



FIG. 1 “In a frame of black and gold carved by Gibbons, Sir Robert Walpole and Catherine Shorter; small whole lengths by Eckardt...,” after treatment. Overall frame measurements: 42 in. (107 cm) by 60 in. (152 cm) by 9 in. (23 cm).

TWO FURNISHINGS FROM STRAWBERRY HILL: EXPLORATION AND TREATMENT

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ABSTRACT

This paper will focus on the conservation treatments of two objects that furnished Horace Walpole's Gothic Revival house, Strawberry Hill, in Twickenham, England and the information and questions that emerged in the course of the treatments. The first of these objects is a foliage-carved and gilded Baroque picture frame of circa 1700 that Horace inherited from his father, Sir Robert Walpole. In 1784 Horace attributed the carving of the frame to Grinling Gibbons. The frame's attribution is questioned here, notwithstanding its similarity to his work. The sequence of the frame's gilding preparation layers is described and may represent an experimental gilding method from the period. The treatment was prompted by an unfortunate accident, and this became an opportunity to address the historical questions, as well as the conservators' immediate concerns for surface consolidation, re-assembly, and structural support.

The second object is a neo-classic and Gothic Revival cabinet commissioned by Horace Walpole in 1784 to display a collection of drawings by Lady Diana Beauclerk. The cabinet is unique for its eclectic style and profuse decoration that includes the drawings, colorful stones and enamels, reverse-painted glass, Wedgwood ceramics, ormolu, and carved and gilded wood. The treatment required a collective conservation effort, and the close scrutiny provided information that may help in identifying period technology and the origins of decorative elements.



INTRODUCTION

The gilded Baroque picture frame (fig. 1) holds a portrait of Sir Robert Walpole (1676–1745) with his wife, Catherine Shorter, which Sir Robert commissioned John Eccardt and John Wotton to execute circa 1727. Horace Walpole's father, Sir Robert Walpole, had successful investments and a political career spanning the reigns of Queen Anne to George II. His wealth enabled him to rebuild and furnish the mansion at Houghton Hall, in Norfolk, England, seen in the background of the portrait. He assembled a considerable art collection at Houghton, and the portrait was painted to fit the foliage-carved frame that supports his painted crest. How he had acquired the frame has not been recorded, but its style and technology suggest an origin in the late 17th century, some 30 or so years earlier than the portrait.

In 1749 Horace Walpole (1717–1797) purchased Strawberry Hill, in Twickenham, and through remodeling and expansions he developed the house into the leading example of the Gothic Revival style, with an eclectic interior that was crowded with his diverse collections. In 1784 Horace placed the frame in the Blue Bedchamber at Strawberry Hill over a chimneypiece designed by Richard Bentley, and described it as “a frame of black and gold carved by Gibbons” (Walpole 1784, p. 28). Horace may have inherited the frame in 1745, or perhaps he had received it as an earlier gift, since he does not include the frame or painting in his detailed description of his father's collection at Houghton (Walpole 1743).

One of Horace Walpole's many additions at Strawberry Hill was the Beauclerk Tower, added in 1776 to pay homage to his good friend and neighbor, the artist Lady Diana Beauclerk (1735–1808). Within the



FIG. 2 The damaged frame in its packing crate on arrival at Williamstown.

small tower hung seven drawings by Lady Diana that illustrated Walpole's play, *The Mysterious Mother*. The neo-classical cabinet with Gothic Revival detailing (fig. 5) was commissioned by Walpole in 1784 to display another collection of Lady Diana's drawings, variously dated between 1775 and 1783, with subjects of a gypsy girl and children. The small cabinet was designed and made by Edward Edwards to conform to the intimate scale of the interior at Strawberry Hill, where it stood in the Great North Bedchamber (Walpole, 1784, p. 84).

Both objects were sold at the infamous Strawberry Hill sale of 1842, and they were eventually acquired in the 1930s by Wilmarth Sheldon Lewis. Lewis was a devoted scholar of Horace Walpole and is perhaps best known for having edited Horace Walpole's correspondence into 48 volumes. Lewis's extensive collection of Walpoliana, which included these two objects, was given to Yale University in 1979 and is housed at the Lewis Walpole Library, in Farmington, Connecticut.

THE FRAME

The treatment of the frame was prompted by an unfortunate accident, when the plaster that was holding the hanging nails gave out (fig. 2). The

painting was barely damaged in the fall due to the sacrificial protection of the frame. The frame's misadventure became an opportunity for the present exposure and documentation that enabled comparisons with other period survivors. Additionally, it was an opportunity to address a mass of surface consolidation that was desperately needed even before the accident occurred.

