

FURNITURE RESTORATION – SOME MEMBERS' OPINIONS

Following the publication in the last Newsletter of R.W.P. Luff's four principles of restoration, and the invitation to comment on them, our editor has to date received three replies from restorer members; a small sample, but thoughtful and useful replies. I have summarised the points in them which, as one might expect, generate further questions, and introduced some point of my own with the object of provoking a wider debate. The result is as follows:

Questions 1 and 2

Predictably, no one had any quarrel with these.

Question 3

All commented here on the need to replace unacceptable restoration: Leslie Syson considers that, however old, badly done or inappropriate restoration should be replaced. An interesting aspect was raised by Brian Crossley on re-caning seating furniture, because ephemeral parts (upholstery must also be in this category) require renewal from time to time due to wear and tear, and new cane can be coloured to 'age' it appropriately; a glance beneath it will reveal whether it is old or recent. He stresses the importance of the status of the piece in deciding whether to re-cane, because minor restoration or retention of the old is only practical if the piece is an 'exhibit', eg. in a museum or open house, and not to be sat upon.

In any case, it has always been the practice to re-cover furniture to suit the owner's decor, and once the original upholstery has perished anyway, there can be no harm in this. A dilemma occurs, however, when an original cover is in place but will not stand further use: eg. Berlin woolwork on a Victorian low chair, which a customer wants to use. What should we do?

As for inappropriate repairs, it seems to me that there is a case for regarding fashionable and vernacular furniture in a different light, in some cases at least. Take the example of added metalwork: obviously, a steel bracket screwed under a mahogany chair frame, in an unsuccessful attempt to stiffen the frame, is unacceptable, but a local smith-made iron bracket shaped to curve round the back arm joint of a country armchair may have a claim to legitimacy because it is a product of the same range of local skills that produced the chair itself.

Question 4

Under this heading, and in general, Willem Irik raises the problem of the restorer who, because of commercial pressures, finds himself obliged to provide 'a quick cheap fix for which a student at a college would fail his subject'.

It would be exceptionally interesting to hear from people who suffer in this way. Personally, I have only once had an indirect enquiry, via another dealer, about this sort of work. What I quite often get is a request to do only a partial job. For example, a dealer with a broken and shabby oval mahogany toilet mirror claimed he had paid too much for it. My estimate for a full restoration was more than he could afford (he said), so I ended up by just gluing on a loose back foot and repairing a front corner. The piece is thus to be sold in sound condition, but with more to be done by the eventual purchaser. I would like to propose an extra principle: **that partial work is acceptable, provided that it contributes to the total amount of appropriate work needed.**

Brian Crossley raises two more points about conservation, drawn from an article on historic building repair in the Institute of Civil Engineers journal: first, that a thorough knowledge, and research if necessary, into the form, structure and materials is necessary before doing the work: second, to make the 'minimum intervention' into historic items; lastly to use reversible methods, so that old and new parts remain separable if required in the future. It specifically mentions adhesives in this context.

Perhaps the main criticism of Luff's four principles is that they are too limited in scope. It would be good to receive more comments, and specific examples of problems and dilemmas would be useful in stimulating discussion. I would like to suggest a broader approach to the problems of value. There is an obvious need to conserve the things of the immediate past; in effect, to close the gap between the antique and the merely second-hand or 'used', to preserve the continuum of historic furnishings. How can we do this if such things are not valued enough to carry the costs of repairing them?

Luke Millar.