

RFS trip to Paris and Burgundy, September 2011

A major problem in the study of regional furniture is that we are much more aware of objects within our national boundaries than those outside. We often underestimate the movement of ideas, makers and objects (whether due to the Hanseatic trade, to religious persecution, to post-1789 revolutionary destruction, or to modern art market forces). The decision to make a second visit to France was, therefore, intended to gain a better knowledge of early French furniture and woodwork both as an end itself and as a help in understanding objects encountered in the UK. Our only regret was that our group of 14 did not include Victor Chinnery, whose idea the trip was.

The programme included museums, churches and secular buildings such as the Hotel-Dieu at Beaune. We were extremely fortunate to have received expert support from curators at every point. Given the very tight schedule (five days away, of which four were spent on visits), this meant we could focus on key objects. Apart from curators' generosity with their time, we greatly appreciated their willingness to question received wisdoms and even the integrity of objects in their collections.

In terms of ideas, we became aware of different interpretations of the source and impact of renaissance thought in France (e.g. the degree of Italian influence, the degree of Burgundian influence, the specific French contribution). Our visit to Bourg-en-Bresse made us aware of Savoy as a distinctive entity. The period of overlap of gothic and renaissance styles was also intriguing, a reminder that reality is more complex than textbook simplifications.

The influence of dendrochronology was strong in dating early objects. We were fortunate in having a lecture by Didier Pousset and Christine Locatelli who are responsible for much early dating work in France, such as the c.1300 Poissy chest at the Cluny museum, the 1470s trestles at the MdAD, and chests from the second half of the 15th century at Beaune.

At a practical level our decision to travel by train, and to stay in hotels near to stations, rather than to go by coach (as on the Brittany trip) worked well and gave us more time for visits. We also made sure that our regional focus extended to choice of restaurant; it is an open question whether the *poulet de Bresse* is a specific type or fed in a particular way.

Such a short visit gave us only a taster of the riches to be found in France in the gothic and renaissance periods. Hopefully the following reports will encourage members to make their own visits.

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