

# Rijksmuseum visit

The previous RFS trip to the Netherlands (*RFS Newsletter* 36, 2002) visited the smaller museums in the north of the country and saw a large number of painted items of furniture from the 18th century. The 2014 visit to the Rijksmuseum saw a very different sample of Dutch furniture. The museum's refurbishment has resulted in additional space but fewer objects on display. It also involved the restoration of nationalist and religious murals that were too Catholic for the Dutch King and were whitewashed over for the opening of the museum in 1885. The restoration took ten years, partly because the city's cyclists revolted against the original plan to enclose the cycle route through the museum's central arch. Paul van Duin, Head of Furniture Conservation, and his assistant Saskia Smulders de Jong, who explained constructional details and patiently answered our questions, accompanied our visit. The museum website [www.rijksmuseum.nl](http://www.rijksmuseum.nl) has a database with a good but not yet complete selection of images: it can be searched via inventory numbers, or names and the relevant numbers are given below for those discussed.

## Furniture up to c. 1650

Visiting in 1993 I had seen thirteen pre-1600 pieces of furniture. These were now reduced to three so presumably the redisplay had involved favouring the 'Golden period' of 1600–1800. The underlying thinking on this may, perhaps, be revealed by Reinier Baarsen, Curator of Furniture, in his book *Dutch Furniture 1600–1800*, where he writes that 'before 1600 no proper Dutch national style had evolved yet' (p. 6).

The first of the three was an Italian cassone of 1450–1500, round-fronted and straight-backed (BK-16627), and decorated in contrasting heraldic (?) squares rather than the *istoriato* style seen in the collection of 16th-century cassone panels at Ecoeu (Fig. 1). Nearby were two Dutch gothic items from c. 1525. A dressoir from Alkmaar (BK-KOG-656) to hold the valuables of a military company is described on the website as 'one of the finest pieces of 16th-century furniture in the world'. It had a front with gothic buttresses either side of four deeply carved openwork tracery panels incorporating a crown and fleur-de-lys, which included a central door, above two drawers and an open base. The other three sides had linenfold panelling of the 'flat' type with mouldings shaped above and below with circular central cut outs but no real folds. The dressoir incorporated later pale oak that contrasted with the darker openwork carved panels. A bench with a swinging bar back and a chest below the seat (BK-NM-1971) had some of the wear one would expect of a piece of this age but again the pale, un-wormed, flat linenfold panelling at the sides suggested later restoration.

The pre-1600 galleries also have interesting carved woodwork and paintings showing furniture (e.g. the St Elizabeth's Day flood painted in the 1490s) and building methods (the Tower of Babel, 1490) The most memorable objects here are the set of ten bronze mourners from the tomb of Isabel of Bourbon (d 1465) (BK-AM-33-C). Cast ten years later from wooden models, the mourners adopt striking poses and their clothes and headwear show remarkable detailing.

The 1600–1650 collection focuses on large cupboards (*kasts*). Some of these relied for their effect on combining



Fig. 1 Italian Cassone, c. 1450–1500 (Acc. No. BK-16627)



Fig. 2 *Kast*, or cupboard, dated 1607 (Acc. No. RBK-16071)

plain oak with high quality renaissance architectural design. They varied in their degree of elaboration. A tall two-door cupboard, dated 1607, with inner-frame panelling (a central rectangle surrounded by L-shaped compartments) between ionic pilasters came from the Northern Netherlands (RBK-16071) (Fig. 2). Another two-door cupboard, but with ebony inserts and auricular carving above the arcading on the doors and sides was dated mid-17th century (RBK-1959-47) (Fig. 3). A Peter de Hooch painting (SK-C-1191, see front cover) shows a similar cupboard being filled with linen by a mother and daughter (according to the website description.) This image supports Witold Rybczynski's proposal in *Home: a short history of an idea* (Penguin, 1980) that the Dutch 17th-century home was the first to be 'feminized' as middle-class women lived largely without servants. Also from the Northern Netherlands is the c. 1630–50 four-door cupboard with ebony inlay and very rich carved decoration (carved and fluted columns, carved panels and friezes) (NM-11448) (Fig. 4). An oak chest of the same date had four minute (10×12.5 cm) finely carved panels depicting the Susannah story set within multiply moulded frames, separated by carved figures, below a carved frieze (NM-9670) (Fig. 5).



