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The refurbishment of the state Drawing Room and Ante Room of Government House Sydney marked a significant turning point in the history of historic and contemporary Australian furniture. The project realized ‘best practice conservation with contemporary innovation’, through the restoration of a major suite of the 19<sup>th</sup> century vice regal provenanced furniture and the commissioning of new contemporary furniture by leading local designers Caroline Casey and Charles Wilson.

The aim of this article is to briefly document the historic significance of this furniture to outline the research, conservation and restoration of the historic upholstery processes. Research has established that the suite was acquired for Government House sometime between 1826-66. Although there is no evidence of a trade label or stamped mark, the accounts of the colonial Architect’s Department indicate that the suite was supplied by leading Sydney cabinetmaker John Hill & Co., whose 100 King Street business received extensive Vice Regal, State and civic government patronage.<sup>1</sup>

The inventory list of new furniture for Government House states the following:

‘...No.92 Mr. Hill supplying two sophas (sic), 3 couches 5 ottomans, 22 chairs, 3 stools and two pillows ...Drawing Room for £51.6. 8; 2 stuffed chairs covered with silk Tabouret for £18.0.0 and 4 chairs stuffed and covered silk Tabouret Drawing Room for £40.0.0’<sup>2</sup>

By 30 October 1873, the Sydney Morning Herald reports that the ‘maple suite was re-upholstered in blue silk damask’ by the David Jones Company to match the new light

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<sup>1</sup> For a detailed biography of Hill, see ‘*John Hill Jun. (1807-1870), Cabinetmaker*’ by John Wade in *Australia* Aug 2005 Vol.27 No.3 p19-31/

<sup>2</sup> Transcript of Colonial Architect’s Papers, Col Arch Box 2/640 GH53

blue Brussels weave carpet.<sup>3</sup> The earliest photographic evidence of this suite are two views of the drawing room taken from opposite ends of the room c1874. These images show the light-coloured timber furniture, featuring carved front arm supports, seats with front and side rails, backs with a top and side rails, turned front legs with out-swept rear legs. The original 1860s tabouret fabric was now replaced by blue silk damask upholstery incorporating deep buttoning, ruching, gimp and piped trim.

Six years later, Sydney's leading painting decorating firm Lyon, Cottier & Co. was engaged to refurbish these interiors. The drawing rooms were re-painted in a tertiary colour scheme of contrasting lightly toned ceilings, drab olive walls and a darker tone dado. This decoration was then contrasted with the introduction of rich crimson silk damask for the seat furniture upholstery; window draperies and a crimson tone foliate carpet. This scheme was influenced by the colour theory of prominent 19<sup>th</sup> century Scottish decorator David Hay, who advocated 'walls of rich drab colour of sufficient warmth of tone to suit the scarlet window curtains'. Contemporary records refer to these opulent interiors as the 'red drawing rooms'.

Another photograph c 1887 clearly shows the furniture all re-upholstered in a crimson silk damask richly figured with palms, ferns and other foliage in the fashionable French 'artistic style'. The design featured deep-buttoned seats and backs, two-toned cord trimmed rolled edges, fringed swags with elaborate embellishments such as rosettes and tassels. Although the style was intended to complement the new window draperies ensuite in the same crimson silk damask, it was very much in keeping with the fashionable taste for elaborately upholstered, heavily stuffed, comfortable seat-furniture widely promoted in contemporary English furniture trade catalogues such as C & Light's designs for cabinet furniture & upholstery and Continental upholstery pattern books.

Later photographs reveal that the crimson damask upholstery had been of sufficient high quality and style to be retained until 1901. Throughout the twentieth century the suite

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<sup>3</sup> Montana, A, *The Art movement in Australia Design, Taste and Society 1875-1900*, The Miegunya Press, Melbourne, 2000 p.134

continued to be used, although photographs show that the furniture was variously re-upholstered or fitted with different case covers. By the 1970s the suite had been broken up for use in both the drawing room and the ballroom and had been re-upholstered in contrasting fabrics.

