



## THE FURNITURE HISTORY SOCIETY

NEWSLETTER

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### CABINET RETURNS TO BECKFORD'S TOWER

The ability to illustrate to today's visitor what the interiors of William Beckford's study retreat at Lansdown Tower in Bath would have been like when they were created in 1828 has long been an essential aim of the Beckford Tower Trust. It is an aim made difficult by the fact that much of the original interiors and fittings of the building were stripped and sold following Beckford's death in 1844. What was not sold was then destroyed by fire in 1931, leaving the Belvidere at the very top of the Tower as the only historic interior remaining in the building.

With the help of contemporary illustrations it is possible to show what the rooms at Lansdown Tower were like in the year of Beckford's death. However, being able to display original pieces of furniture designed specifically for the building is essential in order to fully convey to the visitor what was so significant about Beckford as a collector and the spaces he created. It was with this in mind that the Beckford Tower Trust embarked on a successful campaign to purchase an oak wall-mounted cabinet believed to have been made for Beckford and return it to the Tower.

The cabinet reflects the development of Beckford's taste in the later period of his life while living in Bath, and was most probably designed by Henry Edmund Goodridge (1797-1864), the architect of Lansdown Tower.

Believed to be one of a pair sold in 1848 on the seventh day of Messrs English & Sons sale of items from 20 Lansdown Crescent, listed as Lot 84 *Pair of very neat oak hanging cabinets for bijouterie, with plate glass doors and gilt enrichments*. The cabinet is very similar in design to pieces seen in the Goodridge drawings of 1828 for the initial interior schemes at Lansdown Tower. The heavy cornice with rich gilt mouldings and the plain geometrical forms of the cabinet are typical of the furniture designed by Beckford and Goodridge, and the strong architectonic style reflects the Greek Revival taste of Lansdown Tower. The applied quoins or roundels seen on the frieze of the cabinet are a decorative motif used continually



*Fig. 1 Oak wall-mounted cabinet made for William Beckford c.1828, Beckford Tower Trust*

throughout both the Tower interiors and the interior alterations made by Goodridge to Beckford's house at Lansdown Crescent. In the four corners of the cabinet door can be seen Beckford's heraldic motifs of gilt cinquefoils, which he frequently included in designs or had applied to furniture and objects he commissioned.

It is highly likely that this cabinet was initially designed for the Lansdown Tower interiors and then removed to Lansdown Crescent in 1841 when Beckford began commissioning new pieces of furniture for the Tower that were less influenced by the severe geometry of the building.

Cabinets for Lansdown Tower were designed to function as display cases for items in Beckford's collection, in this instance books and small objects. They were also vital parts of the interior architecture of the rooms. Cabinets with plate glass doors were mounted above highly polished surfaces of marble and sat opposite windows or large mirrors. The rich use of colour and a clever manipulation of natural light in the rooms would therefore create



Fig. 2 Willes Maddox, *The Crimson Drawing Room at Lansdown Tower*, from 'Views of Lansdown Tower', Edmund English, 1844 (Beckford Tower Trust)

dramatic settings for Beckford's famous collection. This cabinet is a perfect example of how oak furniture commissioned for the Tower would have been enhanced by wall hangings and upholstery of crimson and scarlet and surfaces of golden Siena marble. It is an item designed to be both a unique object and an integral part of a larger design scheme, and is therefore a fine example of the dual nature of Beckford's furniture.

The Beckford Tower Trust has a collection of books from Beckford's library, including some Christian Kalthoeber bindings that incorporate Beckford's heraldic motifs. The ability to display these books in the cabinet at Lansdown Tower now makes it possible to show objects from Beckford's collection in the manner he originally intended them to be seen. With so few surviving Beckford interiors, this makes it possible to illustrate how the display of objects was equally as important to Beckford as the objects themselves, and further enhances our understanding of the aesthetic ideas he expressed through the art, architecture and furniture he commissioned.

The purchase of the cabinet was made possible with support of the Art Fund, the MLA/V&A Purchase Grant Fund, the Heritage Lottery Fund and many personal donations.