Fig. 3 Oak two-door cupboard with auricular carving, c. 1650 (Acc No RBK-1959-47)

An overall impression of a middle- (or upper-?) class interior was provided by the sequence of built-in bed, wall panelling, tiled fireplace, chimney-breast with painted panels, and doorway from a house in Dordrecht in the Southern Netherlands in 1626 (BK-NM-3931-B) (Fig. 6). The decoration combined inner-frame panelling with inlay and marquetry in contrasted shades; at Sizergh Castle, Cumbria, the returned V&A panelled room, dated to c. 1575, has similar decoration but with round-headed arcading.

In all of the above pieces the oak was pale, and the pale, unstained, unpainted cupboard in the de Hooch painting suggests that this was an aesthetic preference rather than the result of cleaning. The contrast with the darker 17th-century oak familiar in the UK was striking and raises questions about the role of the oak itself, sealant, staining, sunlight and smoke in producing colour.

Turning to the more elaborate of the pre-1650 pieces, the inspiration shifts from renaissance architecture to the display of luxurious, exotic woods and materials used in the solid and for veneers, inlays and linings, such as ebony, snakewood, tortoiseshell, ivory and mother of pearl. Most striking were two 'cabinets' in which the upper part was set back from the front and sides and the top was supported



Fig. 4 (above) Northern Netherlandish *kast*, c. 1630–50 (Acc. No NM-11448)

Fig. 5 (below) Carved oak chest, c. 1630–50 (Acc. No. NM-9670), carved with panels telling the story of Susannah and the Elders



on columns. An ebony and ivory veneered example of c. 1635 with fluted columns was more restrained and had cupboards below and above (BK-NM-10829) (Fig. 7). There is a press cupboard of similar design, but with much less elaborate decoration, at Provand's Lordship in Glasgow. An ebony and mother of pearl veneered cabinet (RBK-1975-81) of c. 1640 had full-height twisted columns and ripple-moulded doors concealing cupboards below and drawers and small cupboards above; it is attributed to Herman Doomer of Amsterdam. It was here that we appreciated having with us Paul van Duin to open the doors and reveal the hidden world of exotic woods inside. These cabinets were aimed at display rather than being functional like linen cupboards, and were no doubt placed in reception rooms where visitors could admire them.

Slightly later, c. 1655 was a low cabinet on open stand of oak with marquetry doors of ivory and tortoiseshell in a swirling renaissance design incorporating tulips, dragons, geese and goslings (BK-2005-19) (Fig. 8). The door backs had the identical design in reverse. A monogram of the owner, Amalia van Solms and her husband Prince Frederick Henry, A H V O (van Oranje), was part of the marquetry design on the internal drawers and cupboard. This was a recent acquisition and was attributed to Willem de Rots.

Also recently acquired was a large Japanese export lacquer and engraved silver chest of c. 1640, one of a set of eight, which had been in collections in Holland, England (the Duke of Hamilton) and France (Cardinal Mazarin)



Fig. 6 Part of oak panelled interior from a house of 1626 in Dordrecht, Southern Netherlands (Acc. No. BK-NM-3931-B)



Fig. 7 Upper section of a large ebony veneered and ivory inlaid cabinet, c. 1635 (Acc. NoBK-NM-10829)

Fig. 8 The Amalia van Solms cabinet-on-stand, c. 1655



(AK-RAK-2013-3-1). Finally, somewhat out of place, was the large pine rounded-top book chest of Hugo de Groot dated to c. 1605 with (surprisingly late) gothic lock plates and closely placed narrow iron straps (NG-KOG-1208).

