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Have a Seat! Famous, interesting, historic chairs on display at IWU

Bob Aaron
Illinois Wesleyan University

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Contact: Bob Aaron, 309/556-3181

Have a Seat! Famous, interesting, historic chairs on display at IWU

BLOOMINGTON, Ill.--From Queen Elizabeth II's regal throne, to FDR's seldom seen wheelchair, to Old Sparky--Thomas Edison's shocking alternative to hanging criminals--chairs of various sorts and styles have played an interesting role in history.

Now, folks will have a chance to see 30 historic chairs from Bloomington-Normal at an Illinois Wesleyan University exhibit opening this month.

The exhibit--featuring items lent by 17 organizations and individuals--includes a chair that belonged to U.S. Vice President Adlai E. Stevenson and another believed to come from the ship that rescued survivors of the sunken luxury liner Titanic.

"Have a Seat: Significant Chairs from the Twin Cities" will run from June 16-Aug. 14 at IWU's Joyce Eichhorn Ames School of Art, Merwin and Wakeley Galleries, 302 E. Graham St., Bloomington. The exhibit is open to the public--free of charge--on Fridays, Saturdays, Sundays, and Mondays from 12 Noon to 3 p.m. An opening reception--also open to the public, free-of-charge--is scheduled for Friday, June 16, at 4-6 p.m.

Exhibit curator Ellen Myers was assisted in preparing the display by Tom Grimes, a senior art major from Pittsfield, Ill.

Myers said visitors will be surprised to see the "diversity of materials used to make chairs and the fact that the chairs in the exhibit span the 17th century to the early 20th century.

"The chairs," she explained, "run from those designed for children to a huge chair that was displayed outside a Bloomington department store in 1888."

That chair, she added, might make for an interesting "photo op" by perching a youngster on its seat. The other chairs in the exhibit are not available for seating.

Among exhibit highlights are:

- o A Windsor chair with decorative splat and spindles that belonged to Bloomington's Adlai E. Stevenson (1835-1914), who served as Grover Cleveland's vice president from 1893-97. Stevenson was among IWU's earliest students in the 1850s.

- o An Edwardian-style chair reputed to be a relic from the Cunard ocean liner Carpathia, which rescued victims of the Titanic, the "unsinkable" ship went to the bottom of the Atlantic after striking an iceberg in 1912 on its maiden voyage from England to the United States.
- o A late 18th century Windsor chair with a distinctive fan back, crafted by Ebenezer Tracy, a famed New London County, Conn., cabinetmaker. A similar chair was priced at 8 shillings in 1797, according to papers from its then-purchaser, Felix Huntington, a well-to-do merchant.
- o A mid-19th century child's rocking chair, originally upholstered in wine-colored velvet, a popular Victorian color. An historical footnote: Revolutionary War patriot-diplomat Benjamin Franklin invented the rocking chair.
- o A 1900 New York ladderback chair with a cane seat made of maple (frame), birch (back), and hickory (front legs).

Among other items in the exhibit are a chair made in 1888 in Missouri for Col. J.M. Kirkpatrick's Bloomington furniture store, circa 1895 Texas short-horned cattle rocking chair, and a wheelchair dating from about 1900.

Exhibits such as "Have a Seat" give IWU the opportunity to share its art galleries with the Bloomington-Normal community during the summer, Myers said. Last summer, for example, the galleries sponsored an exhibit of Japanese kimonos. During the school year, IWU's Merwin and Wakeley galleries are display venues for student-crafted and other academic artworks.

Curator Myers explained that the idea for the chair exhibit came from Miles Bair, professor and director of IWU's Joyce Eichhorn Ames School of Art.

The chairs on display are on loan for the exhibit. Lenders include the McLean County Museum of History; Adrienne and Tim Ives, great-grandson of Vice President Stevenson; Helen and John Goldrick, an IWU trustee; John E. Jordan, class of 1957 and an IWU trustee; Betty Shirk, wife of the late Russell Shirk whose family is the namesake for IWU's Shirk Center for Athletics and Recreation; several IWU faculty and staff, and others.

During the colonial period, American furniture design was dependent on British styles and methods as seen in some of their names: Queen Anne and Chippendale. However, by the end of the 18th century, the American "Federal" style emerged.

"In the 19th century," according to an informational brochure about the exhibit, "America was pushing westward. Ingenious craftspeople using readily accessible materials could continue to create chairs by hand [and] when trees were scarce — corn husks worked in the prairie, and chairs fashioned of animal antlers have been found in the western plains."

The brochure also points out: "With ever-increasing leisure time, chairs are now more important than they were in the 17th century when the pioneers worked from sunrise to sunset with little time to sit and reflect, except perhaps on the Sabbath.

"If the chair that 20th century science, technology, and design have allowed America to build were never imagined by our ancestors," the pamphlet added, "its function as a place to take respite from work, to sit and enjoy both company and food has remained constant."

IWU, founded in 1850, enrolls about 2,070 students in a College of Liberal Arts, and individual schools of Music, Theatre Arts, Art, and Nursing. Since 1994, these facilities have been added to the IWU campus: a \$15 million athletics and recreation center, a \$25 million science center, a \$6.8 million residence hall, a \$5.1 million Center for Liberal Arts, and a \$1.65 million baseball stadium. A \$26 million library and a \$6 million student center are under construction. Kiplinger's Personal Finance Magazine ranks Illinois Wesleyan University 12th among the nation's top 1,600 private colleges in providing a top-quality education at an affordable cost. Also sharing IWU's rank are Princeton and Dartmouth.