

The Conservation of the Seehof Furniture

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WHEN THIS UNIQUE SUITE of German polychromed furniture¹ arrived at the Museum in 1973, it was upholstered with eighteenth-century painted silk panels. Although it was known that these silk coverings were not original, there was no reason not to believe that the inner back panels were always meant to be upholstered. New documentary evidence, however, researched by the Museum's Department of European Sculpture and Decorative Arts, suggests that the upholstery covering the inner backs of the entire suite was introduced later and that it actually concealed elaborate polychromed and gilded carved panels.

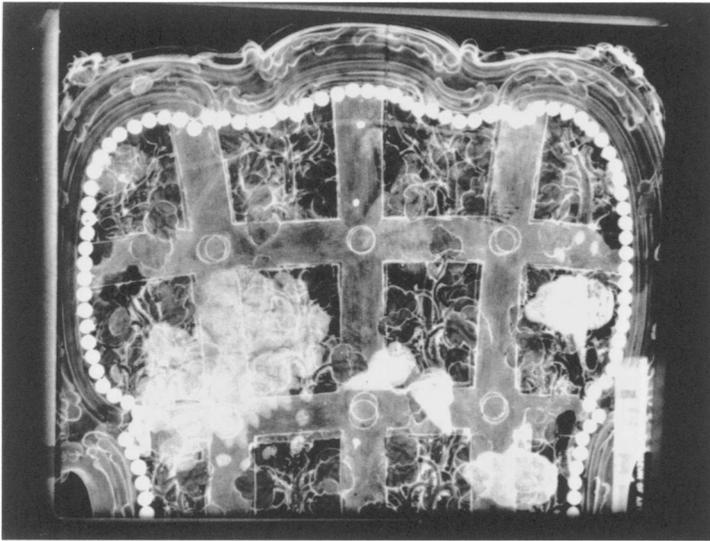
Certain aspects of the construction of the suite are typical of German furniture of the period, such as the joints of the legs to the seat rails, the use of nails made of wood (not to be confused with the wooden dowels used today), and the suspension, by metal wires, of independently carved flowers within the openwork aprons. But other facets are highly unusual. Commonly, the open framework of such furniture has extended back legs formed in one piece with the seat back, but in the case of this suite the seat is constructed like a stool with the back attached separately.² Most of the joinery is fairly simple, and remarkably so for a period when the level of craftsmanship in cabinetmaking might have encouraged more sophisticated methods. Indeed, the wood cho-

sen—lindenwood—is more often found in sculpture than in furniture of the period. The choice of material and manner of construction, together with the free and unique design of the pieces, suggest that the suite may have originated from the workshop of a carver or sculptor rather than from that of a cabinet-maker.

Stretched over and tacked to each of the seat frames is a layer of green linen and an open interlaced lattice of linen webbing. Examination of the tacks confirmed that the green linen, the webbing, and the majority of the tacks are original to the frame.³ In addition, the original glued linen facing remained intact on the outer backs of both settees.⁴

The entire surface of the furniture received a layer of carbonate gesso as preparation for the polychromy.⁵ The flowers of the apron, rail, and frame also have a coating of lead white, on top of which the paint layers of the leaves and petals in pigments common to the period were applied. These layers, especially the reds and greens, have, sadly, lost most of their original glazes.

What is highly unusual is that the branches of the leaves behind the trelliswork are studded with copper flakes. These flakes, which have been randomly applied, create an irregular and rough surface texture that simulates bark. On the settees and armchairs, the gesso has been left in a coarse state,



1. X-radiograph of the back of a side chair, one of a set of four, German, ca. 1763–64. The upholstery is still attached; the upholstery nails and the carved decoration are clearly visible. The white irregular patches are the lead-bearing pigments on the painted silk. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, The Lesley and Emma Sheaffer Collection, Bequest of Emma A. Sheaffer, 1973, 1974.356.115

perhaps intentionally as a “tooth” to receive these flakes. Accordingly, the copper flakes are better preserved in these examples.

Whether the suite was to be left in its present form, with its later silk upholstery, or corrected to its appearance at the time of its manufacture, was contingent upon the condition of the carved panels. X-radiography of sections of the back panels confirms that the carving was largely intact, although those areas of carving adjacent to the wood were either damaged or completely missing (Figure 1). In order to assess the extent of the damage, decorative nails and tacks anchoring the layers of upholstery were lifted from a corner of one of the side chairs to expose a section of the carving for examination. Apart from areas of damage to the carving (discussed more fully below), the panels appeared to be in good condition, and the decision was made to remove the later upholstery. Samples of the upholstery materials were retained, and the outer panels—fine examples of eighteenth-century Chinese painted silk—were fully documented and prepared for flat storage.

After the fabric and foundation material were removed, it was discovered that extensive damage had occurred to the original carving, polychromy, and gilding of the furniture (Figure 2). While it is very likely that regular repairs and maintenance were made during their tenure in Schloss Seehof, the primary alterations took place during the middle of this century. The major damage at this time was the removal of the foliage around the inner edge of the frame in order to accommodate the later upholstery.

