The Treatment of Bullion Fringe Valances with Composite Silk-wrapped Wooden Drops for Rouse Hill Estate

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Abstract

This paper looks at the treatment applied to preserve a set of late 19th century bullion fringe valances, augmented with drops composed of silk floss-bound strung wooden finials. It also looks at the collaboration and decision making process behind it.

The three valances hang at the Historic Houses Trust of NSW (HHT) Rouse Hill Estate. The HHT has developed a conservation policy unique to Rouse Hill Estate which endeavours to maintain the condition of the house contents in the state they were left by the last occupiers of the house, before the HHT undertook care of the estate.

The Rouse Hill treatment philosophy requires the conservator to understand the unique situation, requirements and desired outcomes of a treatment. These often include attention to the possible use of items as exceptional research tools because of their provenanced environment. Treatments also often involve problem solving to use less invasive cleaning or repairs than might otherwise have been considered, while still protecting them from further degradation or damage in their historic house environment.

The treatment decided upon and carried out on these soft furnishings involved retaining some previous treatment work, removing and replacing an old support structure and preserving some repairs possibly carried out by a member of the Rouse family. This successful treatment also involved cleaning, some silk consolidation and providing additional structural support in a way which was not visually intrusive once the valances and drops were re-hung.

Introduction

Three woollen bullion fringe valances hang in the drawing room of Rouse Hill House. The valances date from around the 1880s and were possibly made by a member of the Rouse Family. Separate decorative, composite silk-wrapped wooden drops hang at intervals in front of each valance. These drops are, again, examples of hand crafts of the era. These three window treatments are part of the extraordinarily rich collection of soft furnishings belonging to the Historic Houses Trust of New South Wales as part of the Rouse Hill Estate.

Rouse Hill was purchased by the Historic Houses Trust of NSW (HHT) in 1978. The Rouse Hill House conservation policy is built on the 'Rouse Hill House Conservation Plan' developed by James Broadbent in 1986. The philosophy of this plan, and the policy today, is that of preservation rather than restoration. The significance of the house and its contents are related to the record of family occupancy. It is the aim of the HHT to preserve the Estate and its collections in the condition they were left by the Terry family, descendents of the Rouses, in 1978.

The three window valances have slowly deteri-

orated since that time. They have undergone some conservation treatment within the past 27 years and this latest conservation treatment was considered necessary due to the structural instability of elements of the valances and drops, the inability of some materials to go on supporting reliant elements as well as the current build up of dust, dirt and insect frass.

The treatment carried out was established as the method which best suited the Rouse Hill conservation policy and the current state of the materials. The treatment was accomplished successfully and has allowed the valances to be rehung with their decorative drops which had recently been in storage for a period of time due to their structural weaknesses.

Rouse Hill

Richard Rouse, a free settler and the superintendent of public works from 1805, received a grant of 450 acres from Governor Macquarie in 1816 which, by the Governor's suggestion, was named Rouse Hill Estate. Rouse Hill House had begun construction three years earlier.

The house was designed by Richard Rouse in a colonial Georgian style and built using convict labour and sandstone quarried in Parramatta 18km away. The house sits on a hill overlooking Windsor Rd in the suburb now called Rouse Hill. This situation was opposite the toll house on the adjacent hill, also designed by Rouse.

Over the span of 185 years, Rouse Hill House was home to six successive generations of the one family, documented as the longest continuous occupancy by one family in a New South Wales country house. Up until 1966 it was still occupied by members of the Rouse family.

In 1978 the house was acquired by the New South Wales Government. The Hamiltons, the next to last of the Rouse family descendants to have occupied the house, left in 1983.Not wishing to take the contents from the historic house, the Hamiltons have left their part of the collection in situ. Gerald Terry, also a relative of the Rouse family, continued living in the house until 1993.

In 1994 the Rouse Hill Hamilton Collection Pty Ltd was formed to be jointly managed by the Historic Houses Trust of New South Wales and the Hamilton Family.