The refurbishment and re-display thus presents a highly selective view of Dutch furniture, and one that is being reinforced by the current acquisition policy. It excludes the painted furniture seen in the Society's 2001 visit; this can be seen as a form of decoration within the means of their owners in the same way that the fine carving and veneer seen at the Rijksmuseum were options for the wealthier urban classes.<sup>1</sup>

*Chris Pickvance*

<sup>1</sup> John Boram has pointed out a Dutch study that suggests that painted furniture was used in kitchens and attic rooms in urban settings and among diverse sections of agrarian and urban society. (A. Vos, J. Hoikammer and H. Pienna. Dutch historical painted furniture, *Vernacular Furniture: Proceedings of the 9th International Symposium on Wood and Furniture Conservation*, 2008.)

### Furniture from 1650

Paul's careful selection of pieces to study next focussed on a French floral marquetry cabinet-on-stand enhanced with copper, pewter, horn and lapis and thought to be the earliest-known cabinet by André Charles Boulle, made c. 1670–75 when he was about thirty. It was purchased in the 1990s from an Irish country house via Sotheby's. A gilt-bronze portrait plaque of Louis XIV in the central trophy had been replaced with a likeness of George I when it had come to England. Paul pointed out the snakewood drawer linings and the inferior oak used for the carcass.

A spectacular marquetry cabinet-on-stand of c. 1695–1710 was one of a group of about ten, along with a table nearby, attributed to Jan van Mekeren (1648–1733) of Amsterdam who is also recorded in church records in London. One is in the V&A and one in the Met. in New York. The doors had lavish bouquets set in vases on ledges, such as one might see in less faded bright colours in paintings of the period. Paul described the complicated construction of the hollow flush doors, discovered during conservation and which was clearly a source of experiment



Fig. 9 Floral marquetry cabinet on stand by Jan van Mekeren, c. 1695–1710



Fig. 10 Paul van Duin showing a detail of the van Mekerem cabinet revealing the plain nature of interior and drawers

on such a large scale at the time. The plain olivewood interior and use of large dovetails and part-nailed construction on the drawers made a strange contrast with the superb skill of the *marqueteur* on the outside. However, a number of identical flowerheads, repeated across the group shows that, here too, savings were made where possible.

An early, and possibly unique, example of recycling was a cabinet-on-stand of c. 1690–1700, veneered with 'seaweed' marquetry and set with panels of Japanese lacquer, five taken from an early 17th-century cylindrical-lidded chest with polished grey shagreen surrounds, which was probably out of fashion by this date. The practice of re-using lacquer became more common later in the century.

Petronella Oortman's huge doll's house of c. 1686–1710, made by a French cabinet-maker in Holland. It stunned us all, both as a unique cabinet-on-stand completely clad in turtle-shell with pewter-line decoration, and as an important record of the interiors of a three-storey house of a flight of steps! Such things were not the playthings of children, but of wealthy ladies.



Fig. 11 The Petronella Oortmann baby house, c. 1686–1710; a view that shows its scale

In the Conservation Department we could not but be impressed by a massive rococo carved walnut cabinet of c. 1745–50, too large to fit in the upstairs workshop, its interior sadly gutted. The multi-waved folding doors and sumptuous all-over carving including lions at the base, however, gave an idea of the splendours that might have been within. The piece engendered some discussion on the prospect of cleaning off the patination of dark varnish that had been applied, probably in the 19th century. There was concern about the ethical and aesthetic choices to be made in doing so.

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Fig. 12 A view of one of the decorated rooms in the baby house



Fig. 13 One of the bedrooms; note the child's furniture



Fig. 14 A huge walnut cabinet that was too large to go upstairs to the main workshops. Sadly the original interior had been ripped out.

