In Alfred Hitchcock's movie The Lady Vanishes, a nun is shockingly revealed to be no nun. She is sitting sedately enough, but we suddenly notice, protruding from beneath her habit, a pair of high-heeled shoes. Footwear of that shape immediately signals to us that this is a woman playing the sexual game.

When clothing resembling nuns' habits was ordinary female apparel, there were no such things as heels of any sort. Heels appeared for the first time in France in the 1590s. They were quite high and worn first by men. It was soon realized that heels had their uses as stirrup-holders on riding boots. But their first purpose was to raise their owners, enable them to pose impressively, and stretch their legs so that their calf muscles bulged curvaceously out.
Women quickly took to wearing heels although their legs were hidden by voluminous skirts, and when they did hemlines rose to show off their shoes. High-heeled shoes are still meant predominantly for posing in, as Miss America does in her swimsuit. She keeps her legs together, one knee gently bent. Pictures of women in bathing suits with heeled legs astride make a more up-to-date, but not necessarily a more feminist, statement.

High heels have never been made for comfort or for ease of movement. Their first wearers spoke of themselves as “mounted” or “propped” upon them; they were strictly court wear, and constituted proof that one intended no physical exertion, and need make none.

The Chinese had long known footwear that had the same effect, with high wooden pillars under the arch of each shoe, so that wearers required one or even two servants to help them totter along. Women had their feet deformed, by binding, into tiny, almost useless fists, which were shod in embroidered bootees: men got out of the thought of these an unconscionable thrill.

The European versions of stilt-shoes were Venetian chopines, which grew in height to twenty inches and more. The shoes attached to these pedestals sloped slightly towards the toe, and this is believed to be one origin of the heel. The other was the thoroughly mundane and practical patten or wooden clog, which raised the whole foot and was slipped over shoes to protect them from mud and water in the street.

High heels seem to have derived from an attempt to lighten raised shoes, by first creating an arch, then letting the toe down to the ground. The metatarsi of the foot (the long bones that end in toes) would remain bent, and bear the weight of the downward thrust.

And immediately the comforts of left and right shoes ceased to exist. “Straights,” or both shoes made exactly alike, arrived with heels; people had to swap their left and right shoes every day, to keep them in shape. Fitted lefts and rights returned only when fashion dispensed with heels—until the pantograph changed shoemaking technology in the nineteenth century and made heeled lefts and rights feasible.

High heels became distinctively female dress during the eighteenth century: men heartily approved. “Heels” cause a woman’s bottom to undulate twice as much as flat shoes permit; they pleasingly hobble the female and give the male a protective function; they add curve to the leg by shortening the heel cords and raising calf muscles. Slingback shoes and curving heels help draw attention to the back of a woman: it is the ancient device of rewarding the turning of a male’s head. Tall cones or “stilettos” heels are aggressive yet incapacitating, like long fingernails.

There has always been a preference for tiny feet in women: even prehistoric Venuses’ legs tend to taper to a point. This might be because animals, especially streamlined ones like cats, dogs, and horses, have short feet or hooves. High heels and skimpy shoes reduce feet and
lengthen legs; they emphasize the animal in woman. Also—and this is important sexually—stretched legs show that she is taut and trying.

Pointed toes redouble the discomfort factor, and cut feet smaller still. Points plus heels aim at lightness, emphasizing the "animal" message—but also stylizing it. They give women an ethereal aspect by raising them from the earth and from common sense.

After the French Revolution the idea of using high heels to advertise status became embarrassing, and men went immediately into flats (very insubstantial ones if you were upper class). Men soon regained a small heel to secure the straps under their feet that held their trouserlegs tight. It was at this very date that ballerinas, heelless in ordinary life, took to dancing on points.

Fashion historians tell us that women don strong shoes, low heels, and round toes whenever society feels threatened and politics uncertain. They are a sure sign that people—men as well as women—are worried, and gearing up for a fight.

Bibliography


RUNS, WRINKLES, SEAMS, AND SNAGS

When the obdurately unliberated male gaze focuses its attention on a female leg—choosing one bit of body and ogling that bit is itself an ancient erotic routine—it likes to find the leg smooth, glossy, without blemish, slim yet curvilinear, with its shape preferably outlined. High heels can induce the desired contours, but for surfaces and outlines stockings are essential. Nylon stockings make female legs different from men's. They also render flesh visible but untouchable—at least for the present—thereby dividing and provoking the senses.

