

## 5 CONSERVING THE FURNITURE IN THE DUNIMARLE COLLECTION

Jeremy Gow

In 1993, I moved back to my native Angus to set up an antique restoration business. Around the same time, Sir Timothy Clifford and the National Galleries of Scotland were arranging to bring the Dunimarle Collection to Duff House. Having built a workshop in the family farm near Forfar, I was in the right place to work on some of the exquisite furniture collected by Magdalene Erskine. Once the National Galleries had given the go-ahead, I took on about 15 items, a practical number given the timescale.

Much of the furniture had been bought in Paris by Sir William Erskine of Torrie, most likely at the Fesch sale of 1816, and had come directly back to the family home in Dunimarle Castle, where it was left intact. What was unusual was its condition. For all this time, it had been largely untouched – just covered in blankets and left alone. For a restorer, that counts for a lot.

In the normal course of work, two things are necessary. First, the damage caused by natural ageing and everyday wear and tear, such as bashes from vacuum cleaners, water spilled from vases and woodworm, must be repaired. Second, the work of previous restorers must be addressed. That work might have been excellent for its time and exactly what the furniture needed, but it will almost inevitably have aged at a different rate to the rest of the piece and will need remedial work of its own.

With the Dunimarle Collection, this was rarely the case. Typically, furniture from this period would be onto its third or fourth restoration. In this instance, time had taken its toll and the pieces were in a dilapidated condition, but they were the originals and the quality was fabulous – the best of the best.

The job involved something like six months' work spread over a year and a half. Restoring is a slow business that requires patience to allow glues to dry and wood finishing to take place.



5.1a Emperor's chair for Napoleon's stepson, c.1800

It is often the rarest items that are the greatest pleasure to work on – and there can be few more rare than the Dunimarle Collection emperor's chair that belonged to Napoleon's stepson, Eugene de Beauharnais (Figure 5.1). It has a serpent's head as a back leg, two winged lions of St Mark as the front legs, elaborately carved rams' heads at the base of the arms, and a cornucopia (or horn of plenty) at the top of each arm. Even the embossing on the leather is fantastic. There is nothing else like it, and yet there is no signature whatsoever. A good guess is that it was made by François-Honoré-Georges Jacob-Desmarter, who was known for making high-quality chairs in his pioneering workshop in Paris in the early 1800s. It is such a spectacular piece, you wonder if he hid a signature underneath the leather.

At the start of the restoration process, the chair was in very good condition, with just a little bit of woodworm on the framework underneath. Like a lot of the furniture, it needed the veneers glued back where they were beginning to come loose, especially around the base, where it is normal to get the most damage. Although it arrived covered in a layer of grime, it was reasonable to suppose that anybody who had carved such wonderful heads would also have used an excellent piece of wood – and that is exactly what it was. It was a fabulous piece, and all the more so because it was so unusual.

Today's restorers need a wide array of skills. My particular specialities are veneer work and marquetry, but at any given time a restorer can be engaged in cabinet-making, carving, Boulle work (a specialised form of marquetry) and polishing, all jobs that were once specialist trades and all skills in danger of dying out. Originally, the cabinet-maker would have made the furniture, but might not have veneered it and would probably have outsourced any carving. Likewise, the marquetry and veneering were separate skills, sometimes done by one person, sometimes two. After this, a polisher would set to work. Gilding, too, was a separate profession, as were chair-making, upholstery and horology (clock-making).

As in any other profession, an apprenticeship has to be served in order to become a skilled practitioner. In this line of work, that apprenticeship will take at least seven years. And, of course, after that, the learning continues. My own apprenticeship turned out to be crucial to my work on the Dunimarle Collection. Having taken an interest in woodwork at school, I took a course in furniture restoring and, by the age of 18, was already learning my craft. What made all the difference were the four years I spent working for a furniture restorer in south-west France. When I was still in my early 20s, I got a job with Jacques Dubarry, a farmer who had lost his stock of 500 sheep to brucellosis and, at the age of 50, had turned his practical skills to furniture restoration.

He was based in Vic-Fezensac in the Ger region, an untouched and unspoilt area where he frequently dealt with furniture that had not moved from the chateau it was made for. During that period, I worked on perhaps 50 jobs a year, but, almost as importantly, my three colleagues were working alongside me at a similar rate. While I was solving my own technical problems, I would cast an eye over the challenges they were dealing with. Our collective knowledge increased with every day.

It was the perfect grounding for the Dunimarle Collection, which includes so much French furniture. It is a lot less daunting to work on antiques of this quality when the restorer has already seen or worked on similar examples. Central to the role of a restorer is an understanding of the furniture's provenance. Before starting work on a piece, a knowledge of historical glues and construction techniques is needed, along with a sense of how wood will react under different conditions. Experience has shown that a nice piece of rosewood that has sat for years on a veneer shelf will not have oxidised as much as a contemporary piece of furniture that has been exposed to the sun; they are the same age, but a completely different colour. The restorer needs to know that rosewood is difficult to bleach and that, if it is sanded, it will go back to its natural colour – jet black – making it very hard to blend in. By contrast, mahogany and walnut bleach well.