Between 1981-85 the NSW Department of public Works carried out a major restoration program of the state rooms of Government House. Conservation architect Donald Ellsmore discovered remnants of the original Lyon, Cottier & Co. crimson silk damask and commissioned the French textile firm Lelievre was to reweave the fabric for the restoration of the suite's c1879 upholstery style. However this proposal was not adopted, the new crimson damask was placed in storage in storage and the suite re-upholstered in pale green damask approved by the Governor.

The Government House Conservation and Management Plan (1997) commissioned by the Historic Houses Trust, identified the ante and drawing room interiors with their surviving original Lyon, Cottier & Co ceilings as being of 'exceptional significance' and representing 'one of the finest examples of high art interior decoration in Australia'. The trust subsequently undertook an extensive project to conserve the original Lyon, Cottier & Co painted ceilings in the drawing and accurately reinstate their contemporary wall and dado painted decoration.

The recent refurbishment of the drawing rooms has been guided by the Trust's *To Furnish a Future* policy, which sought to commission leading contemporary artists and designers to collaborate on the project. The Trust's intention is to re-establish Government House Sydney as an important showcase for the best contemporary Australian art, craft and design. The policy also recognizes the need to conserve and respect the artistic integrity and heritage significance of the historic interiors and their collection. Given the historic significance of the 19<sup>th</sup> century suite to the drawing room and in order to maintain a balance, the Trust decided to reinstate the original style of the crimson silk damask window draperies and traditional upholstery, as both elements were integral to the Lyon, Cottier & Co. decorative scheme in 1879.

This presented a number of difficulties as the study of the historic upholstery and its conservation and restoration is still a relatively new field of study in Australian Historic interiors and decorative arts history. However the project was seen as a unique opportunity for the trust to properly conserve and restore the historic upholstery of one of the earliest suite of furniture provenanced to Government House.

Extensive curatorial research focussed on sourcing similar documented examples in period furniture trade catalogues, upholstery pattern books and secondary references. Consultant furniture conservator Ray Gurney scanned the historic photographs of the suite electronically to obtain close up details of the upholstery. He also traced and interviewed the former upholsterers who had worked on the suite during the 1980s and this resulted in additional photographic records of the original damask upholstery.

Fortunately another original armchair from the suite was found in storage and investigation revealed the frame was constructed of beech with show-wood frame in rock maple and the darker japan finish was a later addition. Layers of upholstery fabrics were carefully peeled back to reveal the original red damask upholstery still intact albeit in a fragile state on the seat, back and roll, which was formed of quality, curled horsehair. No surviving evidence of trims such as swags, cords and tassels were found, however important details of the deep-buttoning and the manner in which the corded, rolled edge of the back had been created were revealed. This chair has been retained a ‘document’ chair.

Since the suite needed to be functional as well as historically accurate, it was clear that a full understanding and prior experience in use of traditional upholstery materials and techniques was critical to the accurate restoration of this historic upholstery. The laborious task of sourcing of proper quality upholstery materials by Ray Gurney – horsehair, wadding/linters and jute/cotton webbing – was vital as this would contribute to the furniture’s long term conservation, stability and provide a higher degree of comfort for guests. This was a fundamental consideration as the suite would be in regular use in

the drawing room of Government House for functions hosted by the Governor, the state Government and other organisations. The furniture and its upholstery needed to meet associated practical requirements to be structurally sound, comfortable to sit on and capable of sustaining regular use over a long period of time.

After extensive investigation, the commission was awarded to Carlos Rodrigues of Provincial Upholstery, who had a deep knowledge and familiarity with traditional upholstery materials and methodology, extensive professional experience training and working in Portugal on significant European 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century period furniture and more recently for the Sydney antique trade. During the course of the project Rodrigues' extraordinary eye for detail (particularly in combining the evidence revealed by the historic photographs with his practical skills and knowledge of upholstery techniques) and standards of craftsmanship, were integral to the project's success.

This complex project comprised: stripping each piece to the frame, to allow for conservation work where necessary; webbing the frame using stainless steel staples and then stitching different size springs to the webbing; lacing the springs and establishing the shape and form of the seat; placing the first layer of Hessian canvas (heavy weight) over the springs, then stitching to secure the springs in the correct position; forming the horse hair padding with bridle ties; stitching a lightweight Hessian layer to secure the horsehair, with different stitching to create forms and angles; applying a second layer of horsehair, followed by full layers of linters and then calico layers; then half layers of linters/ split wadding and finally fitting of the fabric, cut out to pattern and pattern repeats. Trimmings and swags, all hand sewn, were then fitted to each piece.