From photographs taken in the early part of this century and in 1946,⁶ it is apparent that the inward curling C-scrolls at the middle of the backs of the side chairs are now missing (Figure 3). The armchairs and settees have lost the large, rather robust carved flowers at the top of the frames, and the front aprons of the armchairs now have a different design. Further examination revealed that one settee (acc. no. 1974.356.121) had two back legs replaced.

The trelliswork of the front of the settee and the chair backs has been overpainted with a thick gray paint. The back of one armchair was planed down at the joint in the middle of the back, reducing its width by one-eighth of an inch (Figure 4).

2. Armchair, one of a pair, German, ca. 1763–64. The removal of the later upholstery of the inner back shows the areas where the foliage is chipped away. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, The Lesley and Emma Sheaffer Collection, Bequest of Emma A. Sheaffer, 1973, 1974.356.118





3. Side chair (MMA, 1974.356.116) photographed in the dining room of the van Zandt family at Schloss Seehof, ca. 1890–1900 (Photo: Bildarchiv Foto Marburg)

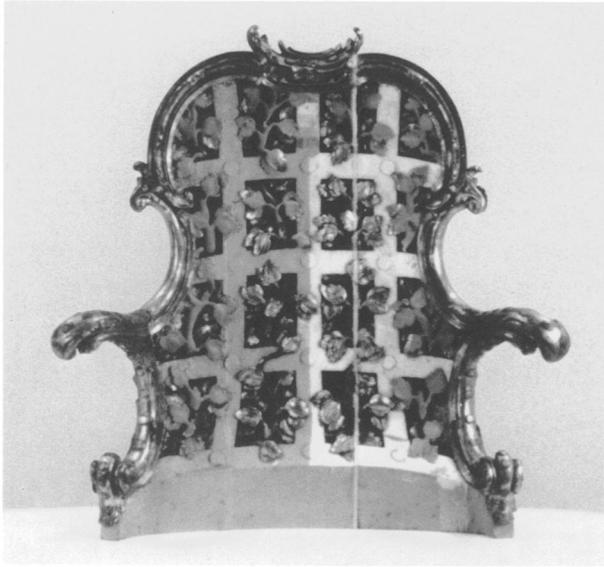


4. Armchair in Figure 2 showing damaged foliage and early repair of the split in the back (see arrow). In this photograph the original linen is partially lifted for examination.

One particularly exciting discovery was the presence of a green glaze, or *Lüsterfarbe*, over the gilding.⁷ This glaze was especially well preserved on the foliage of three of the side chairs. Careful examination of all the pieces revealed that originally this green luster was applied over all of the gilding, including that of the frames and legs. Unfortunately, the armchairs and settees and the frames of the outside backs of the side chairs were overcleaned in the past,⁸ and large parts of the frames were regilded. Thus, it is only by looking at the inside backs of three

of the side chairs that we may gain an impression of the original conception of the furniture.

While *Lüsterfarben* are commonly found on sculpture from the Middle Ages onward, their application on furniture is very rare. The original appearance of the pieces would have been a variety of transparent to opaque green tones with the gilding partially shining through. It is not surprising to see the pieces referred to in the various inventories as *grün angestrichen* (green-painted), or more accurately as *grün lassiirt* (green-glazed).⁹ It is consistent that Prince



5. Armchair in Figure 2 showing gray overpaint removed from the right side, the missing foliage reconstructed, and the new wooden fill

Bishop von Seinsheim had three different samples made before selecting his final choice for a pier table intended for the same room. Two of the techniques considered by him were almost identical, as they both incorporate a true green glaze, one on silver leaf, the other on gold leaf.¹⁰ The third, however, is quite different: it incorporates opaque greens directly on the gold leaf in addition to green glaze. It is this last technique that is found on the Seehof suite.

The green glaze used on the furniture is based on a copper-gilt dissolved in a resinous medium.¹¹ Copper salts are commonly used for green glazes and are mentioned in the early seventeenth century by de Mayerne, who recommends verdigris and Venetian turpentine as the main ingredients. He also states that this glaze may be applied over gold and silver.¹² A century later, in 1743, Cröcker also refers to verdigris for green glazes but is less clear about the nature of the medium. He, too, mentions its use on gold and silver, stating that “on silver it gives a nice, bright, transparent green and on gold it is transparent, too, but grass-green.”¹³

The various types of damage and options for treatment were individually evaluated as to how they

might affect the overall appearance of the pieces, and all decisions concerning treatment were made in conjunction with the curators.¹⁴

The thick gray overpaint covering the trelliswork, which had been obscured by the later upholstery, was removed mechanically to reveal a beautifully preserved and original lead-white monochromy (Figure 5). Losses to the paint layer, especially apparent around the edges of the frames, where tacks had been applied to hold this upholstery, were filled and then inpainted to match the surrounding areas.

As the original outlines of the leaves, also lost at the time of the later upholstery, were still evident, it was decided to reconstruct the foliage. Subsequently, these areas were gessoed, gilded, and patinated to match the surrounding leaves. The missing “curls” of the backs could be reconstructed on only one of the side chairs, because an early photograph of the chair provided sufficient information for such reconstruction (see Figure 3). The join at the back of one armchair (acc. no. 1974.356.118) was taken apart in order to restore it to its original width.