The first recorded photograph of the frame was published in 1914 (Tipping, 1914, p. 82) while it was in the collection of Lord Lansdowne, who had acquired the framed portrait at the Strawberry Hill sale. Lord Lansdowne added an inventory number, "77" in the bottom center. A second useful image was recorded in the 1930s when Lewis acquired the frame. A comparison of the photographs revealed several parts to be misaligned, loose, or missing, and the painting to be only precariously held by the rebate. The gilding and black decoration evident in the 1914 photo had deteriorated badly in the intervening years, and the smooth surfaces in the early image imply a recent restoration with over-gilding. Comparative analysis of gilding layers on Lansdowne's inventory tag with later layers on the frame (not completed during this treatment) may assist in the dating of overgilding.



FIG. 3 Detail showing the level of the glued lamination at the crest (A) and a carved corner platform (B) on which additional layers of carving were stacked.

FRAME CONSTRUCTION

The frame is constructed with four 1½-inch (29 mm) thick boards of linden (*Tilia* sp.)¹ that are joined at the corners with nailed lap joints. The wrought nails penetrate the back where they are bent over. Short miters are cut at the inside corners, and the rebate behind is carved, not planed. The choice of linden and the joinery method are consistent with the late 17th-century technology of Northern Europe (Thiel and de Bruyn Kops 1995, p. 12). Extra depth at the crest was built up with a glued lamination applied to the front before carving on a plane behind the faces of the *putti* who support the crest (fig. 3). Elements were also stacked, after being carved, in one and two layers, onto carved platforms at the corners, centers and sub-centers, and secured with glue and nails. An early use of wire armatures covered with a composition paste was noted for the modeling of the thin legs of the birds that perch in the top corners. Otherwise, the frame's ornament is achieved entirely with carved wood.

GILDING LAYERS

Cross section analysis and an instrumental analysis of particles showed an interesting sequence of gilding layers² (fig. 4). There are two early gesso

preparations; first on the wood is calcium sulfate (gypsum), which is followed by calcium carbonate (chalk). Then there is a thick protein layer, taken to be animal glue. This is followed by an orange/red bole, gold leaf, and edges of black paint, and concludes the original or early decoration. A restoration sequence follows, with more chalk gesso, bole, leaf, etc.

Evidently the cause of the extreme surface flaking is the inclusion of thick glue between the early gesso and bole, and this defies our present understanding of a successful gilding preparation. Nevertheless, thick glue without gesso has been reported as a preparation for gilding on a pair of contemporaneous Dutch frames (Bayer, 1997). Walpole's frame may show another experimental form of late 17th century gilding practice, although it is also possible that a previous intervention, yet to be identified, may have played a role in this sequence of layers.

It is an often-repeated notion today that calcium sulfate was used for gilding preparation in southern Europe, and calcium carbonate was used in the north, but our present northern example of gilding suggests an exception. Powell (1997) has

also suggested that there is no factual basis for the north-south distinction between chalk and gypsum for white gilding preparations. As we learn more about historic gilding layers through the use of analysis, we can look forward to a more detailed and coherent understanding of the regional use of white gilding preparations.

FRAME RECONSTRUCTION

Before the compromised structure of the frame could be addressed, all flaking gilding and paint was consolidated with thin gelatin size (~3%) applied by pencil brush beneath each flake, prior to pressing the flake into position.

Each splinter of wood was eventually relocated, the pieces having been carefully collected after the accident. Most wood breaks were secured using animal glue and various clamp forms, and the remnants of some old hide glue were removed in

