

TECHNICAL NOTE 1

A DUTCH TILT-TABLE OR A TABLE CHAIR?

The rescued oak components, which were discovered at Twisk Church, included two carved uprights, 4 cm (1.6 inches) thick which slot into shoe or trestle feet, a horizontal board set in between at 50 cm (19.7 inches) above the floor. Underneath this board were two panels with stiles and rails to supply the required lateral resistance against distortion. (fig. i). It was a remarkable fact that there was a clear distinction between the front and the back of this piece of furniture. The uprights, the board and the panels were decorated with carvings on one side, whereas they were flat on the other side. The top of each upright was provided with a hole on either side and its back was rounded in the shape of a quadrant which had its centre between the side holes. This led to the conclusion that the piece of furniture was in fact of a tilt-table; the table-top of which was missing.

It soon became clear that this tilt-table had antecedents and possibly very remote ones. We find the earliest image of the tilt-table with asymmetrical uprights on the central panel of the Altar-piece of Flemalle. Furthermore a tilt-table is depicted on the left wing of the painting of the Schöppinger-altar. The uprights of the latter having been decorated with a pear-shaped profile which one associates with the ribs of Gothic arches.

Although less elaborately painted, we also find this pear-shaped profile on a tilt-table with a rectangular table-top as shown on Pieter Bruegel's painting 'The Peasant Dance'.

B. Dubbe illustrates his article on mediaeval tables with a picture of a fifteenth century oak tilt-table. This particular table can still be found in the St. Elizabeth Hospital at Aalst in Belgium (fig. ii). The similarities are striking. This table has asymmetrical uprights too, both of which slot into shoes or trestle feet, with two holes and a quadrantally rounded corner at the top. The tilt-table of Aalst clearly shows how the frame of the Twisk table and its missing table-top had been connected. There are, of course, differences in design. While the uprights of the Aalst table have a somewhat vague profile, those of the Twisk table are decorated with prominent double-arch mouldings. There is also a difference in the height of the table-tops: the table-top of the Aalst table is 84.5 cm (33.3 inches) from the floor, whereas the Twisk table is at the height of c.73 cm (c. 28.7 inches), which is the normal height nowadays.

Fig. (i)

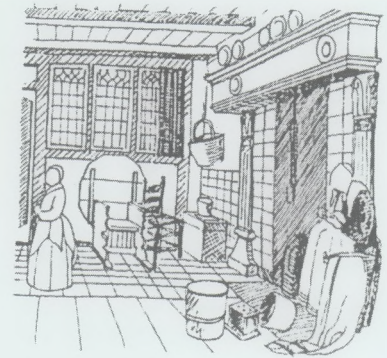
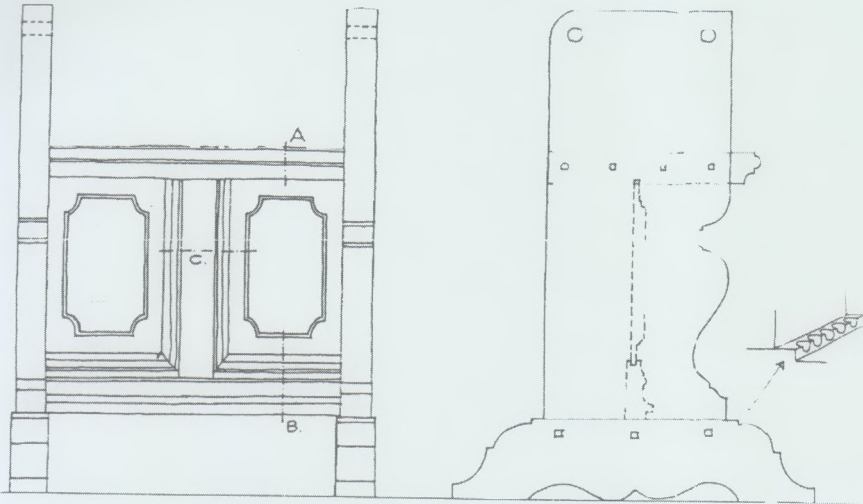


Fig. (iv)

