

Reinterpreting an English medieval painted chest

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Richard de Bury chest c.1340

A large oak chest in the Burrell Collection, Glasgow, is associated with Richard de Bury (1281-1345) on the basis of painted shields of arms. A well-established provenance links it to the office of the Court of Chancery of the Palatinate of Durham, where de Bury was Bishop from 1334-1345.

The chest was bought by William Burrell (1861-1958) in 1941 and came to Glasgow Museums in 1956 as part of the bequest of Burrell's collection to the city. It is one of the few pieces in Burrell's collection that had not been restored, possibly because it was bought directly from a private collector, unlike most of the furniture, which came through sale rooms or dealers.

Examination in 1966 by the conservators of the Ministry of Public Building and Works revealed that the surface layers on the inner side of the lid were extremely friable with areas of loss and detached fragments.



Richard de Bury chest. The Burrell Collection (14.352) (© CSG CIC Glasgow Museums Collection)



Stabilising the flaking and blistering paint surface – Rab Snowden using a binocular microscope in the Stenhouse Restoration Centre, Edinburgh, 1966 (Historic Scotland)

Treatment at this time focused on removal of damaging additional layers of decayed varnish and wax, re-adhering the original painted surface without the addition of any new paint.

Research in progress

The key aim of our project is to gather technical data in order to aid understanding of all aspects of the chest including its history, construction and decoration. Our investigation includes examination of documentation and physical evidence in search of confirmation of authenticity.

The next stage is to examine paint samples from both the lid and sides to gain an understanding of the pigments and ground layers. This involves using FTIR (Fourier Transform Infrared Spectrometer) and XRF (X-ray Radiography) equipment in order to identify chemical makeup. Tiny samples of the surface layers will be examined by polarised light microscopy, scanning electron microscopy or FTIR micro spectrometry by Glasgow University colleagues, Dr Erma Hermens and Dr Anita Quye.



Regional Furniture Society members studying the construction with Lindsay Robertson, 3rd from the right, during a research visit.

Before and after conservation



The painted underside of the lid showing flaking paint before and after cleaning and consolidation treatment. Detail of the arms of de Bury with the Percy lion to the left (Historic Scotland; © CSG CIC Glasgow Museums Collection)

Up in arms: Identity in the northern counties

The shields of arms identify several of the influential figures of both Church and Crown who were associated with travelling commissions on behalf of King Edward III. One such event was the commission in April 1340, when de Bury, Ralph Nevill and Henry de Percy were appointed to travel to York to collect taxes and payments to the King's Army in the North.

Construction

The chest is of planked construction with single boards of oak secured with wooden pegs, iron straps and braces. The end boards project below the base of the chest to form solid legs. Tool marks from a long-handled pit-saw and an adze are evident in raking lights. The interior was lined with a linen fabric and fitted with a small compartment on the right.

Ironwork

Durham was an important source of iron in the middle ages. Six wrought iron straps hold the chest together, finishing on the lid in decorative split curls. Although the lock plate is now missing, it along with internal fastenings would have made the chest very secure and therefore likely to have been made to hold valuable objects or currency. Iron rings at both ends show that the chest was carried on a long pole.



View of chest lid showing the single board of oak and wrought iron strapwork (© CSG CIC Glasgow Museums Collection)

Conclusion

This is one of the few chests of this period with surviving paintwork. The results of our research will contribute to a fuller understanding of medieval painting on furniture.

Selected Bibliography

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