

CHRISTOPHER GILBERT MEMORIAL LECTURE

By Gregory Landrey, Director of Conservation,
Winterthur Museum at Christies, St James's, London.
3 December 2001

This was the first Christopher Gilbert Memorial Lecture, and we were pleased to welcome Gregory Landrey, Director of Conservation at the Henry Francis du Pont Museum, Winterthur, Delaware.

In a brief introduction, the Chairman paid tribute to the achievements of the late Christopher Gilbert, and welcomed Greg Landrey, who proceeded to give an erudite and carefully crafted lecture on current furniture conservation philosophy and practice as developed at Winterthur under his guidance. His approach is based on a sound understanding of the history of the furniture, careful and detailed analysis of the materials and condition, the application of a treatment which removes as little of the original as possible, is thoroughly reversible and leaves the piece close to the original condition intended by the maker.

The lecture included an introduction to Winterthur Museum, its foundation, development and purpose. The main displays comprise 175 period rooms, many of which are as first set out by Henry du Pont and are now period pieces in themselves. There is also a gallery on American furniture which includes a display wall of chairs allowing comparison of period features and styles, and the Dominy cabinet-makers' workshop set out to show the tools and workshop practices of the 18th century. The museum focuses on the colonial, federal and Republican periods.

Mr Landrey described the conservation team, emphasising the importance of the team over individual achievement. He explained the principles of conservation as followed by the museum, illustrated with a series of case studies. He said 'our aim should be to stay connected with our past through an appreciation of the aesthetics and history of an object. We must be clear why we do this and what we intend to achieve as our goal.' He recalled Benno Forman describing patina as 'that thin scale that grows over the eyes of the collector', and contrasted this with a saleroom description of a desk with 'a fine old surface and mellow patina'. Opinions on such matters differed but Mr Landrey stressed the importance of establishing clear aims and guiding principles, and of acting on the best possible degree of information based on accurate and scientific research.

As an example, he discussed an early 19th-century dining chair from Baltimore, made by John Finley, an Irish immigrant, on which the painted decoration had become obscured by layers of varnish. Microscopic analysis of the finish revealed that the top layers could be removed without disturbing the painted surface and the chair could then be seen much as the maker had intended. On another chair there were signs of bolt repairs and reinforcements which the conservators had decided were part of the item's history and should not be restored. A third chair, a colonial period ladder-back, had been converted with major disturbance of its original character into an upholstered winged easy chair; it

was felt it could not be successfully restored without even more intrusion and potential loss of original material and no further work was done on it.

A 19th-century Philadelphia dressing chest with mirror by Walter Revery showed its history in a number of marks on the top left by scent bottles. On evaluation it was felt these were the effects of normal use and since they did not distract from its appearance no attempt was made to remove them. Some repairs to the veneer had been necessary, but these were achieved without disturbing the original fabric and were coloured to match. On an 18th-century mahogany chest on chest, also from Philadelphia, acquired by Mr du Pont in the 1940s, Mr Landrey showed old repairs to the acanthus leaf cartouches which were poorly executed. These were removed and replaced with new carvings copied from the one original, and coloured to match. The new work was fitted in a way which ensured it was reversible, and all the pieces of the former repair were retained as part of the documentation of the work.

In making repairs to a painted Windsor settee by Ebenezer Tracey, which had suffered damage to some of the feet, it was decided to make resin casts to replace the losses rather than carry out traditional repairs in wood, which would have entailed trimming the legs and securing the new feet with dowels. The resin casts could be joined without losing any original material, using animal glue to make the joins reversible. The casts were taken from one of the complete legs, and included the surface texture of the original paint, so when the new casts were painted the surface appeared exactly as the original leg.

A similar approach was adopted in restoring a mahogany bureau-bookcase of circa 1750, which was signed 'purchased by Josiah Quincy, Braintree 1778'. The middle capital was a replacement, confirmed by micro-analysis of the surface finish, but it was considered a poor repair. The new resin cast was a perfect match and once coloured was indistinguishable from the workmanship of the original cabinet. On a Connecticut bureau of c.1780 there was evidence of extensive repairs, including double pegging to the legs and metal brackets to support the joints. These were all part of its history but were considered undesirable and restoration included their replacement with alternative repairs which left the piece with an appearance close to that intended by the maker. The finish had previously been partially scraped and a coloured varnish had been applied to mask the patchiness. However on analysis, it could be seen that some of the original finish remained and with careful use of solvents the later varnish was removed. A shellac layer was then applied, followed by wax. The structural repairs had taken 110 hours and the finish 35 hours.

Throughout his lecture Mr Landrey demonstrated the importance of careful analysis and research as an essential basis for deciding the most appropriate treatment. At Winterthur he had the benefits of highly technical equipment and a sufficiently generous budget to enable assessment and treatments which would be well beyond the resources of most conservators. However he considered his principles could apply in any situation, aiming for minimal intrusion, minimal

loss of original material, reversibility and careful documentation of every stage of the work.

Some might question the ethics of removing the accretions of history, the layers of old varnish, the interventions of earlier repairs, the scratches and scrapes of everyday use, in order to present the piece as the close to the maker's intentions as possible. This is rarely seen as desirable on this side of the Atlantic, even in restoration for the trade let alone for museum work. But Mr Landrey's is a different approach, one which accords with a different set of values, and one which he has no difficulty in justifying. One could not help admiring the degree of skill, intellect and enthusiasm which he brought to his profession. It was a privilege to hear him.