

# The Folding Chairs in the Escorial Palace: Modest Early Works of Chinese Furniture Rich with Historical Context

Curtis Evarts



FIG. 1

Deep within the medieval surroundings of the Escorial Palace, where the royal apartments of King Philip II (1524-1598) have survived relatively intact since the end of his life, the sudden encounter with a pair of Chinese folding chairs must seem rather odd to the ordinary visitor. However, in historical context of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, these objects actually fit neatly into the circumstances of the Portuguese and Spanish colonial empires that stretched east to India, Southeast Asia, and the Far East, and west to the New World and Philippines. Lucrative trade largely financed these overseas colonies, and during this time, oriental curiosities were collected by members of the Iberian royalty as trophies of dominion as well as interest in the exotic. Such are the Chinese chairs, which were previously featured in article written by Margaret Medley published by *Reales Sitios* (1985), and also discussed in earlier works by Vilhelm Slomann (1934) and Gustave Ecke (1944). Not to diminish the value of former studies, but rather under the brighter light of more recent knowledge and research, as well as the opportunity to personally examine the chairs (fig. 1), the following article will reinvestigate these modest, early works of Chinese furniture through exploration of their rich historical background as well as a deeper look at the objects themselves.

# 1: The Chinese Square-Back Folding Chair



FIG. 2



FIG. 3



FIG. 4



FIG. 5

The folding chair has existed as a traditional seating form in China for more than a thousand years. Evidence for both the “round back” and “square back” form appear throughout the Liao (907-1125) and Song dynasties (960-1279) in wall murals (cf. fig. 2), scroll paintings (cf. fig. 3) and literary references. Throughout the Ming (1368-1644) and Qing (1644-1912) dynasties, similar evidence as well as objects that have survived reveal a continuity of use with little change. Generally speaking, the “round back” folding chair carried implications of status and formality, while the use of the “square back” form was more casual and informal. That which follows will primarily relate to the latter type, of which the Escorial chairs belong.

By the Yuan dynasty (1279-1368), this chair was sufficiently common that detailed instructions for the weaving and/or reweaving its soft, collapsible seat (*chuan jiaoyi fa*) were provided in a contemporary work on household necessities (*Jujia biyong shi lei quanji*). Specifications for the chair are also included in the Ming dynasty (1368-1644) carpenter’s manual *Lu Ban jing* (Classic of Lu Ban), suggesting a very standard form. And its ubiquity is further alluded to in Wen Zhenheng’s disdain of the type, commenting that “folding (chairs) with a single backrest (*danbei*)...are all too commonplace...” Nonetheless, numerous earlier 16th century Ming period artists (including Wen’s great-grandfather Wen Zhengming) often depicted literati gentlemen seated upon such folding chairs. Such is a work by one of the great Ming dynasty talents, Tang Yin (1470-1523), who illustrates the legendary meeting between the Tang dynasty courtesan Li Duanduan and the literary talent Cui Ya (fig. 4). Tang’s rendering of the square-back folding chair is typical of the type, and a pattern that is also repeatedly seen in Ming period wood cut book illustrations and Ming period



FIG. 6

pottery furniture used as burial objects (cf. fig 5).

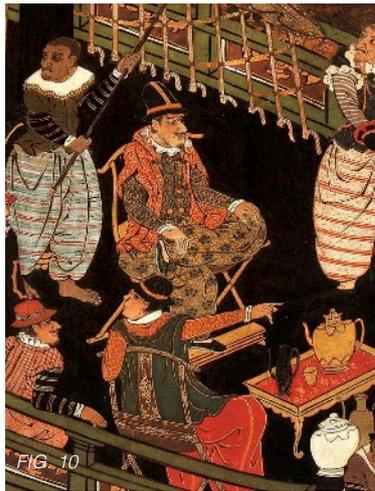
The portability of this seat was certainly one of its virtues. Some of its earliest representations depict the lightweight, collapsed form carried upon the shoulder as seen above (fig. 3) and in a detail from the Yuan dynasty hand scroll *Master of the Bamboo Forest Coming out of the Mountains* (fig. 6). Descriptions in Ming dynasty literary works also note the suitability for travel by boat or excursions into the mountains. And regardless of time or place, the collapsible form has long been suited for compact storage or the unexpected arrival of guests.

