

7. Research report

(Kathryn Gill, Upholstery Conservation, APN30800)

ACHIEVEMENTS AND CONCLUSIONS OF PROJECT

The care, interpretation and treatment of historic upholstery is a relatively new subject. This project involved the dissemination of on-going practice in upholstery conservation through a well-illustrated publication *Upholstery Conservation: Principles and Practice*, by Kathryn Gill and Dinah Eastop, co-editors and significant contributors. The book was published in December 2000 by Butterworth-Heinemann, a major international publisher in the conservation and museum field. The award of £ 925.00 provided support for the copy editing process of this publication and allowed for additional high quality illustrations. Due to strong professional links and the excellent reputation of the prestigious Museology and Conservation series of which this publication is a part, several of the copyright and reproduction right holders waived their charges. Therefore, we were able to support more academic input into the development of the publication through employing temporary staff.

Publication focus

The publication focuses on the conservation of the multi-media, many layered functional artefacts that constitute upholstery.

The book encompasses the preservation and creation of knowledge and artefacts and demonstrates the complementary nature of material, pictorial, textural and experiential evidence for an understanding of upholstery and its conservation.

The principles and practices of this specialist area of conservation are illustrated in the book with a series of case histories and case studies which are contributed by the editors and other leading international specialists in the field. They concern objects and collections in the care of internationally renowned institutions.

Issues related to the preservation, investigation and interpretation of upholstered furniture are discussed and reviewed in the introduction. Upholstery conservation as preservation includes preservation of the designer's intentions, treatment of surviving components, integration of new and old materials (or substitution of new for old) and documentation. Upholstery conservation as investigation and revelation includes preserving evidence of workshop practices, preserving evidence of use and preserving evidence of the 'social biographies' of upholstered objects. Upholstery conservation as interpretation includes interpreting designers' intentions and restoring decorative schemes. These issues are illustrated through each of the following case histories and case studies.

Object treatment case histories

The Ernest Race 'Heron' chair and footstool, designed c.1955: an example of conserving foam-filled upholstery
Kathryn Gill

This case history focuses on an innovative method of conservation, including the re-incorporation of the chair's original foam fillings. Several of the polyurethane foam fillings had deteriorated to crumbs. They were encapsulated into archival quality transparent envelopes and re-incorporated with new upholstery materials added to replace and/or supplement the missing and compressed foams. In this way the original shape and profile of the chair were re-established, and the degraded foam samples stayed with the chair, remaining available for further investigation.

The Lawrence Alma-Tadema Settee, designed c.1884- 85: the challenges of interpretation and replication

Kathryn Gill

The focus of this case history, concerning a settee which no longer retained its original embroidered top covers, is the recreation of a set of top covers and trimmings that more closely resembled the designer's original intentions. The process of interpreting information from contemporary sources, including photographs, written descriptions and fragmentary evidence from the settee frame, is described. The exciting discovery of a matching curtain from the original suite, five years after the new top covers had been created, provided an opportunity to compare how closely the designs, colours and materials of the reproduction covers resembled the original embroideries.

William Burges' mermaid chair, c.1870: conserving both original materials and later adaptations

Sherry Doyal and Dinah Eastop

This case history concerns a chair which retained its original rush seating concealed by later upholstery. The significance of the latter was investigated and a conservation approach was adopted for the treatment and presentation of the chair. This allowed for evidence of changing tastes to be preserved and presented.

Developments in untacked re-upholstery: the Denon chairs project

Derek Balfour, Simon Metcalf and Frances Collard

This case history describes an application of the 'minimally intrusive treatment' approach. This approach avoids damage to bare frames by creating upholstery units which require no or few metal fasteners for attachment. Each unit profile was built up in layers on the frame in contrast to the reductive process described in the 'Ethafom^R treatments' case history below.

Reconciling conservation and interpretation: strategies for long-term display of a late 17thC state bed

Nancy C. Britton

This case history centres upon the commissioning and manufacturing process of damask replication. It focuses on challenges of integrating old and reproduction textiles and the

importance of understanding such things as the pattern, weave, handle, weight and colour of the textile being replicated as well as the importance of co-ordinated collaboration of different specialists.

