

# New thinking about 16th-century furniture

Saturday 24 February 2018 at the V&A, London

The aim of this meeting was to encourage more research on 16th-century furniture by drawing attention to work currently being carried out. In order to attract a good audience for what is a specialised subject the meeting was advertised widely and the 55 participants included 16 members of other societies and two bursary recipients. The V&A Sackler seminar room proved to be a comfortable venue.

Megan Wheeler explored the remarkably early dated furniture at Sizergh Castle and the surviving family and other documents. The panel back armchairs show craftsmen experimenting, with turned rear legs, arm supports of rectangular section and distinctive scrolls bearing early 1560s dates and Strickland family initials. The plain chests with two-board walls and almost no iron strapwork seemed to me what one would expect by the 1560s when the ironwork of pre-1500 chests was no longer common. Megan had searched without success for evidence of the presence of Flemish craftsmen, the alleged makers of these pieces, but as she said the absence of evidence is not evidence of absence. The applied template used to clamp the chests' till boxes, rather than the usual grooves, suggested a mass production approach. Megan's thoughts on the Sizergh furniture can be found by searching for Sizergh Castle objects 'by date' on the National Trust website.

Michael Pearce gave us a tantalising glimpse of mid-16th-century woodwork and furniture in the Scottish east coast ports which were important trading hubs. He drew on a cache of rare Edinburgh guild documents which described the pieces which joiners had to make to

be accepted as master craftsmen. His talk was intriguing as it challenged the idea that foreign craftsmen made their careers outside guilds. Michael also emphasized the breadth of work done by Andrew Mansioun, a Frenchman, from carved ceilings and wall panelling to work on boats and harbour installations. He acknowledged that it was not always easy to be sure of joiners' nationalities. Scotland's historic links with France and flows of Flemish immigrants, and the well-known early Scottish adaptation of the caquetoire chair, means that it offers great scope for research on 16th-century furniture and woodwork.

Nick Humphrey presented the results of his long-term research on imported cypress chests. He distinguished between cypress chests made at different times based on their construction (sizes, joints, internal compartments, etc) and decoration (techniques, design types). The three phases he identified ranged from rare 15th-century to the more familiar 16th and 17th-century examples. He argued that the cypress was grown in Crete and was exported to the Veneto area, either ready-decorated or for decoration there, and he linked the end of production with the interruption of Venice-Crete trade in the 1660s. In conclusion Nick mentioned the related Portuguese work made in juniper. The precise identification criteria for the three phases will be interesting to know. The V&A collections database includes cypress chests from all three periods.

Yannick Chastang concluded the day by bringing the perspective of a trained marquetry maker and restorer to bear. He started by denying there was any clear distinction between inlay and marquetry; for him marquetry covers both. He was also doubtful whether English and German marquetry could be distinguished. Yannick traced the path of marquetry across Europe from its Islamic origins through Italy, South Germany



and Spain, to Cologne, France, Flanders and England. This brought to mind the dated (1515) Treasury door with marquetry-bordered 'panels' Society members had seen at Biertan church in Romania. Yannick explained the technique of marquetry in detail and gave us the benefit of his detailed knowledge of the Hugh Offley chest of c. 1585 in Southwark Cathedral and the Hardwick Hall 'sea dog' table.

After each talk time was left for discussion. Subjects ranged widely. Recurrent issues included the identification of imported furniture, and of immigrant craftsmen and their work. Scotland, Cumbria, East Anglia, London and Hampshire were all referred to but Wiltshire and Devon deserve attention too. Other topics included access to family records, the limits of documentation given that immigrants were not always required to be included, where cypress chests were decorated, the use of leather and fabrics to protect oak from stains made by iron locks and hinges, and triangular gothic joined stools. Hopefully the meeting and the following summaries of the papers will stimulate interest in this remarkable century.

*Chris Pickvance*

*Chris Pickvance: Some problems in studying 16th-century furniture*

The aim of this talk was to encourage interest in the period by identifying problems with existing knowledge and opportunities for advancing it. Key arguments are that: a) English 16th-century furniture lagged behind French and Flemish furniture in range of types, construction, decoration and volume, and this had led to extensive importation (which continues today) and to an influx of immigrant craftsmen, and b) there was extensive recycling of fragments such as carved panels, the extent of both of which was unrecognised. A knowledge of Continental early furniture and woodwork was essential to avoid imported objects being mislabelled 'English' and the large-format pre-war works on early furniture should be treated critically rather than being seen as 'bibles'. Museums such as the V&A and Metropolitan were currently re-assessing objects in their collections and identifying many made-up pieces and outright fakes. In the V&A database these are described in detail.