The aprons of the armchairs were left as they were, and the missing flowers on the frames of the armchairs and settees were not replaced, the early photographs providing too little information for reconstruction. Reapplication of the green luster lost from the frames, legs, and foliage of the armchairs and settees was considered, although not made, as there was no possibility of fully understanding the variety of tone and opaqueness of the eighteenth-century *schattieren* technique.

The treatment of the remaining original upholstery was restricted to cleaning by vacuum to remove loose surface soils. It may be deduced from the style of the frames and surviving documentary photographs that the upholstery was probably supplemented by loose cushions. It is thought that the loose cushions, now missing but still extant with the suite in an early photograph,¹⁵ were not original.¹⁶ From documentary evidence, however, found in the 1817/1818 and the 1867/1870 inventories,¹⁷ it is apparent that each piece of furniture originally had loose cushions, which were filled with animal hair and covered in a green silk velvet. No material evidence was found regarding the profile or the construction of the cushions, and, therefore, modern reproductions were designed. As the suite is unique, it is impossible

to glean information by comparison with similar examples. Consequently, designs were based on the shape, proportions, and dimensions of the frames, as well as by review of the inventories and other sources that indicated the use of cushions during the second and third quarters of the eighteenth century. These

other sources included contemporary paintings,¹⁸ etchings from upholsterers' manuals,¹⁹ and surviving examples of eighteenth-century squab cushions,²⁰ in addition to secondary source material.²¹ Reproduction squab cushions covered with velvet cases have been constructed to replace these missing elements.

NOTES

1. The suite of furniture is also discussed in the two preceding articles in *MMJ* 25: Daniëlle O. Kisluk-Grosheide, "The Garden Room from Schloss Seehof and Its Furnishings," and Burkard von Roda, "The Design for the 'Berceau' Room at Seehof."

2. All the backs are made of smaller or larger pieces of wood glued together in order to create the curve and bulk that were needed for carving. The backs are attached to the seats either by shallow mortise and tenon joints (side chairs) or simply by screws from underneath the seat rails (armchairs and settees).

3. The fiber and weaves were examined under magnification (including the polarized microscope), and the fabric was identified as a plain-weave linen and the webbing as a plain-weave warp-faced linen. The green dye was identified, using thin layer chromatography, as a mixture of indigo and a yellow natural dye.

4. The number 56B is painted in black on the back of each settee and armchair. The same number can be observed by ultraviolet light at the polychrome surface of the outer back panel of each side chair.

5. All the elements of the polychromy and the glaze were identified through EDS analysis by Mark Wypyski of the Department of Objects Conservation, MMA.

6. See the photographs in the Kisluk-Grosheide article, Figures 15–17.

7. *Lüsterfarben* are pigments, or other colorants, dispersed or dissolved in a medium creating a translucent paint. They come in a variety of colors—ranging from red to yellow, green, and blue—and are utilized as glazes.

8. One of the side chairs is in an overcleaned state that precludes its exhibition at this time.

9. See Kisluk-Grosheide.

10. *Ibid.*, n. 27.

11. EDS analyses confirmed the presence of copper.

12. "Pour faire le Vert transparent que s'applique sur un fond d'or ou d'argent." In J. A. Van der Graaf, *Het De Mayerne manuscript als bron voor de schildertechniek van de Barok* (Mijdrecht, 1958) p. 174.

13. "Unvermischt bedient man sich dessen ben Lacquiren, denn so man das Silber damit nette übermahlet, so gibt er eine schöne helle durchsichtige grüne Farbe, übermahlet man aber das Gold damit, so wird es auch durchscheinig, doch Grasgrüne." In J. M. Cröcker, *Der Wohlanführende Mahler* (Jena, 1743; reprint Rottenburg, 1982).

14. The treatment of the polychromy was performed by Kim Travis; the treatment of the gilding and structural aspects by Yuri Yanchyshyn; the fabrication of the new cushions by Sherry Doyal and Diane Arbeit.

15. See Kisluk-Grosheide, Figure 15.

16. The shape and construction of the cushions suggest that they were made at a later date.

17. See Kisluk-Grosheide.

18. J. A. J. Camelot, *Portrait of Marquis de Mirabeau*, 1743, illustrated in Peter Thornton, "Upholstered Seat Furniture in Europe," in *Upholstery in America and Europe from the Seventeenth Century to World War I*, Edward S. Cooke, ed. (New York, 1987) p. 34.

19. R. Manwaring, *The Cabinet and Chair Maker's Real Friend and Companion* (London, 1765) pls. 24, 26, 28.

20. Osterly Park House, London. Leather squab cushion on a chair from the library, ca. 1770; squab cushions on a set of painted satinwood chairs, ca. 1770.

21. P. Fowler and P. Cornforth, *English Decoration in the Eighteenth Century*, 2d ed. (London, 1974) pp. 158–159. Peter Thornton, "Upholstered Seat Furniture in Europe," p. 33.