It was men who first displayed their legs in stockings. In late-fifteenth-century Europe, a revolution in fashion removed the skirts, tunics, and loincloths that tend to be worn by males in societies seriously committed to clothes. Men strode forth in tight stockings and power-flaunting codpieces. Their legs have never since, in the history of normative Western fashion, retreated into skirts.

Women became two-legged four centuries later. They had worn hosiery all along, of course, a fact that used to be hinted at by the occasional glimpse of a stockinged ankle, often decoratively clocked. After World War I, however, women dared to chop their skirts short, and stockings began their modern rise to unprecedented importance.

For keeping bared female legs warm, smooth, and shiny, nothing was better than silk. And silk stockings were wickedly expensive, setting apart both occasions and people as above the common; they therefore made luxurious gifts. They "ran" too, and had constantly to be replaced: a "ladder" ruined one's entire outfit. Remaining ladder-free compelled women to be careful, delicate, and well financed.

Cotton, wool, or lisle stockings were more sensible, stronger, warmer, and therefore low in status—and far less erotic. Nylon appeared in America on the eve of World War II, so that international availability of nylon stockings had to wait until the end of the 1940s. Nylon was much cheaper than silk, but it was sheerer, and laddered even more readily.

For a long time stockings had seams up the back, which were difficult to keep straight, yet straight they had to be. The line emphasized shape. It rose from a reinforced and patterned back-of-the-ankle and disappeared up the skirt.
A straight one demonstrated control, and constant attention even to the back of one's look. When seamless stockings became the norm in the 1960s, millions who had achieved competence were saddened and reluctant.

Crooked seams were matched in shameful delinquency by wrinkles. These had been a problem for medieval gallants also who, having constantly to salute their peers and betters by bowing and "making a leg" in fashionably ultra-tight hosiery, would annoyingly ruckle, bag, and even rip their stockings at the knees. They are described as moving the leg round "in a circular motion in the manner of a windlass," in a manful effort to save their stockings.

Feet, in addition, meet legs in an unfortunate join that can wrinkle stockings at the ankle, spoiling the important doll-smooth, unblemished effect. Twentieth-century people became more and more fussy on this point, until the invention of stretch thread, which has made any hint of a wrinkle a sad lapse: your stockings are too big or too cheap, or you have worn them more than once without washing them.

In the late 1960s we accepted the miniskirt, a step that would have been impossible without the arrival, just previously, of pantyhose. These descendants of acrobatic costume (Monsieur Léotard was a famous trapeze artist) had already become everyday children's wear. The teenage girl's initiation into her First Stockings has therefore mostly disappeared. Suspender-belts went the way of seams. Suspenders, like garters before them, had been hidden, and required undoing before stockings could be peeled off. With their disappearance another erotic prop had gone.

Pantyhose, in fact, have enormously reduced the erotic draw of stockings. They are protective, sensible (given the demands of female fashion), and comfortable—or ought to be. If they are not, the discomforts they cause (sliding down till crotch reaches mid-thigh, legs too short, panty waist too high or too low) are definitely the opposite of erotic. They run constantly (and are wasteful too: one run and both stockings are disqualified), but they are cheap. For the time being women remain committed to the dull nuisance of pantyhose. We are also learning to be more critical of the Male Gaze than at any time in history.
The human male has always revered his chin. In the hairy races, such as the Caucasian, male chins produce beards. This means that they may be shaven, unshaved, or the hair upon them decoratively and variously clipped. The expressive and mythic possibilities are enormous: chins have been amorousely sighed over because still smooth, stroked to produce thought, and beards either plucked as the ultimate disgrace or sworn upon in taking oaths.

Beards arrive with puberty, so they inevitably represent male potency, and male sexuality in general. But old men, who often lose the hair on the tops of their heads, keep it on their chins. This has been a source of great satisfaction; and men as they age often choose to wear longer and bushier beards than young men do.

