

Working in the Dark: Fine furniture making in the 18th century Alan Moore

Alan Moore started the afternoon session by posing an interesting question; just how did 18th-century cabinet-makers translate designs into fine furniture with speed and economy? The various tricks of the trade that craftsmen used are not easy to replicate, as they were the result of many years apprenticeship and were jealously guarded by the craftsmen as the 'art and mystery' of their livelihood.

One of the speaker's key points was to stress the importance of geometry. Without a good practical knowledge of geometry it was not possible for a plasterer to layout a ceiling design or a cabinet maker to draw a perfect oval for a gate-leg table and so on. However, the work of Peter Nicholson (1765–1844), an extraordinary self-taught mathematician who trained as a cabinet-maker and wrote a number of important books from 1792 onwards especially for carpenters, joiners, and cabinet-makers, might shed even more light on the subject. For example *The New Practical Builder and Workman's Companion*, first published in 1823, starts with a chapter 'The Elements of Geometry', which alone runs to 104 pages. Nicholson pioneered a method of making beautiful flowing curved staircases, and he invented the centrolinead (to construct a vanishing point) and a cyclograph (to draw large scale arcs) and both were still used until the advent of CAD made such tools redundant.

The second aspect of Alan Moore's talk concerned the making of marquetry patterns and here he was possibly on thinner ground. He had made a splendid half-moon inlaid table using his geometrical ideas and had developed a method whereby a fretted-out steel pattern could be used to make multiple copies of neo-classical ornament such as corn-husks. But this disregards the recent publications by Frenchman Pierre Ramond and Yannick Chastang in England on the cutting and manufacture of marquetry ornament in the 18th and early 19th centuries. Marquetry-cutters used a 'donkey' upon which they could sit with a vertically-set pair of jaws that could be opened and closed using one's foot; into the jaws were fixed a sandwich of various wood veneers the design on which was then fretted out with a saw. It was a task that took considerable skill and one that was made easier in the early 19th century with a fixed fret-saw but which moved horizontally and the 'sandwich' moved around as one cut.

This was an engaging and thought-provoking talk and covered subject areas that are not given as much attention as they deserve.