

THE CONJUNCTION OF CONTINENTAL AND ENGLISH FURNITURE CRAFTSMEN IN LONDON

Widening the context for evaluation

"Furniture brought into England by foreign merchants and sold at fairs and markets common, even in London, until the mid-eighteenth century, may have been another vehicle by which consciousness of the new style was transmitted. English craftsmen attended the same fairs as foreign merchants did and presumably had easy access to their wares. It was easy enough to copy these items, and doubtless, the English imprint was quickly put on them. To identify the imported objects at this late date and to trace them to their places of origin, and indeed to separate these prototypes from the native English furniture, is a task that would challenge the ingenuity and persistence of the most intrepid historian, if it could be done with assurance" B. M Forman (1)*

During the 16th and 17th century a large number of foreign craftsmen with furniture-making skills came to London (2*). Some 400 craftsmen came between 1511 and 1621 and are listed in Volume 10 of the 'Publications of the Huguenot Society of London'. In view of the scale of the activity - especially in London during this period - and its likely impact on furniture-making in the City, this essay has addressed itself to methods of examining furniture making traditions in the Low Countries (3*) in more depth and where possible to consider widening the field of observation when examining these early traditions. Careful scrutiny of the names, abodes of origin and footnote remarks quoted after each name reveals the foreign craftsmen hailed almost entirely from a region commonly referred to as 'The Low Countries'.

The biographical details of the 405 foreign and denizen craftsmen and 73 servants to craftsmen, listed in Benno M. Forman's 'Continental Furniture Craftsmen in London', reveal the stark reality of religious persecution in the Low Countries at that time: (the dates indicate recorded years of residence in London)

- 1560–1582 Gabriel Battes, 'came for religion'
- 1562–1571 Kathryn de Key, 'came for religion, probably widow'
- 1564–1571 John de Dranssa, 'came for religion'
- 1566 John Barley, 'born under King Phillip' (of Spain, ed)
- 1568–1583 Lodeuyke Tijves, 'born under the Dominion' of the King of Spain'
- 1571 Christian Vanioye, 'came for feare of the tyrannye of Duke Alba'.

The Duke of Alba was the Governor of the Low Countries for the King of Spain, rounding up the Protestants for the Spanish Inquisition. The immigrants to London, fleeing in fear for their life, were not met with an undivided welcome. The Worshipful Company of Joiners of the City of London was suffering from the competition of non-Guild craftsmen from the Continent. Laws and rules were promulgated to protect the 'closed shop' of the Guild. Establishment of new business by

such foreign craftsmen was forbidden; foreign skills or qualification were not recognised. The Guild was the judge and jury when vetting applicants. Admittedly these laws were bad laws and observed in the breach by Guild members looking for imported skills. Students of furniture history will be aware that the restrictive practices enforced by the London Guild delayed the natural evolution of furniture design and making in England. An evolution already embedded in Continental furniture making since the onset of the philosophy and practices of the Renaissance. The skill descriptions of the immigrant craftsmen, as listed in the Huguenot Society Publication, are given in the English language, the 17th century Dutch language and occasionally in a 'latinised' version thereof. I have subdivided the entries in an attempt to identify the specific skills. The figure in brackets indicates the number of entries under the given job descriptions.

English language entries

Joiner	(360)	Looking glass maker	(1)
Turner	(35)	Custody maker (sic)	(1)
Virginal maker	(4)	Upholdar (sic)	(1)
Carver	(11)	Box maker	(5)
Carver in stone	(1)	Cofer maker (sic)	(1)
Stoolmaker (ie chairmaker)	(1)		

Dutch language entries

Scrynmaker, Scrynwerker,	(16) - (joiner)
Kistmaker	(10) - (chestmaker)

As to country of origin, 37 are described as 'Dutch' and 13 came from 'Holland'. The biographical details show that the name 'Dutchman' was applied indiscriminately to classify strangers from Holland, Flanders, Brabant, Gelderland and the (present) border regions near Cleve, Aachen and Cologne. Allowances must also be made for the strange phonetics of continental name pronunciation to English ears. Registration of proper surnames did not occur on the Continent until a late 18th century Napoleonic law enforcing registration of proper surnames. Thus the arrivals from the continent had to choose a surname on the spur of the moment when registering with, for example, the perambulating constable of Southwark, the clerk at Southwark Court, the Guildhall and so on. A stranger with a sense of humour could invent a name and job description farcical to the registrant, but solemnly written down by the registrar. In the given listings the 'jokers' stand out; for Nr. 100, 1562, Guillelmus Forestarius - faber scrynarius, read: Guillaume (William) of the woods - scrynwerker (joiner), for Nr.90,1561, Theodorus Kistemaker - accularius read: Theodore the chestmaker - turner (?) for Nr. 228, Hendrick de Stoeldrayer - turner - Henry the chairturner.

