

VISIT TO THE CONSERVATION DEPARTMENT, WALLACE COLLECTION, 18th March 2003

On a beautiful Spring day in March, a unique opportunity awaited ten members of the RFS. We had gathered at the Wallace Collection in Manchester Square to have a 'hands on' look at a 'secretaire à abattant' made by Jean-Henri Riesener in 1780. This piece was delivered to Versailles and commissioned by Marie-Antoinette.

The cabinet was in the Furniture Conservation Workshop for some much needed work and thus Paul Tear, Head of Furniture Conservation and Jannick Chastang, Senior Conservator, thought it would be good idea to involve members of the RFS.

We gathered at 13.50, to receive a briefing from Paul Tear at 14.00, before being put into the capable hands of Jannick Chastang. Jannick was to lead us through the practical conservation of the cabinet whilst answering questions from ourselves.

We were given a potted history of the cabinet before the Wallace Collection acquired the piece in 1870 with good evidence pre-dating this period of rather invasive restoration techniques. These later restorations were clear to see – sub-standard veneer patches, re-gilding, scraped veneers, poorly defined marquetry and later varnishes but one assumes that these were simply the current techniques used at that time. The dilemma that the Collection was faced with was how far to

conserve/restore the cabinet. The decision was made to put the piece back into the condition when first acquired by Richard Wallace.

Having ascertained the problems which faced Jannick and Paul, we were then given an insight into the research, problem solving and the explorative techniques they are employing in order to see the conservation process through to a successful conclusion.

Once the cabinet had been dismantled tests were carried out to identify the present surface coating. This was achieved by making various solvent gels. The gel is a mixture of an appropriate solvent, perhaps Acetone or IMS, suspended in Laponite. Laponite is synthetic clay which forms a thixotropic material when mixed with water; at this juncture varying percentages of Acetone or IMS can be added. By applying these amalgams judiciously one can remove the surface coatings layer by layer until the varnish is totally removed. Not only does this remove all surface coatings but it will also draw dirt and other unsightly residues out of the grain of the timber.

All loose veneer is laid using a vacuum press. This is a technique Jannick has pioneered himself with fantastic results. By enveloping the veneered member in a sealed plastic bag and applying a vacuum, pressure can be brought to bear on any part of its surface, thus eliminating the need for heavy and often dangerous clamping procedures.

Unfortunately, due to the heavy scraping of the marquetry surfaces in the past, a great deal of definition has been lost from the cabinet. A large percentage of the sand shading and engraving is now missing and techniques are currently being investigated as to how they can re-create that definition artificially, but of course ethically.

Considerations at the time of the study day were centring on the use of coloured inks but they had also considered re-engraving the marquetry or staining it.

I believe at the time of our visit the final finish had yet to be decided upon. Riesener would have probably just waxed the *Secrétaire* but may also have sealed it first with sandarac. The possibilities of sealing timber with glue before polishing were also discussed.

In amongst all of this talk about continental furniture, materials and metal fittings came various interjections from the RFS members. One particularly enlightening fact came from Michael Legg re the 'Batting' of English nails to make them directional. The tip of the nail was hammered to give a leading edge which would enable them to be driven into timber in a straight line without splitting through the edge of the timber e.g. the nailing of a drawer bottom to the back of the drawer.

Such study events are essential if we are all to further our knowledge in all aspects of furniture history. The days of the 'closed shop' approach to furniture re: practical and historical knowledge are fortunately behind us. Jannick and Paul certainly gave us the

opportunity to experience first-hand current conservation techniques but also the ethical dilemmas they face daily. We all took away new ideas, techniques and product details. They certainly champion the dissemination of information. Thank you both.

Jamie Chatfield