Having spent those years in France, as well as working alongside master restorers in Austria, Australia and Edinburgh, I knew a lot about French furniture, its different woods and distinct techniques. In the 18th century, French furniture-makers used a huge variety of woods, both exotic and provincial, all of which have their own qualities. Compared with their British equivalents, French pieces use much more marquetry and veneering, and a lot less mahogany. Walnut, which is excellent for carving, allowing for a fantastic level of detail, was more popular in France than the UK.



5.1b Emperor's chair, details

LOW  
RES

5.2 Regency ebony sofa table with cedar drawer lining, c.1810

LOW  
RES

5.3 Pair of French ebony barometers with brass inlay, c.1800

Similarly, the woods used for marquetry in France were quite different from those employed in this country. Another common feature of French furniture is that it looks fancier on the outside than on the inside. Indeed, it was sometimes made by different people: one would make the carcass (the plain chest with some drawers, for example) and then an ebonist would do the fine marquetry and inlays. All this knowledge was invaluable when it came to the Dunimarle Collection.

Other unusual items included a Regency sofa table made of ebony (Figure 5.2). The drawers were made of cedar, which in itself is a good sign of quality, but to see a wood as expensive as ebony being used not just for decoration but as a veneer made it especially rare. The bands of ebony were about 3in. wide (also unusual) and inlaid with boxwood to make them stand out. With this piece, it was important to study the underside because the construction wood was beech, which is particularly susceptible to woodworm, unlike the much harder ebony surface. Fortunately, treating it was straightforward and did not present any problems. The inlay around the outside, however, was either missing or had popped up and needed to be redone. The whole piece had become grey through lack of dusting and waxing, and needed to be lightly revived with linseed oil, vinegar and methylated spirits. The linseed oil feeds the wood and rejuvenates the surface, while the other two lift off the dirt. Once the oil has dried, which takes a while, it can then be re-polished.

Also novel were a pair of French barometers with a lovely brass inlay inset in ebony and a gorgeous marquetry design (Figure 5.3). These were of very high quality, and I have seen a barometer like them on only one other occasion. Because they had been stored in a damp area, a lot of the mouldings around the edge were lifting, loose or missing. Some were replaced, others were lifted and re-glued.

The same was true of a brass inlay. One pane of glass was broken and had to be remade. It seemed too good a piece for the brass finials (which go up) and the pendants (which hang down) not to be gilded, so these were sent away. Being so dark, the ebony needed to be offset by a flash of gold.

Curious, too, was a gentleman's dressing chest (Figure 5.4) that looked quite ordinary at first glance; however, one section pulled out to reveal a writing slope and the top lifted up to reveal a mirror and numerous small compartments inside. It is like a piece that would go on a ship; it can do everything. Again, I have only seen one other like it. It had what are known as ogee bracket feet – shaped rather than flat – and those that were missing had to be replaced. Some veneers were lifting and had to be glued down. Also lifting around the drawers was the cock beading that protects the veneer. Timothy Clifford was happy to leave the cracks inside the drawers where there was shrinkage because of age, which is the right approach. With furniture of such high quality, the aim is to do as little as possible, to make the furniture look loved and not like it has just come out of a restorer's workshop. With some of the small compartments, however, shrinkage meant the lids were not staying in place and they had to be reconstructed. After that, it was a question of re-waxing and polishing to build up the shine, without making it look as though it had been completely stripped.



5.4 Mahogany gentleman's dressing chest, c.1770



5.5 Pair of mahogany Georgian dumb waiters, c.1780

Some of the pieces that were worked on were quite simple. Take, for example, the two-tier Georgian mahogany dumb waiters (Figure 5.5), on which the servants could leave food, condiments or drinks before retiring to let the guests continue their conversations in private. Its state was typical of the collection. After sitting under blankets for 150 years, it was covered in a layer of dirt and grime, looking nothing like the well-crafted antique it is. At the same time, it was a joy for a restorer, because there were no botched repairs on it or unnecessarily replaced legs. The item on display today looks bright and attractive, yet it did not have to be stripped or polished. Rather, it was a case of careful cleaning and rejuvenating the old finish.

The modern approach is for informed and sympathetic conservation of our heritage. If possible, the aim is to make the furniture look as though it has not been restored. That is the real art. Rather than trying to pretend an item is as bright and shiny as the day it was made, its age is acknowledged, even if it means deliberately weathering a modern replacement to look as though centuries of hands have left their mark. In Britain, we tend to under-restore; in France, where the furniture was always glitzier, the preference is to go for something brighter. It depends on the context; the furniture should look loved and fit in with its surroundings, not call attention to itself.



5.6 Oak grandfather clock with swan's neck pediment, c.1790



5.7 Set of walnut carved Austrian hall chairs, c.1720

Other jobs required more intervention. There was the grandfather clock that had taken a few bashes over the years (Figure 5.6). Nothing too ornate or unusual: it was a nice piece of oak furniture that must have served its purpose, making sure the household ran to time. It was missing what is called a swan's neck pediment, the decorative S-shaped gable above the clock face, which had to be remade. That required a band saw to cut the shape, then carving tools to get the concave surface before sanding it down. Machines cannot be used for work of this delicacy, which is what makes the job complicated. The brass filaments also had to be replaced and the surfaces needed reviving and rejuvenating.

