ASIAN FURNITURE

A DIRECTORY AND SOURCEBOOK

EDITED BY PETER MOSS

Thames & Hudson

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With 451 colour illustrations

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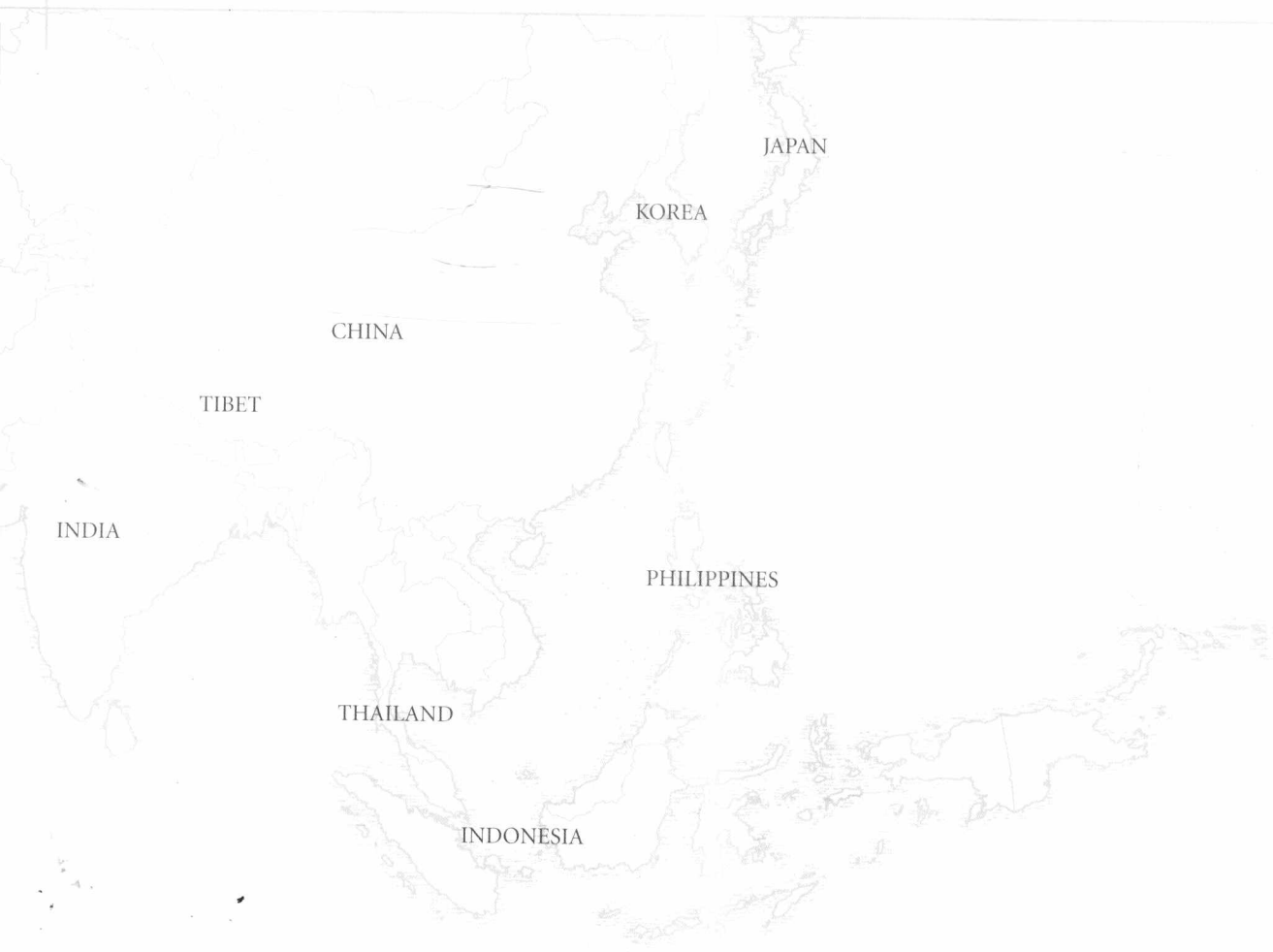
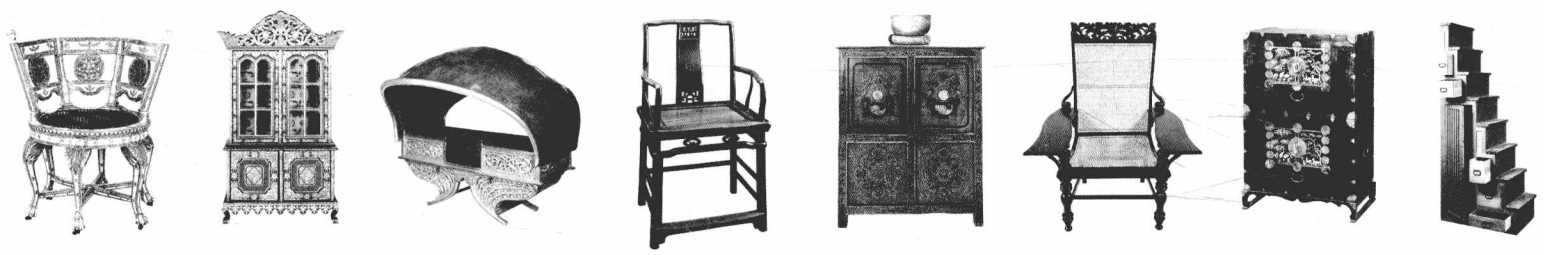