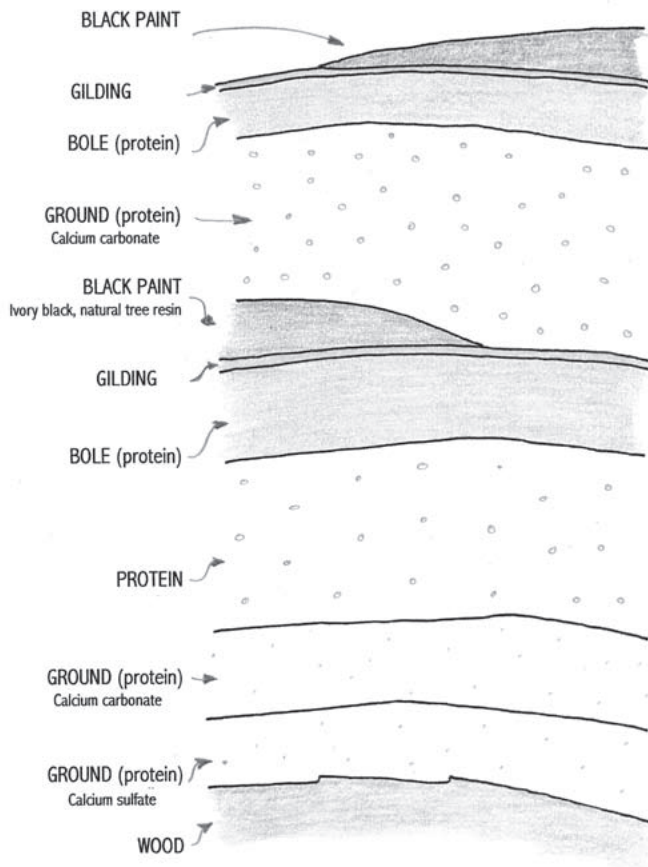


FIG. 4 Diagram of cross-section view of early and later gilding layers on the frame.

the process. Acryloid B72/acetone adhesive (1:1, by weight) was used as a more soluble alternative to secure non-structural elements, and allowing for some remnants of old hide glue to be preserved in place. The B72/acetone adhesive was also useful for securing irregular forms that defied positive clamping.

ADDING A BACK FRAME

There were significant cross-grain breaks across the width of delicate frame members compromising the structural soundness of the picture-framing device. A lightweight aluminum support frame was constructed and fitted to conform to the step of the rebate and frame back, and secured with screws using pre-existing screw holes that resulted from added metal plates on the back. The aluminum frame now supports the cross-grain breaks and houses the painting. It also usefully reduces the sight size by $\frac{3}{16}$ -inch (5mm), relieves pressure on the thin and fragmented sight edge, and supports the modern hardware that retains the painting and hangs the frame against the wall.

COMPENSATION FOR LOSS

Losses to the carved wood ornament were apparent in comparing the two photographs of 1914 and the 1930s. Older and larger losses were apparent by observing old breaks on surfaces and reading the symmetry of the surviving ornament. Any reconstruction of these old losses was beyond the scope of the treatment. Modeled and painted wax was used to continue the lines of three small stems which had suffered more recent losses and to reduce the impression of the most prominent gaps in the joinery. No new wet gesso gilding was added. Instead, areas of gilding and black paint loss were inpainted using stable colors in a soluble medium (Maimeri Restoration colors and mica pigments). These added materials are distinguishable and easy to remove, and they will not contribute to future flaking of the gilding.

ATTRIBUTION TO GIBBONS

Grinling Gibbons (1648–1721), the premier wood carver of his time, was born in Rotterdam to English parents. Sir Robert possessed a portrait

FIG. 5 The Beauclerk Cabinet, after treatment. Commissioned by Horace Walpole to display drawings by Lady Diana Beauclerk. Overall measurements: 50 ¼ in. (128 cm) by 19 ½ in. (49 cm) by 16 in. (41 cm).



of Gibbons as well as a number of his works at Houghton Hall (Walpole, 1743). Horace Walpole was so intrigued with the genius of Gibbons that he published a five-page account of the carver (Walpole, 1762–71) that has since been described as “picturesque” (Tipping, 1914, p. 46) and “far from trustworthy” (Green, 1964, p. 18). He owned the much admired point cravat carved in lime wood by Gibbons, now in the collection of the Victoria and Albert Museum and erroneously believed that an ivory relief set into his Palladian hanging cabinet was from the hand of Gibbons (Wilk, 1996).

Of 20th-century publications that address the work of Gibbons there are three that refer to Walpole’s frame (Tipping 1914; Green 1964; Beard 1989). However, the attribution they give appears to be based on the repetition of Walpole’s own attribution, rather than on a close visual inspection or direct comparison to documented examples.

During the course of the conservation treatment, the frame was examined by David Esterly, who was then preparing an exhibition of Gibbons’s work at the Victoria and Albert Museum, and an accompanying publication (Esterly, 1998). Esterly saw the frame as the work of an accomplished carver who may have had connections or training in the Low Countries. He thought familiarity with the work of Gibbons was implied by the choice of wood, overall design and construction, and the similarity of some foliage to known examples of Gibbons’s work. However, he questioned the handling of the undercutting and saw flower, leaf, cereal, and putti body and facial types that are not characteristic of Gibbon’s practice. He did not recognize the frame as the work of Gibbons or of his shop. The frame could be another example of mistaken attribution on the part of Walpole.

