, were in turn transshipped to outlying regions, especially Albany, a center of the fur trade with the Mohawks and other native American tribes.” Logwood is difficult to work and seldom used for the construction of furniture, though it appears in the decorative marquetry of some eighteenth-century French furniture. It is also used to make haematoxylin, a biological stain used in microscopy. Logwood was imported by the thousands of tons from Campeche to New Orleans (see Figure 2). Today, the Bay of Campeche is known for offshore petroleum production.

7. The word “Campechy” is written for “Campeche” on numerous early-nineteenth-century cargo manifests of ships entering New Orleans from Mexico, and the name came to be applied to the imported chairs.


9. The baroness completed this sketch while returning to the United States from Barcelona. The origin of the chair is uncertain, however, since the journey was completed in several stages.


11. A Campeche with a patterned leather seat much like that of the Metropolitan’s chair exists in a private collection in Saint Francisville, Louisiana.

12. Robert W. de Forest was president of the Museum from 1913 to 1931. Mrs. de Forest was the daughter of John Taylor Johnston, president of the Museum from 1870 to 1889.


14. Ibid.

15. Ibid., pp. 260–62.

16. This information was discovered by Peter M. Kenny in “The House, 7 Washington Square, and an Inventory of Its Contents,” written by Emily de Forest, April 1928, Hagen furniture file, Department of Drawings and Prints, The Metropolitan Museum of Art. One known Hagen reproduction survives in the Holden collection, Point Coupée, Louisiana (Figure 46).


18. Carlos de Ovando, “El taracea mexicana/The Mexican Marquetry,” Artes de México, no. 118 (1969), p. 72. Ovando’s caption for this photograph (number 105 in the index of illustrations) reads “Marquetry armchair, Campeche.” He does not refer to this chair directly in the text. For a brief reference to this type of form, see Teresa Castello y Yturbi de, “El mueble popular/Regional Furniture,” Artes de México, no. 118 (1969), pp. 86–92: “[a] great variety of armchairs are found throughout Mexico. Those of Campeche are embellished with marquetry, while in Jalisco, they are of the same type but greatly simplified. In Tehuantepec, they are entirely of wood, with cross-slats forming the back and seat. Those from Veracruz at the turn-of-the-century had caned seats, making them somewhat cooler. And in Yucatán, they are made of cowhide or deerskin, and are sometimes decorated across the top with elegant low-relief carvings.”

19. Two chairs in Southern collections feature bulb-shaped armrest supports similar to the Ovando chair’s. One is in the collection of Dr. Robert Judice, Hermitage Plantation, Baton Rouge, Louisiana; the other belongs to Dr. and Mrs. Calhoun, Elgin Plantation, Natchez, Mississippi.

20. Ovando, “El taracea mexicana,” p. 72. Campeche was well known for its marquetry artisans. The Andalusian colonists, heirs to a marquetry tradition learned from the Moors, passed on the skill to Indian artisans, who in copying Spanish models added Mexican elements that gave their work a distinctive character. By the beginning of the nineteenth century, a substantial quantity of marquetry furniture was being made throughout Mexico—in Mexico City, Puebla, Tlaxcala, Oaxaca, Campeche, and Durango. The most characteristic motifs of this furniture were geometric figures and plant forms. The Campeche artisans did much of their work with shell inlay and exported many of their famed writing desks to South America. Ovando lists materials used in Mexican marquetry, but does not say which were used on the Campeche chair he illustrates.

21. One belongs to Dr. and Mrs. Wade Hollensworth, Baton Rouge, Louisiana, and the other is in the collection of the Louisiana State Museum, New Orleans (Figure 37). In addition to the American eagle, their seats are embossed with an identical flower pattern. The Mexican eagle motif on the Ovando leather seat is found inlaid in some Mexican furniture. See, for example, Abelardo Carrillo y Gariel, Evolución del mueble en Mexico (Mexico, 1957), fig. 42, which is captioned “Silla de manos que se exhibe en el Museo de Churubusco. Tanto a los lados como al frente aparece el escudo Mexicano, en este ultimo con la leyenda. IMPERIO DE MEJICO, Alrededor de 1825.”