It also must be generally noted that since ancient times, the application of lacquer finishes have been the norm for treating the surfaces of traditional Chinese furniture. By the late Ming dynasty, when the art of lacquer had reached a pinnacle of achievement, nearly one hundred techniques were recorded in the lacquer treatise *Xiushilu*; of these, some ten percent of these were common to furniture production; and of the use on folding chairs, gold-outlined lacquer (*miaojin*) (fig. 7), painted lacquer (*caihui qi*), carved lacquer (*tihong qi*) (fig. 8), transparent lacquer (*shuimo qi*), and plain lacquer (*su qi*) (fig. 9) can be evidenced amongst extant examples. Of those that have survived several hundred years, the condition of these shell-like surfaces may range from marginally deteriorated to entirely missing, with only the barren structural forms surviving.

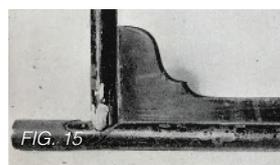


## II: The Chinese Folding Chair and Iberian Trade in the Far East

It was during the early 16<sup>th</sup> century when the Portuguese established relations with the Chinese in Southern China to develop trade as well as to promote the Christian religion. While their principal commercial interests were in the trade of porcelains and textiles, they were also intrigued by the novelty of Chinese customs and handicrafts. Curiosity regarding the furniture tradition was noted by Gaspar de Cruz, who upon a visit to Canton in 1556, wrote of the “great variety of chairs ...some of very fair white wood, and others fairly gilt and silvered, very finely wrought” and “chairs with shoulder-backs, all made of a very strong wood and very well made.” Certainly, the folding chair was amongst this “great variety”, for it quickly became a common attribute of the Portuguese sea merchants in depictions by contemporary Japanese artists.



The Portuguese, who secured trading rights in Macao in 1535, and eventually settlement rights in 1559, prospered greatly as middlemen at a time when direct trade between China and Japan was prohibited. Portuguese ships arriving in Japanese ports laden with Chinese goods and other exotic cargo are frequently depicted on Namban lacquer screens—the term Namban referring to Japanese art of the 16<sup>th</sup> and early 17<sup>th</sup> centuries influenced by contact with these “unsophisticated foreigners”. The renderings often provide the minute details of Portuguese merchants on ship deck sitting on Chinese folding chairs (fig. 10) and/or upon chairs taken to shore to observe the off-loading of cargo (fig. 11); even the decorative lacquer surfaces are sometimes clearly detailed. The frequency of appearance suggests that their use had been commonly adopted by the Portuguese sailors, who likely found their lightweight, portable and storable characteristics well suited for the lifestyle of seafaring



commerce. Notwithstanding a visual context limited to Japan, where chair-level sitting had hardly yet been adopted, it would not at all be surprising if similar examples also arrived in Lisbon on ships making the return voyage laden with their cargoes of exotic goods from the East. And this is certainly one of the possible routes the Chinese folding chairs in the Escorial could have traveled.

Here it is also of interest to draw attention to a Japanese folding chair dating from the early 17<sup>th</sup> century that survives in the Zuikoji Temple in Kyoto (fig. 12). This chair also features Namban style decoration; both sides of the back rest depict Portuguese figures in baggy trousers (fig. 13), and an elephant is carved in the upper medallion (fig. 14); the latter being in reference to cargoes with exotic animals, which were yet another attribute of the foreign merchants. Although the chair is generally modeled after the traditional Chinese pattern, the construction detailing is unmistakably Japanese (fig. 15). As the chair level sitting was also a foreign concept to the Japanese at that time, it is possible that such chairs were prepared as gifts, or as Gustave Ecke suggested, even commissioned by the foreign guests. Indeed, Japanese lacquer products were recognized as superior to the Chinese. Folding chairs with Japanese characteristics that occasionally appear on Namban screens (fig. 16) also suggest that the Zuikoji chair may have been more than an anomaly; nonetheless, few appear to have survived.

By the time of the unification of Spain and Portugal in 1580, when King Philip II became also King of Portugal, trade between Southern China and Manila was also already well established. Antonio de Morga, who lived in the Philippines 1594-1604, recorded that the Chinese ships from Fujian and Canton (Guangzhou) were loaded with a wide range of merchandise, which besides silks and porcelains, also included “little boxes and writing-cases; beds, tables, chairs, and gilded benches, painted in many figures and patterns.” Elsewhere, Morga notes that Portuguese ships also arrived with similar items made in Macao. Such goods were traded for gold and subsequently shipped to the New World where cargoes were variously distributed—including allotments that were carried overland to the eastern port of Veracruz where they were again reloaded onto vessels sailing to ports in Iberia.