THE BEAUCLERK CABINET

By 1784 Horace Walpole had participated in many design collaborations with cabinet makers, architects, and artists, and he is therefore likely to have been involved in the design of the Beauclerk cabinet (fig. 5), made in that year to house a col-



FIG. 6 Interior view of drawer fronts, before treatment.

lection of drawings by Lady Diana Beauclerk. The cabinet is crafted with the best workmanship and materials of the period, and it was embellished with Walpole's collected treasures. It is small in scale, measuring 50¼ in. (128 cm) high, and encloses three equal sized oak-lined drawers that have negligible wear. A door conceals the brightly colored drawer fronts inlaid with polished stones, enamels, Wedgwood, and ormolu knobs (fig. 6). The unique design by Edwards, possibly with Walpole's input, provides an impressive neo-classic setting for Lady Diana's drawings, while the gothic additions repeat the theme of Strawberry Hill and reinforce Walpole's English heritage.

Altogether there are seventeen of Lady Diana's drawings framed under glass on outside surfaces of the cabinet, five on top, one on each side, and ten on the front. The sub-apron on three sides

holds fifteen triangular reverse-painted glass panels. Black jasper Wedgwood bas-reliefs are inlaid on each side, and a blue jasper relief is inlaid on the central drawer front. There are a total of sixty-four colorful inlaid semi-precious stones, possibly collected on Walpole's continental travels. Ten enamel roundels (origin unknown) depicting tropical birds in colorful foliage are inlaid into the top and bottom drawer fronts. Ormolu mounts (possibly) include side handles, the festoon on the front, drawer knobs, and the framing of the drawings. Water gilding on the exterior covers six round lion masks in the fluted frieze, carved leaves at the cuffs of the legs, carved pendants from the apron, blind Gothic tracery, together with carved wooden frames around stones, and architectural detailing. The woods employed include ebony veneers on secondary woods of mahogany and oak, and ebonized mahogany drawer fronts. This great variety of decorative material required the collaborative effort of a conservation team.

An engraved brass plaque was added by Walpole to the inside of the door that reads: "This cabinet was ordered by and made at the expense of Mr. Horace Walpole in 1784 to receive the drawings which were all designed and executed by the Right Honorable Lady Diana Beauclerk. The cabinet was designed by Mr. E. Edwards."

There had been some maintenance since 1784. Loose parts had been put back with glue and nails, detached parts were lost or stored inside, metals had been polished, while the gilding and varnish had been overhauled with added layers and had deteriorated a second time. The purpose of the treatment was to prepare the cabinet, after many years of quiet neglect, for the 1999 exhibition *A Treasure House in Farmington* at the Yale Center for British Art, New Haven, Connecticut.

DISMANTLING

The cabinet was dismantled down to its structural parts, all nails and screws were set out on cards and pencilled identification marks were recorded. A dovetailed oak liner within the cabinet with two drawer dividers was removed for access to screws



FIG. 7 The nine drawings removed from the door, during treatment.

into the base and cornice, and to the side drawings and handles. In order to remove the glass panels, the Gothic sub-rails were removed as well.

DRAWINGS

The drawings were executed on medium weight laid paper with gray and brown washes, some with graphite underdrawing, and details and highlights in black, red, gray, blue, and white (fig. 7). The paper had been cut to the exact size of the cover glass, backed with additional paper and sealed along the edges with goldbeater's skin. The glazed drawings were housed in brass/ormolu collar frames and backed with oak boards, and the frames fitted tightly into openings in the woodwork. The papers had become discolored due to acid migration from the oak backboards, and they had also become lightstruck to varying degrees.

The primary treatment for the drawings was their rehousing to isolate them from the acidic wood backings. It included surface cleaning with grated eraser crumbs, a dry soft brush, and a vacuum aspirator, with a focus on non-image areas and the avoidance of graphite underdrawing. Those drawings without water-soluble inscriptions could also be float washed in deionized water, after removing their stained backing papers with steam and a Teflon spatula. Edge tears on the drawings were mended with Japanese paper and wheat starch paste. They were then sealed as packages with their glass, Marvelseal® vapor seal backings, polyester tape edges, and interior backings of Artcare® and Microchamber® board and paper. The molecular traps and buffers in these products will protect the drawings from further pollution and degradation. The increased thickness of the packaged drawings, backed with their oak boards, meant that new nail holes were required in the sides of the brass-collar frames. The close tolerances for fitting the drawings into the cabinet did not allow for spacers between the drawings and the glass.

