

Thomas Chippendale: A Celebration of British Craftsmanship and Design

Friday 23 March 2018 at Leeds City Museum

The RFS was delighted that Adam Bowett, Co-Curator of the exhibition and Chairman of the Chippendale Society was our guide for the morning.

Adam began by telling us the remarkable story of a re-discovered table, found in the Harewood workshops in the 1970s being used as a work-bench. Originally part of the Gentleman's Dressing Room at Harewood House, the blue, white and pink colour scheme still survived beneath a coat of black paint. The top was damaged but the marquetry could be restored. Although the Dressing Room itself was lost in the 1840s during the re-modelling of the house, the original designs by Robert Adam for the room still survive. The vibrant colour scheme of the designs would have harmonised with the decoration on the table. Always thought to have been octagonal, it

became clear that the room was in fact circular, which makes perfect sense of the table under discussion as it is of curved outline. Adam then discussed the technique to decorate the table by dyeing the sycamore top with iron sulphate to create a silver-grey colour. This was laid on a base of mahogany and then intricately inlaid with the brightly-coloured elements of the complex design of scrolls, foliage and paterae, cross-banded in tulipwood, then smoothed and varnished. Although supplied with cloth covers, within around five years the table would have oxidised to the brown colour we recognise today.

Adam gave us a guided tour of the exhibition, which ran to 95 exhibits and looked at the life of Thomas Chippendale through four main themes: his family and business; the different styles in which he worked – the Gothic, the Rococo, the Chinese and the neo-Classical;

his customers; and his legacy. The items on display ranged from the spectacular to the more straightforward. In fact, the broad range of furniture he provided for his commissions is one of the more surprising elements of the story. He produced plenty of good quality workaday, ordinary furniture as well as the top-of-the-range for his most important clients. Another surprising fact we learned was that lack of cash-flow was a common feature of his business. Although in 1767 the *London Gazetteer and New Daily Advertiser* proclaimed him as 'that celebrated artist, Mr Chippendale of St. Martin's Lane', only the year before his business had been plunged into financial crisis when James Rannie, his business partner, had died. The story of *The Gentleman and Cabinet-Maker's Director* and its publishing success (initially in 1754, followed by editions in 1755 and 1762) was highlighted, with engravings, drawings and a copy of all three editions.

We were treated to a visual feast of furniture which memorably included two examples of the fashionable Rococo style, a 'French' cabriole leg open armchair (part of a suite) and a serpentine card table (both circa 1759), but also a workaday butler's tray, from Dumfries



Lady's dressing table, c. 1760. Attributed to the Chippendale workshop and probably made for Lady Arniston of Arniston House, Midlothian. National Museums on Merseyside (Lady Lever Art Gallery)

House. One of the pair of 'Panshanger' marquetry display cabinets (*circa* 1773) was featured; made for Melbourne House, Piccadilly, London, it is now at Firle Place.

This was a very enjoyable and informative trip to Leeds and our thanks go to Adam for imparting such detailed knowledge on his tour.

Simon Green