

Library Ladders

How the British had their steps and hid them too

by Alastair A. Stair

The image of a little girl converting the Castro sofa into a bed has been a familiar one to television viewers for years. Convertible furniture however, is not an invention of the twentieth century. The idea of creating household pieces to function in two or even three different ways has challenged furniture makers for centuries. The English maker in particular has continually demonstrated a special ingenuity for combination pieces since the seventeenth century. English technical skill has spawned all manner of technical devices that today delight the collector of English antiques. One specialized form that clearly illustrates this fact is the English library ladder.

Library steps came into general use around 1750, and it is not a mere coincidence that this development was concurrent with the flowering of the Industrial Revolution. Various

technical advances made at this time were instrumental in both instigating the need for library ladders and in influencing the forms they were to take.

Fostered by a favorable climate of conditions, the Industrial Revolution began in England toward the middle of the eighteenth century. One of its offspring was the quicker and less costly printing of books. A greatly increased production continued until 1798 when Earl Stanhope of London invented the iron press which made the work even more easy and rapid. As a result, more books were in circulation in the second half of the century than in the previous century, and more attention was devoted to the library and to furniture for it. Books were no longer locked away from view, and new prominence was given to the library breakfront bookcase that was often so tall that the upper shelves could not be easily

Convertible chair was commonly used in the Regency period. This chair is hinged at the seat rail so the back swings forward after a catch is released. The scimitar-shaped leg was quite popular, although other styles were also used. This chair fetches \$1450 in the antique marketplace.



reached by standing on stools or chairs.

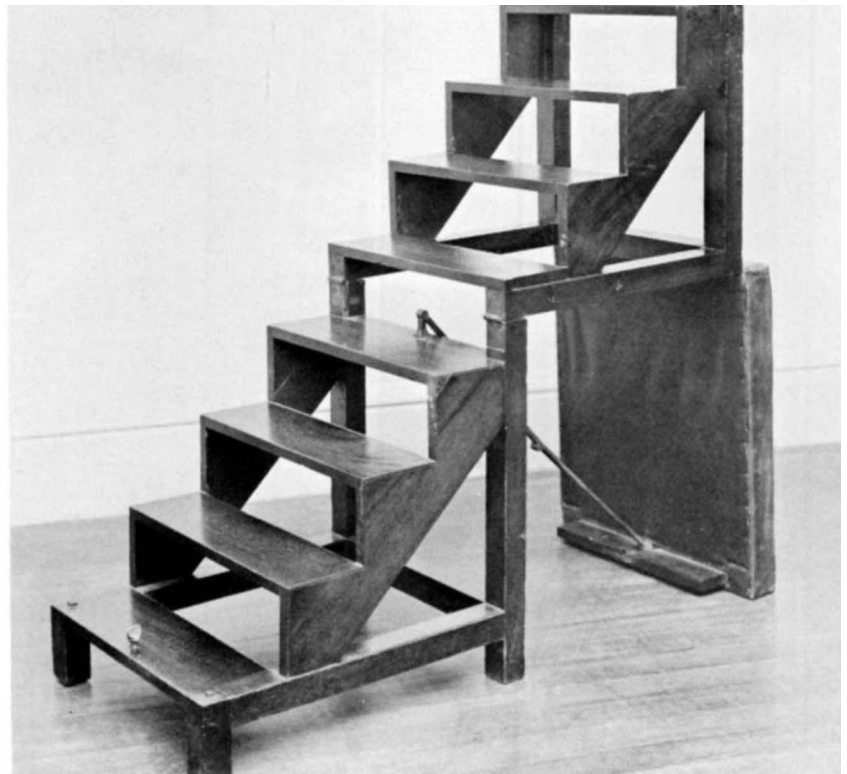
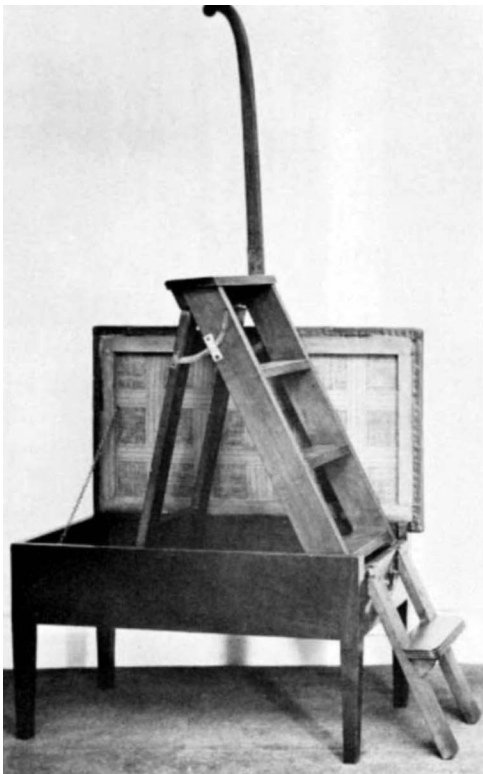
The ladders that were made to meet the need were often cleverly contrived to serve a dual purpose, with form and function uniting in most striking ways. Inspired by the new preoccupation with technical devices, English furniture makers of the eighteenth century, and later in the early nineteenth century, employed simple mechanisms which enabled chairs, stools, book stands and even tables to ingeniously convert into library ladders. Appearing along with straightforward step ladders and pole or "elephant" ladders of all shapes and sizes (sometimes even spiraling, like pulpits) these double-purpose pieces constituted a great variety from which the contemporary gentleman could choose. Playful, sometimes over-ambitious in its attempt to combine beauty of line with practical function, yet often quite elegant in design, the English antique library ladder has a unique appeal for the connoisseur.

