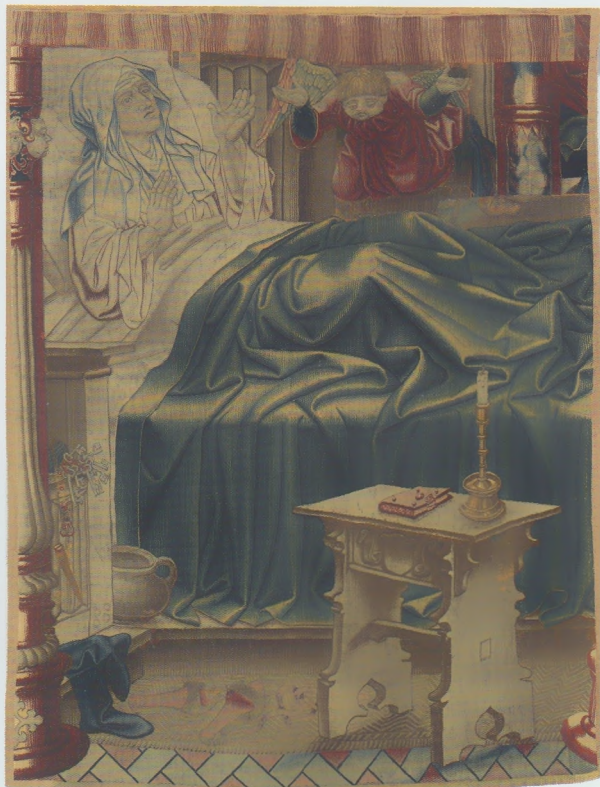


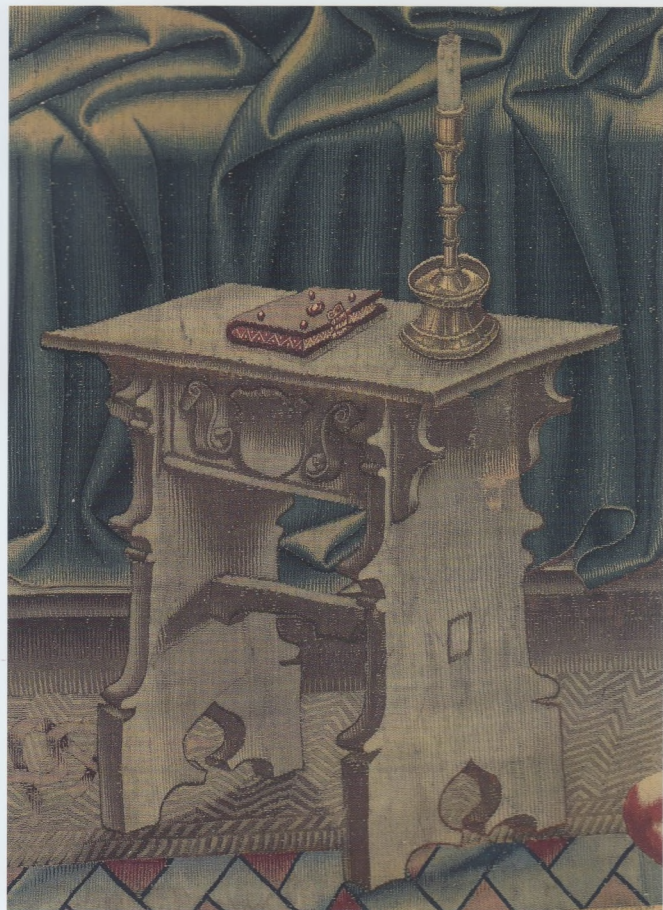
A gothic boarded stool in a Burrell Collection tapestry

The Burrell Collection, Glasgow Museums, has a tapestry, *Beatrix Soetkens in Bed* (46.126), which includes a gothic stool prominently placed in the

foreground. It is a small fragment of a larger tapestry (3.5 × 5 m) and has been the subject of detailed study. The tapestry was probably made in Brussels between 1516, when the owner, François de Tassis, was



Beatrix Soetkens in Bed. Design attributed to Bernard van Orley (1488–1541). Woven in the Southern Netherlands, probably Brussels, between 1516 and 1518. H 64¼ in (1630 mm), W 50 in (1270 mm). *Burrell Collection* (46.126). © CSG CIC Glasgow Museums Collection



Detail: the boarded gothic stool. © CSG CIC Glasgow Museums Collection

appointed Post Master to the Habsburg Empire, and his death in 1518. It depicts four scenes in the Legend of our Lady of the Sands and was hung in a chapel which de Tassis had endowed in the Brussels church of that name. It shows de Tassis himself in two places, contains numerous armorials and heraldic devices that identify him and has a later inscription recording him as the owner (Cleland and Karafel, 2017, pp. 578–585). The designer was Bernard van Orley who became court artist of Margaret of Austria.