REVERSE PAINTED GLASS

The fifteen reverse painted glass panels set within the Gothic sub-rail depict the arms of Walpole (center front, fig. 8), his crest of a Saracen's head (center of sides) and strawberry leaves and berries (front and sides). The artist who painted the glass



FIG. 8 Detail of the painted glass panels in the front sub-apron, before treatment.

FIG. 9 The black jasper ceramic relief removed from the proper right side of the cabinet, after cleaning.



has not been identified, but the specificity of the panels suggests they were commissioned for the cabinet³.

It was difficult to remove the sub-rails and glass panels due to their entrapment in the cabinet's framing with added fasteners and glue, as well as the extent of flaking paint behind each glass. Fallen paint had collected in the lowest point of the framing behind the glass, and fragments that could not be put back in this treatment were collected in vials. Flaking paint was secured into place with Acryloid B72, and losses were inpainted with Acryloid B67 with dry pigments. Modifications to the rails were incorporated at the time of re-assembly, using small screws instead of glue and nails to allow for future access. Strips of polyethylene were also added to compensate for wood shrinkage, against the fixed dimension of the glass, and Mylar film was fitted between the glass and its wood backing to protect against abrasion.

WEDGWOOD

A black jasper ceramic relief is inlaid between the fluted frieze on each side and a blue jasper relief is inlaid on the center drawer front. Their porous surfaces were cleaned with an aqueous solution on cotton swabs. One cameo was removed from

its setting (fig. 9) during the re-gluing of the surrounding ebony veneer, and its reverse revealed the impressed Wedgwood mark of the period.

Walpole listed owning Wedgwood tableware and cameos with Lady Diana's designs, and he had several of her drawings and wax reliefs in frames that were decorated with Wedgwood cameos (Walpole 1784). Josiah Wedgwood included Lady Diana's drawings translated into bas-reliefs in his 1787 catalog, where he recommends their use for ornamenting furniture (Reilly, p. 607). Although there is no documentation linking Lady Diana to the design of the cabinet's ceramics, it is an intriguing idea that she might have participated in a project that was so intimately related to her work.

ENAMEL ROUNDELS

Walpole described the ten enamel roundels inlaid into the drawer fronts as "ancient enamels" (Walpole, 1784, p. 84). They are brightly painted over an all-white and modeled base, with a macaw perched in foliage within a circle of beads (fig. 10). The enamel bodies are mounted onto pierced and scored silver armatures that are attached to gold-colored back plates with wire⁴. The origin of the enamels has not been established, although they presumably came from Walpole's collection



FIG. 10 Detail of the enamel roundels, after cleaning the lower one.

and were given to Edwards for inclusion on the cabinet. Detached beads were reattached with Acryloid B72, and surfaces were cleaned with an aqueous solution on small swabs. Encrusted corrosion on the gilt metal backings was reduced mechanically.

SEMI-PRECIOUS STONES

A total of sixty-four semi-precious stones are inlaid on the cabinet's outside surfaces and on the drawer fronts. They, too, presumably came from Walpole's collection and like the roundels were also chosen for inclusion on the cabinet. The color of a lapis-lazuli stone set behind the center trefoil of the upper frieze is echoed in the blue painted backgrounds of the other trefoils in the molding. All of the stone surfaces were cleaned with an aqueous solution, and loose or detached stones

were reset with Acryloid B72/acetone adhesive. A missing stone in the top was replaced with an epoxy substitute with swirled pigmentation, cast from a mold taken from a similarly sized stone.

ORMOLU

Ormolu was the term used by Walpole in his description of the cabinet (Walpole, 1784, p.84), and we might have expected mercury-gilded ormolu produced by Matthew Boulton. However, after cleaning the mounts in an ultrasonic bath, the copper color and tarnish on the beaded top edge of the metal frames brought the presence of ormolu into question. The gold color normally associated with ormolu occurred only in the corners of the frames where the parts were soldered. Particles from one frame were analyzed for elemental surface composition using scanning electron microscopy with energy-dispersive x-ray spectrometry (SEM-EDS). Results indicated the back frame (rebate) to be copper and zinc (i.e. brass), the beaded front to be copper with minor zinc, and the gold-colored corners to be copper, zinc and iron. No gold or traces of mercury were found on the frame or in the interstices of a more discretely placed back plate of a side handle.