*The cabinet can be seen at Beckford's Tower & Museum in Bath from Easter 2009.*

Amy Frost  
Curator, The Beckford Tower Trust

## A COLLECTOR'S CABINET BY ERNEST GIMSON, c. 1902

Cheltenham Art Gallery & Museum recently acquired a collector's cabinet on its own stand, designed by Ernest Gimson (1864–1919). The cabinet belonged to a cousin of Gimson and remained in the family until it was offered to Cheltenham. It was acquired with a generous grant from the Art Fund, and the MLA/V&A Purchase Grant Fund, as well as assistance from our very supportive Friends organisation.

Sir Nikolaus Pevsner called Ernest Gimson 'the greatest of the English artist-craftsmen' in his *Pioneers of Modern Design*. Gimson, and his colleagues Ernest and Sidney Barnsley, sought little public acclaim, but their respect for the quality of materials used and workmanship ensured that they, and particularly Ernest Gimson, were well-known and admired by their contemporaries in Britain, continental Europe and the USA. More importantly perhaps, Gimson's work continues to have a resonance and relevance for designer/makers today that transcends the historical movement.

Ernest Gimson was born in Leicester where he began his architectural training. He moved to the London office of the influential Arts and Crafts architect John D Sedding in 1886. Inspired by Morris, Sedding and Philip Webb, he took up chair making and decorative plasterwork and began designing embroideries and furniture. Between 1890 and 1892 he was involved in Kenton and Co., the firm set up by five young architects to produce well-designed and well-made furniture. However, Gimson and his friend and colleague Sidney Barnsley felt 'a desire to make closer contact with Nature than they felt was possible over the drawing board in a City office'. In 1893 they moved to the Cotswolds with Sidney's brother Ernest Barnsley. They shared a workshop until 1900 when Gimson and Ernest set up a second workshop and began employing cabinet makers to execute their designs. This workshop was run from Daneway House near Sapperton. Gimson took sole control of the workshop from the end of 1902 until his death in 1919.

Cheltenham Art Gallery & Museum has a large collection of material relating to Ernest Gimson. As well as sixteen items of furniture and a substantial collection of smaller decorative art objects, in 1941 the gallery acquired two thousand of his drawings and designs, which form the heart of the museum's designated Arts & Crafts collection. However, while there are many designs of Gimson's cabinets, most of the furniture designed by Gimson in the collection reflects the rural Arts and Crafts style, with an emphasis on vernacular craftwork featuring chamfering, chip-carving and open-construction work.

The collector's cabinet is very different. It is a smart and sophisticated design. Jonathan Marsden, one of the Art Fund's trustees said of the piece during the purchase, 'the first thing that strikes one is that it's a very beautiful object, and extraordinarily unusual ... it's a metropolitan, urban piece which makes it all the more rare and interesting.' Although we think of Gimson as a rural, vernacular designer, these cabinets were very much a part of his oeuvre right from the very beginning of his career. Contemporary photographs show several modish cabinets with inlaid, veneered and marquetry decoration, particularly before 1910, although there are very few in public collections (a Kenton & Company marquetry cabinet of 1891 in the Musée d'Orsay).

The cabinet is very similar to a design in Cheltenham's collection (CAGM1941.222.320), with black ebony roundels set in a plain brown ebony cabinet. The roundels appear to be decorated in a pattern of roses to be gilded, and as this design is dated 11 December 1901, it allows us to date the cabinet to around 1902. The cabinet is made of rosewood, and has a veneered exterior with a cut inlaid moulding. The interior doors are veneered in macassar ebony with circles of satinwood. The drawer fronts are also veneered in satinwood with



*Fig. 3 Collector's cabinet by Ernest Gimson, c. 1902, Cheltenham Art Gallery & Museum*

silver handles made by the leading Arts & Crafts jeweller and silversmith, John Paul Cooper.

Inspiration from the seventeenth century for this cabinet and others was taken by figures associated with the Arts and Crafts movement, as diverse as C R Ashbee and Gordon Russell. The V&A held examples of Spanish vargueno cabinets that were studied by many designers in the Arts & Crafts Movement: elaborately decorated cabinets on open-work stands designed primarily as writing desks. The form gave the designer and makers an opportunity to show off their skills and craftsmanship. Gimson's photograph collection reveals that he was also inspired by seventeenth-century vernacular cabinets, spice cabinets and Indian inlaid boxes, and early pieces by him include boxes decorated with mother of

pearl. The newly-acquired cabinet, however, is startling in the simplicity of its design and the reliance on the quality of the materials and workmanship speaks for itself. It shows the impact that Japanese design had on Gimson, and of Aesthetic designers like E W Godwin. This sophistication and simplicity looks forward to twentieth-century developments in design, such as Art Deco.

