

10th International Symposium on Wood and Furniture Conservation

Amsterdam, 8 & 9 October

The wood and furniture conservation conferences organised by the Netherlands-based organization, Stichting Ebenist, are now the premier such event internationally. Papers are carefully chosen: there is much of interest to hear and learn, with opportunities for questions; the post-prints are an invaluable reference, and there is, of course, the all important networking. From personal experience, speakers are well looked after. The 2010 conference, *Restoring Joints, Conserving Structures* was, as ever, a resounding success.

The conference theme went straight to the heart of wooden object conservation – the foundation work of structure, on which everything relies. Papers were presented by speakers from the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, Denmark, Portugal, Canada, Italy and the USA. As a rough guide the papers could be classed into joints, scientific analysis and treatments. The whistle-stop tour of dovetail joints was a brilliant start. The ubiquity, longevity (as a technique), variation and usefulness of dovetails were covered in furniture, joinery, building structures, wood, metal and stone. A fascinating and little-known variation on the theme of dovetails was the subject of the next paper, the wedged dovetail, peculiar to certain regions of Germany. The experimental joinery of two furniture artists was also documented.

The designs of the Dutch furniture designer and architect, Gerrit Rietveld, form part of the lexicon. His jointing techniques are unique, but tend to end up with very angular structures. Certain faults arise in use as well. The artistry of Peder Moos of Denmark was in stark contrast to Rietveld, with very fine joinery that is also decorative. His curvaceous and sculptural furniture is utterly unique, highly collectable, and gives an insight into some novel thinking.

The following two papers focussed on historic picture frames. One was on the structures and joints of medieval examples, with some beautiful drawings and animations of how the joints interlock - part of a cataloguing project at the Rijksmuseum. The other looked at remedial treatments for frame structures. The paper on Portuguese furniture had particular relevance to delegates from the UK: there was much trade between the two countries, and many similarities with respect to painted furniture.

The use of x-rays as an investigative technique in conservation is pretty common. New applications were described in two papers: stereo-radiography; computed tomography, and digital radiography. Three papers



Participants in the New Zealand conference visiting the 'Sod Cottage' out of Milton



The exhibition *Out of the past* in New Zealand

focussed on remedial treatments to wooden structures, all of which had useful experiences and methodologies to share. A paper from a conservator at the Rijksmuseum, on a highly complex treatment to the substrate panels under marquetry veneers of 17th century Dutch cabinets-on-stands, and to the marquetry too, was very illuminating. It went into considerable detail about the layered construction that forms the base for the panels of these types of objects. The speaker from the USA gave an account of heroic restoration to the water damaged architectural joinery of a colonial era house in the eastern USA. The panelling had become badly warped and twisted from extreme water penetration. Using wood's elastic properties, re-plasticising it under highly humid

conditions, then flattening it and drying it slowly, the panelling was, incredibly, wrestled back into shape and re-fitted to the room it came from.

There were various excursions, including a tour of the conservation laboratories of the Rijksmuseum, and an exhibition about a 19th century Dutch furniture manufacturer, Horrix & Mutters. I chose to visit the Batavia Shipyards, Lelystad, Zuider Zee, mainly because I am nuts about maritime history. Like Nelson's advice of 'Never mind tactics, just go straight at them', the conference theme went straight to the heart of the matter. We were shown replicas of historic ships, both finished and under construction. Wooden structures can be dynamic as well as static, load-bearing and non-load-bearing. Seeing the bones of wooden ships illustrates in a visceral way the complex and changing forces imposed on wooden structures. It also serves as a reminder of what an incredibly useful and versatile material wood was and still is: for building material, furniture and domestic items, fuel, transport, engineering applications, carbon sink. A valuable resource, and you all think it just grows on trees don't you?

I acknowledge with thanks the assistance of the Yorkshire Museums Hub, without whom my attendance at this worthwhile conference would not have been possible.

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