Of decorative Chinese furniture arriving in Lisbon through this multiple-transfer eastbound route, Juan González de Mendoza (1585) noted:

[Chinese] women and men are ingenious in drawing and carving, and excellent painters of flowers, birds and beasts, which is quite apparent in the beds and tables they bring (to Manila) from there. I saw one piece that was brought by Captain Ribera, mayor of Manilla, to Lisbon in the year 1582; regarding its excellence, it suffices to say that it aroused the admiration of his Majesty (Philip II) as few things do. Perhaps not to such an extent (as the King), but for most who saw it, including the famous embroiderers, there was mutual appreciation.

While Mendoza’s narrative is insufficient to understand precisely what type of object aroused Philip II’s admiration, it is sufficient to reveal Philip’s curiosity with exotic lacquer furniture from China; furthermore, it also suggests another possible route of the Chinese chairs to the Escorial Palace.

The event described by Mendoza corresponded to the time of Philip II’s residence in Lisbon, from where he reigned for nearly two and one half years to stabilize the unification with Portugal. And it was from a seaside palace in Lisbon where Philip also came into direct view of the shipping vessels that conducted trade from his vastly extended colonial empire, which now included the Portuguese holdings in India, Indonesia, China and Japan.

Since the early 16<sup>th</sup> century, Chinese porcelains and silks had been exclusive luxuries that circulated amongst the Portuguese nobility and shared as gifts through the network of Hapsburg aristocracy. Queen Catherine of Portugal (1507-1578), who was Philip II’s aunt as well as mother-in-law, formed one of the earliest collections Chinese porcelain and exotica in Europe. In 1565 she imported a large quantity of Asian lacquered furniture from Macao and sent some as gifts to her grandson, Prince Charles, and to the third wife of Philip II, Elizabeth of Valois in Madrid. By the late 16<sup>th</sup> century, such imports had become commonly available in the high-end markets of Lisbon, where speciality

shops offered exotic items sourced along the trade route from Japan, China, Indonesia, India, as well as the New World. Regardless of origin, these imported goods were often simply designated as “Indian”, regardless of origin. And even further clouding the origin of Chinese-style objects was the phenomenon of Chinese settlements throughout these colonial regions with inhabitants also engaged in traditional handicraft production. Thus, Lisbon had become a hub of distribution for such overseas goods, both to other courts as well as markets throughout Europe.

Philip II was a renowned and avid art collector; he and his father, Charles V, both cultivated relationships with masters from Italy and the Netherlands, and many of the fine works of fine art and sculpture they collected are now in the Prado Museum. Philip II was also fascinated with exotic works from the East. He continued to add to his father’s collection of Chinese porcelains, which grew to become the largest in Europe at the time; an inventory made shortly after his death in 1598 listed over 3,000 pieces—the majority of which were Ming dynasty blue and whites.

And, in 1584, when Phillip received his first gifts of Japanese lacquerware, his remarks regarding the marked difference with Chinese lacquer revealed his familiarity with the medium. Perhaps a reference his aunt’s gifts to his son and wife, as well as the Chinese object decorated with “flowers, birds and beasts” he had admired during his stay in Lisbon. Interesting to note here that, so too, are the backrests of the Escorial chairs similarly patterned (fig. 22).

### III: The Chinese Folding Chairs in the Escorial



When viewed as objects of antique furniture from the Far East, the qualities of pattern, construction, and decoration of the Escorial chairs clearly fit into the highly sophisticated Chinese furniture-making tradition. Curiously, in 16<sup>th</sup> century China, these chairs would have been considered as not more than ordinary examples of the type. Yet, as fate sometimes shines upon the least expected, they were destined for a journey half way around the world, where they eventually found service with a king, and afterwards were safely enshrined to present time. Moreover, having survived as relatively early examples of their type, they now also serve as important references for the study of traditional Chinese furniture. Accordingly, the qualities and condition of the Escorial chairs will be addressed below.

