

Furniture at Temple Newsam House and Lotherton Hall, Leeds, Volume III by Christopher Gilbert, published by Leeds Art Collections Fund and W. S. Maney & Son Ltd, Leeds 1998.

This is the third and, alas, final volume of Christopher Gilbert's Temple Newsam catalogue. The first two were published in 1978, and were immediately recognised as works of the first importance - authoritative, meticulous and scholarly, and shot through with the penetrating, sometimes acerbic commentary that characterise the author's distinctive style. None of the latter has been lost in the intervening years. A china cabinet made by the unfortunate Archer & Co of Bradford is described as 'A typical example of low grade provincial furniture in a feeble Adam Revival style'. Some might balk at finding such subjective judgements in a work of reference, but I rejoice at this example of Christopher Gilbert's robust approach to historic furniture.

Museum catalogues are prone to be formulaic and repetitive, but the author has the happy knack of making each entry fresh and original. His prose is economical but not arid; the scholarship is precise and wide-ranging, but lightly worn. Complex issues of provenance, authorship and attribution are handled deftly and without fuss. He writes as a man thoroughly comfortable with his subject.

There are 239 new acquisitions recorded in the catalogue, ranging from spectacular 'parade' pieces like the famous Murray cabinet, to cottage furniture, baby walkers, bed brushes and early radios. As with the previous volumes, the entries are arranged alphabetically by category and in approximate chronological order. The sheer variety and range of acquisitions is surprising, and includes many rare, semi-ephemeral survivals such as wicker chair-back fire screens and cane bed-rests.

Neither age nor quality are the criteria here, but their relevance as historical objects, informing and illuminating our understanding of the past. Nor is contemporary furniture neglected. Here are pieces by Makepeace, de Graaff and Baier alongside nineteenth-century classics by Mackintosh, Voysey and Bevan. The Temple Newsam collection must be unique in combining so wide a range of objects under a single curatorial management and in a single catalogue.

Under Christopher Gilbert's direction Temple Newsam has always had an emphasis on country house provenance, and indeed he has made the phrase 'country house condition' - shabby but essentially untouched - virtually his own. Provenance provides context, documentary support and sometimes proof of authorship, all attributes which the author regards as essential to understanding historic furniture. Objects from more than a score of houses both large and small feature in the catalogue, and again their diversity is surprising. Painted pine backstairs furniture from Raby Castle rubs shoulders with a bantamwork chest from Castle Howard and pair of rare walnut, lead mounted and *vere eglomise* chairs from Sutton Scarsdale. In many cases these were bought direct from country

house sales, in others through the London salerooms, or through the author's multitude of contacts in the trade.

It seemed innovative and far-sighted in 1979 to begin a small collection of name-stamped regional chairs, but despite Temple Newsam's pioneering work in the field of regional furniture studies, these chairs have always been out of place at Leeds. They were rarely on public view, and lacked any real context for their display and interpretation. In any event the collection is now made redundant by the far more extensive collection being assembled at the British Regional Furniture Study Centre in High Wycombe. It is several years since any were bought for Temple Newsam, and the chairs are included in this catalogue for the sake of completeness only. A similar change of tack is apparent in the treatment of Continental furniture. This was always a mixed bag - the previous volume contained German, Dutch, Italian, Iberian and even Peruvian pieces, but the author considers that there is little point in extending this holding.

The final section of the catalogue contains a useful update of information on furniture recorded in the previous volumes. Most of this is of minor import, such as the pair of brass inlaid chairs now thought 'likely to be 20th century fakes'. Some, like the discovery of the bills relating to the gilt seat furniture and girandoles by James Pascall, is of first rate importance. So too is the reassessment of the Murray cabinet, which Christopher Gilbert once championed as a cornerstone of the 'nymph and satyr' group of brass inlaid furniture attributed to John Channon. He admits that the arguments for a Channon attribution are now less persuasive than they were once thought to be. A small concession perhaps, but one which opens the door to future re-appraisal and re-attribution.

Some aspects of this catalogue are strangely old fashioned. The author acknowledges that 'the methodology of cataloguing furniture has made impressive advances, particularly in America, where the scientific identification of timbers and extended structural analysis is now routine', but he doubts whether this has much relevance to furniture made, for instance, by a large London firm. This is questionable. Microscopic wood identification is as fundamental to furniture history as blood groups are to medicine - it should be a routine museum procedure. Structural analysis is far from irrelevant, even for high style London furniture. It is precisely through this kind of analysis that workshops producing stylistically identical articles might be differentiated. One of the weaknesses of the joint Temple Newsam /V&A Channon catalogue, of which Christopher Gilbert was co-author, was its complete failure to get to grips with the structural analysis of its subjects. This was an opportunity missed, for such information will ultimately prove to be important.

On the other hand, the author has a point when he writes that minutely detailed descriptions of construction and condition, close-up photographs, and endless illustrations of analogous examples are of limited appeal in the catalogue of such a large collection. Quite apart from the cost implications, who except a dedicated professional wants to read such stuff? Scholarship is worth nothing if

it is left on the shelf. So although the style and content of this catalogue were determined largely by that of the two previous volumes, all three evince a personal conviction of the nature and purpose of museum catalogues. Each entry is sufficient to describe the object, delineate its provenance and historical context, and to note whatever else seems noteworthy in terms of materials or construction. There is not the redundancy of the arcane detail from which many catalogues suffer. This will disappoint some specialists, but not the majority of informed, interested but unspecialised readers.

The author takes issue with the idea that catalogues are an obsolete genre, 'their principal merit being to enhance the prestige of an institution in order to attract lucrative grants and gifts'. This is a riposte to a scathing and slightly tongue-in-cheek opinion given in the *American Newsletter of the Decorative Arts Society* (Winter/Spring 1993), which itself was a reaction to the ponderous, over-technical, verbose and repetitive catalogues currently in vogue in North America. His reply is characteristically forthright:

'Just because a few maverick American scholars have lost their confidence in the relevance of collection catalogues does not mean that providing a disciplined objective record of furniture, believed by committed curators to be of art historical significance, is no longer worthwhile undertaking. There may, it is true, be higher intellectual challenges, but marshalling information about the date, authorship, design, existence of documentation, provenance, etc., of museum quality furniture remains an honourable objective.'

This is as good a definition of a catalogue's purpose as you will find. Mix it with economical prose, occasional dry wit, a profound and wide-ranging scholarship expressed with an original and apposite vocabulary and you have a catalogue which embodies all that is best in the work of Christopher Gilbert.

Adam Bowett