Cheltenham has been fortunate in acquiring a DCMS/Wolfson Museums and Galleries Improvement Fund grant to redisplay the Arts & Crafts collection and this cabinet forms a highlight of this newly redisplayed gallery. The collection has had a purpose-built gallery since 1989 and the display focuses on a series of designers and makers: Morris, Voysey, Ashbee and the Guild of Handicraft, Ernest Gimson and Sidney Barnsley, Gordon Russell and Peter Waals. The next step for our collection will be to develop an Open Archive for access to our extensive archive collection, including the Emery Walker Library, which includes many works by the foremost Arts & Crafts bookbinders, as well as our archive relating to Gimson and the Barnsleys. This will be part of an exciting new development for Cheltenham Art Gallery & Museum to expand for temporary exhibitions and to increase access to the permanent collection.

Kirsty Hartsiotis  
Curator of Decorative Arts & Designated Collections  
Cheltenham Art Gallery & Museum

#### SUBSCRIPTIONS 2008–09

The 2008–09 subscription year commenced on 1 July 2008. Those members who pay by cheque or credit card annually should complete the enclosed form and send it to the Membership Secretary. Members who pay annually by banker's order should ignore this notice. Payment may be made by credit/debit card but this is subject to a 2% surcharge to help recover part of the additional cost to the Society. The scheme for early notification of events is an option which allows for the sending of the activities pages of the Newsletter by fax or first class airmail at proof stage, about three weeks before publication. Members who have not to date provided a gift-aid declaration, and are able to do so because of the payment of income or capital gains tax in the UK, should tick the box provided. This brings valuable additional income to the Society at no cost to the member providing the declaration.

The Membership Secretary can be contacted at 1, Mercedes Cottages, St. John's Road, Haywards Heath, West Sussex RH16 4EH (tel/fax 01444 413845 or email: [brian.austen@zen.co.uk](mailto:brian.austen@zen.co.uk))

#### EMAIL COMMUNICATION

The officers of the Society find it increasingly convenient to use electronic communication. For members who have joined over the last few years we already have email addresses but for many members we do not. Those sending in subscriptions will find a space for this information on the form provided. Others who pay by banker's order are requested to provide this information to the Membership Secretary at [brian.austen@zen.co.uk](mailto:brian.austen@zen.co.uk)

## FUTURE SOCIETY EVENTS

### BOOKINGS

For places on all visits, please apply to the Activities Secretary, Clarissa Ward, 25 Wardo Avenue, London, SW6 6RA, tel. /fax 020 7384 4458, enclosing a separate cheque *and* separate stamped addressed envelope for each event *using the enclosed booking form*. Applications should *only* be made by members or joint members, and by those who intend to take part in the whole programme. No one can apply for more than one place unless they hold a joint membership, and each applicant should be identified by name. If you wish to be placed on the waiting list please enclose a telephone number where you can be reached. Please note that a closing date for applications for all visits is printed in the *Newsletter*. Applications made after the closing date will be accepted only if space is still available.

### CANCELLATIONS

Please note that no refunds will be given for cancellations for occasional visits costing £10.00 or less. In all other cases, cancellations will be accepted up to seven days before the date of a visit, and fees returned subject to a £5.00 deduction for administrative costs. Separate arrangements are made for study weekends and foreign tours and terms are clearly stated on the printed details in each case.

N.B. PLEASE REMEMBER TO SEND SUFFICIENT STAMPED, SELF-ADDRESSED ENVELOPES FOR ALL APPLICATIONS, INCLUDING REQUESTS FOR DETAILS OF FOREIGN TOURS AND STUDY WEEKENDS.

### ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING, WORKS IN PROGRESS TALKS AND SPECIAL TALK BY PHILIP CLARIS THE NATIONAL TRUST COLLECTIONS MANAGEMENT PROJECT, FOLLOWED BY AN AFTERNOON VISIT TO THE REFORM CLUB

The East India Club, 16 St James's Square, London SW1

Saturday 29 November 2008, 10.30 am–3.30 pm

The Annual General Meeting for the year ending 30 June 2008 will be held at the East India Club. The AGM will start at 10.30 am (coffee from 10.00 am) followed by Works in Progress talks by Christopher Rowell, the National Trust, Treve Rosoman, English Heritage, Sarah Medlam, Department of Furniture Textiles & Fashion, V&A Museum and James Lomax, Temple Newsam House, Leeds.

These will be followed by a special paper delivered by Philip Claris, Collections Information Manager, The National Trust. The National Trust is completing a six year programme of converting its collections inventories to a new computer database. The database itself has been specially commissioned as a joint project with the Royal Collection. Details of the Trust's collections can now be searched as a whole, both for research and management purposes. Future plans include the enhancement of electronic catalogue records in specialist areas of the fine and decorative arts, and publication of the results for general public access.

After a light lunch, there will be a tour of the Reform Club at 104 Pall Mall. This Italian renaissance-style masterpiece by Sir Charles Barry was inspired by Palazzo Farnese and completed in 1841. The original interiors are richly flamboyant in decoration with most of the furniture made by Holland and Son to the designs of Barry.

Admission to the AGM is free but all members wishing to attend should notify the Activities Secretary at least 7 days in advance for security reasons. Tickets for lunch and the

afternoon visit are available at a cost of £25 per head and likewise must be booked with the Activities Secretary at least 7 days in advance.







## EXHIBITION REVIEW

'Thomas Hope: Regency Designer', The Bard Graduate Center, New York, 17 July–16 November 2008

Exhibitions have two lives: they exist in a physical form for their duration, and survive in perpetuity through their catalogues. Each of these interconnecting elements should ideally work in isolation. In the case of 'Thomas Hope: Regency Designer' the impacts of the two

versions of the exhibition, the first of which ran to great acclaim at the V&A Museum in London ( 21 March-22 June 2008), are also quite different.

In its theatrical installation at the V&A, the larger version of the exhibition was visually arresting. The visitor entered to be dramatically confronted by William Beechey's full length portrait of Thomas Hope (cat. no. 1) paired with Martin Archer Shee's portrait of Hope's wife Louise (cat. no 3). Soon one was winding towards brilliantly rendered, partial reconstructions of rooms at Duchess Street, and then swiftly on past platforms of furniture, and show cases of objects and books, before exiting, seemingly too soon, via the Deepdene.

The exhibition at Bard, although numerically smaller, has the advantage of being installed over three floors of a town house, thus lending an appropriate sense of scale to the furniture, sculpture and other objects. While not attempting to replicate the interiors created at the V&A, the designers at Bard have nonetheless successfully evoked the spirit of Duchess Street, notably on the entrance floor. Here, the use of colour and textiles immediately expresses the richness of Regency period interiors.

Bard's installation begins not with Thomas Hope's early travels, but with Duchess Street and *Household Furniture* (1807), his greatest achievements. The visitor is presented almost at once with the three strands that most readily identify Hope: the collector of ancient art, the patron of contemporary artists, and the creator of the furnishings and interiors at Duchess Street.

Informative juxtapositions, rather than strictly chronological sequencing, are a feature of the display at Bard. For example, the Hope-commissioned painting by Richard Westall, *The Sword of Damacles*, 1812, with an elaborate classically-inspired throne surmounted by a pine cone finial (cat. no. 64), is hung behind Hope's similarly embellished settee (cat. no. 81). Next to this is a reconstructed Roman cinerarium from Hope's own collection (cat. no. 40), incorporating carved decoration like that on the sofa. These three linked exhibits demonstrate succinctly aspects of Hope's response to neo-classicism and its sources.

The richness of the giltwood furniture that dominates the beginning of the exhibition is separated from, and contrasted with, a group of mahogany furniture, most of which it is suggested was probably from Hope's private appartements; an interpretation that was not apparent in the V&A's less didactic installation. A further benefit from layout at Bard is that one is able to get near enough to examine the furniture closely. One can observe, for example, consistencies in the execution of the carving. Thus, the exhibition offers the significant opportunity to better understand the common characteristics of furniture that the catalogue entries attribute to Bogaert.

