



Seated Massage In History

The modern massage chair revived this form of bodywork in the 1980s.

By Patricia J. Benjamin

It is a common misconception that seated massage is new in the history of bodywork. On the contrary, throughout its history massage has been

given with recipients in various positions, including seated.

The idea that massage is only given with the client lying faceup or facedown on a table comes from the popularity of Swedish massage offered at salons and spas in the early 20th century, and its derivative Esalen massage in the 1970s. The invention of the massage chair in the 1980s sparked a revival in seated massage that continues to grow.

Around The World

There are many examples of seated massage practiced around the world. In cultures that did not have tables and chairs, massage was typically given on the ground, possibly on

mats, with receivers in a lying down or seated position.

For example, picture a Ju/wasi healer, a bushman of the Kalahari Desert in Southern Africa, rubbing the head of a tribesman sitting cross-legged on the ground. The healer is holding the head of the seated man with the palm of one hand and rubbing his neck and back of the head with the other hand (New River Media, 1998).

In the past, people receiving massage sat on whatever structures or furniture were available at the time. For example, centuries-old Japanese block prints depict people sitting on low stools next to their baths to receive massage (Palmer, *Chair Massage History*, 2001). Sitting up from the ground or floor no doubt increased the comfort of the receiver as well as the giver.

A drawing from 18th century China depicts a “barber-masseur” performing percussion on a patron’s back, with the patron sitting on a box. This form of “onsite” seated massage is still available in villages and cities of China today (Benjamin, 2002).

Swedish Movement Cure

To receive the Swedish Movement Cure in the late 19th century, recipients might be in one of several differ-

ent positions, including lying on a table, leaning against a rail, kneeling on a cushion, hanging from a bar, half-lying on a couch or sitting on a stool or chair. Which position they took was determined by the part of the body to be exercised or massaged, and best access by the practitioner. The apparatus at the Gymnastic Orthopedic

To access the muscles of the back, the practitioner, shown in Figure 2, had the recipient sit backward in a common chair and lean on his knees for support. The practitioner is exhibiting good body mechanics by kneeling to preserve his alignment while pinching the muscles of the back. Or, both giver and receiver might be sitting as in

In the past, people receiving massage sat on whatever structures or furniture were available at the time. For example, centuries-old Japanese block prints depict people sitting on low stools next to their baths to receive massage.

Institute in Stockholm, Sweden, in the early 1900s included a variety of furniture and equipment to facilitate various positioning. There were tables, stools, chairs, couches, wall-bars, poles and devices called “booms” on which to lean.

The “fundamental sitting position” was described as follows: “The buttocks and thighs rest on some horizontal support; the knee and ankle joints are kept at right angles and the feet rest on the floor or on some other support; the legs are kept close together ... the arms hang freely close to the body.”

Variations include hips-firm sitting, reach-sitting, stretch-sitting, long-sitting, half-sitting, stride- or ride-sitting, twist-sitting and other derivations. Positioning was creative, guided by the intent of the techniques to be applied, and limited only by the imagination of the practitioner.

“Neck muscle sawing,” as demonstrated in Figure 1, shows use of a stool and a piece of equipment called a boom. Note that the boom is padded and adjustable in height, and is used in this case for the client to rest his arms at shoulder height while the practitioner, called a medical gymnast, is massaging the neck (Wide, 1909).

Figure 3, Page 146, demonstrating passive movements at the ankle joint (Bilz, 1898).

As the Swedish movements and massage were adapted for treatment of soldiers in World War I (1914-1919), both tables and chairs were used in

massage units of army hospitals. Massage of the arm and shoulder might be given with soldiers in chairs, as shown in Figure 4, Page 146. Patients might also sit up on tables to receive massage on their legs. Their position was determined by what was best to gain access to the area receiving treatment.

Full-Body Table Massage

By mid-20th century, the concept of giving massage in the seated position had been largely forgotten in the West. Physical therapists may have had their patients sit for some applications, such as applying friction to a tendon in an arm or leg, but massage was a very minor part of physical therapy treatment by the 1960s. The days of whole massage units in hospitals had past.

With the increase in popularity of full-body Swedish massage, the general public fully associated massage with lying on a table, covered only by a drape, by the 1940s. The idea of full-body table massage for relaxation and



Figure 1. Use of stool and boom for neck muscle sawing in Swedish movement cure. From *Hand-book of Medical and Orthopedic Gymnastics* by Anders Wide, 1909.



Figure 2. Sitting backward on a chair for massage of back. From *The Natural Method of Healing* by F. E. Bilz, 1898.



