

An Overview of Historic Upholstered Furniture

– Karin Walton

Karin Walton from the Bristol Museums and Art Gallery gave us an insight into the work of the 'Upholder'. The many slides of interior scenes demonstrated the way in which textiles were used to reflect fashion and reinforced a social status. Royal accounts and bills, inventories, manuals and design books are shown to prove this point well.

The importance of the State bed was shown in many of the slides, which included those at Dyrham Park and Ham House. Interestingly, at Ham they had two sets of furnishings - a blue velvet for winter and a pink satin for summer, following the French custom. In the 1730s the State bed was replaced by the Tester Bed. We also looked at other types of beds from those of Marot to Sheraton and Ince and Mayhew. In the nineteenth century, due to a realisation of the importance of hygiene, we discovered that those beds with hangings were replaced by metal bedsteads with the intention of reducing the amount of bed bugs. The original uses for hangings, to protect from draughts and to give privacy, were by now largely redundant.

One of the earliest types of window curtains were festoons, introduced circa 1695. 'Draw-up' curtains followed from the 1740s onwards. The 'continued drapery' of 1820, from the Saloon at Devonshire House, covered one large wall of windows, which were treated as one. Wall hangings were introduced in medieval times for insulation and decorative purposes, and remained popular until the late seventeenth/early eighteenth century. We looked at chair covers that matched wallpapers from the Houghton Saloon circa 1730, hung with caffoy, a wool fabric imitating silk damask. Reference was also made to the Tapestry room at Osterley circa 1775 when there was a revival of hangings.

With upholstered seat furniture, our attention was drawn to the 1601 inventory at Hardwick which listed many cushions, thus demonstrating the progression through the sixteenth century to the stage where stuffing was attached to the seat frame. Furniture became bulkier for social reasons and breeches fell from fashion when wooden benches were replaced by padded furniture. From 1660 onwards, new types of furniture, such as armchairs, daybeds and settees were introduced, as well as rich silks and cut velvet to complement the opulent lifestyles of the Continent.

Discussion then focussed on upholstery techniques employed to create seating support, utilising a layer of webbing, a layer of linen and a layer of stuffing (usually Irish horsehair which could be washed and re-used). In the eighteenth century, stuffing could be shaped into a 'roll' which was then reinforced around the seat-rail. In the nineteenth century the introduction of springs changed the proportions of the seat.

Printed cottons were introduced in the second half of the eighteenth century when copper-plates and woodblocks were used to produce patterns. As production levels increased, they became more widely available to all classes. To finish the lecture, a slide was shown of an 1874 working class interior where, despite obvious poverty, there was an attempt to reflect the current fashion for tablecovers and overmantel drapery.

The delegates left with a much better understanding of this often neglected field of furniture history which we are grateful to have shared.

Sally Robertson

Upholsterers and their Clients – Geoffrey Beard

The speaker said that he had not been researching a full history of upholstery, but the part which craftsmen – the upholsterers – had taken in the history of the trade in England in the 16th/17th and 18th centuries. Firstly, where did they work?

The principal workshops for the Crown were those of the Great Wardrobe for over 300 years. From 1361 to the Great Fire of London in 1666, these has been housed on the site adjacent to Baynard's Castle in parish St. Andrew's. The site which can still be traced, is shown on John Ogilby and William Morgan's post-Great Fire map of London of 1676 (Guildhall Library). There is no site plan to indicate the exact area of the Wardrobe workshops but a small colony of artificers lived in the precincts, and carried on many functions such as upholstery, making beds, knitting, weaving, embroidery, lace and button-making and silver and gold-wire winding.

The Wardrobe moved after the Fire to premises in Buckingham Street in the Savoy, near to Somerset House, with much of the Wardrobe's daily business supervised by a comptroller and a surveyor, the then Master, Sir Edward Montagu soon tired of the office and sold in 1671 to his cousin, Sir Ralph Montagu, later 1st Duke of Montagu. He acted as Master twice (until 1685; 1689–1709) and was succeeded by his son, John, the 2nd Duke, in 1750. Another seven Masters succeeded in turn, until the Wardrobe was abolished in 1782. Such departmental affairs then became the responsibility of the Lord Chamberlain's office.

