

Le meilleur métier *A research into the art of the Dutch upholsterer (1670-1810)*

'Upholders' in the time of William and Mary – some conclusions

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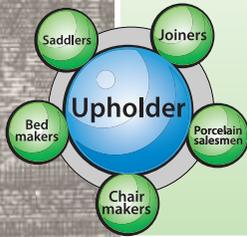
Introduction

The last 30 years of the 17th century form an interesting period for the study of the art of upholstery in Holland. William III of Orange comes into his own as Stadtholder. For the first time, he has the means to buy and decorate houses, and his court follows suit. From 1689-1702, as King and Queen of England, William and Mary create even more lavish interiors at Hampton Court and other palaces. Velvets and silks are being used more often next to tapestries and gilded leather as the preferred choice for wall hangings and upholstery for beds and seat furniture. This period is therefore where I start my research, and here are some of my conclusions.

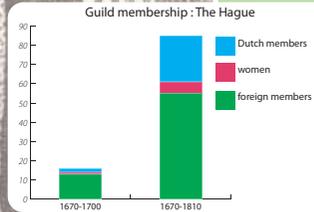
Upholders

Changes: a new profession

At the end of the 17th century, the 'arte of upholsters' began to incorporate the services and products of other craftsmen. An upholsterer who could supply 'all that is necessary to furnish a house' was common in France, but not in Holland, where guild regulations divided the crafts neatly. When the French upholsterer Paul Tison established himself in Tournai in 1682, he got permission from the city council to be exempt from guild membership as 'his work is mixed, and belongs neither entirely to one, nor to another corporation, and is something new'.



Guild membership and foreign craftsmen



Between 1660-1700, 15 'ledikantmakers' or upholsterers became a member of the merchant's guild at The Hague. (Records for the merchant's guild of Amsterdam and Harlem do not exist for this period.) They never had a separate guild – upholsters mostly were members of the merchant's guilds, and

later of the guild of Saint Luke. In spite of the preference for French fashion, there is proof of only a few Frenchmen working in Holland. But as they - Marin Geoffroy and Pierre Courtonne – both worked for the stadtholder, they could still exert influence on style and fashion. Maybe there are more Frenchmen hidden among apprentices and upholsters working under Dutch masters, but there are no records about them.

Location: close to court



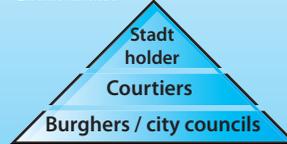
At The Hague, the upholstery workshops were located in the streets near the court (Hof).

Clients

Needs

Different clients had different needs when commissioning new furniture or wall hangings, but one is common to all: the need to underline their status by sufficiently splendid surroundings. As William Bentinck would later explain: "If people don't see me spending, they will think that I am too poor to do so and I will lose my credit".

- Expression of status
- Impress visitors
- Celebrate a special occasion
- Courtiers: to be able to receive the king/stadtholder in state
- Live in comfort



Who decided fashion?

"Je ne trouve nullement que les Lits et Meubles que l'on fait ici puissent être au gout de Votre Majesté car toutes ce qui se fait de propre est galonnée d'or ou d'argent, ou brodé de mêmes, les Lits sont tous carrés par de hors, Jusqu'au haut... à la vieille mode... il fait mieux faire faire les meubles... en Angleterre".

Hans Bentinck, earl of Portland



"Quoi que vous croiriez que je pouriez mieux faire des meubles ici je souhaite pourtant que vous m'en faissiez faire une pour ma chambre du Lit à Dieren avec un gallon d'or n'aimant point l'argent...".

"... Je suis un peu en peine de meubles que Votre Majesté souhaite que je fais faire pour Dieren, parce que je suis sûre que la façon des Lits comme on les fait ici ne lui plaira pas, n'approchant pas de ceux que l'on fait en Angleterre, et cependant cela coûterait beaucoup d'argent...".



William III

Great Wardrobe, the service that provided William and Mary with furniture as king and queen of England, probably made the final decisions on details.
• France was superseded by England and Holland when it came to the style of beds.

Commissions

State beds

The state bed was undoubtedly the most magnificent piece of upholstery of the day. Their popularity is reflected in the number of 'bed makers' that joined the merchant's guild of The Hague in this period. State beds were used as center pieces to impress the status of the owner on visitors, rather than used for sleeping in.



The Melville bed, Victoria and Albert Museum, London

They were often commissioned 'en suite' with seat furniture and wall hangings with the same fabrics. William ordered many beds for his English palaces, with prices ranging between £ 300-600. The woodwork, which made up a small amount of the sum, would be made by a joiner or turner while the upholsterer added the textile furnishing. Trimmings were used abundantly to underline the already rich design.



Design by Daniel Marot for a bedchamber, 1712

Methods

- **Database** of upholsterers working in The Hague, Amsterdam, and Harlem
- **Case studies** of commissions

Sources for both:

- Period textiles and furniture (rare)
- Scale models, dolls furniture
- Contemporary documentation: accounts, inventories, bills, correspondence, guild records, etc.
- Visual materials: prints, paintings, etc.
- Literature

Conclusions

- The end of the 17th century is when the upholsterer comes into his own.
- The reinstatement of the stadtholder, later king of England, the demand for state beds, and changing fashions all helped.
- Courtiers were probably the most interesting clients to work with, as they had more means than the stadtholder to order new furniture... and actually pay.
- More research is needed! [as always...]

What is an upholsterer?

Dutch: behanger
French: marchand tapissier

An upholsterer – or 'upholsterer', the contemporary term – was a gentleman merchant who made the upholstery for seat furniture, bed and wall hangings. He rented out furniture, and was called upon to decorate the important events in social life, such as weddings. The upholsterer provided his clients with interior decorations in the latest fashion, which he actively promoted or even created. Other suppliers, such as joiners, sometimes worked under his supervision.



For more information:



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