



Figure 1. Frullini armchair before treatment.

Museum Objects and Private Collections: Conserving an 1870s Frullini Armchair for Use

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ABSTRACT

An armchair thought to belong to a suite made for the Linden Gate mansion in Newport in 1873 was recently purchased, along with several other pieces from the set, and is intended for use in a private collection. Linden Gate was built as a summer residence of Henry G. Marquand of New York. Marquand was a wealthy railroad financier, philanthropist and President of the Board of Trustees of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. The house was designed by architect Richard Morris Hunt in conjunction with furniture maker and sculptor Luigi Frullini, and decorators John LaFarge and Samuel Colman. Sadly, the house was damaged by fire in 1973, and demolished for new residential building. A brief history of the house and some of the known Frullini furniture is offered in order to better understand the context for the preservation of this magnificent object.

The chair is a grand and masterfully worked object of medieval and Renaissance Revival style sculpture, obviously made for a grand house. It appears to have been upholstered with a generous set of springs and covered in embossed, painted and gilt leather, now lost. The owner of the furniture not only wants to use the chair, but wants the upholstery to feel the same as it did when it was new. In addition to some minor and some significant structural repairs and recarving, recreating the upholstery presented the biggest challenge in its treatment. A non-intrusive sprung under-upholstery system was designed to fit into the chair frame bottom and back, complete with old springs and contemporary cushioning materials to match the feel of the original chair. A new decorative leather cover was fabricated and fitted over the new under-upholstery, for use. The non-intrusive or minimally-intrusive upholstery allows the chair to be used in much the same way as it formerly was.

Unique and high-quality nineteenth-century furniture is increasingly sought after by museums as well as private collectors in our country. One such object is especially noteworthy given its proximity to the Wooden Artifacts Group meeting this year in Providence, Rhode Island: an armchair attributed to Luigi Frullini. Frullini was a reknown Florentine sculptor of the mid-to-late nineteenth century. The chair, along with a small group of other related furniture, was purchased by a private collector at a recent auction. Previously, the furniture was recorded to have been sold in 1951, presumably after the death of Rodderick Terry, Jr., the son-in-law of Allan Marquand, whose father Henry was the original owner (Minosh, 2006). It is thought to have been made for the Linden Gate mansion in Newport, Rhode Island in 1873. Linden Gate was built as a summer residence of Henry G. Marquand, who was a wealthy railroad financier, philanthropist and President of the Board of Trustees of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. The house was designed by architect Richard Morris Hunt in conjunction with Luigi Frullini and decorators John LaFarge and Samuel Colman. Sadly, the house was damaged by fire in 1973, and demolished for new residential building (Miller, 2005).

A fair amount of art and architectural works by Frullini survive in various public and private collections today. Perhaps the most impressive are the two carved-panel rooms with en suite dining room furnishings in Chateau-sur-Mer in Newport, RI. Other examples of Frullini's armchairs from this period survive without their original covers at the Art Institute of Chicago, and at the Cleveland Museum of Art. A single dining chair also from Chateau-sur-Mer with its original cover can be found at the Philadelphia Museum of Art. The Museum of Fine Arts, Boston owns one of the finest examples of similar armchairs with original materials intact, including an embossed and painted leather cover. These surviving examples in public institutions provide a wealth of information with regard to the armchair being treated.

The chair is a grand and masterfully worked piece of Renaissance Revival sculpture, obviously made for a grand house, and signed in the upper left side of the crest; "L. Frullini Firenze." (figs. 1 & 2). The frame is stamped with an unknown reference on the inside of the side rail, "C.W. Pat." In addition, it was originally labeled on the inside of the front



Figure 2. Signature on crest.



Figure 3. Label on the bookcase matching the outline on the chair inside seat rail.

seat rail. The label is lost, but a shadow outline and fragments remain that correspond to the size of the label on the back of the bookcase from the same group, and bought by the same owners (fig. 3).

It was upholstered with a generous set of twenty seat springs, and covered in embossed, painted and gilt leather, sadly now lost. It should be noted here that the wood of the chair appears to be European walnut (*Juglans regia*), and possibly of the Circassian walnut variety, based on its physical properties and the similar oral history of the carved rooms at Chateau sur Mer. Circassia is a region in Northwest Caucasus, bordering on the Black Sea, today a part of the Russian Federation. The wood from that region is prized for its figure and density (Hinckley, 1960).

In addition to some minor and some significant structural repairs and recarving, recreating the upholstery presented the biggest challenge in its treatment. The chair was structurally stabilized by regluing the vertical split between the two main leg-members in the proper left side before reattaching the lion's face and associated fragments over the split area. To compensate for a lost element, a new rear seat rail architrave molding was recarved in American walnut and attached with hide glue (fig. 4). A large portion of the treatment featured the design and construction of a non-intrusive sprung under-upholstery system.

Before and during the process of the reupholstery treatment, the upholstery materials were extensively studied, documented and closely compared to the known examples. The owners anticipated a chair that would be reasonably comfortable and similar in feel to the original. The upholstery appears to have been treated in three separate campaigns. At the outset, it was obvious that the cover was a non-original, heavily worn, but early 20th-century replacement, a finding that largely drove their decision to replace it with a more accurate original interpretation.



Figure 4. Recarved black walnut back rail.

