

# The Christopher Gilbert Memorial Lecture

## Dr. Glenn Adamson: The Carved and the Flat

**Geffrye Museum, 17 November 2007**

The Regional Furniture Society has a great tradition of inviting outstanding speakers to present the annual Christopher Gilbert lecture. The choice of lecturer reinforces on a yearly basis the desire of the organisation to bring to its members the latest trends in scholarship in furniture history. This was clearly behind the choice of Glenn Adamson as the 2007 speaker. Dr. Adamson is one of the scholars applying the theory and philosophy of art, already so popular within the fine arts, to furniture history.

One of the highlights of his talk, perhaps, was his empowering definition of regionalism, namely the distillation into one person of the various specialisations normally distributed among those working for a large cabinet-making firm in a capital city. He also discussed how being 'modern' in furniture making did not mean

industrialisation, but rather an evolution in the organisation of production, namely the greater specialisation of those working in the field of cabinet making. This, obviously, was in reference to cabinet making in large urban centres.

In tracing the origin of specialisation Dr. Adamson described 'de-skilling' as characteristic of piecework, beginning as early as the 17th century with the making of cane chairs. He gave the production of French luxury goods in Paris, and the East End furniture trade of London in the 19th century as further examples of piecework, with little mention of the West End cabinet-making firms where distribution of labour in the 19th century led, arguably, to greater quality in the finished product as opposed to the lesser quality, generally, in East End products.

Another theme in the lecture was the centralisation of design control, and an examination of how the detachment of, for example, architects from the actual process of making furniture led to less successful designs, using the Kimbolton Cabinet (in the V&A) as an example. He also suggested that flat expanses of veneer came to replace carving in the early 19th century as a result of the increasing dominance of central design. Dr. Adamson brought up a number of ideas, both historical and current, in thought on design, mentioning Gombrich and Barthes among others.

He ended with the example of Samuel McIntire to demonstrate that modernity, meaning the evolution in the organisation of labour in furniture making, is human- rather than technology-based. This American 18th-century architect, unlike Adam in the case of the Kimbolton Cabinet, embodied both the professions of craftsman and designer, and therefore was pushed to a higher level of good design and (craft) production rather than *losing* artistic quality. Ironically, McIntire, who came from a craft tradition, also helped to make it obsolete.

*Christina Anderson*