

**VISIT TO THE VICTORIA AND ALBERT  
MUSEUM CONSERVATION STUDIOS, LONDON  
Wednesday 20th November 1996**

About twenty members of the RFS were welcomed to the Victoria and Albert Museum by Nick Umney, Assistant Head of Conservation, for our visit to the Furniture and Upholstery sections of the Conservation Department.

We passed swiftly through the public furniture galleries, pausing for a brief talk on the problems of housing items in a museum environment; an amazingly hostile one, with relative humidity ranging from 30 to 70%, plus aerial pollution and dust creating an acid environment, and the destructive effects of ultra-violet light, all very damaging to exhibits, particularly textiles. The planned installation of a new state-of-the-art air conditioning system was a real necessity. We became aware too of the museum's pioneering role when considering the as yet unknown future conservation problems of modern materials such as plastics and recycled matter; for example, a chair made from nut-shells. The present policy was to allow circulation of 'museum' air for a period each day within the show-cases, while monitoring long-term effects.

The first conservation area visited was the upholstery studio, where under Derek Balfour's expert guidance, we saw several projects in progress. The necessity for 'non-invasive' methods was highlighted when we looked at a French Empire chair of 1813 in the Egyptian style, by Georges Jacob of Paris, probably made for Thomas Hope. Recently acquired, the upholstery had previously been stripped, but the old nail holes showed that it had carried English-style spaced webs rather than French close webbing. The problem of covering it presentably without damaging this evidence was being solved by attaching the new upholstery to loose frames, a wooden rectangle for the seat, but for the scrolled back a frame had been cut out from thin sheet steel, bent to hook over the top.

Most of our visit, however, was spent in the furniture conservation workshops, where Albert Neher, the chief conservator, introduced us to his team, and showed some of the wide variety of items currently receiving attention.

We examined part of a mid-15th century Egyptian 'Minbar', or pulpit, which is surmounted by an octagonal wooden 'chimney', supporting an onion dome. The chimney had suffered past damage, including burning. Examination of its blackened surface had revealed that it was covered with bands of textile wrapped around it, and traces of a form of gesso and gilt decoration were present. The structure was now reckoned to be too fragile to support the dome, so a replica was being constructed for this purpose. The intention was to conserve the old chimney in its present state and display it separately beside the minbar. The main part of this fascinating piece of Islamic furniture was decorated with marquetry patterns made of pieces of wood jointed together without glue.

We were on more familiar ground with a neo-classical mahogany fall front *escritoire*, on four tapered fluted legs. It was ornamented with floral marquetry and gilt mounts featuring, at the top, draped swags and goat's heads, and is attributed to Georg Haupt, emigré Swedish cabinet-maker of the 1760s (see DEFM, p.410). The fall-front had been removed for repair, having split across the centre due to shrinkage of the groundwork opposed by the clamps. These were veneered along their length, the centre part being outlined as a panel by a planted gilt brass bead. The front was, however, quite stable,

and the concern was to fill the crack with a flexible *non-invasive* material. For this purpose, Albert was devising a filler made from glass balloons in vulcanised rubber, which would have low adhesion (the inner contours of the crack would keep it in place), be non-absorbent, and could be coloured with acrylic paint. The internal construction of the piece displayed a continental lack of concern for the fine detail we associate with the best British cabinet-work: the drawers, in particular, had thick sides and glued-in side-to-side bottoms, where shrinkage had set up inevitable stresses, resulting in cracks and so on.

In contrast, a great cabinet designed by Bruce Talbot for Jackson and Graham, was in for conservation. The back of this piece was covered with superb marquetry and raised decoration in ebony, ivory, boxwood and mother-of-pearl, and panels with classical scenes in marquetry. Much had come loose, and some pieces were missing; conservators were engaged in sticking down the loose bits and making replacements where necessary. Ivory pieces were stuck with PVA, because it was considered that animal glue was apt to discolour it, and we saw tiny replacement ebony mouldings made with the scratch stock. This piece had won the British Prize at the 1878 Paris Exhibition. Future conservation sessions were foreseen too, as existing firm pieces became loose and required re-laying. Both this and the Haupt cabinet can be seen as suffering from shrinkage problems never envisaged by their makers, causing (in this case) loosening of pieces by the differential shrinkage of the dense veneer (ebony, ivory) and the more open wainscot groundwork.

A pine coffer with a domed lid, 15th century French, showed traces of a fabric or leather covering, held in place by light iron-work tracery nailed down onto it. It had suffered *in the museum*, over the years from surreptitious handling by visitors, and from previous woodworm. Consolidation of its surface was to be carried out before returning it to display.

Smaller items included a 1951 'Festival of Britain' mild steel framed chair, with a chipped stove-enamelled finish, and upholstery of springs covered with orange plastic. Only a clean-up was needed before returning it to display.

A number of Anglo-Indian boxes featured a rush-like effect consisting of porcupine quills, laid side-by-side, and one was covered by a marquetry of little spotted rectangles, sections of betel nut. A new betel nut awaited cutting down to make some replacements.

Throughout the workshops, the priority was the preservation of existing structures and surfaces. A good appearance was important, but unless it had deteriorated to the point where the character of the piece was changed, it would not be tackled unless the piece needed conservation as well. This was in part the result of budgetary constraints, but each piece is considered as having its own life, and the nature of the treatment is determined so as to enable its character to be 'read'. The importance of non-invasive, reversible techniques was stressed, and the conservation of existing historic finishes was paramount, to preserve pieces for future investigation also.

The day was punctuated by coffee, tea, and an excellent light lunch. Throughout the visit Nick Umney, Derek Balfour, Albert Neher and their assistants were generous and patient in their explanations, and in answering our questions. The information we gained, which I have attempted to summarise, makes a worthwhile contribution to recent discussions in The Newsletter about the ethics and objectives of restoration. We are deeply grateful to them all for a fascinating visit.

Luke Millar.