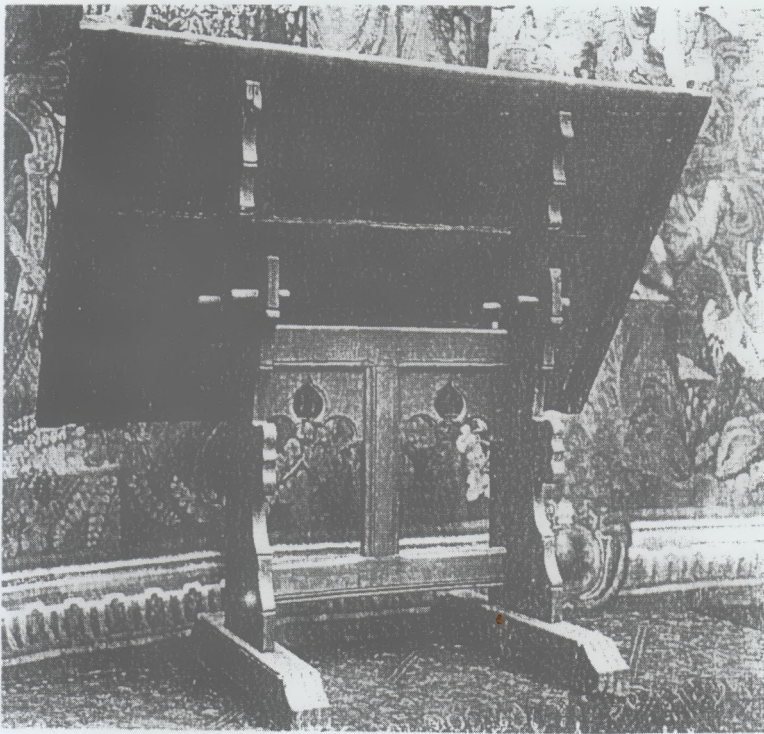


Fig. (ii)

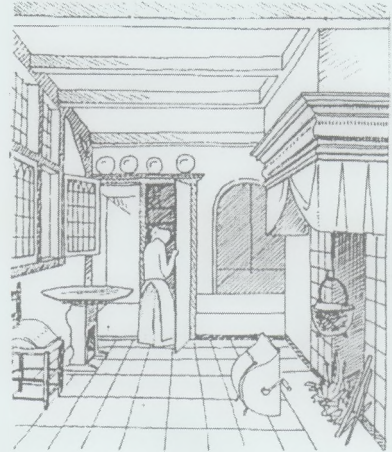


Fig. (v)

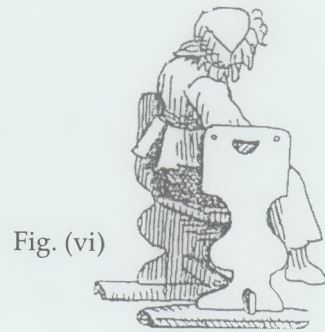


Fig. (vi)



Fig. (iii)

- Fig. (i) Under frame to Twisk table
- Fig. (ii) 15th century oak tilt table at the St. Elizabeth Hospital, Aalst
- Fig. (iii) Painting by Abraham de Pape 20-66, Mauritzhaus, Hague
- Fig. (iv) Painting by Emanuel De Witte 1615/17-1691/92, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston
- Fig. (v) Painting by Esaias Boursse, 1631
- Fig. (vi) Sketch by Harmen ter Borch, 1650

During the seventeenth century the tilt-table was used in North-Holland. Nevertheless, we seldom find these tables illustrated on paintings or prints. The Mauritshuis in The Hague is in possession of a painting by Abraham De Pape (1620-1666) which shows an old woman plucking a rooster. Next to her a basket of carrots is placed upon a tilt-table with asymmetrical uprights (fig. iii). The painting probably dates from around 1640-1650, although the woman is wearing the unstarched ruff in accordance with the fashion of 1630.

What is unusual, is the horizontal board underneath the table-top is set at exactly the same height as the seat of the chair the woman is sitting on.

A painting by Emanuel De Witte shows the contents of the hall of a rural house (fig. iv). Beneath the leaded windows we can see a tilt-table with a dodecagonal table-top.

Finally, Mr J. G. Berkhout drew my attention to the fact that an item in the Baron Jansen collection, a painting by Esaias Boursse, which also shows a tilt-table, had been sold by auction in 1927 at Frederik Muller's in Amsterdam (fig. v). Beneath windows of a somewhat disorderly kitchen one can observe a tilt-table with its dodecagonal top folded, next to a Dutch turned chair. The uprights of this table are asymmetrical too, but strangely enough, the carved side of each upright is facing the wall.