Prior to commencing the project, advice was sought on the methodology and estimates of Mr Bertram Chapman MBE (Warden to the Trade), of Albert Chapman Ltd, upholsterer to the Queen, who concurred with Rodrigues' proposed treatment.

Whilst it was expected that area of the frames would have been damaged or weakened by the repeated renewal of the upholstery, the extent of damage was much greater than

anticipated. Multiple layers of old upholstery fabrics, wadding and webbing were still intact and areas of the frames were literally perforated with tack holes. Great care was needed in removing these materials and the process was carefully recorded with photographs and documentation.

The work revealed the original form of the chairs, the show-wood revealed the original form of the chairs, the show-wood of a light coloured rock maple with scrolling and carved details, as evident in the c1870 interior photographs. However the history of use (or abuse!) of the suite was also revealed. Some chairs had their original carved elements removed, the timber being roughly cut back to accommodate the form of the new upholstery in 1879. While most of the suite had suffered damage from age/use, several pieces had also been poorly repaired. Some had old woodworm damage; in others the rails had split or snapped and been repaired with wedges, random dowles and epoxy; in one the back legs of maple had badly split in the joint sections and these were incomplete, requiring re-building. In many of the pieces extra dowles and glue had been skewed into the joints, hampering the process of rebuilding and consolidation of the frames. This work was fully documented and where timbers needed to be replaced, emphasis was placed on retaining areas of show wood and inventory marks.

Given the complexity of the upholstery techniques, with its voluptuous full padding, applied cords, deep buttoning and associated pleating, it was agreed that a trial chair should be completed. This would provide the opportunity to resolve the various difficulties that were likely to arise in the re-creation the 1879 upholstery and ensure that the work was of the highest standard and accuracy. The prototype was to resolve several important details of the upholstery – the proportion of the padded roll around the backs of the chairs; the colour and width of the applied cord to this roll and to the seat; the set-out and depth of the buttoning; and the colour and length of the fringing of the swags. Given time and budgetary constraints the two-toned cord and fringe had to be sourced from a commercial supplier.

The resolution of each of the issues was achieved through a close collaborative process between the curatorial staff Robert Griffin and Ann Toy, Ray Gurney and Carlos Rodrigues. Detailed analysis of the upholstery of the chair as it appeared in the historic photographs was combined with an understanding of 19<sup>th</sup> century upholstery practice, materials, form and function. Once the prototype was completed and approved, this process was extended to the remainder of the suite, nine pieces comprising: two sofas, four easy and a Grandmother Chair; two occasional chairs and a triple curved banquette.

As the frames of the suite were originally intended for a quite different form of upholstery, each piece had to be built-up in a different way with wadding/horsehair/stitching to accurately re-create the 1879 upholstery style. And each piece presented particular problems – the two sofas, for example, were each of differing form and the curved shape of their arms made the set-out and depth of the buttoning and associated pleating of the fabric difficult to re-create.

Another aspect of the upholstery that was challenging to re-create was the form of the swags over the legs. This feature of the 19<sup>th</sup> century upholstery is rarely reproduced today and the task of re-creating these swags made more difficult by the form of the rear chair legs as, their shape tended to distort the swag. Elizabeth Wright Australia's leading specialist in 19<sup>th</sup> century soft furnishings analysed the form of the swags from the historic photographs and provided advice on their cutting out and hand stitching. As a result the fullness, shape and pleating of the swags as evident in the 1882 photograph of the was replicated correctly.

The successful outcome of this complex project is that this historic suite has been reunited, conserved and returned to its rightful position in the State Drawing room. But today this furniture is juxtaposed with contemporary and boldly designed pieces of furniture, textiles, glass, ceramics and works of art and sculpture and the ensemble of 'old and' signifies the Trust's challenge to care for and continue to re-invigorates these unique historic interiors.

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