

## CHAIRMAKING IN THE LOW COUNTRIES: PART TWO

Newsletter No. 25 (Winter 1996) reviews the Culemborg chair. The source publication 'De Culemborgse Stoel' by P.W. Schipper (1979) limits study to the vernacular furniture-making tradition of the town, its growth and decline. Our second source of information is an article by a Flemish author Dr. G. Weijns (1913-1974). He takes us on a very well illustrated and documented journey through a part of his country, Belgium. Our guide is a collector, researcher, author and lecturer on the subject of Flemish vernacular chairs. (*The article appeared originally under the title 'Netherlands' Flemish Chairmaking Traditions'. Ed.*)

Not unexpectedly, and rather similar to the development of vernacular chairs in the British Isles, the author identifies the three-legged chair as the earliest recorded example of chair-making and quotes from various inventory lists:

1382, DEN GHEYSEER Oudenburg; 4 *drievoete* (4 tripod chairs)

1382, GHERAERDS, Oudenburg; 3 *drievoete* (3 tripod chairs)

1462, LOENIJS, Brussels; *Octo (8) tripedes* (8 tripod chairs)

1521, SAPEELS, Mierlo; Item *xij drievoete*, Item *ij drievoete met hoegen leene* (tripod chairs and tripod chairs with high armrests), and further references dating to 1535, 1542, 1664, and variously called *drievoet*, *drievoete*, *driestal*, *driepickel*, *driestapel*, *driepedes*.

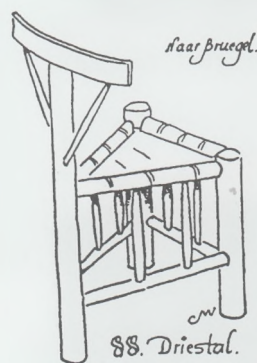
The tripod chair was also developed to become a 'throne-like chair' by extending the front legs to facilitate the attachment of armrests (arm leggers).

1505, ESSELEN, Anderlecht; *eenen leenstoel met drye pickelen* (one armchair with three legs)

1575, DE HOENSBROECK, Maastricht, *so leenen als sonder leenen ontrint 8 off 9 hoge drey voete* (with or without armrests, about 8 or 9 high tripod chairs.)

1582, VAN HOUTE, Herentals; *een dryvoeten setel en... houghe dryvoetige leenstoelen* (one tripod seat and ... high tripod armchairs)

Since chairs were made in various types of wood (ash, beech and poplar), they were usually painted green. The author points out "We must think immediately of the character seated on a tripod chair in Bruegel's famous painting in Vienna 'The struggle of Lent and Carnival' (ill. 88). Whoever might believe that the tripod chair is merely a piece of furniture should visit the Welsh Museum in St. Fagans Castle near Cardiff. The monumental three legged 'thrones' are possibly the most impressive tripod chairs in Europe; truly baroque in style."

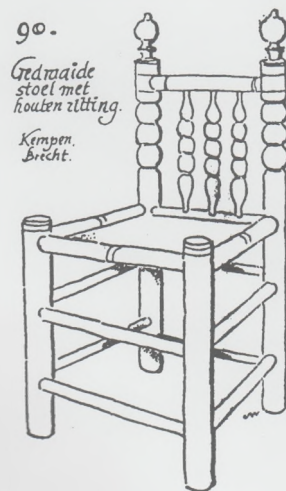


The tripod chair in Belgium is a valuable example of the woodturning craft. Judging by inventory lists, the fashion declined, circa 1700, to make way for the four-legged chair, partly influenced by foreign examples, such as the Spanish leather chair.

Several regional museums (HEEM MUSEUMS) possess plaited turned chairs; Taxandria Museum Turnhout, Brecht Museum and Zottegem Museum.

The four-legged chair (*vierpotige* or *vierstapelstoel*) also appears in the Middle Ages; the oldest reference dates to 1382. In its simplest form it is the work of the woodturner and comprises the front section (*voorraam*), the backsection (*achterraam*) connected by stretchers; the upper stretchers forming part of the seat frame (*zittingraam*) to support the inserted solid seat (*berden zitting*). The author identifies this style as a regional vernacular form of the Kempen-Antwerp region. He recounts meeting on 3/4/1967, in the town of Zandhoven, the last chairmaker, a Josef Gyselinckx (born 1893), son of Melchior Constant Gyselinckx (1853-1935), grandson of Jan Gyselinckx (1814-1871).

