



## Closing the Loop

### The 18th-century inspo behind Frances Elkins's 20th-century icon

**T**he delicate cabriole leg. The carved-wood curlicue back. Any in-the-know design person can identify this hot seat: the 1930s Frances Elkins Loop chair. But do they know its eye-catching silhouette originated more than a century prior?

"No one speaks about where Elkins got the idea—that she didn't invent it," says James Shearron of AD100 firm Bories & Shearron Architecture. He supposes the decorator spotted a japanned 1770s seat with the same loopy design in Percy Macquoid and Ralph Edwards's *Dictionary of English Furniture*, from 1924. (Edwin Lutyens, perhaps also seeing this image, made a lesser-known riff.) Another theory is that Elkins laid eyes on the pictured chairs in the homes of Edward Burgess Hudson, the founder of *Country Life*, or Ronald and Nancy Tree (later Lancaster).

Either way, inspired, she came up with her own version—a coat of white paint, a slight adjustment to the pitch—which was likely produced by her Monterey, California, carpenter Myron Oliver. Little is known about these

It chairs; they're called simply "bridge chairs" in her files, and there are no accompanying sketches. They only appeared in three documented projects, all featured in Scott Powell's new book, *Frances Elkins: Visionary American Designer* (Rizzoli).

"She was brilliant at getting the proportions exactly right," Powell notes of the chair that captivated the design world, spawning a fleet of look-alikes. (Several made a cameo in the 1944 flick *Laura*.) In this case, there's no such thing as an "authentic." Unless you count one of the dozen or so Elkins made for clients (four, now painted black, were sold by Sotheby's in 2009) or her 18th-century

references, which were auctioned with other pieces from Bunny Mellon's estate by Sotheby's in 2014. Shearron, who calls most of today's takes "clunky and lacking movement," says Nicholas Wells in England makes the most elegant option. In true Elkins fashion, today's tastemakers are buying or producing them to suit their fancy—Marc Jacobs bought metal ones for his New York garden; Christopher Spitzmiller got a set from antiques dealer Kevin L. Perry. Many are still taken with the 1770s original originals, which AD100 designer Miles Redd dubs "as graceful as a whippet." —HANNAH MARTIN



1. A SET OF LOOP ARMCHAIRS IN ADMAN PETER ROGERS'S NEW ORLEANS COTTAGE. 2. MARC JACOBS'S NEW YORK CITY GARDEN FEATURES WROUGHT-IRON VERSIONS. 3. SCOTT POWELL'S NEW BOOK ABOUT ELKINS. 4. ELKINS, CIRCA 1946. 5. DANIELLE ROLLINS'S ATLANTA HOME, DESIGNED BY MILES REDD. 6. JAMES ANDREW'S MANHATTAN APARTMENT.