22. The Artes de México reproduction is not very clear, but there appears to be a snake in the embossed eagle’s mouth. According to legend, the Aztec people were guided by their war god, Huitzilopochtli, to seek a place where an eagle had landed on a cactus and was eating a snake. After many years of wandering, they found the sign they sought on a small swampy island in Lake Texcoco. They named their new home Tenochtitlán, or “Place of the Prickly-Pear Cactus.” In A.D. 1325 they built a city
on the site, now at the center of Mexico City. The legendary eagle was adopted as the state emblem of Mexico in 1823, after the country achieved independence (1821). The Mexican eagle motif on the Ovando leather seat is also found inlaid in some furniture; see Carrillo y Gariel, Evolución del mueble en México, fig. 42, and n. 20.


24. Ibid., pp. 27-29, 48. Wanscher refers to the throne of Tutankhamun as a "faldstool," although it does not actually fold. According to him, the addition of a back to the Egyptian folding stool did not transform it into a seat of superior rank but did render it more imposing.


27. Wanscher, Sella curulis, p. 72. Furniture was recorded among the most valuable items seized by the Assyrians from conquered lands or accepted as tribute; see Elizabeth Simpson, "Furniture in Ancient Western Asia," in Civilizations of the Ancient Near East, vol. 3, ed. Jack M. Sasson (New York, 1995), pp. 1657-58. The curule-base table seen here in Figure 17 appears to have a top complete with a tail, a feature also seen on Egyptian X-frames with inlaid-wood seats designed to imitate animal skins. The object upon which it stands is reminiscent of Egyptian ritual beds.

28. Wanscher, Sella curulis, p. 121.

29. Ibid., pp. 121-90. The *sella curulis*, or "curule chair," was used by the Roman consuls, praetors, curule aediles, and so forth, who were hence called *magistratus curule*. The adjective *curulis* derived from *curus*, meaning "chariot." From early Republican times until the end of the Empire, Romans utilized a variety of folding *sealae curulae*, including a stool with S-curved legs, a stool with inverted lion's legs, a plain campstool, and a stool with tined legs. Their names varied with use, construction, and material: *sella regia* (royal chair) *sella ducis* (general's chair), *sella consularis* (consular chair), *sella consulis* (chair of a consul), *sella eburnea* (an ivory seat often used for gift for foreign dignitaries), *sella castrensis* (the campstool, a military version of the *sella curulis*), and *sella aurea* (a gold chair). The *sella aurea* was used, most notably, by Julius Caesar, who retained the *sella curulis* to signify the origin of his power in the consulship of the Republic.

30. See ibid., pp. 186-90. Ivory dipytches of the fourth century A.D. are frequently portraits of consuls seated on the *sella curulis*.


32. For additional information, see Antonio García y Bellido, Esculturas romanas de España y Portugal (Madrid, 1949), pp. 256, 350, fig. 328.

33. This ivory belongs to a series of fourteen identified by Hans Graeven as those of an ivory chair in the cathedral of Grado, Italy, that traditionally was believed to be the cathedra of Saint Mark, a gift of the Byzantine emperor Heraclius (r. 610-41). This idea was later refuted by Kurt Weitzmann, who noted the lack of literary evidence to support Graeven's claim and the Islamic style of the ivories; see Kurt Weitzmann, "The Ivories of the So-called Grado Chair," Dumbarton Oaks Papers, vol. 26 (1972), pp. 43-91.


35. For another example, see The Circumcision by the Master of the Tucher Altarpiece (Nuremberg, ca. 1450), reproduced in John Morley, The History of Furniture: Twenty-five Centuries of Style and Design in the Western Tradition (London, 1999), p. 61.