A man may grow a beard to mark a turning point in his life, or to show that he is waiting for a change (“I shall not shave until...”). He might also wear one as a symbolic shield, to hide behind. An antishaving tract (1860) called the beard “a divinely provided chest-protector”—but found it necessary to add, “Were it in any other position, its benefit and purpose might be doubted.”

Two favourite metaphors for beards are of water and “flowing” (classical river gods were richly bearded males), and of flowers and “flourishing.” Charlemagne was famous for having “la barbe fleurie,” and the word for producing a beard in ancient Greek means “flowering.” Beards in another mode may be repellent (the Emperor Julian’s was called “shaggy and populous” by the satirists of Antioch); or threatening, and compared with knives, axes, or spades.

Chins have been used as badges of status. Ancient Egyptians were chic if they shaved all over, so that hairiness was lower-class. (Important Egyptians, however, tied metal beards to their chins on ceremonial occasions: even women wore these if they were very high up.) When the upper class was bearded, as among the frizzed and anointed Assyrians, poorer people were often forced to shave. Several times in history, men had either to pay a tax on their beards or to shave them off, the pleasures of beardedness being restricted to those who could afford them.

Beards were one thing women could not have—which was of course part of the charm for their possessors. Bearded ladies were freaks of the circus. But women had a saint they could implore if they wished to avoid unwanted masculine
attentions. She was St Wilgefortis, a determined Portuguese woman who prayed to be delivered from men, and was delighted when she found she had sprouted a full beard. Englishwomen called her St Uncumber, and Frenchwomen prayed for her help as St Débarras.

A large beard can look heavily significant: of years, of broad and intricate knowledge, and of vigorous commitment to something beyond the trivial concerns of the rest of us. Revolutionary and prophetic beards have been worn in recent times by radicals from John Lennon to the Ayatollah Khomeini, while Marxist iconography included an image of Lenin, Marx, and Engels—the Three Founders—overlapping, beard upon beard.

But even men not aspiring to the prophetic have tended to consider their beards both sacred and precious. The Anglo-Saxon fine for spoiling a beard was calculated at twenty silver pieces, compared with twelve for breaking a thigh. Beards have been threaded with gold, jewelled, beribboned and curled; and men have gone to bed with their beards in bags and wooden presses to protect the styling. We all remember the oath of the little pig confronting the wolf's entreaties: "No, no, by the hair on my chinny-chin-chin!"

Young people often complain that the old ramble on and on. The French exclaim "Quelle barbe!" ("What a beard!") when they are bored; southern Europeans popularly express this in graphic silence, by pinching their chins, or sketching onto them a beard with their hands.

Not very long ago, beards were rarely seen in our society, and wearing one was shockingly non-conformist behaviour. But men now feel as free to choose beardedness as they do the clean-shaven state. Those who wish to look tough, and dangerous because unclassifiable within social conventions, have very little opportunity to make their point, as it were, with their chins.

One can still cut a disturbing figure, however, by being neither clean-shaven nor bearded. People are forced to wonder about motivations for an unmistakable stubble: is this man growing a beard for a reason (but what could it be?), or is he too busy, too miserable, too aggressive, or too socially out of tune to shave? Whatever the case, he is, at least temporarily, not one of us; his transitory, prickly, ambiguous chin is both intriguing and uncomfortable to see.
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High in the cloud forests of northern South America, the fruit grows to the size of a large olive; it is beloved of two-toed sloths and named by botanists *nubigena*, “the cloud-born.” In the region of Mount Popocatapetl, Mexican Indians worked long and hard upon another race of the same tree and perfected a somewhat larger, thin-skinned, purple version, with a scent like anise. These two, hybridized in pre-Columbian times, eventually created the big green avocado usually for sale in northern cities today.

The purple parent is the most ancient cultivated one; it was being grown by the peoples of Central America before 7000 BC. Gradually the fruit improved through selection, but avocado trees grow so slowly and their seeds produce so erratically that a sudden great leap forward in the fruit’s size, which occurred around 900 BC, is considered to be
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THE LEFT HAND

The human body is less symmetrical than it looks. Internally, our organs are not divided neatly down the middle—the heart, for example, being both inclined and on the left—and externally our hands are almost invariably quite unequal, although they apparently mirror each other. About ninety per cent of people are right-handed; the other ten per cent have a strong preference for the left. This is one of our differences from animals, among whom fifty per cent prefer the right front leg, fifty per cent prefer the left, and ambidextrous behaviour is far more common than in human beings.