Note: During the 16th-17th century a person could elect to latinise his name for status embellishment: a practice deemed absurd amongst working classes (Ed). The furniture business of London was a melting pot. These men may not have been great inventors but they brought novelties in design and practice. They were there in such numbers that it would be inconceivable to write about English furniture history without taking their influence into account.

The Low Countries were a haven for the persecuted during the first half of the 16th century. When this status became decidedly dubious after 1550, people looked for the 'next haven': England. Thus the furniture makers moved to London, the cloth workers to Norfolk and so forth. And so they came, with their intellectual and craft skills, an accumulation of evolved Greco-Roman, Hispanic, Germanic, French and Jewish influences. If one also takes into account the foreign exports of finished furniture, a complex scenario emerges that may defy the brave furniture historian bent on identifying English designed, and made, 16th century furniture.

Faced with this dilemma when examining early English furniture, a widening of the viewing angle may reveal hitherto concealed contexts illustrated on ceramics, paintings, etchings and stained glass originating not only from specific areas within the Low Countries but also within recognisable timescales.

The time capsules illustrated in figures 17 to 20 provide a glimpse of tools of trade and work practices rather similar to English customs of that time. As to design and style of the finished product it would be prudent to admit the possibility of Netherlandish origin. Indeed a wider appraisal of case studies may provide us with parallels and greater understanding of the sources of these traditions both in England and in the Low Countries. To raise discussion at this stage about names of makers and their abode leads one into uncharted waters where tenuous conclusions are likely to be drawn.



Fig 17. A stained Glass Roundel – The Holy Family in the Workshop, 23.5cm (with border 31.5cm) Flemish (?) circa 1500 (4*)

This roundel depicts the Holy Family. Joseph is using a plane, the Virgin sits in a Gothic Chair carding wool while Christ picks up the shavings. The border is from two sources, of somewhat later date. There is a Gothic

fireplace, merchant's marks on the window and an assortment of woodworking tools. The V&A woodwork department holds on file photographs of all these tools. Popham dates this at 1470, judging by the hairstyle and execution by that date or possibly early 16th century. Sotheby, 3/5/55 sale, lot 107 and in private collection since. Reference: Dr. William Cole. 'A catalogue of Netherlandish and North European Roundels in Britain'. Illustration 71 (4*)



Fig 18. A signed etching, probably depicting 'De Drie Zinnen' (The three senses) signed: Pinxit, A van Ostaden, Sc, Jonas Suyderhoef, circa: 1650 (date not legible). Private collection

Note: A van Ostaden, 10/12/1610-1684, Haarlem J. Suyderhoef, 1613-1686, Leiden and Haarlem

The text is a 17th century Dutch ditty of no literary merit.

'When Jan de Moff makes his fiddle play a new tune
and Lichte Pietje's throat thereby sings,
then it's to you and me a fresh pipe.
Sodden Gysje Tap, pour. Who would want to
depart as long as his money lasts.'

A typical furniture time capsule: chair, stool, table, bench, cupboard, turned candlestick, draught animal harness. In all likelihood, the chair is a Kempen rush-seated chair (see RFS Newsletter 27, pl4, ill. 90)

Note: It is not unusual for an etching to be preceded by an earlier oil painting of the same scene especially when it concerns a popular theme and thus is much in demand. I have as yet not succeeded in locating the preceding painting - if there is one.

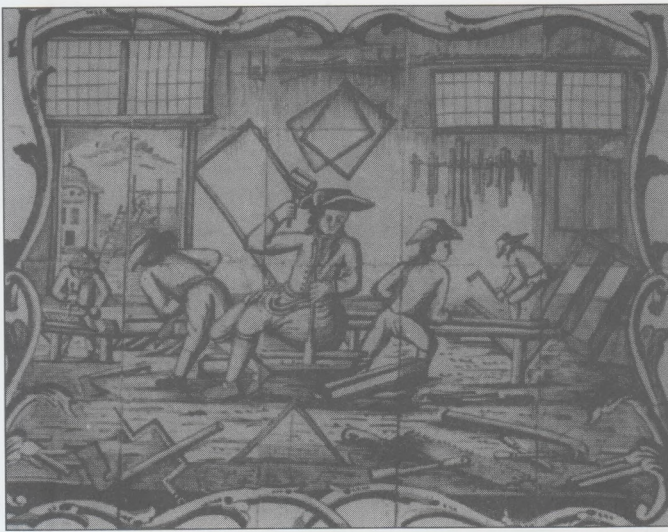


Fig. 19 Tin-glazed Tile Tableau. 'Carpenters at work'. Twenty Blue and White tinglazed tiles. Overall dimensions circa 50x63cm from Makkum (Friesland) 1780-1800. Based on a painting by Gatse Sytjes (1724 1798). Ref. Pluis, J. 'The Dutch Tile, designs and names', Primavera Pers, Leiden, 1997, No.E.03.05.02 (5*). Private collection.