36. Juan José Junquera y Mato ("Mobiliario," in Artes decorativas II, vol. 45 of Summa artis: Historia general del arte, ed. Alberto Bartolomé Arriaza [Madrid, 1999], p. 399) tentatively identifies the *silla francesa* with the *chaise perroquet* ("parrot" or "parakeet") chair. The *perroquet* was a folding seat with a back, widely used for dining in the seventeenth century; see Henry Havard, Dictionnaire de l'ameublement et de la décoration depuis le XIIIe siècle jusqu'à nos jours (Paris, 1887-90), vol. 1, pp. 652-56, vol. 4, pp. 286-68 (the passages quoted below were translated by the author with the kind assistance of Glenn Cain). Havard quotes Antoine Furetière, a French scholar and writer (1619-1688), on seventeenth-century seating, as follows: "Seats are chairs with a back and arms: chairs that have only a back, or stools and tabo- rents fitted with neither, [and] folding seats supported by straps or strong pieces of cloth to render them softer, are otherwise called *sillas brees* ["broken saddles"]; if they have a back they are called *perroquets*, and their purpose is for sitting on at a table" (vol. 4, p. 266). Havard adds that the *brisée*, or "broken chair" (X-frame) was mentioned in the "Inventory of Catherine de Médicis" (1589), described there as a "broken chair, trimmed with velour, black and seated on a center pin" (vol. 1, p. 655). He observes that the presence of four or five others in the same inventory shows that they were starting to be commonly used as dining chairs; however, in the sixteenth century the *brisée* remained the exclusive privilege of those seated at the head of the table. Ordinary dinner guests continued to sit on benches or on stools. It was not until the seventeenth century that the latter were replaced and that the chair was used generally for dining. In the "Inventory of the château de Turenne" (1615) there is an entry for "folding chairs in red and green leather," which bear a strong resemblance to *perroquets* but are not yet called by that name. He adds that it is not until the inventory of Cardinal Jules Mazarin (1653) that the latter are classified as such; moreover, they are strangely numerous (vol. 4, p. 266). In fact, Havard says, we notice in this document: "Twelve *perroquet* chairs in all crimson red velour decorated with a silk fringe of the same color, mounted on walnut. They also appear by the dozen in the "Inventory of Superintendent Fouquet" (1661); "Twelve *perroquets* of moquette with faux silver border" (vol. 4, p. 266).

Havard (vol. 4, pp. 266-67) describes the use of the *perroquet* in France as follows:

Until the end of the sixteenth century, the dining table, poised as it was on trestles and therefore easy to both set and to remove, had its indispensable companions: two long benches running on either side, while the end was occupied

2 1 0
by seats with backs and arms, constituting the place of honor. By replacing the benches with folding chairs, Cardinal Richelieu—we owe him the honor of this innovation—permitted the use in his household of circular or oval tables, or those in a horseshoe, making the placement of guests easier and making it possible to avoid questions of etiquette that were always difficult to resolve, and sometimes dangerous to handle.

Throughout the seventeenth century, perroquets remained in vogue because a separate room for meals did not exist, even in royal residences, and so, as soon as the meal was finished, everything relative to its serving was made to disappear. Now we understand how with a snap of the fingers, twelve or fifteen perroquets could be gathered in a corner. [Later] a room was set aside for eating, which made it possible to encircle the table with seats offering full comfort. We are indebted to the eighteenth century for this great revolution.

With the eighteenth century the perroquet disappeared. Its existence, albeit ephemeral, is linked to a reform in the dining habits of high society.

37. Although in these illustrations the sillas francas appear to have a curule base, there is no evidence that the perroquet was anything but a plain foldable X-frame form.

38. The following etymology is taken from Martín Alonso, Diccionario medieval español: Desde las glosas emilianenses y silenses (s. X) hasta el siglo XV, vol. 1 (Salamanca, 1986): “Cadera (1. catedra, asiento, silla, y éste del gr. katêdram, asiento) f. s. XV. A cada una de las dos partes salientes formadas de la pelvis; <Coxa musol o pierna: y dízense coxe las caderas quasi exes juntos en que se iuntan los cabos de los muslos.> A. de palencia: Vocab. (1490), g9d. <Cadera o quadril, coxendis, icis> Nebrija: Voc. Esp. lat. (c. 1495), s.v., cadera, cIV, b. <Gimiendo e revolviéndose por el campo, como aquél que tenía tres costillas y una cadera quebrada> Rdgz. Montalvo: Amadís (c. 1496), ed. AE, t. 40, 138b. 2. s. XIII al XV. Silla: <Entonces el Emperador que estaba asentado, pareció sobre una cadera de oro vestido muy noblementre.> Like silla, sillón comes from the Latin word silla, meaning “seat.” Cadera, which derives from the Latin word cathedra, (meaning the chair or seat of a bishop in his church, hence the term ex cathedra, literally, “from the chair,” in the manner of an authoritative pronouncement from the seat of political or religious office or academic chair) came to denote the hip. Cadera, the Portuguese word for seat, also meant “leather saddle.” In Castilian, sillón originally meant “saddle for a woman.” The terms “Dante” or “Saronarola” are nineteenth-century, Renaissance Revival appellations for this chair type.