To help establish some bases of knowledge examples of furniture which were dated or dateable were discussed. Aspects of construction, decoration and metalwork such as the practice of dating, the use of mastic, the use of linear and geometric marquetry, types of locks and hinges, and types of chamfering and moulding could help identify imported and immigrant work. However, these were not areas of certainty but needed further research. Finally, some sources of confusion were pointed out. Types of furniture which were often misdated '16th-century' include Continental clamped chests which continued into the 19th century (and whose post-1600 carved dates are often deduced to be later additions), Black Mountains clamped chests which continued into the 17th century, and Breton chests with gothic tracery panels which continued to be made until the 1670s. Plain boarded English 16th and 17th-century chests 'improved' with later carving in 16th-century styles are another source of confusion, but can usually be identified by the precision of the carving which is not distorted by movement across the grain of the carved surface.

*Megan Wheeler: Early Elizabethan chairs and chests at Sizergh Castle*

This paper explored the longstanding but largely uninvestigated tradition that the furniture of the 1560s and 1570s which survives at Sizergh was made by Flemish craftsmen, working either generally in the locality or in a workshop established at the castle itself. To better understand where the makers of the furniture originated, this paper closely examined its constructional and decorative features, including the chests' decorative lockplates and their remarkable scroll-edged and chamfered applied till plates (a possibly unique departure from the more commonly found grooves in the interior face of a chest's rear board), and the carving to the reverse of the chairs' cresting rails. This section concluded that makers of both the chests and the chairs incorporated a combination of features, some considered to be 'Continental' practice, others considered to be English.

Having established that there were Continental influences at work at Sizergh, an exploration of surviving archival material followed, in the hope that it



A frame and panelled chest at the Hotel Dieu, Beaune, Côte d'Or, dendro-dated c. 1450





Detail of chest with lockplate dated 1571, showing the remarkable till plate applied to interior. National Trust

might shed light on who was living and working in Kendal in the 1560s and 1570s. Records of Strickland expenditure, both on goods and wages, show that there were clearly defined and distinct phases of employment at Sizergh, some of which may indicate periods where craftsmen were at work either carrying out improvements to the castle or making furniture for it. The question of who was being employed by the Stricklands when, and for what purpose, requires further research. Finally, this paper turned to lay subsidy returns – which taxed ‘aliens’ – to enquire if there was a large community of immigrant craftsmen living in or around Kendal at this period. It found that none of the aliens listed during the middle decades of the 16th century was described as ‘Flemish’ or coming from Flanders, whereas ‘Dutchmen’ were relatively prevalent in the area.

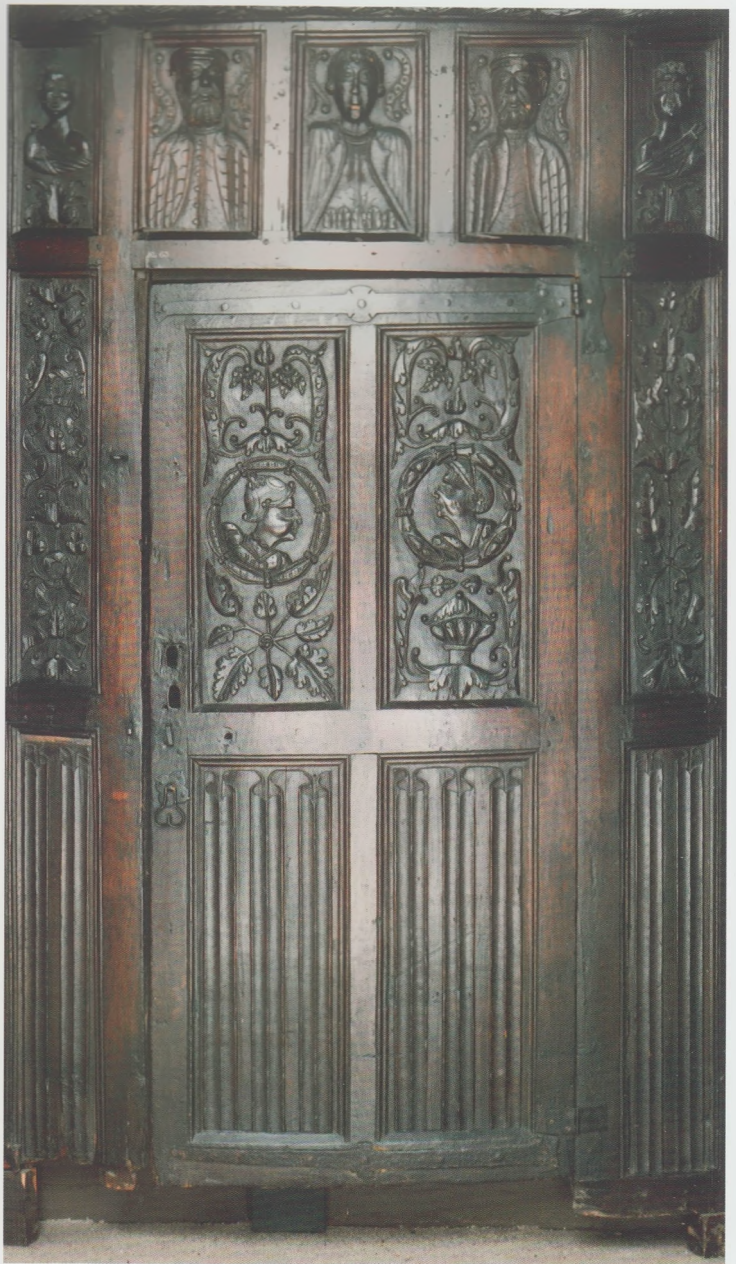
**Michael Pearce: *A French furniture-making school in Edinburgh***

