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Figure 1. Ivory-clad, drop-front secretary (acc. no. 2001.231), after treatment.

2005 WAG Postprints—Minneapolis, Minnesota

Conservation of a Diminutive Ivory-Clad Drop-Front Secretary from Vizigapatam, India

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ABSTRACT

The Virginia Museum of Fine Arts recently acquired a diminutive, ivory-clad drop front secretary that exemplifies the 18th century international luxury trade between India and America in the 18th century. Made in Vizigapatam, a coastal station in southeastern India, the diminutive secretary is part of a group of furniture made by craftsmen there in the 18th century specifically for the western market. The use of ivory as a veneer, black lac within incised patterns drawn from chintz textiles, and the derivation from an 18th century English furniture form make this one object a perfect example on which to study exotic materials, innovative decoration, and the history of cultural exchanges.

This secretary has an impeccable provenance that can be traced to its initial arrival in the United States in the 1780s on a ship belonging to a prominent Philadelphia merchant.

The ivory-clad secretary was purchased by the Museum prior to the usual restoration many such items go through before coming on the American market. The current condition, including some water damage to the carcass, lifting and cracking veneer, detached moldings, and old, crude attempts at faux ivory, might look to the casual observer to be an eyesore, but to a conservator, it is a jewel: an enviable opportunity to study untouched surfaces and explore construction methods and exotic materials centuries old.

The technical research and conservation treatment for this object will be discussed along with much of the information about its construction discovered during this process.

This is a follow up to a presentation given in Amsterdam in 2002 at the Sixth International Symposium on Wood and Furniture Conservation, The Meeting of East and West in the Furniture Trade. That article, published in the Proceedings of that symposium and given jointly with our Curator of American Art, David Park Curry, discussed the provenance and context of the object as well as information gathered in the technical examination of the cabinet (fig. 1) and problems to be addressed in the treatment.¹ This paper will focus on the treatment decisions made in the course of the actual treatment.

Some decisions were easy: the 16 detached ivory pieces that arrived with the cabinet (in drawers or plastic bags) were returned to their original locations and secured with either Acryloid B-72,² or Acryloid B-48N.³ The decision as to which adhesive to use was determined by the weight of the detached piece and the ability of the adhesive to hold it in place. For example, the upper case molding on the proper left side was a piece that required the additional holding power of Acryloid B-48N.

Cleaning materials were also chosen easily, based on accepted practices in cleaning ivory and ivory veneers. Various methods to remove surface grime or remnants of adhesive were used depending on

