

French Gothic and Renaissance Furniture in the V&A Store

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Our group was led round the august treasure-trove that is the V&A store by Nick Humphrey and Sarah Medlam. Racking which would normally grace an important library held, in this instance, the most fascinating pieces of richly carved French renaissance and gothic furniture. No less than 430 objects were acquired by the then South Kensington Museum from Emille Peyre in 1895, some of which we studied. Although he was a decorator and furniture dealer by trade, he amassed a personal collection of ancient French furniture.

As a group we examined three chests on plinths, two of which were in an Etruscan/late renaissance style, the other boasting crisp carving of gothic tracery in the decorated style incorporating cusped lancet window forms and complex reticulations. The plinth, however, did not share the chest's quality and gothic style of decoration. These three chests, together with a miniature one, raised serious questions regarding historical 'authenticity' and the effects of subsequent restoration and modifications, including stripping and re-varnishing. We were particularly privileged to examine the interiors of these chests, as well as a chair with integrated chest - a commode in the truest sense of the word. Of particular interest were the metalwork, the tills and scars, which indicated the presence of a shelf running along the rear-cresting rail of the renaissance chests.

This visit serves a very useful preparation for the society's intended visit to France in the future. Trade links, affecting furniture-makers' working and stylistic influences, were considered. Moreover, the parallels and differences between the pieces of furniture we examined highlighted national and regional characteristics in design and craftsmanship. The South Kensington Museum acquired these pieces of furniture as teaching aids, and our group's examination of a fragment of a carved panel in the gothic style underscores the importance of furniture in the reading of regional variations in design, and ultimately of culture.

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