Body images are among the most powerful metaphors we have; "culture" seizes upon the body and uses it to express moral ideas, social structures, prejudices, preferences, fears, and ideals. Often the metaphor squeezes the facts into its
own mould: the "heart" of anything is its middle, even though our hearts are definitely off-centre. We have always emphasized the difference in efficiency between our two hands; we have then meditated on the weakness of the left, and used it to confirm our worst suspicions.

The right hand, in almost every language and every culture on earth, means permanence, reliability ("a right-hand man"), power, truth, and rectitude. Dexterity, acceptability, immediacy, and correctness are "right-handed" in English; "sinister" means "left," a word that itself derives from Anglo-Saxon lyft: "weak" or "worthless." Droit in French is "straight" and also "just," while someone gauche ("gawky" in English) is maladroit. An Italian who is mancino is left-handed—or treacherous. In many cultures dealings with the dead are carried out with the left hand, since its connotations are with the dark, the inept, the polluted, the obstinately unknowable. Leftness is commonly used to express whatever: is outside the official life of the group.

Women have tended everywhere to be classified as "left." The feeling behind this is that they are irrational, lower (most people gesture with the right hand for "high" and "front," and with the left for "low" and "behind"), dark, marginal, fluid, cold, deceitful, and generally sinister. Men (on the other hand) are high, dry, straightforward, lucid, bright—and right.

On the continent of Europe, couples when marrying give each other rings, a custom that is spreading as equality strengthens between the sexes. Among post-Reformation Anglo-Saxons, only the woman has traditionally worn the ring, on the fourth finger of the left or "female" hand. The "ring" or "gold" finger was believed to have a direct arterial connection with the left-leaning, passionate, irrational, but—one hoped—faithful heart.

Left-handed people have always been pressured by the majority to conform. Even when not forced by anxious parents and misguided educators to use the less capable hand, they have had for example to shake hands with the right because other people do it, or to use tools constructed for right-handers.

More men than women are in fact left-handed. In the ancient world they had worse difficulties than we, because it mattered desperately in battle that your shield arm covered your heart, while the other did the fighting; and for a member of a phalanx to insist on wielding his sword in the left would have meant leaving a chink in the wall of overlapping shields, and jeopardizing the safety of the whole troop.

In many societies where eating is done with the hands, the left hand is disqualified as profane, and kept for polluting and unpleasant tasks deemed beneath the dignity of the right. Greek and Roman diners put left hands out of commission by leaning on their left elbows as they reclined at meals, and eating with the right. A left-hander attempting to use his more capable hand would find himself lying down the wrong way round; unless he conformed he could ruin the configuration of the party.

Modern science has shown us that the right hand has usually been governed by the left side of the brain all
along—and vice versa. Speech, even in most left-handers, is a function mainly of the left brain. The right half of the brain has become the subject recently of much attention and speculation: it is as large, as complex, as the left half, but we are far less certain what it does, apart from its evident governance over perceptions of space, including the ability to recognize faces.

"Left" and "right" have lost some of their force as metaphors, as the strength ebbs from the prejudice against women which they used to express. But left- and right-handedness have acquired a powerful new fascination: they are now recognized as clues, the full significance of which remains mysterious, to the workings of the human brain.

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BLUSH, CRINGE, FIDGET

The reactions are physical all right: face turning red and sometimes white, voice switching to falsetto or to bass, stuttering, throat contracting, inhibited breath, dry mouth, stomach contractions, blinking, lowered head and eyes, shaking, fumbling, fidgeting, plucking at the clothes, hands cold and twisting together or held behind the back, smile fixed, feet frozen. These are symptoms of embarrassment, or dis-ease. They are brought on by entirely social and mental conditions, and they constitute proof positive that the human body reacts directly to the mind, even without reference to willpower or design.

To be embarrassed is to be disclosed, in public. Both factors are important: you must have something to hide first, and you must have an audience. Fall over your shoes as you get out of your solitary bed in the morning, and you may curse but you will not blush: embarrassment is about how you look in other people's eyes. (Extremely sensitive people might blush in private—but only when imagining that audience, which remains indispensable to the experience.)