One remarkable device of this kind is the library table that folds out into a step ladder. Sheraton illustrates two designs for this form in his *Drawing Book* (1791-4) and according to the famous designer, such steps were apparently first made for King George III. Thereafter they became quite popular because of their simplicity and ease of use. The steps can be put up in half a minute, and the whole can be taken down and enclosed within the table frame in about the same time. The hinged top simply folds out and down to the floor to reveal a series of sturdy steps, with the uppermost step resting approximately five and a half feet from the ground. The inner horse relieved by springs, unlocks, and becomes erect, along



An inlaid Sheraton library table was apparently first made for King George III; convertible stools and benches (below) came in various designs. The cane-shaped handle

is held in a slot; everything else hinges. Because of their unusualness, devices like these don't stay long in the marketplace and bring from \$1800 to \$2800.



with the multi-hinged handrail. The whole is supported by four strong, square legs.

These ladders created marvelous architectural skeletons when open, and some display a very elaborate, often rhythmic handling of vertical, horizontal and diagonal effects. The visual aspect of the table when closed was considered as important as the function, and handsome woods were employed, often with decorative inlay and sometimes with painted ornament.

Another special type of library ladder is the convertible chair, used commonly in the Regency period. In the decades of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, archaeological excavations at Pompeii, Herculaneum, and in Egypt resulted in a lively interest in the furniture forms of ancient civilizations. One of the most popular chairs of this period possessed in-curving "scimitar" shaped front legs, wide arcing back uprights with reeded members curving in opposing directions in the manner of classical prototypes. This chair, with its graceful design, made a very attractive object when converted into a library ladder.

A third type is the library stool that can be adapted into a ladder. Of necessity rectangular, and usually rather long, these were most often upholstered in leather and make a quite handsome appearance. One such stool, with an

elaborately inlaid case, has been attributed to Thomas Chippendale and dated c. 1770-1775. Over the years I have seen many examples of this type and they provide extra seating along with the additional advantage of a tool for saving space. It is easy for even a child to lift the upholstered seat and pull out the ladder or to carry it all the way down to the floor where the seat can act as an upright support.

A more rare article of cabinet work is the book rest, pedestal or plinth, on which one side opens to produce a series of steps. Intended to support large, heavy books or folio volumes, these provide the maximum of convenience in the smallest amount of space. The enclosing cabinets were constructed of the finest mahoganies and endowed with carved effects. They were usually mounted on casters.

As the draftsman's pen and the cabinet-maker's skill produced whimsical versions of ladders, much scope was provided for the contemporary metal worker and he was very adept in the art of forging the necessary hinges, springs, locks and metal mounts of all kinds. The metal worker of the Industrial Revolution enabled the designer and furniture craftsman to allow their imagination to run free in the pursuit of exciting, convenient and pleasing forms of ladders for use in the library of the eighteenth century gentleman of taste and distinction.

Trickiest of the lot is this book rest, shown with one side folded down. It's been many years since the author last saw it work, but there's a hinge in the middle tread, a concealed pin hinge above the top tread, and what looks to be a hinge (or maybe a catch) where the small leg supporting the top tread meets the longer leg below it.

