

Materials and Techniques: a visit to the V&A Store

10 June

Nick Humphrey and Lucy Wood introduced 21 members to a most promising work in progress. Reorganisation in the museum has released space for a new gallery, and it had been decided that this would be used for a display of the techniques and materials used in the construction of wooden furniture and artifacts. This is planned for two years hence, and it is hoped to prepare 150 main items together with a similar number of small items: we were to see the first pieces being investigated.

Our first stop concerned surface techniques. A c.1550 walnut trestle table, with hook and chain for height adjustment and a folding top inlaid with many small bone pieces (all apparently different), was being submitted to the recurring question, how was it made? A German (or English?) marquetry commode where the surface finish may or may not have been 'refreshed' was being investigated with a small hand-held microscope reflecting an image onto a screen. This was followed by a brass inlaid cabinet on stand where various methods of inlay had been used.

A Brussels chair of c.1934 where legs, seat, arms and back were of one continuous curving piece of 17-ply wood was puzzling: surely it could not have been made from a flat sheet of ply, laid-up and glued over formers? If so, the laminations were remarkably uniform. Another most ornate 19th century chair of multiple curves and shapes could only have been of papier mâché, and was decorated with a japanned finish.

Carving began with an early 17th century small chest with very shallow decoration. A column capital could be easily viewed from above in cross section, and could be seen to be hollow. It was made up from accurately shaped pieces glued together and added to as necessary to provide body for carving, with strengthening fillets glued around the inside. A cabinet with interior drawers, designed by

Robert Adam, had much applied carving, but with a clearly different base.

The construction of a mid-18th century bureau was fairly clear with the top removed, but the assembly of the drawers was not so obvious, as the fronts had been resurfaced with decorative pieces probably cut from doors that originally concealed them.

An English baroque chair with original caning to both back and seat showed the frailty of structure when both back and side seat rails meet the leg at the same level (avoided in rush seating); these had been strengthened with metal plates. Conversely, a similar Portuguese chair covered with tooled leather, to be used in the upholstery section, gave no clue as to construction. A heavy Danish chair had a wide and almost semicircular back rest with the flimsiest of supports, or so it seemed, until the back was inspected, when a very robust and carefully shaped bracket could be seen.

An 18th century mahogany table, with adjustable slope for supporting a large book, and bold cabriole legs with wide chamfering down each outside edge, clearly showed its construction. An elegant and very long three-seat settee had cabriole legs positioned and shaped to accommodate the X-stretcher tenons. Finally, a 1934 Z-chair, of the sort much beloved by students, could clearly be seen to gain its strength from the use of engineering bolts, as used in most flat-pack furniture today.

This display will be of serious interest to a very wide audience. Its success, however, as our hosts remarked, will depend on the design: to show so many objects close-up and in detail while providing the necessary protection will not be easy. Our good wishes will be with them – a definite date for two years' time!

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