

AN INTRODUCTION TO SIMULATED MAHOGANY FURNITURE IN THE NETHERLANDS

The paper presented by Hans Piena, which is summarised below, provided a useful context in which to interpret and understand the processes and workshop practices involved in the making of much of the vernacular furniture which we were to encounter during our visit to the Netherlands.

'It is an accepted fact that, even nowadays, we know far less about the interiors and utensils in the labourer's houses than about those in the abode of the more affluent. This situation has been attributed to lack of interest and benign neglect.' (P. W. Schipper, 'The Culemborg Chair', RFS Newsletter, Winter 1996, No 25)

Mr Piena's first example of softwood furniture grained and painted to simulate mahogany was a Dutch trousseau cabinet that originated from a 'Loshoes', a dwelling previously occupied by a farmer. It would have been a one-room covered space with dirt floor where man and beast lived together. The cabinet would have stood on a low platform to protect it against moisture. The lower part had three drawers; the upper section had two doors. Made in a softwood, the boards were hand sawn. The outside was painted and ingrained with dirt (including the remains of a chicken nest – truly a rural specimen). The interior showed the original finish; painted to simulate mahogany.

Mr Piena's research work is still in progress, but simulated mahogany-grained furniture can be found throughout the Netherlands. He listed the following examples which have been treated in this manner: corner cupboards, peat chests, door / drawer cabinets or kasts, fall-front desks, gateleg tables, klaptafels (folding

tilt-top tables), nursery furniture, school cases, cradles and Louis XVI style tapered leg kitchen tables.

Some of the furniture has provenance and Mr Piena holds the view that mahogany-grained furniture was produced throughout the length and breadth of the Netherlands. The fact that his distribution chart showed a preponderance of recorded examples in the area around Amsterdam and in the central Eastern region of the country probably has more to do with the presence of the research activity in those two areas and the absence to date of research elsewhere.

The occurrence of real mahogany in the Netherlands dates back to the 17th century; some of Rembrandt's paintings were executed on mahogany panels. Such panels were apparently reclaimed from 'sugar crates' from the West Indies. Mr Piena reported that the evidence of mahogany furniture in the Netherlands dates from 1733 when furniture was imported from England by an English cabinetmaker in the seaport of Rotterdam. The first mahogany veneered cabinets were made in the Netherlands from about 1750 and mahogany-grained furniture should not be expected to have appeared prior to 1750.

Its manufacture steadily increased from around 1780. This date would appear to be confirmed by the incidence of late 18th century English hardware, such as locks with off-centre bolts, hand-made nails; and wire nails by the end of the 19th century.

It is therefore claimed that mahogany-grained softwood furniture was produced in noticeable quantities from circa 1770 till 1870.

Most of the examples in this subject group are made of softwood and with the exception of tables do not feature joints; the parts are butt joined and normally secured with nailed-on battens. Glue was used sparingly.

Although we had come across many Low Country cabinet doors during our tour, it was Mr Piena who drew our attention to an unusual manner of softwood cabinet door construction, which is not to be found in England. Each door features a raised decorative edge carved from the solid boards, not applied. The example he illustrated was constructed in the following way. The raised edge is marked off on the door panel, the excess wood in the centre of the panel is then removed by chisel and plane from the front side, leaving the raised edge standing proud. It is surprising to learn that this costly and labour intensive method was still being used in the Netherlands during the 19th century.

In spite of the foregoing, softwood furniture had to be cheap. It was found in every household. In the houses of the poor it was found in prominent positions. In the houses of the rich it could be found in kitchens or servant's quarters. Painting and finishing were elementary and linseed oil finishing was not commonly used, because it was deemed too expensive and it took too long to dry! Water based finishes were in use.

In the cities, guild and local regulations restricted the activities of the 'Witwerkers' (white wood workers).

A guild regulation of 1636 stated that Witwerkers were not to work with oak but only with softwoods to make crates, chests, shovels, watering cans (the so-called 'white works') and the flat softwood school cases of which we saw so many 18th to 19th century examples.

The activities of the furniture makers, joiners, turners and chair-makers on the one hand and Witwerkers on the other were well-defined and regulated in the cities and populated centres.

Mr Piena has found a number of references to the trade, of which the following are examples:-

In 1690 the Witwerkers made a plea that anyone wishing to work as a Witwerker should be required to make two Master pieces – a tea table and a type of chest.

In Amsterdam in 1614 the Witwerkers' Guild is mentioned and grouped with the House Carpenters' Guild.

A 1667 illustration by Fouquet shows the Witwerkers being summoned to move their street stall since 'they are blocking the traffic'. The illustration shows large quantities of common furniture. In the same year Witwerkers obtained permission to open a shop near the Dam Square in Amsterdam to be run by the wives of the Witwerkers.

The rules for separating the memberships of the Witwerkers' Guild and the Furniture Guild were not enforced outside the towns, where they were called carpenters or house builders.

In 1697 Witwerkers complained about the shortage of sawn timber. The sawmills had a monopoly (e.g. in Amsterdam) and 'imported' sawn timber was not permitted. In that year the Witwerkers were finally allowed to 'import'.

Throughout the 18th century the Witwerkers were among the few crafts permitted to bring sawn timber into the city. Records for Amsterdam mention Witwerkers and their masters in 1811; of the 595 members of the St Josef Guild, 26 were Witwerkers.

The last reference which Mr Piena is aware of, dates from the end of the 19th century, when the Witwerkers from Amsterdam had a stand at the Crafts Exhibitions of 1877 and 1888. This would make for some 300 years of Witwerkers' activity.

In his closing remarks Mr Piena bemoaned the 20th century destruction of old painted furniture in order to meet a demand for nostalgic country furniture: caustic dipping, steam cleaning, rough sanding and 'period' colour dyeing finished with original 'organic' wax. The customer is led to believe he is looking at a honest piece of country furniture. I quote, 'Maybe it is time for a Dutch Regional Furniture Society, to avoid future disasters.'

summarised by Willem Irik