He enquired whether the 'old ladderback chair' he had brought with him was correctly identified as a Zandhoven chair. Josef retrieved three patterns of backstretchers from his workshop, one of which fitted perfectly, thereby identifying the chair as being made by father Melchior! Melchior turned all the chair components: Beech for the legs, ash for the stretchers, Canadian poplar for the seat. The chair was coloured with a linseed oil/red pigment/drier preparation to conceal the different types of wood. As it so happens the Zandhoven chair is claimed to be the most attractive of the Kempen range; another regional chair form? Seating height was 450mm, back height 810mm (topped off with a 'hat') and proportionally low for the seat height. Similar chairs but with variations in the backspat were made in at least six neighbouring villages, some as recently as 1900. The '*berdenstoel*' in the Kempen Museum in Brecht (ill.90) is an excellent woodturning achievement. The author considers these chairs justify the group name of Kempen chairs.



The author's next category, describing a second vernacular style, is the turned chair with plaited seat. In Kempen seat plaiting is called '*luiken* or *loken*'. In East and West Flanders the word is '*matten*'. Plaiting was made from rush (*biese*) or straw (*strooy*). The techniques were similar to the practices in the British Isles. Earliest references date, for instance, to 1540 (Anderlecht), 1632 (Brugge), 1650 (Essen). In the 18th century the references become more numerous, without certainty as to whether the chairs were turned. The chair with plaited seat also had the common name '*begynstoel*' (spinster chair). The final development stage is the plaited turned armchair spanning a recorded history from 1540-1773, as mentioned in the following inventory lists:

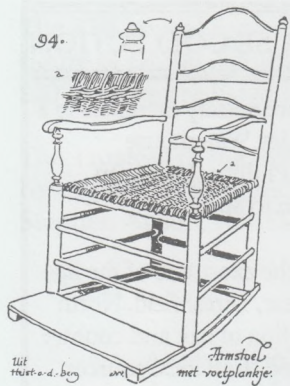
1540, VANDEN CAMMEN, Anderlecht; 2 *setelstoelen met stro gelooken* (2 grand chairs with plaited straw seats)

1733, DE LEEU, Brussels; 10 *biese leenstoelen*. (10 rush-seated armchairs)

1788, SMITS, Rekem; 1 *matte leunstoel*. (1 plaited armchair)

Several regional museums (HEEM MUSEUMS) possess plaited turned chairs; Taxandria Museum Turnhout, Brecht Museum and Zottegem Museum.





The author draws attention to an unusual chair in his private collection (ill. 94) having a plaited willow seat, the legs standing on sleigh feet with a footrest nailed thereon; found in Heist op de Berg and dating to the mid 19th century. The Izemberg Museum (W. Flanders) has a rare vernacular corner chair (ill. 95)

The third turned vernacular variant is known by the name 'Lilse', from the village named St. Huibrechts - Lille to the north of

the Limburg Kempen. Chairmakers Jan Slechten, up to 1905 and Frans Ieven, until 1910, produced a rather simple lightweight ladderback chair (ill. 96). The four backslats or ladders increase in size upward while the tapering back posts carry an insignificant compressed 'hat'. The timber used (ash) and the large number of stretchers and slats accounted for its durability. The absence of turned knops detract from the chairs appearance. Chairs made in Lieshout and in Veghel (N. Brabant, Netherlands ) but widely sold in Belgium incorporate

such knops and finely worked cresting rails or ladders. The similarity to these ladders suggest that the Lilse chair was influenced by the North Brabant examples.

The rushes for the plaited seating came from the Maas (Meuse) estuary in the Netherlands. Three varieties were available: yellow, green, salt. Production rate was 6 chairs per week.

For the third regional variant the author takes us to East Flanders, to the village of Stekene, where chairs have been made by three generations of the

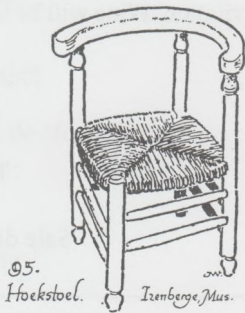


Van Nielandt family: grandfather Johannes (1812-1884), his three sons Benedict (1851-1919), Eligius (1860-1937) and Alois (1859-1905) who each had their own factories. Jan van Nielandt, the son of Benedict, was the only member of the third generation to continue chairmaking until 1939.