The setting up of a place of business, to receive customers, store materials, part-finished and finished upholstered furniture, with adequate room to construct it and sub-divide activities was a craftsman's primary consideration at the end of his 7 or 8 year apprenticeship. Those intent on advancement looked constantly to improvement of location and layout. Dr Beard showed, in slides, the trade-card of Christopher Gibson's London upholstery shop, showing two ware-rooms, with a stock including caned chairs, chairs and stools with upholstered seats, an angel bed (that is, one without foot posts), a mirror, funeral hatchments (undertaking was a principal concern with many upholsterers) and numerous bales of cloth. An analysis (by Kevin Rogers), of a sample of London upholsterers' inventories 1667 to 1721 in the records of the Orphans' Court (Corporation of London Records Office) shows that substantial yardage of about fifty different sorts of furnishing textiles was maintained by most. The average value of stock was about £600 but one shop in Cornhill, that of William Ridges, housed in 1670 an extensive stock worth about £7000, in a total inventory of £17,567. There were at least five rooms for a display of stock for storage and production.

In the later 18th century upholstery warehouses became a usual means of supplying goods wholesale to the trade and, to a lesser degree, at retail price to customers. The speaker instanced the very large furniture workshops of George Seddon, situated on a two-acre site in Aldersgate Street. However, the 1851 census confirmed that most of the London furniture-making firms employed fewer than fifty people.

The speaker then showed a further sixty slides, in double projection, showing details of upholstered furniture in 17th and 18th century portraits, including those by William Larkin, c.1620 (Ranger's House, Blackheath); stamps recording royal ownership (Knole, Kent); various important state beds at Houghton Hall, Norfolk, chairs dated 1752 at Petworth and slip-covers to protect the upholstery 1780, (Temple Newsam House, Leeds, anon, conversation picture).

Geoffrey Beard is always a most absorbing speaker who gave us a wealth of information with his customary good humour. The Chairman referred to the speaker's forthcoming book (Yale University Press, £50) entitled '*Upholstering and Interior Furnishing in England, 1530-1840*', and congratulated him on its having been awarded the CINOVA Prize for 1996.

Philip Duckworth

Weaving Seating: Caners, Matters & Willow Workers – Mary Butcher

Dr Geoffrey Beard's enthralling lecture on the history of upholstery was followed by a fascinating and well illustrated exposition from Mary Butcher, Chair of the Basketmakers' Association, on the development of rush, cane and willow chair seating. She began by explaining that, in the early part of this century, most workers in these materials did so (and still do today) from home, without a proper workshop, in order to cut down on overheads.

Mary started with rush seating, explaining that to become a proficient rush matter took a 3 year apprenticeship, during the first year of which the unfortunate student earned nothing save the occasional sixpence and knowing that an unsatisfactorily finished chair would be cut out and redone! On completion of the apprenticeship, the prices in those days were low indeed, only ten pence (10d!) being paid for the largest arm-chair. It is highly skilled work and has always attracted better pay than seating in the other two materials.

The rush matters in those days worked either with the local river material or in larger workshops, where material imported from Holland might be used. The speed at which they worked was fast compared with many of those involved in the craft today, although rushes twelve feet in length no doubt were very useful. An average time to complete a dining chair was about 3 hours and the very fastest workers only took an hour and a half. She cited the story of one worker who would take in the chairs on a Thursday and toil through the night by candlelight to finish the task and be paid on Friday in order to meet the rent and settle the household bills.

She explained the difference in technique between English and Continental work and dealt with straw wrapped rush seating. English work is characterised by untwisted rushes on the bottom, whereas the Continental work is often twisted underneath as well as on top. Straw wrapped rush seating is enormously skilled and very rare today, there being few rush workers in this country with the necessary skill.

Mary moved on to talk about cane chair seating, explaining that the raw rattan was used as packing for the cargo holds in the sailing ships which plied between this country and the Far East. This packing was known as 'dunnage' and the ship's captains would auction it on the quayside, once they had docked and unloaded their cargoes. Men known as 'makers off' would then treat the rattan to turn it into long shiny strips suitable for seating. Nowadays, it is all highly mechanised, with Singapore as the centre for the export of rattan originating in Indonesia and the Philippines. Most of the cane is imported to Germany, from where it is redistributed to other countries in Europe.