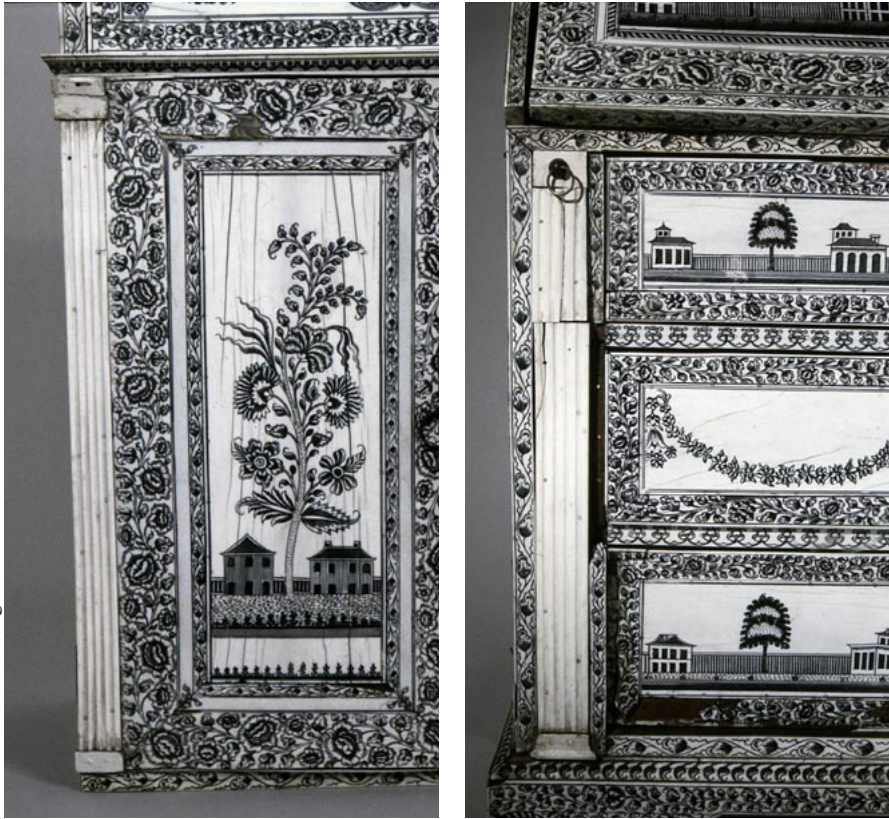


Figure 2. Upper (left) and lower case, before treatment.

effectiveness: primarily dry erasers; then in heavily soiled areas swabbing with unstimulated saliva, followed by acetone to ensure removal of any remaining moisture on the ivory.

Severely lifting veneer was removed in areas where this could be safely done. Old glue on the back of this veneer was softened with moisture and removed mechanically. The pieces were flattened with humidification and reapplied as well as pos-

sible to the original positions. These panels required the holding power of animal hide glue for reattachment. For smaller areas of lifting, these elements were eased back into place where possible. They were left proud if the efforts necessary for re-laying had the potential of breaking the ivory, i.e., the underlying wood structure had shrunk enough that there was insufficient surface area to contain the veneer.

Much of the black material (possibly ebony) laid into the black and white dentil frieze surrounding

the pediment was missing and had been inpainted or inked in with a black paint, ink or marker. This was not done consistently or completely, and the stepped loss was distracting at close range. The decision made here was to add black-pigmented wax into the areas where the black material was missing.

Next came the decisions regarding previous repairs. Questions as to which should remain in place and which should be reversed and redone with more stable materials were more complex. The visual impact of the repair and the possible historical importance of each repair were taken into consideration. Previous repairs included one documented repair by Anne Eckert Brown, wife of the last descendent in the Brown Family in which the cabinet had descended.⁴ Mrs. Brown's repair involved the upper case proper right drawer beneath the pediment and was carried out in the year 2000. The most useful information in her report states that this repair was done over the existing 19th-century replacement by painting with a toned, alkyd paint in an effort to "soften the negative visual impact" of this non-



Figure 3. Interior of desk, after treatment. The base of the proper right pilaster is our replacement.



Figure 4. An Anglo-Indian ivory-veneered miniature bureau cabinet. Sotheby's NY sale no. 7779, lot 775, April 19, 2002.

original section which had been “primitively recreated” on a “painted wooden surface which had badly yellowed over 150 years.” Since Mrs. Brown’s repair already obscured a 19th-century repair, was done competently by a member of the Brown family and was fully documented by Mrs. Brown, we decided to keep this repair intact.

Other areas on the cabinet, particularly a long, horizontal section of replaced ivory at the center, just below the drop-front board, displayed this appearance of “badly yellowed” material that Mrs. Brown describes, and probably dated to between 1826 and 1846.⁵ These compensations were poorly executed and deemed visually obscuring, and therefore the decision was made to remove them. In all cases these areas were documented in photographic and written form before removal, and the removed sections were retained where possible. The two massive, unsightly iron screws holding the pediment

in place, obviously later additions that were causing iron staining on the ivory, were also removed. Evidence on the cabinet suggests that the pediment was originally only glued on.