Rouse Hill Estate has been open to the public since 1999 where the collection is on display in its original situation and context.

Rouse Hill Conservation Policy

The Rouse Hill House Conservation Policy builds on the 'Rouse Hill House Conservation Plan' developed by James Broadbent in 1986. The philosophy of the policy is that of preservation rather than restoration. The policy was developed to be able to implement only essential maintenance and conservation works to prevent further deterioration and keep the house and contents in their existing state when the last family member moved away.

The significance of the house and its contents are related to the record of family occupancy. It is the aim of the HHT to preserve the Estate and its collections in the condition they were left by the Terry and Hamilton families. In some ways this has provided unique problem solving opportunities. As with any family home, alterations and repairs made by various family members through the generations have obscured, changed or even partially destroyed evidence of the way previous family members lived.

At the same time, the progression of the uses of different elements of the home, as well as items within the home, emphasises the unique circumstance of successive generations living in the same home over the span of 185 years.

One example documented in the house is the use of fabrics from soft furnishings and items of clothing as components of a quilt made by one of the family members of a later generation. There is also evidence of fabrics being built up in layers of upholstery which still cover the dining chairs.

These alterations made by the family are just as, or indeed more significant to the house than the original state or intended use of the fabrics. Their later use alongside the evidence of the original use shows the unique quality of this home, that is the family life within it.

The Valances

The three valances, made to hang in the drawing room of the house, are each of the same construction but vary in width according to the window dimensions. The valances are constructed of woollen bullion twists of what appear to have been cream, burgundy, pink and yellow wool. The bullion twists hang from a woven header in a repeated colour pattern to make a fringe. The fringe is scalloped. The scalloped shape is emphasised by small silk floss-wrapped wooden baubles (turned wooden shapes) which hang at the end of each twist. Each bauble is bound vertically with a golden coloured silk floss and bound horizontally at a dip in the shape by a band of fine green silk threads.

The first and second valances are 1850mm wide and the third is 1690mm wide. The longest point on each one is approximately 420mm.

The front face of the woven woollen header of each valance is predominantly pink with cream dominating the verso.

The valances each hang above a window and below a pelmet with a stepped shape and gesso moulding. The inside structure of the pelmets is wooden. Originally the valances were tacked in place to the inside surface of the wooden pelmets. The striped headers created a solid band through which the valances could be tacked in place and may not have been visible.

Figure 1: The valance hanging from it's pelmet with the silk drops

2006 Condition of the Valances

The most recent conservation and cleaning treatment of the valances had been carried out a number of years ago. This treatment involved cleaning as well as providing structural support to the weakening original materials. The fringe was brush vacuumed removing dust, dirt and moth casings as well as loose fibres. Brushing was restricted to the stronger woollen areas to avoid loss of fibres in the fragile areas. Many of the bullion twists were reinforced by means of binding and stitching a woollen thread down the centre of the twist with cotton threads of matching colours.

Figure 2: Cotton stitched into a woollen twist

The headers of each of the valances were encapsulated with silk crêpeline and Tetex™ bands which provided support for a band of hook Velcro™ to be stitched to one face. The soft Velcro™ face was attached to the inside surfaces of the pelmets and this support system was employed for re-hanging the valances.

Figure 3: Previously added header support

In the intervening years the valances had again collected dust and dirt on the surface. The bullion twists reinforced by stitching with cotton thread had not dropped or lost shape. However, many of the untreated twists had straightened and hung lower, out of sequence with the scalloped pattern.

The hook Velcro™ support had proved too inflexible for mounting the valances following the stepped edge of the pelmets. Attempts to manipulate the structure had weakened a few areas of the stitching holding the silk crêpeline encapsulation in place.

Since the last treatment the pink wool seemed to have lost some colour intensity when compared with the matching cotton thread used in the repairs. The other colours appeared not to have altered significantly.