Aptly for a teaching organisation, Bard has produced exemplary introductory panels and labels. In each case, these provide information composed to appeal as much to cognoscenti as to the visitor approaching the exhibition with less knowledge. Plates from *Household Furniture* are invariably incorporated on labels, suggesting instantly how a table, bust or vase looked at Duchess Street.

On the second floor, which includes watercolours by Hope from his extensive Grand Tour, the highlight is the compact installation representing the Egyptian Room, with a yellow background (following an element of the colour scheme for the room described in *Household Furniture*). In this section, as elsewhere, the detailed labels help interpret the context of each object, without interfering with any instinctive reaction to the ravishing and self-evident aesthetic qualities of some of Hope's best-known furniture (cat. nos 76-77). Another effective use of colour is the rich, deep red terracotta-coloured background to a display of Greek vases. On this floor too, a notable addition to the Bard show is the V&A's pair of tables, with a reputed Newcastle provenance (cat. no. 75). Lack of space led to their exclusion in London, but here their bravura carving, presumably by Bogaert, can be



Fig. 4 Settee, after a design published by Thomas Hope. c. 1802. Bronzed and gilded beech, with restoration, and bronze mounts. Trustees of the Faringdon Collection, Buscot Park, Oxfordshire. Photo: Bruce White

instructively compared with that on the fully documented mahogany table, also from the V&A (cat. no. 84), shown on the floor above.

The top floor of the exhibition tells the story of Hope's family and, as well as some of the furniture from the private rooms at Duchess Street, includes books and a final section on the creation and furnishing of the Deepdene.

Modern technology is used to great effect in two 'virtual tours' that take the visitor through Duchess Street and the Deepdene, neither of which survive. The visit to Duchess Street is mainly via Tatham's recently discovered architectural drawings and the pages of *Household Furniture*, while the Deepdene is seen principally through a series of contemporary interior and exterior watercolours. Both tours are accompanied by a well-scripted narrator.

While it is of course a shame that not all the objects shown in London could travel, here in New York there is the additional benefit of a walk across Central Park to see the chandelier (cat. no. 94) at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. The organisers and design team at Bard have conspicuously succeeded in placing an influential patron and collector in context, while at the same time allowing great works of art to reflect in their own glory.

Martin P. Levy

The reviewer was a contributor to Philip Hewat-Jaboor and David Watkin (eds), *Thomas Hope: Regency Designer*, New Haven and London, 2008, but was not involved with the installations of either of the exhibitions.

## BOOK REVIEWS

Suggestions for future reviews and publishers' review copies should be sent to Dr Reinier Baarsen, Reviews Editor, Rijksmuseum, PO Box 74888, 1070 DN Amsterdam, The Netherlands. Tel. 00-31-20-6747220. e-mail: r.baarsen@rijksmuseum.nl

Richard Bebb, *Welsh Furniture 1250–1950: a cultural history of craftsmanship and design* (Kidwelly: Saer Books with the assistance of National Museums Wales and the National Library of Wales, 2007), 2 vols, 825 pp., 1500 mainly col. illus. ISBN 13-97809553773-1-0, £150.00

This highly ambitious and wide-ranging work reviews the many sorts of furniture made and used in Wales, at all social levels, over several hundred years. Although in principle beginning in the thirteenth century, the earliest date proposed for any extant furniture is in the fourteenth century, and the density of material naturally increases from the sixteenth century to the eighteenth. After 1800 the emphasis is on pieces that can either be linked to Welsh patrons (mainly of the land-owning classes) or that represent a continuing tradition of small-scale rural manufacture. Large commercial firms in Carmarthen and other towns are discussed in relation to an interesting output of labelled pieces, but for the twentieth century discussion is almost confined to the 'reinvented' Bardic Chair, made to carry the winner of an Eisteddfod.