The revelation of something we wanted to keep hidden explains the fingering of our clothes: we touch, tighten, and arrange, reassuring ourselves that the shell is still in place. Clothes cover what society has decreed shall be concealed; and a good many embarrassing moments involve clothes: lacking them, popping out of them, or wearing the wrong ones.

What we would like to hide is most often the truth about ourselves: the inexperience, incompetence, and ignorance that lie behind the bombastic or slick facade. To step forward before the expectant crowd with every sign of cool control, and then to fall flat on your face, is to produce embarrassment at nightmare level. The slip on the banana peel, the rug sliding out from under are concrete shorthand for the public fall from grandeur that everyone who is sane can recognize and remember. Failure to live up to expectations is another cause for embarrassment, both for you (provided you understand the extent of your inadequacy) and for everybody watching. The mountain heaves, as Horace put it, and all it brings forth is a mouse.

The word embarrass is from the Spanish embarazar, "to hinder by placing a bar or impediment in the way." It creates confusion, as when the march of a column of ants is broken up by a sudden interference—someone "putting
their foot in it,” perhaps. (In dialects of French and Spanish the equivalents of this word are coarse terms for “to get someone pregnant [embarazada].”) Germans use the word verlegen—to put something in the wrong place. The original sense of the French gêne is “confession.” It came to mean the torturing of someone, forcing them to own up; and finally settled down to signify the peculiarly French discomfort of embarrassment.

The specific meaning of embarrassment in English arrives fairly late in the language. The term once meant merely “not knowing what to do” in a specific situation, for instance when confronted by a dilemma (as in the French embarras de choix), or when there is a superfluity of good things (an embarras de richesesses). The narrowing of this sense, till we get “an inability to respond where a response is due,” approaches the modern English meaning of the word. One can still feel “financially embarrassed,” or unable to pay. The sense of inadequacy that having no money can arouse in the breasts of upright citizens was then further honed and differentiated until we get the naming of the precise phenomenon we now call “embarrassment.” It still includes occasions where we have to respond but the role we must play is one we have not learned. Examples are: finding yourself honoured by a surprise party, or having suddenly to dance in public (if you are not in the habit of dancing, of course).

If, on the other hand, what your image requires is a crowd of spectators, then, if no one takes any notice of you, that absence will constitute your shame. If you set yourself up to give a speech and no one comes, the lack will hurt as much as being howled down. But even here, embarrassment comes about only if there are some people around: the three members who make up the audience, or the idle ticket sellers who watch you arrive, are needed in order for you to cringe. (Cringing is making yourself small, which is why embarrassment causes the hanging of heads, the shrinking back: these physically express the belittle-ment you see in the eyes of others.)

There is often complicity in the watching crowd; embarrassment is contagious. So when you step out on stage, or before the TV cameras, and start to sing, only to hear yourself warbling way out of tune, the audience will start to squirm and blush on your behalf. They imagine what it must be like to be you—and they can do it because somewhere in their lives they too have experienced your fate. It is far worse, of course, for members of the crowd who are your friends and relatives, for, as allies, their reputations are vested in your behaving “properly.”

The only way socially to pass muster is to “fit in,” as we say: to do what is proper, or “fitting.” Impropriety, then, is the very stuff of embarrassment. Once again the body comes into play: exposure that is deemed “indecent” evokes embarrassment, and so do flatulence, snores, dribbles, burps, and sniffing. You should not be caught talking to yourself either, or picking your nose, or being smelly. To have committed such misdemeanours in public means the
death of your reputation—and it is important to remember that in such cases whether you are to blame or not is of no significance. Your only hope is that the crowd, who usually have an interest in not interrupting the official agenda of the meeting, and in not being contaminated by an impropriety through drawing attention to it, will behave—at least for the moment—as though nothing has happened.

Incompetence is what impropriety of the embarrassing kind most often demonstrates. I once said to an important gentleman who arrived to visit my French landlady, “Madame est sur le téléphone,” and he answered gravely, “Cela ne doit pas être très confortable.” The stories travellers bring home from foreign countries often concern the embarrassing results of not knowing the language well enough, or not knowing what the social norms are: what you should on no account do or say. You bumble ahead with the best intentions, yet commit the offence—and the horror or the amusement you evoke cannot subsequently be put back into the bottle.