The little silk and wooden baubles hanging at the end of each woollen twist were in quite poor condition. Many of them had lost a significant amount, if not most, of their silk floss bindings. The remaining silk had been consolidated in the previous treatment. Considering the bare wooden surfaces on most, this consolidation appears to be the sole reason any silk remained.

Figure 4: Previously consolidated silk floss

The remaining silk had now reached a state where it had begun to powder away again and in some places, where the adhesion between the silk and wooden surface had begun to fail, clumps of consolidated silk were lifting and falling away.

The bare wooden surfaces of the baubles showed some discolouration which could have been caused by uneven distribution of consolidant or revealed where silk had been lost. Some of these markings were now quite dark.

The green thread binding the baubles had in most cases been lost but in a few cases been replaced with new green silk thread.

The Drops

The decorative silk drops were designed to hang in front of the bullion fringe valances. Two valances have six each and the third valance has only five. Each drop is constructed of seven turned wooden shapes with a hollow down the centre. Some of the shapes have details carved into the surface allowing more intricate silk binding.

Each turned wooden shape in the set is a different shape and size and wrapped individually in silk floss coloured yellow, purple, turquoise, golden, green, pink and burgundy. These colours would originally have matched the colours in the fringe valances well.

Figure 5: Silk Drops

In addition to the silk floss binding, some silk threads and some silk bullion twists have been used. In some instances the silk floss binding is horizontal around the wooden substrate, in others it is vertically wound like an un-skirted tassel and on a few shapes a combination of the two is present.

All but one of the shapes, a simple round bead, are made up of stripes of at least two colours. On the top most piece of the drops, a long finial, bands of four colours of silk floss have been wound horizontally and then a double helix of silk bullion is wrapped, resting in a carved groove around the full length of the piece.

The internal construction of the drops is quite simple. The bottom-most bauble of the drops is constructed like an un-skirted tassel, giving an internal knot of threads around which a length of wool has been threaded. This double length of wool is then threaded through the centre of each successive wooden shape. At the top the wool is tied off under tension around a thick loop of wool. Above this the woollen lengths extend to be used as a hanging support.

2006 Condition of the Drops

The decorative drops were in a range of conditions. For a period of time many of them had been in storage, unable to be hung. Ten of the seventeen drops still had all their pieces. Of the remaining seven drops some were missing only one piece and some had retained only one piece.

The condition of the individual baubles making up the drops also varied. All had significant surface dust and dirt as well as powdering silk to some degree. Some remained structurally sound but others had lost their cohesion, most by the breaking of internal silk threads and floss fibres binding the outer surface coverings under tension.

Figure 6: Condition of silk floss and thread bindings

Many of the drops had also had a new length of wool threaded through the centre as part of the most recent conservation treatment. This wool was distinguishable from the original in both colour and texture. Both these new strands and the original wool had suffered insect attack, and in most cases neither was strong enough to support the drops. In many cases the wool had failed, leaving the baubles disconnected.

The insect activity was no longer live but there was a large amount of frass inside almost all wooden pieces, especially the upper-most long finials. A few of the drops had bare areas of exposed wood which appeared to have been exposed by insect activity. This insect activity cannot have been recent, however, due to the already consolidated silk edges around these few sites.

Some wooden pieces had threads wound around, imitating the original floss bindings. It is unknown at what date these were added. There were numerous partial repairs to the drops, some of which were documented as part of conservation treatments and others which are more ambiguous.

The previous conservation treatment documented the consolidation of some silk. The unconsolidated silk had now reached the point where it was powdering and breaking at the points of pressure. Some of the silk bullion threads were also partially detached.

Treatment Options

The need for treatment of the valances and silk drops stemmed principally from the structural instability, and inability to hang, and the significant build up of dirt on both. The Velcro™ hanging system had also proved unsuitable due to the lack of flexibility it created, affecting the drape of the valances.

The major issues needing to be addressed were therefore: the hanging system; the soiling and evidence of insect activity; the powdering silk actively being lost; and the structural stability of the silk drops.