Replacement moldings were fabricated for areas where they were missing. These were made by taking silicone rubber molds of similar moldings and casting the replacements in plaster. Losses were filled with conservation-stable materials and inpainted to continue the surrounding incised decoration.⁶ Filling was required in approximately 70 areas where the original ivory had sustained losses or where the 19th-century repairs had been removed. Along the sides old ivory piano keys were used to create a continuous line where the warped backboards protruded from the edges.

The most difficult decision involved the question of the appropriate appearance of the capitals and bases on the exterior pilasters of the secretary. We have yet to locate another secretary of this comparatively “large” size for clues as to the original appearance of these elements. (I encourage anyone who might be aware of one to please notify me or Virginia Museum of Fine Arts.) All of these elements had been replaced on our secretary at some point with flat or crudely carved pieces of wood (fig. 2). The interior of the desk has similar pilasters with three of the four original capitals and bases intact (fig. 3). The proportions of the bases to pilasters could be extrapolated to the exterior, but not the capitals. On the interior, the capitals occupied a rectangular area. On the exterior, the space left for capitals was square.

An examination of clues from other similar cabinets from Vizigapatam only complicated the issue. As mentioned above, the Museum’s secretary is the



Figure 5. An Anglo-Indian Vizagapatam ivory miniature bureau cabinet. Christie's London sale no. 5626, lot 211, July 4, 1996.

only one we are aware of on its scale. Most other examples are much smaller, about half the size of ours, not divided in upper and lower cases, and with only one drawer below the drop-front desk. The closest examples to our secretary had no exterior pilasters, and the interior document drawers were usually round half columns (fig. 4). The capitals on this cabinet, auctioned at Sotheby's in New York in 2002,⁷ are somewhat of a fantasy variety—triple tori, not really in keeping with classical prototypes.

No other examples examined had ring pulls on the lopers that supported the drop front. In fact, the small pulls we found on other examples appeared to be designed almost to blend into the front surface of the cabinet. The brass pulls on our loper/document

drawers appear to have been replacements, as other original ring pulls on the drawers and drop front are silver. Ring pulls are probably not reflective of the original means of extending the lopers.

Two cabinets appeared at Christie's in London in 1989 and 1996 that did have exterior pilasters, although they did not have the same configuration of cabinet doors and drawers as did our piece.⁸ One of these (1989) was missing its capitals, but had multiple element bases, similar to the capitals on Figure 4. On both, the bases were stepped almost as three bases stacked on top of each other. The 1996 cabinet had capitals that defy the classical expectations of pilaster capitals, but fit the requirement of filling the strange square space (fig. 5). On this cabinet the bases are also trimmed flush with the side of the cabinet. The capitals are mirror images of the bases.⁹

As long as we were making replacement capitals and bases, we decided to make a series and try them all out on the cabinet. James Heitchue, Mountmaker and Conservation Technician at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, prepared six sets of capitals and three sets of bases.¹⁰ The vacancy of the bases had the correct proportions to reflect the interior bases. Therefore, only one base was prepared for the lower case, following the example of the interior bases. On the upper case, however, the appearance of trimmed capitals and bases on the upper case of the Christie's 1996 mini-secretary allowed for this possibility.

UPPER CASE

Three options for the capital and two options for the base allowed for the following combinations: (fig. 6)

- a) Full capital with one cove; full base with one cove
- b) Trimmed capital with one cove; trimmed base with one cove
- c) Full capital with two coves; full base with one cove
- d) Trimmed capital with two coves; trimmed base with one cove



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Figure 6 . Upper case capital and base combinations.