French craftsmen can be identified in the 16th-century minute books of the Edinburgh incorporation of masons and wrights (wood-workers). These records have recently come to light in Edinburgh City Archives. They set out how a craftsman had to complete a masterpiece, called an ‘assay’, to qualify as a free master in the 1550s. The equivalent craft in Perth did not set assays, but instead required new masters to pay for a football match.

One Frenchman, Andrew Mansioun, who was prominent in the royal accounts, working in wood and in the cannon foundry, was a judge of the assays. Two

of his sons were furniture makers, making a bed and a pulpit for the king in the 1590s.

In 1555 Thomas Wod was set the assay of making a ‘drawin burde with ane close case with thre lidds’, an extending drawing table with three leaves. When he died in 1586 his workhouse contained two of these tables. John Whitelaw refused to complete his assay, and the craft set conditions for his future work as an unfree craftsman. He had to swear to make ‘only writing desks, coffers, chairs, and stools’ in his own booth and not to work in houses except under a master for wages. Only a fully paid-up master could employ craftsmen or contract to work in houses, but others could make and sell these items of furniture. The Edinburgh craft readily accepted foreign workers, and this French influence probably dominated fashion and style. A contemporary inventory describes ‘carved and raised work in the courtly manner’ – furnishing which may have been from this French school.



Mid 16th-century internal porch from a house in Leith. National Museums of Scotland, H. KL. 63





Chest (cassone), Venice or Crete, 1585–1600, Cypress wood, carved and with penwork. Museum no. 4886-1858. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London

**Nick Humphrey: *Imported cypress chests in the 'long' 16th-century***

There are surviving in England many examples of imported chests typically made of cypress wood (*cupressus sempervirens*) with shallow, flat relief decoration and penwork decoration. It is clear that they were highly valued in the 16th and 17th centuries. Their graphic decoration, though usually obscure, typically features with figure scenes, standing figures in niches, and scrolling stem borders. Their origins, technical characteristics and design evolution from the 15th to the 17th centuries, have not yet been clearly defined, nor why their manufacture and import appear to have ended abruptly around 1640.

A precursor chest type *c.* 1430–75(?), probably made in NE Italy – examples of which now in Britain were collected from the 19th century – is characterised by

wide cypress boards with pyrographic decoration with coloured wax infill. Schubring's (1915) brief mention has led to cypress chests of all types being commonly attributed to the Alto Adige region.

From *c.* 1470 a second phase chest type emerges, examples of which survive in some English churches, probably imported at the time of manufacture and which has been outlined by Charles Tracy (2001). This is characterised by dovetailed construction using narrow planks ingeniously nailed to form larger boards, with penwork and punchwork decoration and incised parallel lines on the plain surfaces. Narrow wood mouldings often frame the rectangular compartments. The identification of some print sources indicates that they continued to be made in several standard sizes until at least the 1630s. Various 'outlier' chests with non-standard features also survive.



Peter Thornton considered manufacture in Venice most likely but entertained a suggestion by Oliver Rackham that they were exported (undecorated) from Crete, a Venetian dependency. Archival research and comparison with Cretan woodwork could substantiate the hypothesis but supporting evidence already includes the plantation production of cypress wood, 16th-century accounts of the manufacture and export of chests and other products, and references to the use by chest makers of 'western' designs.