The factors influencing the treatment choices were: the Rouse Hill conservation policy; techniques used in the previous treatment; the desire to re-hang the valances and drops; and the known environmental factors at Rouse Hill House.

Developing a treatment proposal did not prove to be too challenging but deciding on the specific treatment steps and materials within those processes required a clear presentation of options and the pros and cons of each choice relating to both the collection management and interpretive viewpoints as well as conservation and preservation factors.

Hanging the Valances

The desire for the valances to hang as they originally would have, without disrupting the appearance with interventive measures such as the Velcro™ support or the crêpeline and Tetex™ encapsulation was considered.

The options ranged through leaving the previous conservation measures in place so as not to disturb the already delicate structure, removing the hook Velcro™ and replacing it with soft loop Velcro™ pieces rather than bands, stitching a supportive header behind the header of the valances which extended above the top to allow for tacking, and stitching a supportive header behind the header of the valances with a sacrificial extra band of linen tape stitched to this support. This last was the method decided upon because it allowed for the desired tacking method of mounting without damage to the valances and also allowing for alterations to this hanging method in the future without disturbing the delicate original materials again.

Deconstruction of the Drops

The evidence of insect activity inside the structure of the silk drops needed to be addressed. Most of the silk drops had been deconstructed and re-threaded before this treatment but full cleaning was going to require this deconstruction again. The desire for the drops to be hung again in accordance with the philosophy of the Rouse Hill Conservation policy and the significant interpretive value of the pieces being in situ helped make this decision. For the silk drops to be re-hung safely they needed to be restrung for structural stability. This process was also going to require deconstruction. From a preservation standpoint it was also desirable to remove the insect frass from the internal structure. The deconstruction and re-stringing of the drops was decided upon.

Silk Consolidation

The powdering silk was the last point which needed to be considered carefully before a treatment process was finalised. Before documentation was found indicating the consolidant already used on part of the silk, several factors were considered. The desire for keeping what silk was left without altering the appearance, particularly the quality of the lustre still present, was most important.

Consolidation was the only logical choice but the various consolidants available were considered and tested for their properties. A sample card of hair silk fibres was prepared with BEVA™ in Toluene, Lascaux 498™ in water, Klucel G™ in water, Klucel G™ in Acetone and Funori™ in water.

Due to the state of the silk and the soiling and particulates present and unable to be fully removed, it was desirable to find a consolidant which was not applied in an aqueous solution. In appearance, comparing the water soluble and solvent soluble options the Klucel G™ stood out as being particularly sympathetic to the original lustre of the silk.

It was discovered that Klucel G™ had been already used on this silk. Although it had failed after time, it had apparently not significantly altered the characteristics of the silk's appearance. Klucel G™ was therefore agreed upon as the most appropriate consolidant.

Treatment Carried Out

The Valances

The valances were first surface cleaned to reduce the excessive dust, taking particular care not to lose any of the previously consolidated silk from the little baubles at the end of each twist.

The silk crêpeline and Tetex™ encapsulations were then removed with their stitching and the Velcro™ bands. This process proved not to be as delicate as was expected. The wool within the encapsulated area was still quite sound, with the exception of the central part of one valance. The woven bands still held together well.

The bindings and stitches of cotton thread were all left so as not to disturb the remaining twist shape of the bullion fringe pieces. Those twists which had dropped were not re-shaped or restored to their original positions.

Figure 7: Bullion fringe valance

The Baubles

The little baubles at the end of the twists were surface cleaned gently, where possible, and then acetone was applied using a brush to reduce the appearance of clumping in the silk surface. This process proved to be more successful in some areas than others.

Klucel™ G in acetone was applied as a consolidant over the whole surface of each bauble both to hold the silk fibres together and to bind them to their wooden supports. This process did not appear to create the clumped appearance of the previous consolidation treatment, perhaps because there was less silk to clump.

