

New Zealand's Furniture History

Invercargill, 8-10 October 2010

This inaugural New Zealand project consisted of three parts – a pre-symposium excursion starting at Christchurch on 5 October and culminating in Invercargill; an exhibition of early New Zealand furniture up to c.1920, and a symposium which attracted speakers from around the world. The event was a major contribution by a regional museum to the cultural history and decorative arts of New Zealand. It owes its roots to the Girl Scouts' exhibition of early American furniture in the early 20th century and more recently to furniture exhibitions in Australia, including *Colonial Character*, *Nineteenth Century Australian Furniture*. The New Zealand symposium was the second for Australasia, following the successful event in Canberra in 2007. One aim was to link the influences on early New Zealand furniture from England, Scotland, Ireland, Europe, indigenous Maori art, and North America. What has emerged is the strong contribution of North American mass-produced furniture from around 1880 onwards. This story has still to be fully explored.

The exhibition, *Out of the Past*, showcased some 80 items of New Zealand furniture dating back to the 1840s. The woods included a range of indigenous timbers including kauri, rimu, totara, and southern beech. Exotic timbers were also used at times and included Australian red cedar and blackwood, English oak and ash and, rarely, mahogany from the West Indies. Among the more important exhibits were pieces by the pre-eminent Australasian colonial worker, Anton Seuffert.

The symposium embraced some 18 papers given by an international group of speakers. A pair given by Greg Peters and Roger Heady on the Australian Riley Chest of c. 1818, where scanning electron microscope techniques were used to identify the woods used, was of particular interest. A highlight of the gathering was when Dr Bernard Cotton was Skyped into the symposium on Sunday morning and the participants were able to hear and see him in real time and he was able to reply to questions. Karen Hogh provided a useful workshop on the identification of New Zealand furniture timbers on the Saturday afternoon.

The programme received strong sponsorship from a number of sources, including the Furniture History Society of Australasia, the Invercargill Licensing Trust, the Community Trust of Southland, the Southern Institute of Technology, and New Zealand Historic Places Trust. Manuscripts of papers given at the symposium are currently being edited with a view to being published as a monograph.

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