The organization of the book is only loosely chronological, and navigation is not helped by some rather misleading chapter headings (such as 'Chairs of Silver and Gold' for a chapter dealing largely with oak furniture). However, the persistent reader will be rewarded by much thought-provoking discussion, even if not always agreeing with the author's conclusions. Near the beginning is a very helpful review of the historiography of Welsh furniture since the 1890s, and here some of the author's chief concerns — frequently reiterated throughout the book — first emerge: in particular, the conviction that the inspiration for new forms of furniture did not always move from 'top' to 'bottom' of society, and that not all Welsh forms and usage owe their inspiration to London. The latter proposition, at least, is so self-evident that the repeated insistence on the point risks having the opposite of its intended effect on the reader. But the reluctance to acknowledge *any* debt to London-made furniture leads the author to propose a 'Continental' source for certain models that indubitably originated in London (such as the late Baroque caned chair, a type known as 'English' all over Europe). The former point is stressed no less often (and could well be argued in relation to certain vernacular forms — whether Welsh or not — such as the ladder-back chair), but discussion of actual instances is long deferred. One such is the characteristic Welsh (and Scottish) hooded 'lipwork' chair, made with bundles of wheat straw tied to a frame, which in the early nineteenth century 'appeared among ... fashionable furniture' (as noted in 1835).

The attacks on 'conventional furniture history', which is here condemned for an exclusively London-centred, 'top-to-bottom' view of formal and stylistic influence, suggest that the author is unfamiliar with much that has become entirely conventional in the writing of the last thirty years. However, the book's prime importance lies not in these attacks on such straw men, but in the assessment of the changing social context for the production of different kinds of furniture, and the review of forms and usages that are distinctive — if not always unique — to various parts of Wales. Important aspects of the social context include the evidence (much of it drawn from seventeenth- and eighteenth-century inventories) that merchants, innkeepers and even some yeomen often lived with better furniture than the declining gentry; the major impact of non-conformism on rural Welsh life (but it might have been more useful to compare this with rural life in other parts of

Britain rather than with the lives of the aristocracy); and in Anglesey the use of barter, especially in payment for rent, rather than a money economy. Among the furniture forms most interestingly reviewed are church screens (with full acknowledgement to the work of Fred Crossley), 'Black Mountains type' chests, two-tier and three-tier cupboards, built-in cupboard beds, and of course dressers. The author states that 'it is not [his] primary aim to provide comprehensive regional typologies', but in fact the sections that attempt just that are among the most useful in the book. Combined with these are some fascinating remarks on techniques of carving and construction — such as the formation of a 'Black Mountains type' chest as a box supported on the ledges of thick, deeply rebated legs; periodical references to evidence for green-wood ('short-seasoned') manufacture; and the use of dovetails in medieval roof construction. The longest discussion of construction (Vol. I, p. 134, 'Carving techniques') is one section that leaves the reader with an appetite for much more.

The value of these surveys is unfortunately lessened because we are rarely told the evidence for crediting an object to a specific region; which is particularly problematic in the case of several types that, overtly, could as easily be English as Welsh. Moreover, the location of illustrated objects is not usually given in the captions (and can only sometimes be worked out by trawling the incomplete (?) photographic credits); indeed it is stated in the preface, confusingly, that 'when a house name is included [in a caption] it can be assumed that the piece is no longer there'. This greatly reduces the illustrations' value as points of reference. A case in point is a very interesting group of rope-seated chairs, discussed as a Cardiganshire product of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries; the illustrated examples (plates 1209–10, 1212) appear to have new rope, but none of these (which have all come through the market) could be traced by an interested reader to assess the evidence that rope was their original treatment — evidence that is not presented in the text.

The lack of firm documentation — which in many cases is unavoidable — compounds various problems with the dating of objects. To this reader's eye there is a tendency to date pieces several decades too early (some are even dated before the introduction in London of a borrowed metropolitan feature, such as the vase splat or the cabriole leg). The dating of some of the turned chairs discussed in chapter 2 (some of which could surely be English) may be even further adrift: all are placed in the fifteenth or sixteenth centuries, but their seemingly excellent condition suggests that most were probably made well after 1600 — perhaps nearer the time of Randle Holme's account of the manufacture of this type (1649), quoted on page 139. Others may indeed date from after 1830, or be made up in the nineteenth century from partly old components (as seems likely in the case of a turned chair in the V&A Museum). Similarly, the Dining Room at Gwydir Castle, which is presented as a creation of '1640' (when the family did not live in the house), using some old material and with some later additions, seems much more likely to be an antiquarian concoction of the early-nineteenth century, contemporary with the made-up communion table in Gwydir Uchaf chapel (pl. 978).

