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# **School Desks - From Antique Craftsmanship To Modern Convenience**

School desks have developed over the last century and a half from the wood and metal antique ones that you sometimes see in museums to ones made of sleek steel tubing and laminated plastic. I experienced both types in my own schooling from a one room rural schoolhouse to a modern high school.

My earliest memory of school desks is of those with ornately designed cast iron frames and a wooden top. The slightly slanted hardwood top, often decorated with names and doodles of past occupants, had a long groove to hold pencils and pens and a circular hole that was just the right size to hold a special bottle of ink.

Beneath the writing top was a storage space to hold books, scribblers, crayons and other belongings. Attached to the front of the desk was a wooden bench seat and back. As the units were placed in rows, a student sat on the bench seat of one section and worked at the table of the one in front.

This elaborately designed desk type was made in the US around 1880. Designed by Anna Breadin, it was for its time, a new and exciting concept for school furniture. Previously, most schools used very rustic wood desks or even tables with either chairs or attached benches that several students would sit at. There was no place to hold pencils, slates or books.

Early in the last century, new designs incorporated more light weight metal tubing as a framework. The attached wooden slanted desktops usually had storage space beneath. Many of these were single units with the seat attached, so could be arranged in more versatile ways. Another innovation was the swivel seat, making it easier to get into and out of the desk.

In these newer models, storage space ranged from compartments under the desktop to others under the seat. Under seat storage first was comprised of a wooden drawer, rather cumbersome to open while seated. These were replaced with a wire shelf that was quite accessible.

Desktops also varied. The Breadin designed ones had fairly spacious hardwood tops, with enough room to hold both text books and notebooks. They could accommodate large sheets of construction or drawing paper, and even were useful as craft tables. More modern styles often had a side mounted desktop with much less workspace. They had just enough room for a writing surface, so textbooks often had to sit on one's lap.

Nowadays, school desks are available in a huge variety of sizes and styles. Some are specifically made for small children, while others can accommodate adults. Many online school supply outlets carry them, often at quite affordable prices. Purchases can be single for individual use, or quantity for institutions.

Newer lightweight classroom furniture today is often made with laminate table tops and molded plastic seats in a combined single unit. Storage is either under the desktop or a wire shelf beneath the seat. Designed for economy, modern classroom desks have come a long way from the early models.

For those with an urge for nostalgia, antique school desks can often be found in museums or antique shops. Most of these antique classroom pieces can be bought for under \$100, and highly sought after by collectors. Even online auction sites have a variety for sale. Old fashioned school furniture can be an interesting display piece in your home.

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