A few stylistic characteristics appearing in the subtle details of proportion and line can

be pointed out that coincide with the 16<sup>th</sup> century attribution. First is the strongly arched profile of the crestrail, whose lifted ends appear like a long-horned water buffalo (fig. 17); amongst later examples, the profiles are less animated, and the protruding ends more withdrawn. Secondly is the strong tapering of the backrest, which is checked in balance with large size spandrels shaped on the upper half (fig. 18); the backrest's oblique profile in later works is certainly less striking. And thirdly is the robust shape of the apron and bulging feet of the footrest below, and the early-style of the negative space that they frame—a pattern which also closely resembles that of Tang Yin's 16<sup>th</sup> illustration illustrated above (fig. 19). All of these vigorous stylistic characteristics are consistent with period of the Ming dynasty when the Portuguese and Spanish were actively engaged in the trade of Chinese merchandise.



The timber of the chairs is not readily identifiable as one of the more common woods utilized for Chinese furniture production. However, it is possibly a species indigenous to regions along the southeast coast of China. A close inspection reveals a “strong, straight grained wood” (*gengmu*), which is a generic term mentioned in the aforementioned *Lu Ban jing* for the selection of material to make the folding chair. However, in the modern vernacular of Chinese furniture, the timber cannot be classified as a “hardwood” as stated by Medley (1985), wherein such use of the term is reserved exclusively for the group of dense, tropical hardwoods such as *huanghuali*, *zitan*, *tielimu*, *hongmu*, etc. Indeed, the majority of furniture produced throughout China was made from local or indigenous woods, which were selected in accordance with their inherent characteristics.

The construction is typical, yet several details may be of interest to those already familiar with traditional Chinese furniture-making techniques. The mortise-and-tenon joints are all pinned with wood (or perhaps bamboo) to tightly secure the integrated framework. Remnants of metal mounts, and traces of their loss also suggest additional reinforcement between horizontal and vertical components—a common technique addressing the fragile build of the folding chair (fig. 20). The underside of the front seat frame was shaped with a recess to conceal the visibility of the woven seat along the bottom edge. And in attempt to dispel the myth that the Chinese furniture-maker never used nails, it should also be noted that the apron of the footrest is just so attached—and not an uncommon technique.

Typical of the period, these chairs were also originally finished with red and black lacquer (fig. 21)—a contrasting, yet traditional, decorative scheme evident since ancient times, and one that continued in use well into the Qing dynasty. Gold-outlined painting (*miaojin*) was also employed to delineate three separate panels on the back rest (fig. 26). In the upper panel, a lobed medallion is set against a cross-hatched ground and frames an auspicious *qilin*. The central panel depicts a garden landscape scene with figures and a building. The narrow panel at the base is also set against a cross-hatched ground and frames auspicious peonies. Backrests with three-panel configurations are common amongst Chinese chairs.

It should here be noted that Medley’s assessment in 1985 of the lacquer decoration as a “out of character with the piece” reveals a bias of some early Western scholars who generally recognized “Ming furniture” as of plain-style, minimally decorated, and made of tropical hardwood; the further suggestion that the decorative surfaces were added later and outside of China to appeal to the Spanish taste also reveals a lack of experience with the immensely broader range of traditional Chinese furniture that was typically finished with lacquer in similar style.



The underside of the back seat-frame stretchers have brushed with ink inscriptions: one is marked *er* 尔; the other, *xin* 辛 (figs. 22-23). Such markings with individual characters are occasionally found on pairs and/or sets of furniture to indicate individual pieces of a set, in the sense of chair A and chair B; traditionally, two character compounds with extended poetic meaning were employed, for example “Heaven and Earth” (*tiandi* 天地) or “Hehe, the Heavenly Twins” (*Hehe* 和合). Curiously, no special meaning has been discovered for the terms *er* and *xin*—either as individual or compound characters—and their selection remains a mystery for the present time.



FIG. 24

The two chairs appear in remarkably different states of condition; the structure of one chair has been significantly altered, and the two are now nearly unrecognizable as a pair. A photograph of Philip II's apartment taken around 1880 (fig. 24) reveals the chair on the right in its current state of repair, but the reconstruction may well have occurred much earlier.