Boulton recognized that a high copper content (apparent on the beaded tops of the frames) was necessary to provide the best foundation for mercury gilding (Goodison, 1974, p. 70). One explanation for the absence of gilding is that it has been removed over time from cleaning with abrasive metal polishes, a point that is supported by abrasions through the varnish on adjacent wood surfaces. Alternatively, the mounts may have been originally lacquered. As to the ordering of the mounts, it is possible that the side handles and drawer knobs were a standard pattern obtained by Edwards, and that he special ordered the festoon to fit the span of the drawing below, together with the shapes and sizes of the beaded frames.

GILDED WOOD

The original water gilding on the carved, shaped and pierced wood elements had been over-gilded with gesso, bole, and leaf. A second generation of

deterioration had resulted in losses of wood and gesso, surface flaking, and accumulated grime. Gesso flakes were pressed into place and secured with gelatin size (4%), and missing tracery was filled with carved basswood inserts. An older application of varnish on the water gilding provided a means for cleaning with an aqueous solution.

Missing sections of the delicate carved wood frames around the stones at the top of the legs were cast in a bulked epoxy resin from a silicone rubber mold, trimmed to size, and after oil gilding, fitted into place with Acryloid B72/acetone adhesive. Most passages of missing gesso were replaced using gesso and red bole prepared with Acryloid B72 acrylic resin in xylene. After shaping the fills, new gold leaf was applied using traditional oil size, and these surfaces were toned with washes of pigments in an acrylic emulsion.

The origin of the six small lion mask roundels set between the fluting of the frieze is unknown, and their composition, whether cast or carved, was not determined since all of their surfaces remain covered with the gilding.

WOOD AND VARNISH

Insecurities in the structural wood joints, glue blocks and veneers were secured with hot hide glue or liquid hide glue, in conjunction with clamp pressure. In areas where water would have compromised the gilded surfaces or deteriorated varnish, Acryloid B72/acetone adhesive was used to secure decorative parts.

Varnished wood surfaces were cleaned with an aqueous solution, dried, and rinsed with mineral spirits, to remove grime and waxy accumulations. The surfaces were finished with a commercial paste wax during the final re-assembly in order to develop a reasonably even luster. No varnish was added to supplement the older varnish coatings. It was apparent that a heavier body of later varnish had been applied to the broader ebony surfaces, and only traces of an earlier varnish, possibly original, remained around the applied gilding. There is now a slightly irregular shine to the thin varnish

around the gilding and the stones, but this is hardly apparent when the whole cabinet is viewed.

A packet to be kept in one of the cabinet's drawers was constructed out of archival materials for all of the removed parts. Among the contents are the vials of paint fragments from the glass, backing papers from the drawings, together with redundant screws and nails that had been added over the years.

CONCLUSION

Conservation treatments provide the opportunity for the close scrutiny and documentation of objects. The resulting information can be useful for the identification of historic materials and techniques, and it can help the curator answer questions of provenance and attribution.

The design and execution of the black and gold frame drew on skills that were developed in the Low Countries in the second half of the 17th century. Eventually, the frame's school of woodcarving may be identified through comparison with contemporary carving. Also, the comparison of this frame's idiosyncratic gilding layers to other examples of the time will enable a more complete understanding of period gilding practices.

Just as the cabinet is the result of collaboration between Walpole and his artistic and eclectic circle, the treatment of the cabinet was a combined effort drawing on the skills of no less than seven conservators.

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ENDNOTES

1. The wood sample was identified by The Center for Wood Anatomy, Forest Products Laboratory, Madison, WI. All species of *Tilia* look alike microscopically (Alden, H. 1995. *Hardwoods of North America*. Madison, WI: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service, Forest Products Laboratory. 118).

2. James Martin completed the analysis in 1997. Six randomly selected detached fragments containing multiple finish layers were examined using a stereomicroscope. Layered fragments were removed and examined using an Olympus microscope with visible light and fluorescence illumination. Particle samples were then removed from each representative layer for analysis by polarized light microscopy (PLM), Fourier transform infrared microspectroscopy (FT-IR), and scanning electron microscopy with energy-dispersive x-ray spectrometry (SEM-EDS).

3. Walpole collected painted glass and used it in the furnishing of Strawberry Hill. He had commissioned “a shield of Mr. Walpole’s arms and quarterings on painted glass, by Price” (Walpole, 1784).

4. Questions concerning method of manufacture (whether porcelain or enamel) were answered with analysis using SEM-EDS and FT-IR. The metal armature was identified as silver, with exposed areas showing silver sulfate (tarnish). SEM showed the colorful body to be fully vitrified.

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