The existing under-upholstery materials consisted of a collection of original and added materials. The only original under-upholstery materials appear to be the interior back cushion and extremely fragile remnants of back webbing (fig. 5). Springs were only used on the seat in this chair, and not the back. The original back cushion and related web fragments were infested with carpet beetles and were sagging due to the failure of couching stitches throughout. Given its fragile and failing condition, it was decided to remove it for safe-keeping by the owner, and replace it with a non-intrusive support that would better stand up to continuing use. The replaced seat materials were removed from the chair as well.

The unfortunate removal of original materials raises an interesting question regarding the use of period upholstered artifacts; that is, does the risk of loss by removal from the artifact outweigh the risk of degradation from use if encased within new upholstery? The answer may lie in the expected use of the chair. In this instance, a privately-owned chair with a very sturdy frame is expected to receive moderate use, and to be as comfortable as it was originally. If a chair were intended for exhibit

only in a museum setting, clearly the original materials would be kept with the object. One other advantage in the removal of the original materials is the opportunity for study in the process.

The maroon velvet cover and gimp trim appear to be the third and latest covers on the chair. Fragments of a yellow plush-woven type of wool cover were found on the rear seat rail and appear to be the second covers. A close inspection of all the tacking evidence suggests that a leather cover was first used on this chair. The outback tacking rabbets most clearly illustrates this finding as three sets of tacking holes are easily distinguished. Two of these sets include textile imprints under the tack heads (including the red cover), and one does not—usually indicating leather. No trim finish nail pattern appears on these surfaces either. No brass corrosion in any holes on the chair was found. The presence of brass corrosion usually confirms the use of brass decorative trim nails. Without this evidence, finish nails were omitted in the new interpretation.

The back retained a portion of what is probably the only surviving original upholstery on the chair. Among more recent additions were found a single



Figure 5. Original under-upholstery materials in the back. horizontal web, foundation jute cloth, and a fixed bridle-stitched back cushion of a coarse white fabric and curled hair. The curled hair stuffing in the seat and back may be original and reused in subsequent reupholstery campaigns. Much of the existing curled hair had been infested with carpet beetles at some point. These materials are no longer actively infested and pose no risk as long as they are bagged and boxed.

After the study and decision to remove the existing under-upholstery, a new under-upholstery



Figure 6. New Baltic birch plywood and sweetgum insert frames.

system was designed and constructed for use. The system consists of two Baltic birch plywood and sweetgum frames that drop into the existing seat frame openings in a completely reversible and non-intrusive manner (fig. 6). Each of these separate frame structures are independent and therefore can be easily reversed in future reupholstery campaigns. A new decorative leather cover was

completed for use and is fixed over the new under-upholstery system.

A commercially embossed leather cover was obtained from Roden Leather Company. This company was one of the few companies that import European leathers embossed in traditional designs as well as whole-hide sizes large enough for unpieced furniture covers. The leather is reported to be combination tanned in a “chrome retan” process. The leather is first chrome tanned throughout its thickness and subsequently further treated or tanned with vegetable and/or synthetic tanning agents, these agents penetrating notably but not necessarily completely into the interior. (2006, Roden Leather). The leather was decorated with oil-size adhered aluminum leaf and colored oil-alkyd resin varnishes to imitate a surviving cover on the Frullini chair in the Boston MFA.

The new seat frames are upholstered in the traditional manner reusing sixteen of the twenty original springs in the seat. Only sixteen springs fit due to the restricted size of the new insert frame. More stable modern materials used included Dacron polyester webs, polyester spring cords, and nylon stitching twine, polyester batting, cotton ticking and muslin. In addition, closed-cell polyethylene foam with synthetic hot-melt glue was built up on the new frame to provide an edge-roll. Stable synthetic materials provide an accurate form and



Figure 7. Springs tied to Dacron webbing.



Figure 8. New upholstery loft in the cotton muslin.

comfort level while ensuring an affordable and long-lasting support. The under-upholstery and springs were tied and stitched in a similar manner to the original with the domed height of the form taken from the relative heights of the Boston Frullini chair (figs. 7 & 8).

Based on the evidence of the Boston chair, this chair's upholstery features rabbeted tacking edges only adjacent to the continuing flat surfaces at the top of the back and the front of the seat. The other cover surfaces meet the arms projecting at ninety degrees, and are interpreted as 'gutter-nailed' with

no trim. In the non-intrusive version, the new leather is wrapped around and stapled to the new plywood frame, or rivet-tacked to aluminum tacking flanges and covered with trim (fig. 9).

All the new materials are attached to the new frames only, to avoid the destructive nature of traditional nailing. These frames can easily be removed and reupholstered with new covers in the future. This can be done by removing the hot-glued outback trim and cover, followed by the 20 gauge aluminum retaining strips and two tacks in the upper corners. Then, the entire back frame can be removed from the front. Lastly, the seat lifts out after unscrewing the four corner mending plates (holding it to the original frame) from the bottom (fig. 10).

The removed original fragments and later portions of upholstery bottom and back "cakes" were returned in bags with supportive acid-free corrugated boards in their correct layered orientation. Other fragments such as tacks, cording

and twine, yellow cover fragments, etc., were also bagged and labeled for the owners.

Conclusion

The interest in such late nineteenth-century furniture is increasingly important as these objects are sometimes not always as highly valued as older materials. So often, nineteenth century revival-style furniture is forgotten in light of more rare and desirable earlier periods. Introducing minimally-intrusive upholstery and other conservation methods for private owners and users of these materials is an important preservation goal.



Figure 9. After treatment.



Figure 10. View of outback before the leather cover: back frame with removable aluminum flanges.

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