She talked about the women who worked in High Wycombe during the early years of this century. The price for caning a small bedroom chair was only twopence three farthings!

Rattan is an easier material than rush to handle and the wages associated with caning were commensurably lower,

although the more skilled workers who could deal with difficult work such as medallion backs and double caning were better paid.

Mary finally initiated us into the mysteries of her own first love, willow. She is an expert basket weaver and the author of several books on the subject of willow basket making, the techniques of which can be adapted to chair seating. We were shown several chairs, some seated with whole willow, using classic basket making techniques like scalloming, randing and waling. Others were seated using willow skeins, where the whole willow rods are first split into three or four using an egg shaped tool known as a cleave. The rough skeins are then cut to thickness and width using a further two tools known as a shave and an upright respectively. To produce the 200 or so skeins necessary to seat a small bedroom chair with a closely woven warp and weft can take 6 hours for one skilled in the techniques. At least the same time again is then needed to complete the seat. It is a small wonder that the technique, always rare, is so little practised today.

We are grateful to Mary for taking time out from an extremely busy life, which includes teaching and her own chair seating, to share with us her deep knowledge of some ancient crafts practised today by comparatively few people."

Christopher Urquhart

Some Case Histories at the Victoria and Albert Museum - Derek Balfour

Derek, Upholstery and Furnishing Textiles Conservator at the V&A, introduced some innovative techniques for the conservation of historic upholstery by outlining two case studies employing very different treatments, but both based on non-invasive principles.

The first was an invalid's chair, circa 1800, of mahogany, brass and iron, upholstered in cloth of horsehair with a linen warp and finished with gilt brass nails. The original covering to the wings was in a particularly fragile condition and a split has been repaired with a hessian backing and black gloss paint! Other repairs have been made by glueing canvas to the underside of the covering. It was decided to remove the original covering having first taken plaster casts of the wings to determine the correct shape, clean off as much paint and adhesive as possible and laminate the fragile cloth between a black dyed nylon gossamer support fabric and black cotton to the underside. It is normal to stitch fragile textiles to their backings but in this case the cover was in such poor condition that an adhesive, Beva 371, was used. This product is widely used in the re-lining of paintings and is re-activated by either heat or specific solvents.

The upholstery to the seat was rebuilt over a polyester support mesh, fixed to the frame with very few tacks over which the original webbing and linen support cloth was laid. Throughout the stripping down and rebuilding process all original materials and techniques were recorded and photographed, and original materials re-used. The seat and arms were finally recovered in new matching hair cloth, neither having retained their original coverings.

New gilt nails to replace those lost were cast in polyester resin with bronze and brass powder filler over standard upholstery tacks and treated with patinating fluid to match originals. These were then repositioned into the original tack holes.

The second and rather more interesting case study was of a French chair in the Egyptian style. The Denon chair (1803-

1813) is one of a pair designed by Baron Dominique Vivant Denon and made by the celebrated firm of Jacob-Desmalter, Paris. First documented in the 1917 sale catalogue of the Deepdene, home of Thomas Hope, the pair were recently acquired, one for the V&A and the other for the National Museums and Galleries on Merseyside, through the Objection to Export of Works of Art procedure. The frame of the chairs are mahogany with brass inlay in the form of sphinxes, the tails of which curve upwards to form the arms and terminating in serpents' heads. Both chairs were acquired without any evidence of original or early upholstery, and the only documentation relating to this was Denon's use of grey wool for furnishing the rooms in which his chairs were placed. It was decided the Liverpool chair would be upholstered first in grey wool and matching braid which could be replaced if the original top cover was eventually identified.

Because traditional upholstery techniques involve tacking the various layers to the frame and the consequent damage to original material, the V&A conservators examined "tackless" conservation upholstery methods pioneered in the USA. These methods made use of polyethylene foam and other synthetic materials which whilst managing to be non-invasive, neither looked nor felt "original". The aim of the treatment for these particular chairs was to recreate the upholstery using traditional materials and techniques that were used at the time of manufacture but without further damaging the chair frames.