Examining the evidence mentioned above, we may conclude that the piece of furniture which was discovered at Twisk is the frame of a rare seventeenth century tilt-table.

Since only a few people would be able to identify this piece of furniture as a table, it was decided that the table top should be reconstructed in the same design as the ones in the paintings by Esaias Boursse and Emanuel De Witte. The cabinet-maker in Amsterdam H. J. O. Grahame performed this task with excellent skill.

Unlike the reddish-brown colour of the frame, the table top was stained in a light hue to show clearly that it was of a much more recent date.

Nevertheless some people doubted whether this piece of furniture had only been used as a table. A drawing by Harmen ter Borch in 1650 depicts his daughter sitting on a piece of furniture which closely resembles the one discovered at Twisk (fig. vi).

In this example there are holes at the top of both uprights as well as hand holds or grips to facilitate mobility. The fact that the girl's feet do not reach the floor might indicate that the horizontal board is at the normal height of chair's seat. Could it be that we have found another type of table-chair at Twisk? Outside the Netherlands similar pieces of furniture, designed to serve more than one purpose, have been preserved. Examples of these are known to exist in England, Denmark and America.

Furthermore these table-chairs often have a tip-up seat with an aumbrey underneath. Comparing the Dutch table-chair to those of other countries, one can

conclude that they were constructed in two ways; either as a tilt-table with uprights, or as an arm-chair which was equipped with a hinged table top.

It is most gratifying that we should come across such a unique piece of the first category in Twisk.

Postscript: After the completion of this article a friend of mine drew my attention to a report of a study into the history of the 'Doelen', the meeting place of the Civic Guard of the Dutch City of Gouda. This study, conducted by Mrs Wies Saurwalt, revealed that in an inventory dating from 1678 two table-benches were mentioned. In 1718 one of these benches still stood in the corridor in front of the so-called chamber of the war-council. Presumably a table-bench was a piece of furniture which was designed to accommodate more than one person at the same time, and the back of which was hinged so that it could be turned forward to form a table top when required. It is to be hoped that some day a convincing reference to a table-chair in seventeenth or eighteenth century Dutch inventories will be found, which will assist us in determining contemporary terminology.

J. Schipper 1981

TECHNICAL NOTES 2 & 3

Extract from p. 79, J. Veenendaal, 'Furniture from Indonesia, Sri Lanka, India during the Dutch period' (Delft, 1985)

In the 17th and 18th Century the VOC made attempts to eliminate a rather chaotic situation whereby expatriate VOC employees bought for their own use and/or traded company supplied furniture. Reports of the day mention the VOC inspectors concern about the apparent disappearance of VOC furniture, after stocktaking of inventories. Rules were subsequently laid down to prevent private trading and exporting. These regulations were only applied to people with the rank of 'schipper' (senior captain) or below. The senior VOC officials were still free to do as they pleased. On 24th of June, 1699 these provisions were further tightened and reissued: Commander of the fleet and senior merchants were also included and the number of 'Bottle cellars' (sic) and pots of 'acar' (Malay 'atjar', i.e. pickles) that could be taken was also restricted! Excluded ranks and the permitted quantities of cargo were as follows:

Governor-General:

18 crates of 5x2x2 ft.

Extra ordinary member of the Council

10 crates of 5x2x2 ft.

Governor, senior Members of the Court

crates of 5x2x2 ft.

All other ranks were restricted to 1 or 2 crates

(One Amsterdam foot equates 11 inches = 28.3 cm)

The wood for crates, chests and furniture was obtained from the West Coast of India, Cochin, Malabar, Coromandel and Moluccas.

Extract from M.P. Wolff. 'Het Machtige Eylandt Ceylon en de VOC' ('The Mighty Island Ceylon and the VOC'). S.D.U. Publishing Co, The Hague, 1988, ISBN 90120 60044. Chapter under the title 'Furniture and The Rich Trade', p.72. (translated by the writer).

After taking the Portuguese Settlements in Ceylon, the VOC quickly discovered the profitable timber export trade to timber deficient places for ship building and ship repair in India, Portugal and The Netherlands.

The growing demand for furniture, largely due to the rapid increase in the numbers employed by the Company, prompted the expansion of the existing workshops and the supervisor was given the title of Master of the Ship and Household Carpenters. He was also in charge of the 'drayers' (turners) and the 'kistenmaeckers' (joiners, box makers).

