

English Royalty:

Influences on styles during their reigns....

Although the style of antique pieces is not bound by the reigning monarch of the time, here is an introduction to the moods, fashions and other influences that occurred in each reign.

George IV, Prince Regent and King (r: 1811 – 1830)

The English royal term 'regent' refers to an appointed ruler during the minority, absence or incapacity of the monarch. After George III (b. 1738, r.1760) was pronounced insane and hospitalised in 1811, his son George IV (b.1763) was appointed to reign in place of his incapacitated father. He served as Prince Regent (1811 – 1820) until crowned King George IV on the death of his father in 1820, reigning until his death in 1830.

To fill in time until crowned, young George did nothing more serious than have a wonderful time and party hard. The social climate was right for a party boy to be copied, so his extravagance and display of great wealth such as clothes, furniture, jewellery and excessive grand balls were followed. To the amazement of all, his father George III, was in an insane asylum, rather than his son.

An outstanding, if extravagant collector and builder, George IV acquired many important works of art (now in the Royal Collection), built the Royal Pavilion at Brighton, and transformed Windsor Castle and Buckingham Palace, George's fondness for pageantry helped to develop the ceremonial side of monarchy.

The English late neo-classical style of the early 19th century that is the Regency style, encompasses the predominant style in England from the 1790's until the early Victorian 1840's, inclusive of the years in which the later George IV reigned as the Prince Regent. It was marked by simplicity and elegance, reactions against over-ornamentation of the late 1700's. There was a desire for furniture based on antiquity, especially Greek motifs. Factory processes started to increase volume of furniture for the growing middle class.

William IV, r. 1830 – 1837

As George IV had never married or produced an heir, the third son of George III and the younger brother of George IV, William IV (b. 1768) was crowned in 1830 at age 62, with no choice in becoming the reigning monarch. William's lack of pretension greatly endeared him to his people after the excesses of his brother. He was a cheerful monarch, offering lifts in his carriage to 'common' pedestrians if he happened to be passing and had the room.

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William IV's reign was marked by the Great Reform crisis that commenced almost immediately and in 1832, he signed the Great Reform Bill, understanding the theory of the more limited monarchy.

During this period, Britain came to acquire much of her overseas empire largely through foreign conquest in the various wars of the century, despite the loss of the American colonies during George III's reign.

In an era of revolutions and reforms that swept the world, he was the only monarch to keep his throne. William died in 1837, one month after his niece, Victoria, reached majority age, thus avoiding another "regency".

Victorian period (1837 – 1901)

Queen Victoria (b. 1919) reigned first as Queen (1837 – 1860) and continued as Queen-Empress after the death of her husband, Albert, in 1861. On her death in 1901, she had the longest reign in British history.

Victoria is associated with Britain's great age of industrial expansion and economic progress. By the end of her reign, the British Empire covered a third of the globe, 20% of the world's population and 40% of its land mass, being the largest empire ever in the world. This period of exploration diversified materials and inspiration for designs of furniture, fabrics, accessories and ornamentation.

The personal style that Victoria introduced was the white wedding dress. Dominant in her reign were styles marked by greater richness and elaboration or ornament, a great love of glitter and more generously upholstered and curved furniture.

The later, widowed period, of her reign coincided with an eclectic mix of styles: the resurgence of religious (gothic) themes marked by simplicity, as well as the newer fashions that increasing industrialisation could provide.

The Industrial Revolution meant that more goods could be made for the larger domestic demand and for export to the growing markets under English control. This resulted in reduced standards in the mass manufactured goods and furnishings.

Several minor styles in reaction to the Victorian excessive rococo decoration were the Gothic Revival and the Arts and Crafts Movement, with Art Nouveau emerging in the 1880's, characterised by exotic, naturalistic motifs and tortured curves.

Edwardian Period (1901 – 1910)

Edward VII (1841 – 1910) was a 59 year old grandfather when he succeeded his mother, Queen Victoria, at the beginning of the modern age of the 20th century. He was the only British monarch of the House of Saxe-Coburg-Gotha from his father's family Windsor during World War II.

Edward VII made a success of the monarchy, did many goodwill visits and promoted cordial relationships and was known to be an excellent negotiator. In the last year of his life, he was involved in the constitutional crisis brought about by the refusal of the Conservative majority in the Lords to pass the Liberal budget of 1909. His death was perhaps early for a man of his skills, but by 1910, the excesses of his youth had damaged his health.

The popular styles in the first decade of the 20th century were principally Art Nouveau and that of Industrial Design, both emphasising originality and artisanship, while much simpler than the excesses of the late 1800's.

George V (r. 1910 – 1936)

Edward VII's son, George V (1865 – 1936) had none of his father's vices and was rather introspective. The House of Windsor came into being in 1917, when he proclaimed it the British Royal Family's official name replacing the historic German name of Saxe-Coburg-Gotha. One of his most important roles was acting as national figurehead and lifting public morale during the devastating war of 1914-18.

George V's reign covered 26 years of extensive social, technological, political and economic changes marked by, and driven by, world and home events, including WWI, the Russian Revolution, Irish unrest, the vote for women, a general strike, the Great Depression and the rise of Hitler in Germany.

Dominant design influences were the late Art Nouveau and the new Art Deco (1918 – 1939), while mass communication was achieved for the first time through the wide use of radio.

Edward VIII (January – December 1936)

In 1936, George V, was succeeded by his son Edward VIII (1894 – 1972), who was never crowned; his reign lasted only 325 days. Edward realised he had to choose between the Crown and his Mrs Simpson who, as a twice-divorced woman, would not have been acceptable as Queen. He abdicated at the year's end and lived abroad the rest of his life.

George VI (r. 1936 – 1952)

Edward VIII's brother, Albert, became King, using his last name George (1895 – 1952) and crowned George VI in 1936. Described as conscientious and dedicated, he adapted to the unexpected role of King. Reserved by nature, in 1923 he married Lady Elizabeth Bowes-Lyon, who helped him in his public duties.

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As his father George VI had done, he acted as an inspiring national figurehead. He and Queen Elizabeth lifted public morale during World War II, remaining for most of the time at Buckingham Palace, even though the Palace was bombed nine times during the war. They visited severely bombed areas in the East End of London, went down into the bomb shelters and elsewhere in the country, gaining him great popularity.

Art Deco was still the elegant style until World War II rationing reduced fashion considerations and material shortages limited new furniture or decorative arts. The extravagance of the new style was welcome in the late 1940's and 1950's.

Elizabeth II (r.1952 – present)

The accession of George VI's daughter, Elizabeth (b. 1926) in 1952 was sudden, even though his poor health was apparent before he died. For more than 55 years, during a period of greater social change than any previous British monarch, Elizabeth II has carried out her political duties as head of State, Head of the Commonwealth and the ceremonial responsibilities of the sovereign.

Post-modernisation, industrial themes, Scandinavian and American architectural influences show that the post-World War II period is internationalised and no one style dominates the long reign of the current British monarch. All of the past 55 years' furniture, fashions and accessories are highly collectable.

Now, from my ramblings, you have a brief but correct summary of each reign. With a small amount of analysis, you can see how these regal periods contributed to styles and fashions. Have I intrigued you into more research? I hope so, as passion, mystery and intrigue wait for every collector.....

Further reading:

John Fleming & Hugh Honour (revised CD), *The Penguin Dictionary of Decorative Arts* (London: Viking Penguin, 1989)

Helen Hayward (ed), *World Furniture an Illustrated History* (Feltham: Hamlyn House 1972)

www.royal.gov.uk