Involuntary impropriety is, of course, most acutely embarrassing when you cannot explain away what you have done. What you want more than anything else on earth is an escape from your predicament, and there is none. You are caught and helpless (which is why you wring or hide your hands in reaction to embarrassment). You haven’t the vocabulary in the foreign language; or your situation is compromised in such a way that no one would believe your explanation if you have it, the clues pointing so much more plausibly to what the audience believes they can see. Into this category fall many of the cases of mistaken identity. You hug your husband, whisper extremely private endearments into his ear, then discover to your horror that you have made a mistake: this is not your husband at all. And immediately you know exactly what this total stranger must be thinking: sympathy is essential to embarrassment.

In spite of the great incompetence factor, the embarrassed reaction itself shows not that you lack social adjustment but that you have it, in spades. You care what society thinks, and really that is what it wants most. If we look at who most often gets embarrassed, we see that it is sensitive people, people who are trying hard to succeed, who are prepared to mend their ways, who never forget the lesson learned—and what more could society ask? On the whole, people who are never embarrassed (the “shameless”) are the most antisocial of us, the least considerate and most uncaring.

The most exquisite kind of embarrassment, and the one that helps us see that the reaction need not merely mean a blind bowing to the pressures of convention, is the horrible realization that you might have hurt someone without intending to do so, or that your own arrogance has made you behave condescendingly where respect was due. Again you have demonstrated incompetence, but here the lesson learned has ethical implications.

Two women discuss, in Norwegian, the handicap of a man with one leg who is sitting opposite them on a Paris
subway train. What would it be like to sleep with a one-legged man? The man gets up and says, in faultless Norwegian, “If you would care for a demonstration, Madam, I would be happy to oblige.”

A friend of mine, invited by a Kurdish chieftain to a banquet in his mountain cave, decided to wear to the occasion a string of gold beads she had bought in the suq. She was especially proud of her good taste in having spotted and bought them, and decided to wear a little black dress to the feast, to show them off. When she was placed at the party among the women guests, she saw to her astonishment that every woman present was wearing the very same gold beads, but in abundance—massed in necklaces, bangles, and fringes, and sewn in profusion all over their clothes. The beads turned out to be traditional signs of dowry and wealth, of the esteem in which a man held his wife. She sat through the meal enduring the pity and concern of everyone present for her meagre lot in life.

My favourite example of this kind of embarrassment happened to John Fraser, the editor of Saturday Night magazine. Visiting one of Jean Vanier’s l’Arche communities, he saw a man struggling with a carpentry chore, and spoke to him in a slow clear voice, with the nervously careful solicitude that we all reserve for the mentally retarded. He discovered later that the man was a Sorbonne professor who had taken time off to care for and learn from the handicapped. The way John tells this story, all those listening imagine themselves in the same position, being kind. Then the punch line is delivered, to all of us. Embarrassment, when it is in working order, can produce enlightenment as well as shock.

Precisely because embarrassment often arises from unawareness of important factors in the social environment, and because it is a powerful aid to learning and never forgetting, it most commonly occurs in adolescence. Almost all the good embarrassment stories happened when we were young, and just discovering the mines and traps laid for those who want desperately to find a place among their peers. Very small children know fear and shyness, but they never blush because of social faux pas.

Adults become surer and surer of themselves as well as less and less sensitive, largely through knowing the rules, and through practice and general wear and tear. It often requires decades of experience and self-assurance before the worst of our blunders can be told to other people. Yet even then, what is laughing publicly at ourselves but further social complicity? We have found out not only that everybody else knows what it’s like to look a fool, but that a very good way to defuse and rise above a crowd’s contempt is to make an even larger crowd laugh with you, even if it’s at yourself.
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There is too much noise in a modern city for the sound of bells to be anything but incidental. Beepers, hooters, and sirens, themselves fighting to be heard over the roar of the traffic, have taken over many of the functions which bells fulfilled in the past. Church and clock towers are no longer the tallest buildings around: high-rise apartment dwellers next to a large tolling bell would risk being deafened by its din, so that fewer bells are allowed.