Once the silk wrapped baubles were more stable a header was prepared for each valance. The headers were made from two strips of flexible cotton webbing tape, machine stitched together. The upper part will be able to be removed in the future by unpicking the line of machine stitching. This sacrificial part of the header has been used to tack the valances back onto their pelmets, following the stepped shape of the pelmets without cutting across the corners.

Figure 8: Consolidated baubles

Support System

The lower band of the header was hand stitched in place behind each of the woven strips of the valances. This stitching was carried out in Gutermann Skala™ threads in a pattern designed to spread the weight throughout this woven header and bind the woollen threads rather than split them. It was desirable for the stitching not to be visible from the front if possible. The state of the woven woollen bands uncovered by removing the encapsulations seemed to indicate the Skala™ threads would be suitable rather than having to use a thicker softer thread and colour matching, risking the stitching becoming visible as further fading happened.

This same method was used to secure the damaged area in the centre of one of the valances. The cotton webbing provided horizontal support onto which all the threads which made up the twists could be secured.

Decorative Drops

The decorative drops all showed some sign of damage and deterioration to the woollen thread which threaded through the centre of the seven individual pieces which together made up each drop.

In some cases this woollen thread was missing and in some it had broken, separating the pieces. In most it was simply loose, not providing enough support to hang the drops. The construction of the drops still held together proved to be quite convenient for deconstruction. The bottom element in most cases had been bound inside with a cream coloured cotton thread through which the new woollen support threads had been looped. This new thread was then threaded up through each of the other elements and tied in a series of knots at the top. In many cases a remnant of the original woollen thread was still present, especially at the top, outside the wooden elements.

By snipping the new woollen thread where it looped through the new cotton thread, the deconstruction was quite easy apart from separating the new from old threads where they had been knotted together at the top. Gently pulling the woollen thread out from the top began to show how much insect activity had been present inside

After gently cleaning each element both inside and out, the Klucel G™ in acetone was applied again as a consolidant, this time to the whole surfaces. The dry Klucel G™ on the silk was not discernible from the unconsolidated silk visually, except by examining the pieces for active disintegration. The consolidant held the fibres in place very effectively.

Once each element had been cleaned and consolidated the pieces were all re-threaded using a polyester embroidery thread. The embroidery thread is finer than the wool, and was therefore easier to fit through the centre of each element. It was also less likely to suffer the same deterioration as the woollen threads.

To loop the new thread through the base, a small clear glass bead was used in the base of each drop, preventing the need for the supporting thread to rely on the strength of the silk floss in the centre of the lower most elements of the drops.

The small glass bead sits partially recessed in the base of each drop. The thread was then passed up through the centre of each element using a device created for the purpose. This tool resembled a very long thin crochet hook.

From the top, the remains of the original central threads were re-threaded down into the body of the upper most turned wooden element and the new supportive thread was tied off on a second small clear glass bead, creating the tension required for the drops to hold together and hang straight.

Those drops which did not have all their elements were bound together in the correct order and secured in the same way as the complete drops.

Figure 9: Re-constructed decorative silk drops

Conclusion

This conservation treatment was both challenging and rewarding. Working on objects from Rouse Hill House is always interesting and the challenge of thinking through a treatment from a different perspective with specific desired outcomes can make a treatment fascinating, allowing you to see past the layers of dust and insect frass to the significance of a piece for its interpretive value.

The fine line of how much influence aesthetics are allowed to have when weighing up treatment processes also helps stretch the treatment possibilities, sometimes producing results and solutions unexpected by the conservator at the outset.

This project combined the possibility to play with ideas before finalising the treatment proposal with that other attraction: a satisfying result at the end of all the intricate and time-consuming work.

The valances and silk drops are both fascinating elements of the interior of the Rouse Hill drawing room and it is extremely satisfying being able to look at them in a state where they can once again be hung safely and still look good after 120 years.

Figure 10: The valance and decorative silk drops hanging as they originally hung

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