The technique is surprisingly simple, using secondary frames cut from 17 mm birch plywood, which sits inside the original frames. Stainless steel plates are screwed to these secondary frames and overlap the parts of the frame to which the original upholstery was tacked. Holes were drilled around the outside edges at 10mm intervals to allow for the subsequent layers of materials to be stitched. Webbing and a linen base cloth was stapled to the secondary seat frame and the curled horsehair filling was built up in the conventional way. Using an original Jacob chair as a model, blanket stitch was used along the top edge of the seat to create a very sharp line in the final profile. The top cover was finally attached, passing under the original drop-in seat frame and secured to the underside of the secondary seat frame with Velcro™ fastenings, thus allowing the cover to be released and the whole of the seat upholstery to be removed.

The inside back was constructed on similar principles to the seat, the overlapping stainless steel plate to the top fashioned into a curve which simply hooks over the top rail of the chair and hangs in place. The outside back with its secondary frame and overlapping metal plates contains no filling, is held in place by four Velcro™ tabs. Thus the chair appears to be conventionally upholstered, apart from examination from the underside of the seat, and which can instantly be removed and re-assembled.

In the discussion following Derek's talk, it became clear that these innovations were greeted with scepticism by one or two more traditionally minded members of the audience. This served to highlight the very different criteria that needs to be satisfied for those "living" objects which require to continue performing the function for which they were designed and those objects of study within a museum environment. However it may be that in this second case study at least, the technique satisfies both function, conservation ethics and has application in a wider context.

Colin Piper

Some Royal upholstery in Scotland

– Priscilla Williamson

This was a talk of contrasts that centred on the different methods of upholstery that could be employed, depending on how the items were to be used in the future by their owners.

To start with we were shown a slide of the oil-painting by Carse, *'The Arrival of Country Cousins'*; a plain, early nineteenth century Scottish interior with no curtains or blinds but a carpet on the floor, covered by a crumb-cloth beneath the tea-table. By contrast the furniture discussed in the talk, came from Scone Palace and Holyrood.

A set of Chippendale-style chairs, circa 1842, had been supplied to Lord Mansfield at Scone, upholstered in a worsted tammy on coil springs. Over the years the springs had distorted the covering and the chairs needed conservation. They were to be re-done using the original covers for they were still in occasional use for corporate entertaining. New gimp had to be made and stainless steel staples used instead of traditional tacks which leave large holes in the bearers.

The other set of furniture, one sofa and eight chairs, came from Holyrood. Dating from c1761 and supplied to the Duchess of Gordon they had been covered in contemporary needlework. Their covers had become mixed from one chair to another or even removed and stored. The chairs were intended more for display than use and this had an impact on the methods used for conservation. The covers were put back on their original frames and a plastic sheet inserted between the needlework and the stuffing. This new layer had holes inserted to allow the upholstery to breathe and to stop any build-up of moisture.

The two techniques were very interesting as a demonstration of the different methods required for conservation when considering the use to which such furniture is still put.

T. Rosoman

'Now or Never': Revealing, interpreting & preserving information during upholstery conservation

– Katie Gill

The last lecture of the day, 'Now or Never' was a refreshing and extremely informative talk with slides showing recent upholstery conservation projects.

It was gratifying to see repairs, such as neatly patched arms and wings, which stabilise and prolong the life of the upholstery while causing a minimal amount of disturbance. The finished, beautiful results prove that it is not always necessary to completely strip-out and re-upholster furniture in order to make it presentable.

Katie also showed x-ray photographs of furniture, which enable us to look through the upholstery to see what lies beneath, without having to disturb anything. This is a great luxury, and a delight to see the outline of the finely carved frame beneath. One settee, when x-rayed, was shown to have an ornately carved trellis-type back, covered over at some point in its life with upholstery. The x-rays are also a useful device to show the placement of original tacks as well as original upholstery forms, such as we were able to see on the arm of a wing chair. The upholsterers among us, always eager to get the proportion, depth, and shape of the under-upholstery, correct for the period of the furniture we are working on, were fascinated to see high-tech processes used to do this. Perhaps we can find ways of sharing this information, and promoting exchanges between conservators and upholsterers.

I have only picked out a few of the many highlights of this lecture, and others will perhaps remember different things. It provided a high-note ending to a most enjoyable day. Thank you Katie, Christopher Claxton Stevens and all those concerned for making it a day to remember.

Angela Burgin