With other objects, too, the author evinces a rather uncritical acceptance of objects as largely of one period. 'Prince Arthur's Cupboard' (pl. 253, in the V&A) is certainly a more complex and puzzling thing than its presentation here suggests, and many other pieces prompt a certain scepticism — such as the cradle of 'c. 1388' that seems never to have encountered a damp floor (pl. 243a), or the bed in pl. 276, which strains credulity. The date of extant painted finishes is not discussed (for instance, the bright red ground on the Newtown Church screen, which was described in the early nineteenth century as 'dark brown' (Vol. I, p. 124)). Some of the documentary evidence is also invested with more significance than it necessarily bears: for example the depiction of highly elaborate thrones in a late-fourteenth-century illuminated book of hours (pls 44, 149, 151) is taken to indicate that such

thrones were in use in Wales at the time, without reviewing the international tradition of manuscript illumination on which this might be drawing.

These quibbles must, however, be set against the much larger achievement of this book, in placing the production of Welsh furniture in the context of the requirements of widely different levels of society, varying in different regions, and changing dramatically over several centuries. Among the most useful evidence presented is the contemporary commentary on Welsh life by outsiders and, even more valuably, insiders — including such gems as Giraldus Cambrensis's account of communal sleeping in the late twelfth century. No less illuminating is the discussion of the use of carpentry as a metaphor for poetry in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, or Roger Mostyn's remarkable letter of 1664 to Sir Richard Wynn, arranging for 'ffoulke the joyner' to make some new tables for Gwydir; had he been younger ffoulke might have moved to Gwydir to make them, but now he preferred to make them at home because 'hee is grown so old and Crazie' that he could no longer travel. For the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, especially, the reader comes away with a highly nuanced sense of the overlaps between the lives of the aristocracy, the higher and lower gentry, merchants, innkeepers, yeomen and peasants - and consequently much better equipped to imagine the likely original context of surviving Welsh furniture, and the scope and nature of what has not survived.

Lucy Wood

Nöel Riley, *Penwork: A Decorative Phenomenon* (Wetherby: Oblong, 2008) 208pp., 138 col., 139 b. & w. illus. ISBN 978-0-9556576-0-3, £35.

Although the decorative surface finish known as penwork is something that furniture historians will readily recognise, it is surprising how little on the subject has appeared in print. One will search in vain for an article in *The Dictionary of English Furniture*, while John Gloag's *Dictionary of Furniture* (rev. edn. 1990) dismisses the subject in one sentence, defining it as 'Ornamental scrolls, arabesques, flowers and other subjects drawn on a surface with a pen, and protected by transparent varnish'. Penwork was mainly practised in the Regency period, but standard histories of the furniture of that time cover the subject in a few lines; only the recent books on boxes by Cummins and Clarke & O'Kelly provide a wider range of illustrations. Clearly there was a need for a more extensive work based on research in depth, and this Nöel Riley has provided.

In a wide-ranging section, she investigates the sources of the technique. As might be expected, lacquer techniques and designs feature here, but the more immediate inspiration is found in the Anglo-Indian ivory-veneered work produced at Vizagapatam, with its engraved detail enhanced by the application of black ink. Another source is identified in the wide range of wares produced at Spa, where penwork was being used from the mid-eighteenth century 'en imitation de lacque'. It inspired English Tunbridge ware makers, who later used penwork techniques on some of their manufactures. Riley fully explains these techniques, making good use of contemporary descriptions. The question of how much penwork decoration was amateur or professional is looked at in depth, and it is perhaps surprising that documentary evidence has been found of large and elaborate pieces of furniture having been entirely decorated by amateurs who were clearly highly skilled. The range of objects extends from large freestanding cabinets, chiffoniers, tables etc. to boxes used for the storage of tea, needlework, writing, games, visiting cards, spectacles and table cabinets for collectables. Face screens, watch stands and bellows also feature, but, strangely, cribbage boards are omitted.