LOWER CASE

Three options for the capital and one option for the base: (fig. 7)

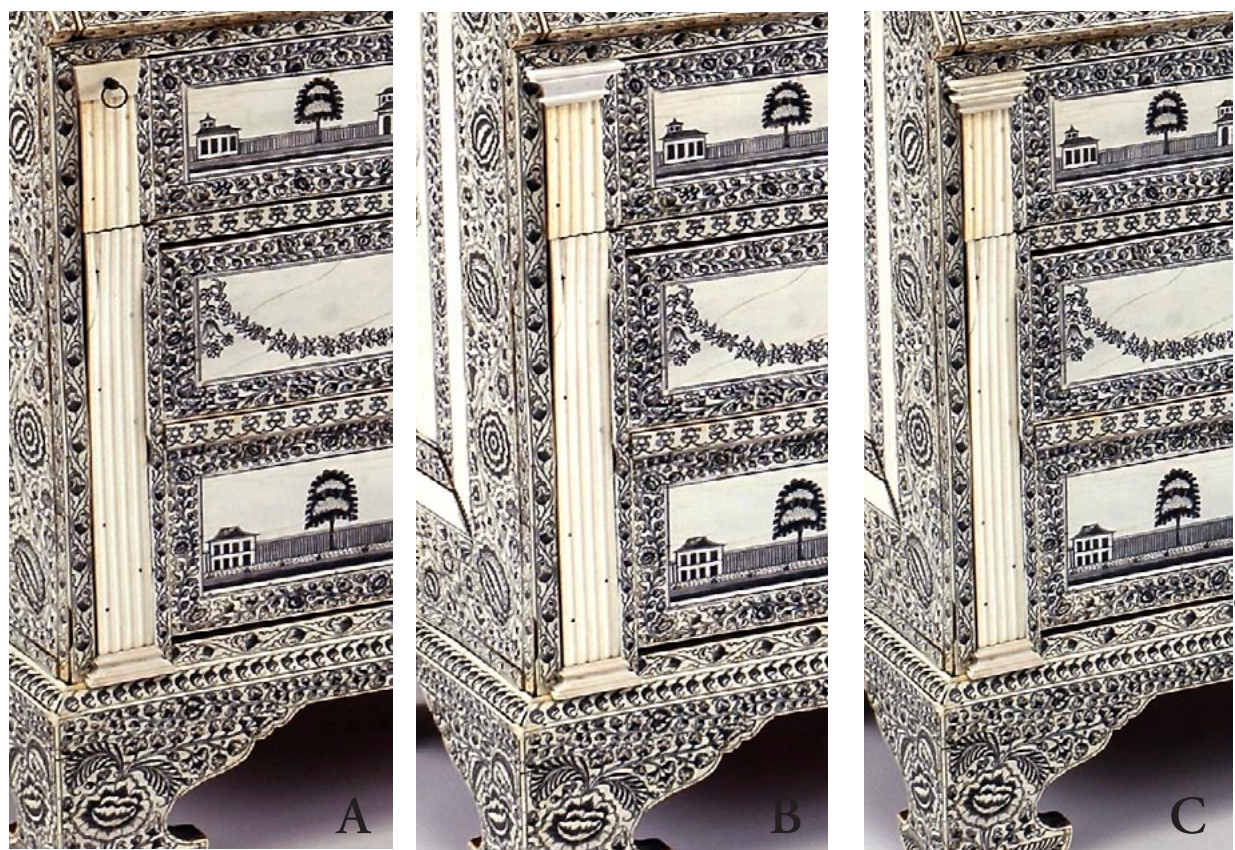
- a) Flat capital with pull; full base with one cove (modeled on interior)
- b) Full capital with one cove; full base with one cove
- c) Full capital with two coves; full base with one cove

The various combinations listed above allowed for five possible interchanges.

The decision for the upper case was option “d”; the decision made for the lower case was option “c.” These options seemed to be in keeping with the proportions of the exterior pilasters and with the scant evidence from other secretaries. The full capital on the lower case provides a means of pulling the lopers/document drawers open, yet it blends into the exterior surface like so many of its smaller

cousins. It is also likely that this type of capital would have been susceptible to falling off and thus would explain its being lost. The trimmed capitals and bases on the upper case, since they move with the doors when they are opened, allow for easier opening of these doors and do not interfere with the side moldings that are at the same height. All samples were retained, and these capitals and bases can be easily removed and replaced with one of the other samples or a new sample if additional information comes to light.

