

RESTORERS' COMMENTS

CANE AND RUSH SEATED CHAIRS

I have now restored cane and rush seats professionally for some 5 years and agree with Leslie Syson that badly executed restoration should always be replaced (this applies to any piece of furniture, not merely in my specialisation). It is certainly true that, if a piece of caned furniture which has fallen through is to be used in the home, it makes sense always to replace all the canework and not merely a part. Although one has to consider the customer (the bill payer!) it is frustrating to replace, for example, the seat alone of a caned bergere, knowing full well the back and sides will not last much longer and that the customer may feel when these also fail the craftsman has done a bad job, since stripping out only the seat inevitably weakens the other canework. If a piece is unique or rare and for display purposes only in, say, a museum or stately home, then conservation rather than restoration is probably more appropriate and a patch toned to match the old canework can be used. If the cane is particularly brittle, even this may be impossible and the piece must then be left unrepaired or full restoration carried out. On this point, some sizes of cane (00, 5 & 7) encountered in older furniture are now apparently unavailable in England and some Carolean chairs which use size 00 cane therefore cannot be restored unless one shaves down size 0 - a time consuming task with a fair probability of frequent breakage. Size 5 cane can be bought from a supplier in the USA, but exchange and carriage costs make it expensive. As a caner and rush seater, I find Luke Millar's final comment most telling. Many cane chairs at the bottom end of the market sell for £10-25 in the sale rooms and antique shops - to recane them costs £30-£50. The value of most such chairs in showroom condition is unlikely to exceed £40. As a result, only the very best furniture survives in its original form - many of the lesser pieces end up with plywood, foam and Dralon! The problem is similar with rush seated chairs.

Christopher Urquhart

A VIEWPOINT FROM AUSTRALIA

Would you be kind enough to pass on some of my thoughts on the ethics of restoration (question 1 N/L No. 22).

If an article is to be placed on exhibition/display, and if attributed to a certain designer/maker I believe that it should be restored as close to an 'as originally delivered' condition as possible; so that it honestly reflects the abilities and intentions of that designer/maker. The viewer of an exhibit is entitled to see it in this state - not reflecting years of wear and/or abuse - so that he can see the true style and craftsmanship inherent in the article. We all visualise differently after all.

I find it hard to lay down principles because so many factors are involved - if an article is in everyday use it has to be practical, as well as reflecting the patina of age - we have elevated dozens of low Victorian extension tables so that only we and the owner know, and restored hundreds of chests of drawers internally, whilst keeping the external finish.

I look forward to reading further opinion on the subject.

Jim Martin

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FURTHER COMMENT FROM RYCOTEWOOD

In response to the RFS Newsletter No. 22 and various other comments concerning furniture restoration, its ethics and practices, we should like to offer our considered opinions. As a group of mature Rycotewood Restoration students, we have spent a few sessions discussing these issues.

The four statements from the above Newsletter seem at first to be acceptable and full of common sense. However, when examined more closely they do seem rather bare and extreme; they do not allow for the 'grey' areas where restoration merges with conservation.

Before answering the four points it seems important to establish what is meant by restoration and conservation. There are restorers who are happy to cut out, replace, change or fake, agree to all the clients' requirements regardless of the damage caused. There are restorers who conserve, use the correct materials and restore to the style with as little interference to the piece as possible whether the piece is being used regularly, kept as a prize piece, of historical value, of high fashion or vernacular.

Dictionary definitions talk of restoration as to give back, to bring back to the original state by rebuilding, repairing, repainting, replacing or reinstating. For conservation they suggest terms like keep from harm, decay or loss; to preserve in as good a state as possible. How restorers respond to these statements depends on the context; the examples above provide such contexts.

Turning to the first of the four statements; if a piece is of historical value and for public view, no restoration is permissible. Here we could ask what if the piece is in private hands and in use, are we to conserve or restore or are they the same process? Do we restore the public piece or merely conserve and not enhance it, perhaps so, but in private use do we try to maintain the life and use of the piece, keeping it from harm, decay or loss, but paying more attention to the authentic aspects and wanting it to look nice and acceptable. So the public/private domain can have a bearing on how we approach restoration or conservation.

Question two talks of a piece being rare but not historic and restoration only being permissible, no new parts etc. This piece may be presented for public view so are we restoring or conserving. Should we protect the piece from disappearing altogether by undertaking essential work if needed, is this to be restoration or conservation? The line between the two can become blurred because often context comes in as a consideration. Are we morally bound to restore something that is rare because of its rarity or because of its history?

Questions three and four about restoration blending into the original and not trying to improve on it would seem to be self evident and yet so often this does happen. Any 'new' wood added would need to be of a character close to the original and so by carefully working this it would fit in with the rest of the piece of furniture.

We hope our observations and comments are of help to this debate which always will be controversial to some and self evident to others.

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