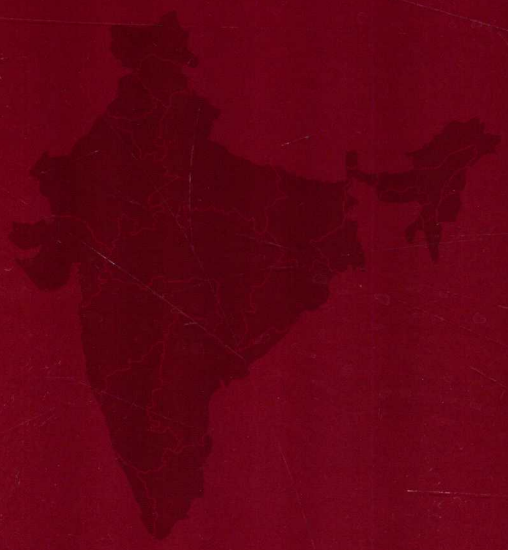
Furniture, the apparatus of domestic life, was intended for a sedentary role, not for travel. It is one of history's minor ironies, therefore, that furniture has led almost as peripatetic an existence as any other aspect of social dispersion. It has travelled far and wide, influenced whole cultures, cross-pollinated others and evolved unique geographical styles as a result of its exposure to outside influence.

For centuries the two terrestrial equivalents of oceanic currents kept the European and Asian worlds circulating in largely separate gyrations, only occasionally spilling across each other's outer peripheries through the voyages of Arab traders and penetrations by Mongol invaders. Furniture, tending not to be readily stowed on heavily laden dhows, or strapped across the saddles of nomadic horsemen, was generally left behind.

Not until the western world commenced its increasingly large-scale incursions into the east, from the fourteenth century onwards, did furniture figure in the accessories that went along for the ride. Europeans venturing into the Orient, to establish their colonial outposts, were reluctant to wholly abandon their habitats, furnishings and lifestyles, no matter how unsuited these might prove in hotter climates. So they took it all with them, including entire wardrobes of clothing that might have been comfortable in Lisbon, Madrid, London or Amsterdam, but were distinctly not so in tropical temperatures.