There were three apprentices, namely Florent Hendrickx (1884-), Leo Sneykens and Josef Vereecken who all eventually had their own factory. Jan van Nielandt

recounted that in 1966 six chairs were produced in 6 days of 10 hours with women employed to do the glueing and varnishing. Two types of rush were used: green and yellow.

The features of Stekene chairs include dark staining, fan-like



95.  
Hoekstoel. Izemberg Mus.

spindles in the chairback and an overhanging curved back cresting rail (ill. 98). It gives the chairs a certain middle class appearance and relates to middle class chairs of the Biedermeier time or of the style of Louis Philippe. There is also a noticeable similarity with Mechelen and Culemborg (Netherlands) chairs of that time. The elm and ash cottage chairs (but usually caned) of the British Isles show similar design features.

The author expressed the view that there must have been many other places where chairs were made. He cites inventory lists and names of 'stoelendraaiers' (chair -turners) in Lede, Aalst (1845), Wetteren (1823), Lebbecke (1867). Laurent Beernaert (died 29/8/65) was the last of the chairturners since 1795 and makers of chairs, brushes, sieves. A newspaper article at that time (1963) announces an exhibition of his Flemish, Louis XV, and Empire style chairs. We learn 'he was at home with all the chair models'. Furthermore, although he was very well regarded as a chair-maker, he no longer felt compelled to make chairs in the regional tradition.

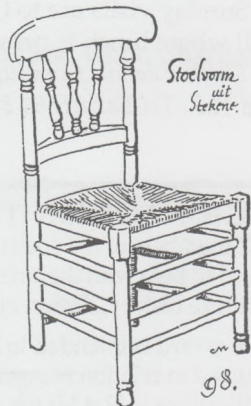
When discussing the second distinct style of country chair, with its square section front and back legs and seatframe, the author's attempt at classification opens with the remark "Not an easy task, what a variety! Let us attempt to create some order in this chair chaos". He lists four types in increasing order of complexity (and cost).

1. Straight back with coarse straw seat.
2. Straight back with solid seat.
3. Curved back with solid seat.
4. Curved back with plaited (rush) seat.

He wisely excludes upholstered chairs as being outside the vernacular form.

The author cites the example of six chairs belonging to category 1, made by the late farmer Louis van Hof, (died 1954) and now in the Flemish Open Air Museum. The seat height of 300mm prompts him to pose an interesting theory that the old way of fire-making has an influence on the height of the chair seat in some furniture and should not be consigned to the category of 'cut-down' chairlegs. An interesting thought! The slightly curved back, the backrails and leg stretchers are shaped with the spokeshave and/or drawknife. The seat is plaited Evie straw, a type of oat straw (*Avena strigosa*) but with a smaller seed than the usual oat (*Avena sativa*). The coarse straw 'sausage' (the tow) is 8-12mm thick. This seat is still made in the Antwerpen-Kempen region. The seat pattern is not the traditional X form, but comprises one large front and one small back trapezium shape. He wonders whether this could be called an Antwerpen-Kempen chairseat? Refer to illustration 92.

Again he cites two dated (around the year 1600) iconographic examples, a) Pieter Bruegel painting 'The struggle of Lent and Carnival'; seated behind Carnival is a waffle baking woman on such a chair, b) On Jan Brueghel's grisaille painting 'Important personage visiting the farmers': in front is a very low chair having a clearly visible thick straw seat.



Stoelvorm uit Stekene.

98.



Stoel met strooier zitting.

92. uit Meeuwen, 16.



In category 2 the author lists numerous examples and references of the 17th-19th century *schrijnemaeckers stoelen* (joined chair), but has difficulty naming a place of origin or identifying a regional trend.

In category 3 the writer identifies regional chair-making in Kampenhout-Laar since circa 1780. Square section front and back legs, turned leg stretchers, curved back cresting-rail and curved backstretchers, accommodating five narrow vertical stiles.

The author places the 19th-20th century Mechelen chair in category 4: A wide variety of designs and styles combined with very large production facilities not dissimilar to the output in Culemborg (see *Newsletter No. 25*).

Dr. Weijns offers a fascinating glimpse of an obviously well-researched and documented regional chair industry in Belgium, a country no larger than Wales. Perhaps even more remarkable in that he has confined himself to the Flemish speaking part of his country, an area no greater than 50x100 miles! As the author has demonstrated during his brief tour of chairmaking centres, a wealth of information is retained in archives, local records and museums large and small. One wonders whether his files and records are retained for further study.

*Willem Irik*