Documentation and conservation of a carriage trimming: the treatment of a nineteenth century carriage interior

Nicola Gentle

This case history concerning the conservation of the interior of a carriage describes the information revealed during treatment and its impact on the remaining treatment and the object's interpretation. The cycles of intervention, re-assessment and re-interpretation during the treatment process are demonstrated.

Ethafoam[®] treatments for two eighteenth century French chairs

Elizabeth Lahikainen

This case history describes another application of the 'minimally intrusive treatment' approach. Each unit profile was carved from a block of expanded polyethylene (Ethafoam[®]) in contrast to the additive process described in the Denon chairs case history above.

Preserving a mid 19th Century decorative scheme: conserving the Morant Suite in the Octagon Room, Raby Castle

Lesley Wilson

This case history focuses on meeting the conflicting demands of form and function. Three main aims in preserving this suite of furniture were re-upholstery of the furniture as part of the restoration of the room's overall decorative scheme; restoration of the seat furniture for occasional use and preservation of evidence of original design, materials and techniques and use.

Documentation case studies

Seat furniture at the court of Henry VIII: a study of the evidence

Maria Hayward

This case study focuses on the comparative analysis of information revealed from archives accounts and paintings related to the court of Henry VIII and surviving seat furniture from the same period.

Eighteenth century close-fitting detachable covers preserved at Houghton Hall: a technical study

Kathryn Gill

This case study focuses on the materials and construction of three sets of 18th century close fitting detachable covers and their method of fixing to the frames.

Evidence from artefacts and archives: researching the textile furnishings of a Victorian bedroom at Brodsworth

Crosby Stevens

This case study provides a fascinating insight into the way decorative schemes are changed. Surviving textile covers were compared with evidence from accounts and photographs.

PROJECT ASSESSMENT AND SIGNIFICANCE OF THE WORK FOR THE FUTURE

The project aims have been fully and successfully realised.

The outcome of this project is a high quality hardback book, Upholstery Conservation: Principles and Practice, edited by K. Gill and D. Eastop, and published by Butterworth-Heinemann.

This book is one of only two books on the subject of upholstery conservation. The first, published ten years ago and now out of print, was the proceedings of a conference (Williams, ed. 1990). It consisted of many short papers, some illustrated with B&W illustrations of mediocre quality.

In contrast, Upholstery Conservation: Principles and Practice, consists of eleven detailed reports by selected specialists illustrated with high quality B&W prints and diagrams, and colour plates. It provides a list of up-to-date references, and includes guidelines on the documentation of upholstery. As part of Butterworth-Heinemann's prestigious series on Museology and Conservation, the book is an important step in bringing upholstery conservation into the mainstream of conservation research and practice.

The book has been written to develop interest in historic upholstery and its conservation. It appeals to a wide range of people, including conservators, curators, custodians, specialist upholsterers, conservation students and heritage management consultants. It has been praised by historians as an excellent example of object-based research because of it demonstrates careful integration of archival and material evidence.

ABSTRACT OF COMPLETED PROJECT

The care, interpretation and treatment of historic upholstery is a relatively new subject. This project involved the dissemination of upholstery conservation through a well-illustrated major publication Upholstery Conservation: Principles and Practice, by Kathryn Gill and Dinah Eastop, co-editors. The book was published in December 2000 by Butterworth-Heinemann, a major international publisher in the conservation and museum field.

The principles and practices of this specialist area of conservation are illustrated with a series of examples by leading international specialists in the field. They concern objects and collections in the care of internationally renowned institutions, including the documentation of eighteenth century removable chair covers, the treatment of a nineteenth century carriage and a twentieth century foam-filled chair.

Issues related to the preservation, investigation and interpretation of upholstered furniture are discussed and reviewed. The ethical and practical difficulties of upholstery conservation explain the importance given to investigation and documentation, interdisciplinary collaboration, minimally intrusive conservation treatments and the management of upholstery conservation as phased rather than fixed projects.

The case histories demonstrate the value of object-based research and the cycle of investigations, interventions and interpretations that constitute best practice in upholstery conservation.

The book will provide a source of reference and interest to those people involved with upholstered furniture, in particular conservators, curators, custodians, specialist upholsterers, conservation students and heritage management consultants.

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