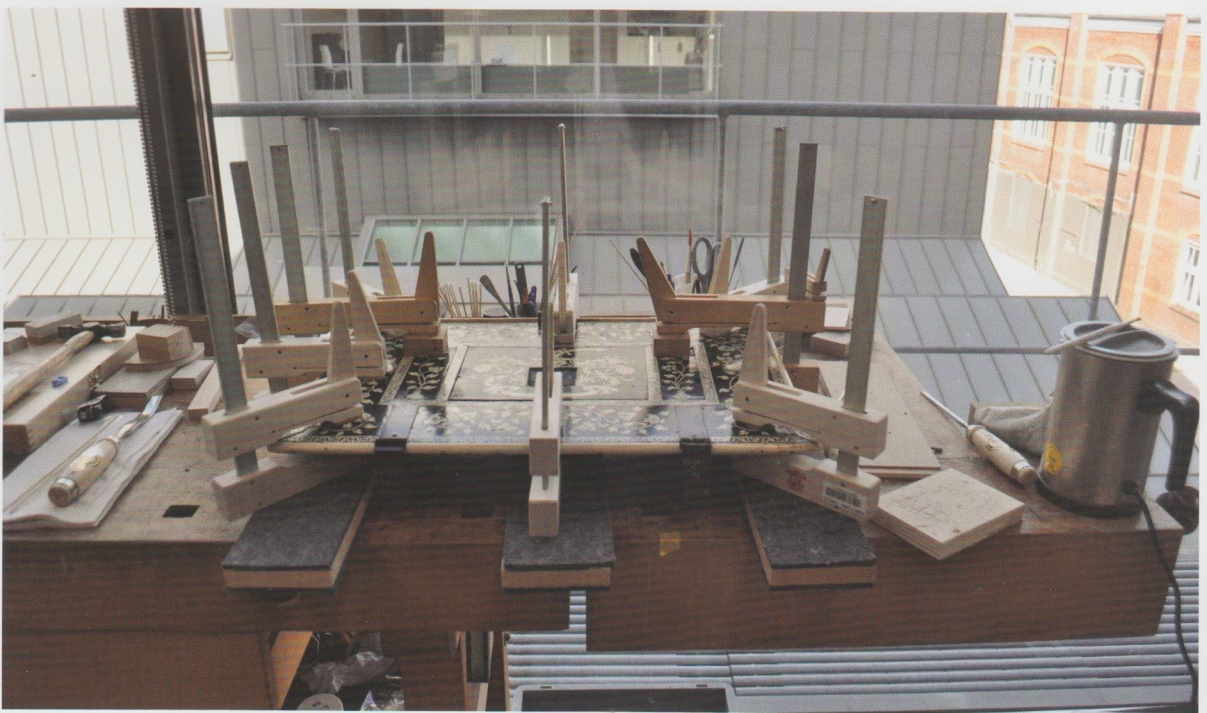


Fig. 15 The lid of an ivory and ebony inlaid box undergoing consolidation

### The Furniture Conservation Studios

Following our tour of the Museum we followed Head of Furniture Conservation, Paul van Duin and one of his team, Saskia Smulders de Jong, over the road to the conservation studios; all brand new and beautifully thought out for access, light and climate control but in an old late nineteenth century building.

We went up in a very large lift to the first floor where on entering the workshops we saw a fine ebony and ivory inlaid panel gripped in a forest of new G-clamps; the rest of the seventeenth century box was being worked on by a member of the conservation team. When we saw it the light, airy studio was almost divided in two by a set of seventeenth century Chinese lacquer panels with a carved and gilded floral panels set below, part of a complete panelled room from a country house in Friesland. The panels were originally part of a coromandel screen of c. 1660 that had been dismantled, each panel cut vertically into two parts, front and back and reset as a panelled room c. 1690. While we are used to seeing lacquer panels reused in furniture, such as commodes, it is surely rare to find such panels re-cast to create a room.

The far end of the room was dominated by a walnut and ebony kast, or cupboard of c. 1630. The cupboard was built in four parts and was well over six feet high. The lower section raised on the familiar doughnut shaped ebonised bun-feet while above the feet were two drawers that were



Fig. 16 Our guide Paul van Duin explaining the lacquer panelled room





Fig. 17 The seventeenth century four-door cupboard

set below a cupboard space with two substantial doors and a single shelf. The upper section was similar but with a removable, robust over-hanging cornice. The back of the kast was beautifully constructed in oak with ten inset panels and five smaller panels for the cornice section.

Set behind the framed-up lacquer panels was a fine walnut corner buffet with a black lacquer decorated interior which I hope we will hear more about in the future. Looking at furniture either in a museum setting or in the place, for which it was designed, is always exciting for members but to see such a fine workshop and its dedicated and knowledgeable team of conservators was a great pleasure and a treat.

*Treve Rosoman*



Fig. 18 The rarely seen exquisitely made back-boards of the cupboard