The overall structure of Chair A (marked *er*) is well preserved (fig. 13). There are losses of metal reinforcing straps, and the metal hinges are replacements. The lacquer surfaces are largely abraded, and only traces of the gold-outlined

decoration are visible on the back rest. Tattered remnants of the original seat of woven palm-fiber survive and are supported with a leather seat panel that was attached below to provide underlying support.

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FIG. 25



FIG. 26

Chair B (marked *xin*) was severely altered long ago (fig. 25). The protruding ends of the crest rail were lopped off, and the front seat stretcher was also correspondingly reduced in length. The back legs were replaced, and the position of the left leg was inset approximately 8-9 cm from the original placement, distanced with wood spacer block that is threaded through the long hinge pin. The foot stretcher of the back legs, which appears to be original, was reduced in length to fit flush with the newly inset leg. The seat retains its original panel of woven palm fiber, which in previous time was covered with a leather panel to which is stitched a remnant of mid-16th century Persian velvet embroidered; the two-ply panel is attached with large boss-head nails. The apron of the foot rest is missing, and the short support between the base stretcher and foot-rest panel was a latter addition. Aside from the reconstruction, the lacquer surfaces are in much better condition than chair A. Fortunately, the gold-outlined decoration of this chair's backrest was recorded in a photograph taken around 1950 (fig. 26); however, the chairs were since re-polished, and unfortunately, the detail is now much less distinct.

#### IV: The Escorial Chinese Chairs after Arrival in the West

Although there is much circumstantial evidence surrounding the folding chairs at the Escorial, the precise details of how and when they arrived remains unclear. No specific record of Philip's acquisition of the chairs has yet been discovered; moreover, his use of the chairs is largely based upon accounts that did not appear until the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Thus, like their uncertain route to the West, their post-arrival story is similarly without clarity; nonetheless, a plausible picture can be inferred from a considerable amount of incidental detail.

In 1565 Queen Catherine of Portugal imported a large quantity of Asian lacquered furniture from Macao, some of which were given as gifts to her grandson, Prince Charles (1545-1568) as well as to the third wife of Philip II, Elizabeth of Valois. An inventory of Charles' belongings at the Alcazar made after his death in 1568 includes two chairs "in pieces that can be set up"; the archaic grammar may well be a reference to a collapsible, folding-chair form. The further notation that they were part of a group that came from Portugal also possibly links them to the gifts given by his grandmother. In any case, the possibility that these chairs were eventually incorporated into the collection of his father, Philip II is certainly plausible.

The royal apartments of King Philip II at the Escorial were left untouched after his death in 1598 until the French invasion in 1807, after which a number of the more valuable objects were either seized, sold, or relocated. In the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Dominican Cárlos Hidalgo, an administrator of the Reale Patrimonio, was able to discover the whereabouts of some of the furniture that furnished Philip's apartments during his lifetime, and he rearranged them as he thought to be their rightful places (Rotondo). Such may well be the grouping of chairs and stools evident in the photograph taken shortly before 1883, when an engraving of the photo was published (fig. 20).

That Phillip II suffered from gout was a well-documented fact in his lifetime. But it is not until the 1861 publication of Antonio Rotondo's *Descripción de la gran Basílica del Escorial* when there is



FIG. 27



FIG. 28

suggestion that the king used the folding chairs (*taburetillos*) to rest his gout-infected leg. While the Spanish and Portuguese terms used to describe furniture from the Orient varies from the generic to the archaic, a very similar reference to Philip's gout that qualitatively terms the chairs as "scissor chairs" (*sillas de tijera*) appears in a guide to the Escorial published in 1874, which further notes "stained surfaces from oily ointments and salves" used for treatment. Such leg-cradling use appears in a painting by Santiago Arcos in 1879, which re-enacts a historical meeting with foreign dignitaries in Philip's apartment at the Escorial (fig. 27); certainly, the soft, pliable seat also would have been comfortable for cradling the outstretched leg. And with regard to a light weight, collapsible form that was well suited for carrying about as needed, another late 19<sup>th</sup> century artist recreated a scene with Phillip and

his architect supervising the construction of the Escorial from a distant viewpoint—accompanied with an attendant folding chair (fig. 28). While the details of these historical scenes are fictitious recreations, nonetheless, they could also represent an oral tradition regarding the Philip's use of the of the chairs.



