

Research in Progress: *New Thinking about Medieval Furniture*

13 March 2021

As with the previous two Research in Progress meetings, *Sixteenth-Century Furniture* (2018) and *The Regional Chair* (2019), speakers presented current research from a variety of perspectives. The sessions were introduced by Chris Pickvance and Nick Humphrey. This event was free and open to non-members to attract a wide audience and encourage new members to the society. The speakers have contributed summaries of their talks:

Agnès Bos (University of St Andrews): *A Reappraisal of the 'Medieval' Arconati-Visconti DRESSOIR at the Louvre*

During my research into the Medieval and Renaissance furniture at the Louvre, undertaken for the publication of the catalogue raisonné of the collection³, many scientific investigations and analysis have been made, thanks to a partnership between the Louvre and the Centre de recherche et de restauration des musées de France in Paris. The aim was to assess the pieces of furniture, and to acknowledge their authenticity or to



The Arconati-Visconti dressoir. H 1.42 m, W 1.6 m, D 0.48 m. Musée du Louvre, OA 6973. © RMN-Grand Palais (Musée du Louvre) / Michel Urtado.

what extent some of them had been transformed during the nineteenth century.

Among the collection, one piece looked truly genuine, a *dressoir* which joined the Louvre's collection in 1916 along with the famous collection gathered by the Marquise Arconati-Visconti (1840–1923).⁴ In 1897, Émile Molinier, curator of the Decorative Arts department at the Louvre, celebrated the *dressoir* as a 'beautiful' piece, typical of fifteenth-century *dressoirs*, and one century later, the great historian of furniture Jacques Thirion described the same piece as 'magnificent'.⁵ The piece is indeed carved with delicate foliage and human figures, and many tiny animals.

The technical investigations led on the *dressoir* (X-Rays and dendrochronology) disclosed a very different picture. The piece has been greatly transformed and seems to have been partly reconstructed, probably during the nineteenth century, maybe when it belonged to the great collector and art dealer Frédéric Spitzer (1815–1890). The lower part of the *dressoir* has been altered, and the three pendants are antique but probably came originally from another part of the piece, or another piece of furniture. The dendrochronological analysis also revealed that wood felled in the seventeenth century had been used for this transformation. Finally, the genuine parts of the *dressoir* are made from wood felled in the first quarter of the sixteenth century, demonstrating that this 'medieval' *dressoir* is actually a

mix of Renaissance parts and nineteenth-century ‘restorations’ using seventeenth-century wood.

³ Agnès Bos, *Mobilier du Moyen Âge et de la Renaissance: la collection du Louvre* (Paris: Éditions du Louvre-Somogy, 2019).

⁴ Jean-Joseph Marquet de Vasselot, ‘La collection de Madame la Marquise Arconati Visconti’, *Les Arts*, 19 (July 1903), pp. 17–32, and 19 (August 1903), pp. 1–14. Gaston Migeon, Jean-Joseph Marquet de Vasselot, Paul Leprieux et André Michel, *Catalogue de la collection Arconati-Visconti* (Paris: Musée national du Louvre, 1917).

⁵ Émile Molinier, *Histoire générale des arts appliqués à l’industrie du Ve à la fin du XVIIIe siècle. Les meubles du Moyen Âge et de la Renaissance*, vol. 2 (Paris: Librairie centrale des Beaux-Arts, 1897), p. 26. Jacques Thirion, *Le mobilier du Moyen-Âge et de la Renaissance en France* (Dijon: Éditions Fatou, 1998), pp. 42–43.