A separate section deals with the design sources for the main decorative features and borders. Individual chapters are devoted to neo-classical, Chinese and Indian motifs, and

to the proliferation of floral and foliate designs for borders or even entire pieces. Often the design used is traced back to a contemporary book or periodical illustration, but it is interesting to note that even Stalker and Parker's publication was dusted off and its illustrations employed. Egyptian sources were largely ignored by the decorators: only one example is illustrated.

The bibliography provides evidence of the wide-ranging research which has gone into the writing of this work. The author may be congratulated for her endeavours which have resulted in such a comprehensive study. The publisher has used his skills to produce an attractive volume which is offered at a modest price.

Brian Austen

### SHORTER NOTICE

Heidrun Zinnkann (ed.), exh. cat. *Der feine Unterschied, Biedermeiermöbel Europas 1815-1835* (Frankfurt: Museum für angewandte Kunst, and Munich, Berlin, London and New York: Prestel, 2007), 288 pp., 190 col., 25 b/w illus. ISBN 978-3-7913-3873-6, €49,95.

The origins and significance of Biedermeier, the strikingly sparse, late-classical style that held sway in the German-speaking parts of Europe from about 1815 to 1835, have for several decades been the subject of heated debate that came to the fore again on the occasion of the major exhibition *Biedermeier, the invention of simplicity* held in Milwaukee, Vienna, Berlin and Paris in 2006 to 2008. Without entirely ignoring these issues, the present exhibition and catalogue firmly concentrate on Biedermeier furniture, in an attempt to analyse more thoroughly than has been done before the local characteristics of the production in the various localities. The main centres, Vienna and Berlin, are dealt with, as well as less prominent cities and regions in Germany, Hungary and Denmark. A number of introductions highlight the features that distinguish these centres, linking them to specific conditions pertaining there, and the catalogue proper presents eighty-eight individual pieces as significant examples of the main furniture types, as well as the small useful items that are so typical of the period. Surprisingly few pieces are securely documented as to place of origin, date or maker, so the commentaries deal largely with assumptions rather than facts. As Biedermeier furniture tends to be quite plain and as printed designs from England, France, Vienna and several German cities were widely circulated and used, the argument typically concentrates on the woods employed and on technical idiosyncracies, but also on subtle differences in proportion or surface treatment — the *feiner Unterschied* from the title of the exhibition — that can be difficult to grasp. The general divisions proposed by Georg Himmelheber in his pioneering *Biedermeier furniture* of 1974 apparently still hold good, but this new publication presents an attractive survey, including many pieces not previously published, together with a number of up-to-date assessments of local conditions.









## THE OLIVER FORD TRUST AND TOM INGRAM MEMORIAL FUND

In line with one of its roles, the promotion of interest in interior design, the Oliver Ford Trust has generously expressed the desire to sponsor a place on each FHS study weekend or foreign tour. Applicants should either be a student with a particular interest in interiors, or a junior museum professional. Applications from non-members will be considered. Grants will be awarded via the Tom Ingram Fund, to which candidates should apply.

The Tom Ingram Memorial Fund makes grants towards travel and other incidental expenses for the purpose of study or research into the history of furniture (a) whether or not the applicant is a member of the Society; (b) only when the study or research is likely to be of importance in furthering the objectives of the Society; and (c) only when travel could not be undertaken without a grant from the Society. Applications towards the cost of FHS foreign and domestic trips and study weekends are particularly welcome from scholars. Successful applicants are required to acknowledge the assistance of the Fund in any resulting publications and must report back to the Panel on completion of the travel or project. All applications should be addressed to Adriana Turpin, Secretary to the Fund at 39 Talbot Road, London W2 5JH, [Turpinadriana@hotmail.com](mailto:Turpinadriana@hotmail.com), who will also supply

application forms for the Oliver Ford Trust grants on request. Please remember to send a s.a.e. with any request.

The committee requests that applications for study trips be made well in advance of the final deadline for acceptance — preferably at least one month before.

#### COPY DEADLINE

The deadline for receiving material to be published in the next *Newsletter* is **15 December**. Copy should be sent, preferably by email, to [M.Winterbottom@bath.ac.uk](mailto:M.Winterbottom@bath.ac.uk) or posted to Matthew Winterbottom, The Holbourne Museum of Art, Bath BA2 4DB, tel. 01225 820813

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