The Burrell fragment shows the Virgin Mary appearing to Beatrix Soetkens, an apocryphal historical character. Elizabeth Cleland notes that ‘her room is rendered with meticulous attention to detail, from the pattens, or clogs, discarded beside the bed, to the chamber pot balanced on the bed’s wooden step’ (2017, p. 578.) A fluted baluster column and the front of a throne-type joined chair with linenfold panels can also be seen, and a low table with cupboard below with linenfold doors is shown in another scene. The stool is of five boards. The sides have openwork trefoils on the feet and pronounced cusped gothic buttress-like edges. Similar-shaped edges can be seen on French gothic chests with tracery panels and French gothic lock plates. The apron shows a relief-carved shield and scrolls and has cusped ends. A stretcher with a shaped lower edge has through-tenon joints. The seat is square-edged.

The obvious question raised by images of furniture is whether they represent actual pieces or imagined pieces. Here, the known identity of the commissioner and the tapestry designer’s detailed representation of the interior

suggest that the image was based on an actual stool, and probably one recently made for François de Tassis. The importance of the stool is that it is shown in great detail, is dateable and is of exceptional quality. Medieval illuminations show simpler Flemish and French boarded stools with plain or open arched sides (see Oledzka, 2016, Figs 10, 59, 61, 63, 117, and 137, for examples from 1470 to 1530.)

In contrast, English boarded stools are mostly plain or have aprons with openwork lunettes or shaped (e.g. ogee) lower edges (Chinnery, 2016, pp. 216–220; Jellinek, 2009, pp. 193–199). Victor Chinnery described boarded stools as ‘weak and vulnerable’ and doubted that any surviving English examples were pre-1500. He noted that many fakes were made by ‘altering plain and comparatively valueless chests’ (2016, p. 218). Boarded stools with replaced seats also exist, as do later copies. They are rarely dateable and thumb-moulded seats are not a sign of later dates unless they are original. Chinnery points out that their low cost helped them to continue into the seventeenth century, e.g. at the London Charterhouse (1614), Chetham’s Hospital, Manchester (1654) and Midhurst church (1689). The only known dated English relief-carved gothic boarded stools are the ‘W1562S’ stools at Sizergh Castle which were part of its refurbishment by the Stricklands, a Westmorland family with close connections to Court through Catherine Parr.¹ They combine gothic ‘buttresses’, cusped apron ends and openwork trefoil arched sides, with an oval boss above pierced scrolls (Megan Wheeler, National Trust catalogue note). See <http://www.nationaltrustcollections.org.uk/object/998000.1>

Comparison of the de Tassis and Sizergh stools is instructive. Both are very ornate and relief-carved, the most skilled type, and were made for wealthy clients. The surprise is that despite their different dates both stools are of gothic design, though the 1562 stool could have been made to match an existing set. This is because gothic furniture started and ended earlier in Flanders than in England. The scrolls indicate that both stools were made during the late gothic period when renaissance motifs were being adopted in each country. The 1539 Garstang chest in Cirencester also has gothic buttresses (Pickvance, 2015). This ties in with other indicators of the advanced position of Flanders in furniture and woodwork relative to England. Frame and panelled furniture and linenfold panelling started in Flanders after 1450. Flemish chests were extensively imported and led to the unsuccessful attempt in 1483 by the London guild of cofferers to have the trade stopped. The well-known difficulty of identifying ‘Flanders chests’ is probably because from the 1300s onwards several different types of Flemish chest were imported, including the St George and the Dragon chest in York Minster (Chinnery, 2016, p. 306). The influx of Continental (including many Flemish) craftsmen, responding to demand, state encouragement, and religious persecution, started in the late fifteenth century and peaked in the 1560s (Forman, 1971). Lastly, designs travelled widely; Wheeler (2018) found no evidence of Flemish craftsmen working at Sizergh Castle but did find a Continental design. Each stool therefore fits into the specific furniture history of its country.

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- Cleland, E. and Karafel, L., *Tapestries from the Burrell Collection* (London: Philip Wilson Publishers in association with Glasgow Museums, 2017)
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- Jellinek, T., *Early British Chairs and Seats 1500-1700* (Woodbridge: Antique Collectors Club, 2009)
- Oledzka, E., *Medieval and Renaissance Interiors* (London: British Library, 2016)
- Pickvance, C.G., 'The slow arrival of renaissance influence on English furniture: a study of the 1519 Silkstede, Shanklin and the 1539 Garstang, Cirencester chests', *Regional Furniture*, XXIX (2015), pp. 101-130
- Wheeler, M., 'Early Elizabethan chests at Sizergh Castle', *Regional Furniture*, XXXII (2018), pp. 103-125

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¹ The Burrell Collection has a boarded gothic stool with relief-carved bunches of grapes on its aprons above two cusped arches (14.16) which is described as English, but, as the catalogue notes, its seat, sides and stretcher do not appear original. Its aprons are probably Flemish. The Metropolitan Museum has a similar stool with three arches (1974.28.18), attributed to Southern Netherlands/France.