41. This chair was discovered in the Palazzo Doria in Genoa by William H. Riggs. With its ornate Islamic motifs, it may exemplify the influence or workmanship of Sephardic craftsmen in Italy, who spread the Mudejar style in northern Europe after their exile from Spain in 1492. The origin and date of the object require further investigation.

42. Antonio Francisco Garabana, “El mueble del siglo XVI y su origen español/Mexican XVI Century Furniture and Its Spanish Origin,” Artes de México, no. 118 (1969), p. 12. Figure 30 in the present essay, a codex illustration of conquistador Hernán Cortés seated in a hip-joint chair, is reproduced in Garabana’s article, p. 9.

43. Carrillo y Gariel, Evolución del mueble en Mexico, p. 10 (passage translated by Jorge Barrieu).

44. Théodore de Bry, Conquistadores, Astes, and Incas (Amsterdam, 1595). De Bry was born in Liège in 1528, and in 1570, during the Netherlandish rebellion against Spain, he fled to Germany, where he supported himself as an engraver, publisher, and bookseller in Frankfurt am Main and Oppenheim.

45. Carrillo y Gariel, Evolución del mueble en Mexico, p. 11 (passage translated by Jorge Barrieu).

46. Ibid., p. 42, and see fig. 32 (passage translated by Jaime Lopez Pestaña).

47. Ibid., p. 42, and see fig. 31 (passage translated by Jaime Lopez Pestaña).

48. See note 5 above.


50. John W. Waterer, Spanish Leather (London, 1971), p. 15. Embossed leather is referred to in Spanish as guadameci or guadamasci, the name by which leathers made in Spain after the Arab conquest were known. Waterer notes that a Spanish-Arab writer of the twelfth century observed, “Ghâdames ... from this village comes the Guadameci skin.”

51. The origin of this chair is presently unknown. The date 1730 is ascribed to it in Junquera y Mayo, “Mobiliario,” p. 399.

52. Luis M. Feduchi, Antologia de la silla española (Madrid, 1957), fig. 58.


55. Ibid.

56. In the sixteenth century the Spanish referred to such objects from the New World as indianoism and the people as indios. Junquera y Mayo, “Mobiliario,” p. 399. In this reference the form is called putaca, and the information is probably based upon Carlos F. Duarte’s recent scholarship (see note 5 above).

57. The armrest supports are described as en forma de cuello de cisne (“in the shape of a swan’s neck”) in Carlos F. Duarte’s Muebles venezolanos siglos XVI, XVII y XVIII (Caracas, 1966), fig. 66. They look like inverted cabriole legs copied from other eighteenth-century chairs.

58. The ancient Greek klimos (the word is akin to klinein, “to lean”) had a concave top rail at shoulder height supported by two uprights and a central splat and had four saber legs.

59. Camaná is the capital of the state of Sucre on the Venezuelan coast. Perhaps originally a plate in a German travel book, this print was sent to the author by Carlos F. Duarte, director of the Museo de Arte Colonial in Caracas, Venezuela. In a telephone interview of June 28, 2001, Duarte agreed that this illustration may have been drawn by the famous German explorer Alexander von Humboldt, who traveled extensively throughout the Americas and documented his observations in sketches, many of which were reproduced and published. Duarte has studied and written about the Venezuelan butaca; see, for example, the exhibition catalog cited in note 5 above, Un asimto venezolano llamado butaca.