Brief consideration was also given to a separate group of chests on low stands that have been frequently confused with the 'Venetian' type. Overwhelmingly associated with SW England, these are apparently made from *juniperus oxycedrus* (a.k.a. 'cedar') and decorated with graphic designs, deeply incised and filled with black mastic, and punchwork. Some, typically Portuguese (possibly Azores) c. 1575–1625, are presumed to have been imported. A related group c. 1610–65(?) display the British royal arms and fantastic beasts; further research may reveal if they were imported or made by Portuguese makers in England.

#### Yannick Chastang: *Early marquetry techniques in Europe*

While highly sophisticated patterns could be produced with the early marquetry technique known as inlay or techniques of *intarsia*, the use of a knife as the principal tool nevertheless limited significantly the craftsman's ability to produce more complex curves. A major development around the middle of the 16th century revolutionised *intarsia* work. This was the invention of a tool still in use today: the fret-saw, otherwise known as

the piercing saw. A small metal frame-saw fitted with a fine blade which enables curved lines to be cut in diverse materials, the fret-saw gave the craftsman a whole range of new possibilities. Pieces of inlay could be cut with great accuracy, then inlaid into cavities created with the inlay knife, thereby allowing a greater flexibility and range of designs. By this time craftsmen were inlaying into veneered backgrounds which had been previously glued onto the furniture carcass, as well as into the solid carcass itself. It can be said that modern marquetry would never have existed without the invention of this tool. The earliest representation of a fret-saw is in a marquetry panel made in around 1565, now in Ecouen, near Paris, where it is shown attached to the wall of a marquetry workshop. The complexity of *intarsia* work of the 16th century was directly related to the fineness of the fret-saw blade. It is no coincidence that some of the most accomplished 16th-century marquetry was produced in Augsburg, a city with a reputation for metalwork of the finest quality, the manufacture of which required extensive use of the piercing saw.

#### Rachel King and Laura Bauld: *The Burrell Collection*

An important collection of 16th-century furniture in the Burrell Collection, Glasgow Museums, has around 400 pieces dating to the period before 1685. This covers a very full and fine selection of early, mostly English, oak furniture. This is both religious and domestic in origin, ranging from choirstalls, to chairs, tables, beds, hutches and court cupboards. These vary in style, from simple to elaborate, and though some are inlaid, few are painted or gilded, with one spectacular exception being the possible ceremonial bedhead with erotic carved decoration made to celebrate the ill-fated marriage of Henry VIII to Anne of Cleves in January 1539/40. It also takes in architectural embellishment in wood, such as screens, panelling – including a complete room from Harrington Hall, Lincolnshire – doors, fire surrounds and screens, and an elaborate ceiling from Bridgewater in Somerset.

Instructions for accessing and using the new object database are available on the RFS website: <https://regionalfurnituresociety.org/2018/03/07/16th-century-furniture-in-the-burrell-collection/>



A craftsman using an inlay or shoulder knife to cut precisely shaped cavities in the solid wood



Detail of panelling carved with grotesques, hybrid monsters and foliage, c. 1500, from Harrington Hall, Lincolnshire. Burrell Collection (32.5). ©CSG CIC Glasgow Museums Collection.





Ines Bravo

Bursaries to attend the event were awarded to two delegates:

*Ines Bravo:* I am a freelance frames conservator currently working at Knole House and the National Portrait Gallery. I trained in Portugal and London at the City & Guilds of London Art School where I grew particularly interested in furniture. As a decorative arts conservator at an early stage of my career, I found the talks very informative and interesting at different levels.

Much of the interest in furniture for me lies in the examination of foreign or regional influences and in the understanding of how these adjust and translate into the materials, techniques and aesthetic choices made. I consider furniture to be particularly interesting as an illustration of a specific culture, while use and alterations over time produce multiple layers of meaning that tend to be especially rich. It was highly enlightening hearing how each speaker differently perceived, explored and interpreted the various influences that can be found in 16th-century furniture.



Eva Kasser

*Eva Kasser:* I am studying for an MA History of Design at the Royal College of Art, and my interests have so far concentrated on 19th- and 20th-century design. The research in progress day not only gave me insight into the Regional Furniture Society's field of action, but also broadened my knowledge of 16th-century regional English furniture. The talk topics were carefully selected and versatile in content. I very much enjoyed the speakers' accuracy in analysing and giving information about the objects, which I think will help develop my own approach to furniture research.