

# The President's chair

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**Figure 1**  
The 'President's chair', originally designed by William Holman Hunt, and given to the British Academy by his widow.

At meetings of the British Academy's Council, the President sits at the table in an ornate wooden chair, designed in a medieval style, bearing the letters 'H H' on it (Figure 1). But why does the Academy have such an unusual piece of furniture? A letter recently found in the archives throws some light on the matter.

The letter (Figure 4), dated 5 February 1930, is addressed to 'My dearest "IG"' – the Academy's Secretary, Sir Israel Gollancz. It is from Edith Holman Hunt, who explains that she wishes the Academy to have this chair 'with my beloved's initials upon it, for use in your Council Chamber ... as my tribute to the Instruction and Delight I have derived from the British Academy'.

Edith (Figure 2) was the second wife of William Holman Hunt (1827-1910), one of the artists who founded the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. Holman Hunt's first wife was Edith's older sister, Fanny Waugh, who died in childbirth in 1866. Edith and William were married in 1875: however, English law at the time proscribed union with the sister of a deceased wife, and the couple therefore had to marry abroad.

William Holman Hunt joined the Royal Academy Schools in 1844. Whilst there, he met John Everett Millais and Dante Gabriel Rossetti, and together they founded the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood in 1848. The Brotherhood was a reaction to what the artists believed was the triviality of British art. In contrast, the group aimed to revive simplicity, truth and seriousness.

In the mid-1850s, Holman Hunt decided to turn his talents to furniture design, thereby starting a new trend amongst his circle of friends. In his memoir, Holman Hunt describes how he came to design the chair now owned by the Academy (Figure 3):

In furnishing my new house I was determined, as far as possible, to eschew the vulgar furniture of the day. Articles for constant practical use were somewhat regulated by necessity; but in the living rooms I could exercise control. For ordinary seats Windsor chairs satisfied me,



Figure 2  
Portrait of Edith by her husband William Holman Hunt.

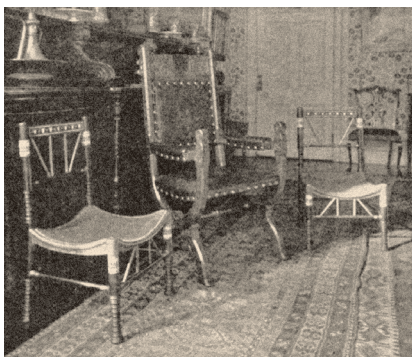


Figure 3  
'Chairs designed by W.H.H.', showing in the middle what would become the British Academy President's chair.

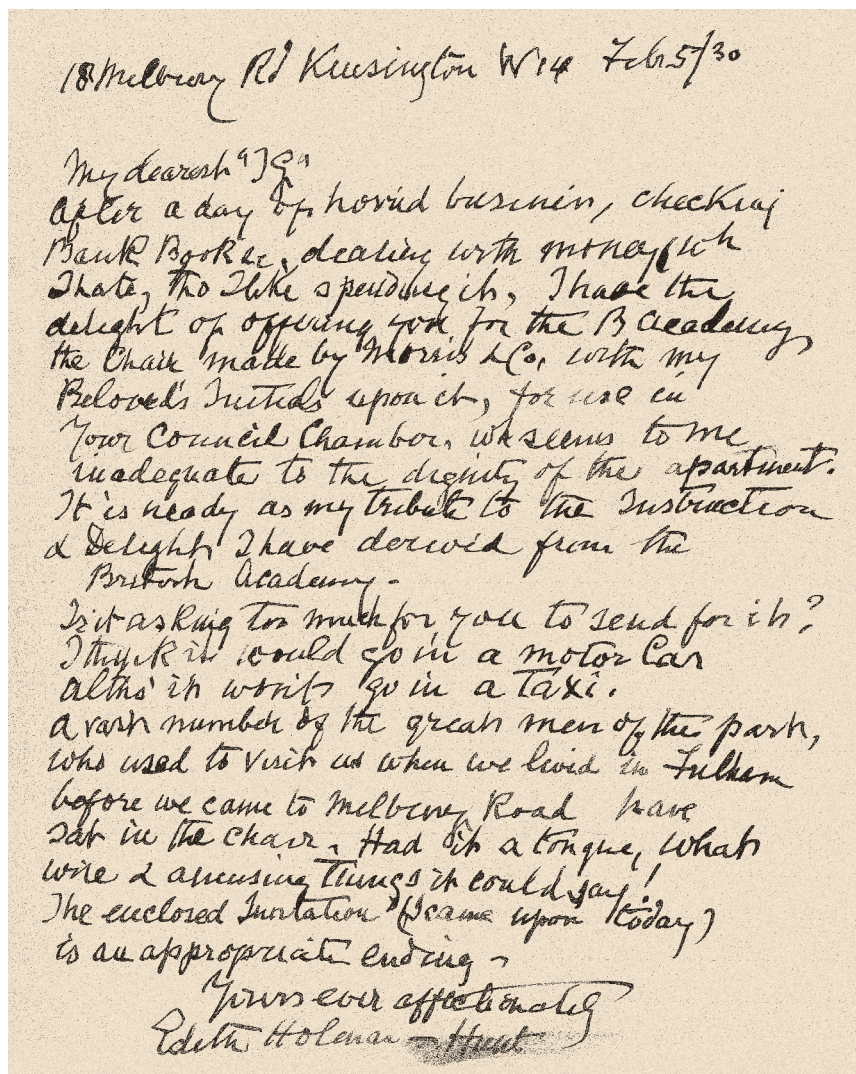


Figure 4  
Edith Holman Hunt to Israel Gollancz, Secretary of the British Academy, 5 February 1930 (BA 360).

but I kept this in countenance by a handsome arm-chair of old English form, and devised an ornamental scroll and shield, with my monogram to give it individuality. [After designing other pieces] I had here to restrain further expenditure, still, I had done as much as I could to prove my theory that the designing of furniture is the legitimate work of the artist. When I showed my small group of household joys to my P.R.B. [Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood] friends the contagion spread ...<sup>1</sup>

Edith concludes her letter to Gollancz by saying: 'A vast number of the great men of the past, who used to visit us when we lived in Fulham before we came to Melbury Road have sat in the chair. Had it a tongue, what wise and amusing things it could say!' So, with such a history, what better chair can there be for our Presidents to sit in?

1. William Holman Hunt, *Pre-Raphaelitism and the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood* (2nd edition, 1914), vol 2 (available at [www.rossettiarchive.org/docs/nd467.h9.1914.2.rad.html](http://www.rossettiarchive.org/docs/nd467.h9.1914.2.rad.html)), pp. 106-7. Figures 3 and 4 are also from the same source (pp. 265 and 106, respectively).