Although the VOC imported Tamil slaves from South India, the Company respected the caste system and would more than likely place skilled craftsmen in their chosen trade. The Company also installed their own skilled workers which resulted in the emergence of a set of distinct styles and a body of skills, encompassing influences from South India (Hindu), Portuguese-Baroque, heavy and stern Low Country practices, as well as other S. E. Asian influences.

What furniture was in demand? In the 17th century, ebony wood for chairs, tables, beds, benches, children chairs, cots and decorated boxes all embellished with shallow carved flowers and foliage in the early 17th century and deeply carved decoration towards the end of the 17th century. The range of carvings was astounding: Mythical creatures and foliage, the cockatoo (faithfulness), lion (strength) and fish (prosperity). Sometimes a European motif was used as decoration: Adam and Eve could have been taken from a Durer illustration, except

for the addition of an elephant that stands next to Adam. An odd case is the burgomaster chair, also known as the King's Chair; the chair has six legs and a round back rest (fig. 24). This form can be traced to the Ming period (1368-1644) in China. However, all the chairs from Ceylon have typical European legs and seat rails. Combined with oval or medallion shaped and carved chair backs, may reflect a further European influence. The burgomaster chair continued to be modified to conform to prevailing fashion and remained a favourite in all the VOC trading posts in Asia. During the British rule in the 19th century, production of this chair never ceased and even to day one can come across this chair in daily usage in Ceylon.

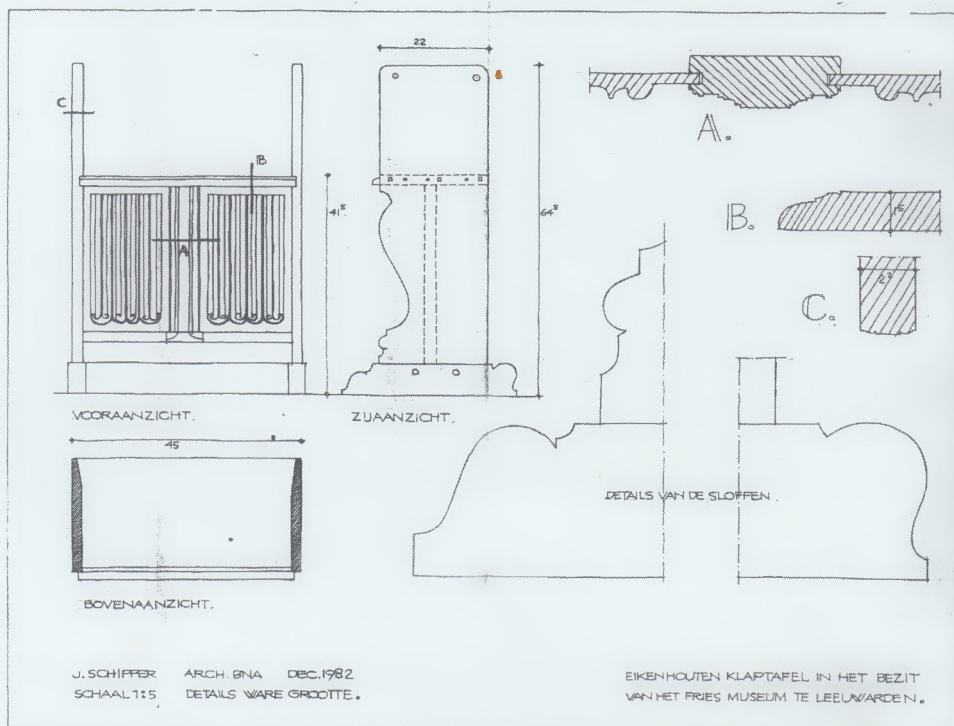
During the 18th century greater use was made of Coromandel wood (of the Diospyros genus, Ed) and Ceylon satin wood, both lighter in weight and colour than ebony. During this century large volumes of satin wood were exported to France and England, where it became very popular with cabinet makers.

Furniture was sold by the owner upon his departure, or was transported home, thus enriching many a Company servant who traded privately, either with or without permission of the VOC.

Sir J. Stein van Gollenesse, in his Memorandum of Transfer of 1751, on the occasion of his departure as Governor, recorded that the VOC book-keepers had recorded an enormous increase in the production of furniture, but upon further investigation, nobody professed to know what had become of it!

When going to church it was the custom for the upper classes to bring their own chair along, which probably explains the diversity of chairs in the Wolvendaalse Kerk in Colombo.

researched by Willem Irik



Detail of chair/table from Leuwarden Museum