

Hans Piena: *The History of Dutch Painted Furniture*

Hans Piena, Curator of the Netherlands Open Air Museum, Arnhem, is well-known to members of the Regional Furniture Society. He joined our Shropshire conference in July 2019, where he delivered a talk on the history of Dutch ladder-back chairs, but we first met at Arnhem on our study tour of Dutch painted furniture in 2001.

On 7 April 2021 he gave his new 50-minute presentation, recently delivered at the Rijksmuseum, which is the result of 17 years of research. It covers the history of Dutch painted furniture which was produced by members of guilds known as 'witwerkers'. 'Wit', meaning white, refers to the pieces in their initial unpainted state. Witwerkers developed great skill in decorating these pieces in faux exotic veneers or with painted stories from the Bible, in imitation of a host of fashionable hardwood items such as cabinets, wardrobes, chests of drawers and tables. It is usually assumed that painted furniture was a rural craft, but Hans explained that witwerkers emerged in the cities. The first witwerkers' guild was founded in Amsterdam in the early seventeenth century. The influx of immigrants and rise of the middle classes during the seventeenth century led to a boom in the market for inexpensive painted furniture. A marketing and distribution network was developed into the distant reaches of the Netherlands and overseas, as far as Russia and beyond, including bow corner cabinets to England. Witwerk evolved to reflect changes in the finest furniture through the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, sometimes with humorous consequences.

Jeremy Bate