If the heavier items of furniture were less readily transportable, they found local craftsmen to imitate the general forms and dimensions, leaving them free to extemporise with the lesser particulars. Hence developed that glorious miscellany of hybrids that constitutes the gallimaufry of Asian furniture, to which this portfolio is humbly dedicated.





Stemming from the world's oldest civilisation, founded on the River Indus from which it takes its name, India is also the world's largest practising democracy and its greatest miscellany of tribes, speaking some 1,600 languages of which the oldest, Sanskrit, is considered the mother of all tongues. Its first six Moghul Emperors ruled in unbroken succession from father to son for two hundred years. Covering a total area of 3,287,263 square kilometres, it boasts more post offices than any other country, serving a population second only to China's. The international numeric and decimal systems originated here, as did chess, algebra, trigonometry and calculus.

If Arabia had intrigued early European travellers with its unaccustomed manners and unfamiliar architecture, it had always been a strangeness hovering on their horizons and occasionally intruding, through incursions by marauding Asiatic tribes, into their geography.

India, on the other hand, positively threw open its doors to immerse them in exotica, provoking a sense of wonder perfectly captured by Van Dyck in the expression on the face of William Feilding, first Earl of Denbigh.

Indian craftsmen transformed chairs, tables, cabinets and sideboards into miniature marvels, often quite astonishing to behold.

Denbigh travelled to India in 1631–33, to visit the Mughal Court, and Van Dyck portrays him in a silken red and gold Hindu suit, apparently out hunting. By his side stands a young Indian servant, pointing to a parrot in the palm tree above.

The subject of the painting resembles a somnambulant walking wide-eyed through a dream. So overwhelmed is he, by all he has encountered, that he extends the fingers of his left hand in a gesture of renewed astonishment. Perhaps the brilliance of the parrot, or the extraordinary sounds it is making, have exceeded the bounds of his sensibilities.

He was fortunate to live in an age that held unlimited surprises, when the sheer varieties of landscapes and peoples, fauna and flora, art and architecture, fashions and furniture, could still thrill and enthrall the uninitiated.

India, in particular, was a vast storehouse of riches beyond the wildest expectations of its newest arrivals. Here the world's earliest known civilisation had developed in the Indus valley around 3000 BC. And following Alexander the Great, whose coming in 327 BC left Hellenic traces in its architecture, numerous other conquerors had contributed to its variegated cultural accretions before they in turn were conquered by India.

India was ever the great absorber, vanquishing its victors and adding them to its gallimaufry of trophies. Hence Britain, as its last coloniser, bequeathed to India a whole and distinct cultural legacy known as 'The Raj', which still rampantly survives in Indian lifestyles and fashions, manners and furniture, while in turn the British became so infected by India that today the popularly voted favourite meal on their menu is Indian curry.

But if Britain left behind more than it took away, the great Nabobs of the British East India Company – the engine that drove its empire – frequently returned home, towards the close of their relatively short lives, laden with more than wealth, honours and souvenirs. India left an ache in their memories from which they never fully recovered, so that they were disposed to bedeck their palatial but otherwise very English country estates with domes, minarets and other appurtenances of Indo-Saracenic architecture.

Into these homes went frequently spectacular assortments of furniture, though little or none of it would have been originally indigenous to India. For in all the bounty that India could offer its discoverers, furniture played an insignificant part.

Domestic furniture of the kind known in Europe was not traditional in India before the 16th century, and even such familiar objects as tables and chairs were rarely used until the successive arrivals of the Portuguese, Dutch, French and English. India's place in the world of furniture stems from its skilful adaptation and transformation of imported Western originals, to produce an independent Indo-European style of furniture much admired for its own sake, which subsequently exerted fresh influences in the West.

It was the boomerang effect, except that when the boomerang returned it was unexpectedly ornamented and elegantly wrought in ivory, bone, horn, silver and other exotic embellishments.