62. The piaster or piastre is the former peso or dollar of Spain or Spanish America.

63. "Inventaire de J. T. Roman, 2 Mai 1848" (see note 61 above). Louisiana historian Beth Bogess explains, "I think these are personal furnishings from the Townhouse near the Ursulines convent that was initially maintained for Madame's benefit, since she did not like living at Oak Alley. As I recall, when J. T. became very sick (TB), they closed the townhouse and she went upriver for the duration."

64. Its original owner is unidentified; however, an auction catalogue explains that the consignor's great-grandmother bought the chair in New Orleans in the late nineteenth century "while furnishing her home, Old Elsoma, in Thomasville, Georgia. Shortly after the chair was removed, the dwelling burned to the ground"; see Important Americana, sale cat., Sotheby's, New York, January 17 and 19, 1997, lot 916.

65. The design makes more sense when this chair is compared with another important nineteenth-century Campeche chair in the collection of Dr. Wayne Stromeyer, Baton Rouge, which may have inspired its design and whose elegant rectangular back is similarly inlaid with a circular reserve, in this case containing an exotic parrot clutching a round object in its right claw. The workmanship of this marquetry bird is more precise and detailed than that of the heron on the Louisiana State Museum chair. Like the Louisiana State Museum chair, the crest rail is flanked by two (slightly larger) quarter-fans. It is not surprising to find a parrot, a bird indigenous to tropical regions, on the Stromeyer chair, which is probably from Mexico. Perhaps a Louisiana chairmaker saw this parrot-inlaid chair and chose to depict the heron, a bird native to the Louisiana marshlands, on a chair of his own devising. The leather of the parrot-inlaid chair is not original; perhaps the seat was once embossed with an American eagle, like the Louisiana State Museum and Hollensworth chairs (see notes 21 above and 66 below). According to Dr. Stromeyer, his chair was purchased at a sale at the New Orleans Auction Company (interview by the author, February 14, 2001).

66. This embossed eagle, patterned after the image on the Great Seal of the United States, is a Latin American rendering. The design consists of a roundel in which a bald eagle holding a shield, arrows, and an olive branch hovers above what appears to be a stylized sun with clouds or a flower. When Congress adopted the Great Seal in 1782, the American eagle became the national emblem. The official seal shows a bald eagle holding a bunch of arrows in one talon and an olive branch in the other. What is infrequently recognized is that the eagle's head always faces in the direction of the olive branch, a symbol of peace. It holds in its beak a banner bearing the words "E pluribus unum." A shield of red and white stripes covers its breast, and a crest above the eagle's head is generally shown with a cluster of thirteen stars surrounded by bright rays emanating from a ring of clouds. The Great Seal of the United States became a popular decorative device during the War of 1812. Other events that may have led to the production of this leather pattern in Mexico for United States customers include the Louisiana Purchase of 1803 and the admission of Louisiana to the Union in 1812; the chair thus dates to the early nineteenth century probably. The source in Mexico of this leather is unknown.

67. The pattern on the lower portion of the Ovando seat, not discernible in Figure 13, may match that of the Louisiana State Museum's chair.

68. The Philadelphia Cabinet and Chair Maker's Union Book of Prices for Manufacturing Cabinet Ware, Established January 1828 by a Committee of Employers and Journeymen (printed for the Cabinet and Chair Makers by William Stavely [1828]); copy in the Winterthur Library. I am grateful to Eleanor McD. Thompson for providing reproductions of the title page and page 40 of this work. See also Nancy H. Waters, "Catalog Entry: Spanish Lounge Chair, Acc. No. 64.143," term paper for "Art History 803," a course given at the University of Delaware (year unknown).


72. Three Supplement to the London Chair-Makers' Book of Prices (London, 1844); copy in the Winterthur Library. I am grateful to Eleanor McD. Thompson for providing reproductions of the title page, pages 39–48, and pl. 3.


77. Thomas Jefferson Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston.


81. Ibid., p. 385.


84. For a discussion of the Monticello Campeche chairs, see Self and Stein, "Collaboration of Thomas Jefferson and John Hemings," p. 239.

85. Ibid.