Figure 3. *Sitting in chair for passive ankle movements. From The Natural Method of Healing by F. E. Bilz, 1898.*



Figure 4. *Patients receiving massage while sitting in a chair and on a table. Massage unit in army hospital. From A Practice of Physiotherapy by C. M. Sampson, 1926.*

health promotion had taken off in the late 19th century, no doubt aided by the popularity of Mitchell's Rest Cure (see *MASSAGE THERAPY JOURNAL*, Winter 2003), and remained the massage of choice well into the 20th century.

On-Site Massage: 1980s

David Palmer of San Francisco developed an idea and a piece of equipment that was to revive the practice of seated massage in the 1980s. The idea was to create a method of bringing massage to the people—at work, in stores and in parks—that would increase the numbers willing to receive massage and the many benefits of touch. Massage adapted for the seated position seemed like the ideal vehicle for the task.

Trained in traditional Japanese massage by Takashi Nakamura at The Amma Institute in San Francisco in the early 1980s, Palmer became director of the school when Nakamura returned to Japan in 1982. It was there that Palmer began experimenting with working on clients seated in a chair, rather than lying on a table (Palmer, *Founder Bio*, 2001).

Palmer's goal was to develop a form of massage that was applied over clothing, and so could be given without oil and in a public space. The client would be seated in an upright position on a portable chair, which could be taken anywhere. And finally, the time for the massage was shortened so that it was more affordable to clients (Palmer, *Chair Massage History*, 2001). Traditional Japanese massage could be adapted nicely for this scenario.

Thus, amma became the basis for the first "on-site" or seated massage as we know it today. It was given without oil, and could easily be adapted for the seated position. But the client needed to be supported comfortably to be able to relax and receive the pressure of the amma techniques. In 1983, Palmer began to develop a special massage chair.

In addition to accommodating the massage, the chair needed to be

portable for easy transport to sites. The first massage chairs had the basic components of those manufactured today—seat, face-cradle, armrest and kneeler. The first model, put out by Living Earth Crafts in 1986, was made of plywood, padding and hardware easily found in stores. It could be taken apart and fit into the box frame like a puzzle. The chairs were somewhat unstable, heavy and awkward by today's standards, but were a revolution in their time. An early Living Earth Crafts massage chair is shown in Figure 5 and Figure 6.

Originally called "on-site massage" because massage was brought to the client at his or her workplace or other public places, the idea caught on and is a popular form of massage in its own right today. Palmer continues to train and certify chair massage practitioners through the TouchPro Institute in San Francisco.

Seated Massage

The design of the original massage chair has evolved over the past 20 years. While the basic elements remain the same, the massage chair has become easier to transport, has more



Figure 5. *Early Living Earth Crafts massage chair, c. 1986.*

adjustments for different body types and sizes, and comes in many models.

The availability of the massage

access the upper body in the seated position during clinical applications of massage.

David Palmer of San Francisco developed an idea and a piece of equipment that was to revive the practice of seated massage in the 1980s. The idea was to create a method of bringing massage to the people—at work, in stores and in parks.

chair itself has sparked renewed interest in the advantages of performing massage and bodywork with the client in a seated position. In addition to wellness-oriented massage, clinical massage is also given on the massage chair, especially for treating the upper back and shoulders. Adaptations of Western massage and other forms of bodywork are being made for use with the massage chair.

Furthermore, once the idea of the massage chair caught on, massage therapists became more open to seated massage in general. Today, there is much more creativity in the use of the seated position, for example, with clients sitting on a chair and leaning on a desk or table, or an athlete sitting on a bench or bleachers. Practitioners are more likely to



Figure 6. *Early Living Earth Crafts massage chair, c. 1986.*

The unending possibilities for seated massage continue to be explored. An old practice has been retrieved from the past, and adapted for today's reality. It is our future and our heritage. ❧

...

Patricia J. Benjamin, Ph.D., is co-author of *Tappan's Handbook of Healing Massage Techniques and Understanding Sports Massage*. She has been writing and teaching about the history of massage therapy since the early 1980s. She can be contacted via E-mail at: pat_benjamin@sbcglobal.net.

Bibliography

Benjamin, P. J. "Shampooing: A journey to the East." *MASSAGE THERAPY JOURNAL* 41:2 (2002): 140-144.

Bilz, F. E. *The Natural Method of Healing: A New and Complete Guide to Health*. Leipzig, Germany: F. E. Bilz, 1898.

Sampson, C. M. *A Practice of Physiotherapy*. St. Louis: C.V. Mosby Company, 1926.

"The Nature of Healing: Massage." New River Media Production, 1988. Videocassette. TouchPro Institute, *Chair Massage History*, www.touchpro.org; accessed 25 October 2002.

TouchPro Institute, *Founder Bio: David Palmer*, www.touchpro.org; accessed 25 October 2002.

Wide, A. *Hand-book of Medical and Orthopedic Gymnastics*. New York, New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1909.