Finally, it should be noted that the condition of chair B as described above is clearly evident in the photograph of circa 1883. But, rather than an abysmal restoration, as is often suggested, it seems more than likely that the reduced length of the crestrail and seat frame, and the repositioned leg were intentional alterations that were made so as to be able to fit or nest the chair in a location. If the right side of the chair were drawn up to another chair, for instance, the manner in which it was reduced would permit it to be drawn very close, especially with the right leg inset as it is. One is also struck by the

sideways orientation of the embroidered fabric, which is decorated with kneeling figures (fig. 29). Thus, someone sitting in another chair with right side of the folding chair positioned in front would see the panel in its correct orientation. The bottom of this panel is on the right side, which is where the chair leg is also inset. The abraded wear along this side also obviously appears to be from many years of use for resting a salve-anointed leg.

## Final Words

The Ming dynasty historian Craig Clunas commenting on Chinese furniture once wrote, “The major, and overwhelmingly the most important body of evidence for the course of development of Chinese furniture lies with the surviving objects themselves, and it is to these that we now turn.” So is it that—despite lacking clarity regarding origin and history—the story of the Escorial folding chairs lies largely in the objects themselves, and secondarily in an interpretation from contextual circumstances. Indeed, they are modest early works of Chinese furniture that became richly imbued with historical context.

Finally, this article would not have been possible without support from the Spanish historians Pilar García Morencos and Almudena Perez de Tudela Gabaldón, as well as the enthusiasm of a Chinese furniture lover and friend, Agustin Escardino Malva.

## Illustrations

- Fig. 1 Photo of author with the Escorial chairs, May 2017.
- Fig. 2 Wall Mural, detail of figure with folding chair, Liao dynasty
- Fig. 3 *Ruiying tu*, detail of figure with folding chair, Anonymous Song 12<sup>th</sup> century
- Fig. 4 *Li Duanduan*, detail of figure with folding chair, Tang Yin, Ming dynasty hanging scroll, Jiangsu Provincial Museum, Nanjing
- Fig. 5 Pottery folding chair, Ming dynasty
- Fig. 6 *Master of the Bamboo Forest coming out of the Mountains*, detail of figure with folding chair, Yuan dynasty hand scroll
- Fig. 7 Folding chair with gold-decorated lacquer, Ming dynasty, former Piccus Collection
- Fig. 8 Folding chair with carved lacquer, Ming dynasty, Metropolitan Museum of Art
- Fig. 9 Folding chair with plain lacquer, Ming dynasty, C. L Ma Collection
- Fig. 10 Namban screen detail, figures on cargo ship sitting on folding chairs
- Fig. 11 Namban screen detail, onshore figures sitting on folding chairs
- Fig. 12 Folding chair in the Zuikoji Temple, Kyoto, 17<sup>th</sup> century.
- Fig. 13 Detail of backrest painted figure, folding chair in the Zuikoji Temple, Kyoto, 17<sup>th</sup> century.
- Fig. 14 Detail of backrest medallion, folding chair in the Zuikoji Temple, Kyoto, 17<sup>th</sup> century.
- Fig. 15 Detail, of foot stretcher, folding chair in the Zuikoji Temple, Kyoto, 17<sup>th</sup> century.
- Fig. 16 Namban screen detail, foreign figure carrying a Japanese style folding chair
- Fig. 17 Escorial folding chair (A)
- Fig. 18 Backrest detail, Escorial folding chair (A)
- Fig. 19 Footrest detail, Escorial folding chair (A)
- Fig. 20 Metal reinforcement detail, Escorial folding chair (A)
- Fig. 21 Red and black lacquer detail, Escorial folding chair (A)
- Fig. 22 Chinese character *er*, Escorial folding chair (A)
- Fig. 23 Chinese character *xin*, Escorial folding chair (B)
- Fig. 24 Photo detail of Philip's Apartment at the Escorial, ca. 1880.
- Fig. 25 Escorial folding chair (B)
- Fig. 26 Detail of back rest, Escorial folding chair (B) after a 1950's publication.
- Fig. 27 Painting detail from *Philip II Meeting Dignitaries*, c. 1879 by Santiago Arcos, Alcázares of Seville
- Fig. 28 Painting detail of *The Seat of Philip II*, c. 1889 by Luis Álvarez Catalá, National Museum of Berlin
- Fig. 29 Seat panel, Escorial folding chair (B)

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