A veritable time capsule, depicting great workshop activity with a number of woodworking tools in use (brace, saw, chisels, plane and adze). Note the striking similarity of the tools with those illustrated in fig. 17 and dated circa 1500, ie 250 years earlier. A bricklayer is seen through the open door.

NOTE: I would greatly appreciate any information about the existence of the English equivalent of curved saw with handgripshield shown in figs. 17 and 19. (Ed)



Fig. 20 An underglaze blue and white Dutch Delftware jug, height: 24cm, before circa 1695

Photo by courtesy of Aronson Antiquairs, Amsterdam 45

The central tableau on this jug (fig. 20) depicts a chair-maker's workshop surrounded by flowers and large birds, marked 'L.V.D' for Lieven van Dalen, master potter at 'Het Jonge Moriaenshoofd' (The young moor's head).

Various stages of chairmaking are illustrated. The chairs resemble the 'old Dutch' Culemborg chair (RFS Newsletter No. 25, 1996). One worker is rushmatting, a woman worker paints, another worker makes chair components and one fellow manipulates an oil lamp(?) Rushes, chair components and a paintpot are scattered on the floor. Tools and a bowsaw are on the wall. Usually such illustrations were first produced by an artist in another medium before being copied onto ceramics; hence a date prior to 1695.



Fig. 21 A high-back chair in various timbers: Beech, Walnut. Replacement caning in seat and chairback, traces of black varnish. Preserved and restored by a student at the Buckingham College of Higher Education in 1996 (6*). Dating from the early 18th century. Height: 1210mm, Width: 460mm, Depth: 380mm. Provenance: The Mountbatten Estate until 1991.

Although there is general consensus about the dating of this chair, provenance has been a much disputed issue. While the restoration log identifies reasons for and against the dating, the consensus is 'between 1695-1710'. There has been quite vocal disagreement as to the maker's origin, giving rise to, as yet, unresolved questions: - *Was this chair made in the Low Countries?* - *Was this chair made in England by a Low Country craftsman?* - *Was this chair made in England by an English craftsman?*

There is, however, one as yet unresolved clue. One back upright carries stamped marks 'SS' and 'IA'. Contrary to the earlier assumption that such a mark would identify the owner, it is now thought to be the craftsman's identification so as to facilitate the count of piece work, prior to payment. The traces of black varnish suggest earlier ebonizing, not uncommon on such mixed-wood chairs. As to provenance I have seen virtually identical chairs in the Netherlands and at the 'Oak House' in West Bromwich!

Adam Bowett's recent article (7*) brings forward the

term 'Indian chair'. English chairmakers are claimed to have used the word to denote the backward leaning curved profile of the rear posts of the backrest; a design feature dating back and recorded during the Ming Period from the 15th century onward (8*).

Note: The catch-all word 'Indian' was indiscriminately used in England to denote East Asian origin. The illustrated high-back chair does not feature the sloping chair back.

The curve at the bottom of the backfeet as well as the above markings would suggest the chair dates from circa 1710 and is of English manufacture.

References

- 1* Benno M. Forman, 'Continental Furniture Craftsmen in London'. 'The Journal of the Furniture History Society' Vol. 7, 1971, pp94-120.
- 2* R.E.G & E.F. Kirk, 'Publications of the Huguenot Society in London' Vol 10, pts 1-4 (Aberdeen 1900 1908)
- 3* John Boram and Willem Irik, 'Chairmaking in the Low Countries' RFS Newsletter No. 25, 1996, Note 1, pp15.
- 4* William Cole 'A catalogue of Netherlandish and North European Roundels in Britain'. O.U.P 1993, ill. 71.
- 5* Jan Pluis. 'The Nederlandse Tegel, Decors en Benamingen' 'The Dutch Tile, Designs and Names' Primavera Pers, Leiden, 1997 pp.600
- 6* L. Newton. Restoration Log 2, 'A William and Mary chair', 1996.
- 7* Adam Bowett 'Myths of English Furniture History, Anglo-Dutch' October 1999. The Antique Collectors' Club.
- 8* Rudolf P. Hommel. 'China at Work', pp 307-309. M.I.T. Press, 1969.

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