Most of us possess our own clocks, watches, radios, and televisions, so that we do not need to be communally reminded of the time, warned of disasters, or exhorted to rejoice, to mourn, or to pray by the sound of a bell. We have, however, considerably enlarged the repertoire of bells by adding them to bicycles and doors, and summoning each other to the telephone by means of repeated ringing: the ancient
When people decide to avoid sitting on the ground, and place three- or four-legged supports beneath their buttocks instead, they are choosing to limit and constrain their behaviour in important ways. Chairs force us to sit where they are placed and, if we habitually use them, quite early in our lives they reduce the ability of our muscles to encompass the postures required for floor-sitting. A typical, healthy, middle-aged person living in a modern western culture must expect to suffer agonies if forced to live even a few weeks without the use of any chair.

Floor-sitters never learn to need back-support, or to be unable to squat; their knees, their hip-joints, their ankles retain the suppleness which they—and we—had when babies. Travelling Americans and Europeans, encountering it in adults, have often thought such versatility highly improper.
They reminded one,” wrote Commodore Perry of the U.S. Navy when visiting the Japanese in 1853, “of those skillful contortionists or clowns, who exhibit their caoutchouc accomplishments to the wonderment of the spectators.”

Anthropologists have enumerated at least 132 ways of sitting, only about thirty of which involve anything comparable with a chair; and of these many are thought, even now and even for men, to be unbecoming in our own polite society. Women should strictly speaking use only very few sitting positions, with legs either together or crossed; crossing their legs at the knee represented a revolutionary relaxation of the norms in quite recent times.

The constricting and formalizing effect of chairs on human posture has made them symbols of status from the beginning; comfort was a consideration which counted far less, until as late as the nineteenth century. A throne, for instance, is a special decorated chair, often the only chair in the “throne room.” Its occupant is not only isolated and made easily visible to everyone, but “raised” in metaphorical ways as well. He or she must sit upright and impressively still; rigidity and immobility are often essential components of decorum. Because sitting on a chair means dignity (we show deference, in our culture, by standing in the presence of another), inviting a guest to sit on a chair is an ancient and powerful gesture of hospitality and respect.

Chairs mean that eating and writing tables must be raised too, waist-high so that legs can fit under them. Specialization of function is typical of chairs: they have different appearances and statuses, and are kept in different places, depending on whether they are kitchen, drawing-room, dining-room, or garden chairs; then there are variants such as settees, love-seats, rockers, highchairs, and chaises-longues.

The living spaces of floor-sitters are far less formally differentiated than ours have become. All human societies limit the number of bodily postures that count as proper, but floor-sitters, especially males, usually have a broader repertoire than we permit.

People who live without chairs (the chairless and the chaired almost invariably inhabit different worlds) are accustomed from childhood to seeing everything in the house from lower down. The great film director Yasujiro Ozu created his striking, intensely Japanese style partly through placing his camera, for interior scenes, as low as the eye-level of someone kneeling on the floor, so that the audience sees everything from the point of view from which traditional Japanese were accustomed to seeing.

The floors in chairless rooms must be warm (made from wood, for instance, rather than stone) and kept meticulously clean. The people who live in them do not normally wear boots or laced shoes, because footwear is removed on entering a house where people sit on the floor, and must be easy to put on and take off. Their clothes are flowing and long, if much clothing be worn at all.

Our own clothing is designed with chairs very much in mind. The most “liberated” miniskirted woman in nylon
stockings is peremptorily forbidden the floor, even if she should be capable of sitting for hours with her ankles on the same level as her sitting bones and without leaning on anything. Men's pants are quickly ruined and usually become uncomfortable if worn on the floor.

It is believed that the Chinese, who adopted chairs in the eleventh century AD, did so because chairs, like raised beds, lifted people out of the reach of draughts. They already knew the folding stool, an exotic import which they called *hu ch’uăng*, literally "barbarian bed," because of its legs. After the adoption of rigid chairs, *yi* (from a root word meaning "to lean"), the Chinese changed their costume, for example to include trousers. However, they continued to speak of mats in contexts where they now mean chairs: Chairman Mao, for instance, translates literally as Mat-Master Mao.

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**Bibliography**