Previous page: Ornately embellished brass doors at the Rambagh Palace, Jaipur, open invitingly to visitors.
Opposite page: (Upper) The Gateway of India commemorates the visit of King George V and Queen Mary to Mumbai in December 1911. (Lower left) Dating from 1857, the Indo-Saracenic façade of the University of Mumbai's historic Fort Campus epitomises the grandiose architectural precepts of its time. (Lower right) The Flora Fountain in the heart of the business district of Mumbai, built of Portland stone in 1864.

Extravagance of Indian Furniture

Peter Moss

What the Mongols were to China, the Moghuls were to India. They came, they saw, they conquered – and they stayed. The pattern was no accident, for *"Moghul"* was the Persian word for Mongol. Asia's two greatest dynasties sprang from the same heartlands in the treeless, horse-ridden plains at its continental core.

And as the Mongols had in China, the Moghuls too found that the longer they remained, the more inextricably entangled they became in their subjugated dominions – until India, in turn, conquered them.

Today the entire Indian panorama is conditioned by that exotic Moghul fibre interwoven into the fabric, its vistas framed in the arabesques of Indo-Saracenic ornamentation, its tapestries dominated by monumental Moghul architecture.

But the Moghuls were latecomers on the Indian scene. More than a century elapsed, following the death of China's greatest Mongol emperor, Kublai Khan, before his descendant, the far-ranging Timur the Lame, arrived on the banks of the Indus to commence his brief but ferocious Indian campaign. This led to the devastation of Delhi, not at Timur's command but simply because his hordes could not be reined back.

Another century would pass before Timur's heir, Babur, the true founder of India's Moghul dynasty, himself fell upon Delhi from the mountain passes of Afghanistan. Where Timur was named after the Uzbek word for iron, Babur gained his sobriquet from the Persian word for tiger.

Unlike his father Teragai, who retired to a Muslim monastery, telling his son "the world is a beautiful vase filled with scorpions", Timur resolved to shatter the vase and release the scorpions, leading them on paths of conquest that stretched from China to Turkey.

Though fired in the same forge, Babur's orientation leant more towards the western end of that sweeping arc his ancestor had slashed across central Asia. Where Timur was unmistakably Mongol in his provenance, Babur was Turkish in his leanings and his army was an eclectic ethnic mix of every strain from Anatolia to Samarkand.

He was amazingly fit, and legend has it that he made a point of swimming across every major river in India, just for the exercise. His hold on the country was nevertheless superficial, confined to its northern territories and terminated with his death in 1530, just three years after his arrival from Kabul. It was left to his grandson, the magnificent Akbar, to consolidate the Moghul hold on India.

Akbar was a born administrator, with the skills of a diplomat. In 1563 he abolished a tax levied on pilgrims to Hindu shrines, and the following year terminated the annual tax on unbelievers that had been imposed in return for Muslim protection. Under the pretence of hunting, he remained in constant motion around his extensive domains, attended by a large army and holding court in splendid encampments laid out like cities under canvas. While a great deal of hunting did occur, using trained cheetahs to pursue deer, the underlying purpose was political, displaying a show of strength, that fell short of open warfare, to negotiate treaties and marriages and generally keep informed of what was going on.

A man of whims, quirky, wilful and unfailingly original, Akbar moulded the Moghul style which, though often astonishingly intricate and ornate, at the same time embodied an indefinable sense of impermanence, as if its author might at any time lose patience with its consequence and embark on yet another hunting expedition.

It was Akbar who commissioned – and then abandoned in 1585, after a mere fourteen years – the jewelled marvel of Fatehpur Sikri, a hilltop citadel made up of courtyards and exotic free-standing buildings, constructed on a linear Hindu configuration instead of the gentler curves of Islam. Beams and lintels and even floorboards were cut and elaborately carved, much as if the material were oak rather than red sandstone.

Vaulted alabaster ceilings, onyx columns, graceful archways, crystal chandeliers, and a dramatic cantilever stairway are hallmarks of the Taj Mahal Hotel in Mumbai, which first opened its doors in 1903.