

Presentation Abstracts

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Triumphal procession: technical investigation and treatment of a National Trust cassone

Full presentation

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The examination and conservation of a 15th century Florentine wedding chest, or cassone, was undertaken at the Hamilton Kerr Institute, University of Cambridge. Owned by the National Trust property Blickling Hall in Norfolk, UK, this cassone depicts an unknown triumphal procession and scenes from the legend of Hercules. The purpose of investigation was to establish how much of the structure was original and what had been modified during the 19th century. Possible attribution to the well-known workshop of Apollonio di Giovanni and Marco del Buono was also investigated.



Before treatment, the wooden core, paint surface and gilding were analysed, and the extent of changes and restorations determined. Key experts were brought together for consultation and assistance: Conservators at the Hamilton Kerr Institute and Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge; gilding and furniture conservators from London; Opificio delle Pietre Dure in Florence; curators from the Courtauld Institute and National Gallery London, and key stakeholders from the National Trust (fig 1). Their combined input guided the treatment and public presentation of the cassone. One of the desired outcomes was making both findings and conservation work accessible to the public.

Fig 1: Hands on collaboration carrying the cassone down Blickling Hall's grand staircase

Marriage in 15th century Florence was an expensive social event that included the parading of gifted furnishings and other domestic goods to the bride's house (Campbell 2009). Painted great chests, or cassoni, were the most significant of these gifts, decorated by some of the greatest artists of the period (Schicker 1985). By as early as the 16th century however the style of furniture had changed significantly. Cassoni were considered old fashioned and were neglected or scavenged for parts. It was not until the 19th century that wealthy individuals again started buying this style of chest, especially in England. The vogue for collecting cassoni as part of a Grand Tour of Italy led to dealers fabricating pastiched chests made up of cut-down panels and later 'improvements'.

In line with other cassone of the period, the subject matter of the Blickling Hall cassone was deliberately chosen, mostly based on scenes from classical history and literature. These were intended not just to be decorative, but to convey moral messages for the new bride and demonstrate power and wealth. Comparisons were made to cassone in other collections, the exhaustive 1915 Cassone catalogue by German art historian Paul Schubring (Schubring 1915) and the workshop records of Marco del Buono Giamberti and Apollonio di Giovanni. Several avenues of attribution were therefore investigated. Technical examination concentrated firstly on the construction of the chest: Using X-ray imaging, a significant original core was discovered. The paint surface was analysed, and the extent of restorations could be determined, e.g. the overpainting of all heraldic shields (fig 2). Punch marks and tooling in the gilded decorations also assisted with distinguishing between the original surface and later restorations.



Fig 2: Detail of central panel, left shield in normal light and X-ray

The construction technique was found to follow traditional methods. A brown coating had been applied to the inside of the chest, presumably to seal the wood and mask repairs and alterations, similar to other chests reconstructed in the 19th century (Brody 2010). Signs of damage were consistent with centuries of use (Callman 1999). Some wilful damage was also seen around faces. Transport to and from the University of Cambridge was undertaken after in-situ stabilisation work. In consultation with the National Trust, treatment involved adhesion of flaking paint, mould removal and monitoring of pest activity, surface cleaning, and reintegration of losses. On its return to the National Trust estate, preventive historic house management and public interpretation now play a key role. The multi-disciplinary approach in this project has greatly improved understanding of Blickling Hall's cassone.

References:

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