It appears that no convention was followed consistently in the group of Vizigapatam cabinets observed thus far.¹¹ Based on the current information we have about our cabinet and other examples, these seemed to be the most logical selections. Additionally, a poll taken of my colleagues at the AIC meeting in Minneapolis seemed to agree on the visual satisfaction of the option chosen for now.



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Figure 7. Lower case capital and base combinations.

We look forward to someone unearthing another such cabinet with exterior pilasters and capitals and bases intact for comparison and possible modification of the selections we made.

ENDNOTES

1 Gillis, Kathy Z. and David Park Curry, Conservation of an ivory-clad drop-front secretary from Vizigapatam, India, *The Meeting of East and West in the Furniture Trade*, Proceedings of the Sixth International Symposium on Wood and Furniture Conservation, 2002, p. 10-17. Since this publication, wood analysis confirmed that the backboards and interior woods are from the Family *rubiceae* and the pediment substrate is teak. A sample of the rear proper right foot analysis was carried out at both the Jodrell Laboratory at the Royal Botanic Gardens in the United Kingdom and at the Forest Products Laboratory in Madison, Wisconsin (with consistent results).

2 Acryloid B-72, ethyl methacrylate copolymer; thermoplastic acrylic resin.

3 Acryloid B-48N, methyl methacrylate copolymer, thermoplastic acrylic resin, (Rohm and Haas, Philadelphia).

4 Report from Anne Brown, April, 2000. The penwork was done with Pigma Micron Pens. No clear coating was applied.

5 A "testamentary letter" from Dorothy Willing Francis to her children, Elizabeth Francis and Anne Bayard, written in June of 1846 refers to this cabinet and notes "... I found it in my garret and much broken & had it repaired at no small expense ..." Since the cabinet came into the possession of Dorothy in 1826, we can ascertain that the old repairs on the cabinet date between 1826 and 1846.

6 Materials for loss replacement included Modostuc (distributed by Peregrine, Wellsville, UT) and Sculpey (distributed by Polyform Products, Elk Grove Village, IL 60007).

7 Sotheby's Sale #No7779, 19 Apr 02 NY (See Note #11 below for listing of all the Vizigapatam

cabinets which were consulted in our research; space does not allow for a comprehensive illustration of them here.)

8 Christie's London Sale "FORSAKE" 4163, November 16, 1989, Lot 28 and Christie's London Sale FANTASIA 5626, July 4, 1996, Lot 211.

9 Information is not currently available to ascertain whether these bases and capitals are original.

10 Replacement capitals and bases were first carved in basswood, and then silicone rubber molds were created. The final products were cast in Alumilite White, an aromatic isocyanate and blend of polyols (Alumilite Corporation, Kalamazoo, MI 49007).

11 At press time, this was the list of cabinets investigated. Not all were available for personal inspection.

Peabody Essex Museum, Salem, Massachusetts

Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam

Philadelphia Museum of Art

Christie's Sale LILA 1559, New York, October 18, 2005, Lot 303

Christie's Sale 7074, London, September 23, 2005, Lot 121

Sotheby's Sale No7779, New York, April 19, 2002, Lot 775

Sotheby's Sale LN7414 "COLZA" London July 4, 1997, Lot 1

Christie's Sale "FANTASIA" 5626 London, July 4, 1996, Lot 211

Christie's Sale "FORSAKE" 4163, London, November 16, 1989, Lot 28

Angus Wilkie, "Anglo-Indian Furniture," *Elle Décor* Feb/Mar 2001 p. 88

Christie's London (Pitchford Hall Sale) 1992 (illustrated in Anne-Noëlle Tamplin, "Twin Traditions," *The Antique Collector*, December/January 1994/1995, Volume 66, No. 1, p. 62