When the damage is more acute, radical action is sometimes necessary. That was the case with the set of seven hall chairs from early-18th-century Austria (Figure 5.7). Made in walnut, they had beautiful carved backs – every one different – with a variety of leg designs, some turned, some fluted. Sadly, none of them are signed (unlike later French furniture), and it is almost impossible to find out who made them and give credit where it is due. Gorgeous though they were, they were badly damaged and two of the chairs were sacrificed to make the five on display. It was a difficult decision, but preferable to the complex task of remaking the seats or returning the legs by shaping pieces of wood of a similar vintage, adding marks, dents and water stains, and even drilling woodworm-like holes for authenticity.

One example of a signed piece of furniture is a *commode*, the French name for a chest of drawers, that bears the name of Jean-Baptiste Hedouin stamped at the top of the legs, under the marble top (Figure 5.8). The stamp was proof the cabinet-maker had paid his taxes before it went on sale. It is invaluable information for a restorer, because it allows for accurate dating of the furniture. There are volumes of books listing all the French makers. Sometimes their date of birth is unknown, but the records tell us when they passed their exams and when they died. With an accurate date, there is a better chance of matching the wood or veneer for any necessary repairs.

The colours on this particular *commode* today are not at all as it would have looked when it was made. The tulipwood on the inside would have had a bright pink colour when new, while the kingwood on the outside would have been a grainy purple. These woods are often put together because there is a strong contrast between them. The inlay, which would typically be boxwood or sycamore, would have been stained green. In the years since it was built in about 1750, the wood has oxidised and mellowed; where once it would have had a bright finish with gleaming golden handles, it has become dull.

Being curved, the brass mounts on the sides of the *commode* would have been very difficult to make. The handles had to be cast and 'sizzled', a process that puts back the definition lost in the casting process. Finally, they would be gilded in baths of gold and mercury (a technique so dangerous it is now illegal), leaving them bright and shiny. Sometimes it is enough simply to clean a handle like this with a fine soap to reveal the gold beneath, but in this instance there was so little gold left that re-gilding was required. That, in turn, created its own problem, because a bright golden handle would have looked out of place on a 250-year-old chest. Between 40 and 60 per cent of the gold had then to be rubbed off, where it would have naturally worn away thanks to people opening the drawers and cleaning the handles. The gold remains in the crevices and the dips that would not have been cleaned so often. It means a fortune is spent on gilt, then half of it is rubbed off!

Gilt handles are a sign of high-quality furniture, because people could afford to use gold only on the best items. The gilding would have cost as much as the casting. Examples are the three *bureaux plats* – or writing tables – one signed by Jacques Dubois underneath (Figure 5.9), the other two unsigned but similar. The quality of the workmanship is amazing, right down to the marquetry going round the handles.

The mounts of ormolu, a gold–mercury amalgam applied to bronze, still had a thick layer of gold on them and just needed to be cleaned to come up looking absolutely brilliant. They look as though they are re-gilded, although they are not.

In the 20 years since I restored these three, I have restored only one other, so restoring them was an unusual privilege. The Dubois desk was made of *satine* (or bloodwood in English) with a kingwood outside. Their oak frame makes them heavy, putting pressure on their fragile legs, one of which was held together with a piece of wire when we started work on it. Having made sure it was solid, the veneers that were lifting then had to be re-glued. It was normal for furniture-makers to cut exotic woods into veneers to make them go further. They secured them with animal or fish glue, which is an advantage to us, 200-plus years later, because it allows the veneer to be steamed off and re-glued. Using an old glue means that, if something slips, you need only heat it up with some hot water to be able to move it back into position. Too often today modern glues and thin veneers are used, that cannot be re-used and recuperated in the same way. One of the joys of working on an early-18th-century piece like this is the knowledge that the veneer will be of a workable thickness. There is, however, a problem in that the glues are reaching the end of their life and are crystallising beneath the veneer, which becomes unstuck. Sometimes the entire veneer has to be completely re-glued.

One of the *bureaux plats* was missing a lot of tulipwood. Unlike mahogany, which can be replaced by veneers from another piece of furniture and easily disguised, tulipwood is rare and has to be replaced by new wood. Being bright pink, it calls attention to itself. To make it look as though it is 200 years old involves complicated colour matching, and hitting it with nitric acid to knock out the colour.

Desks like this often sat next to the window, so one side of each green-leather top tended to be badly bleached by sunlight. Dubois took the leather to the very edge of the moulding on the outside of the table, where other cabinet-makers would have inserted a piece of wood. It is clear where the leather has shrunk and the wood on the table has moved beneath it, with the odd wormhole coming up through it. Generally, however, the leather was in good condition and too good a quality to consider replacing, something that would have been difficult to do convincingly. It is always a joy to work on something of exceptional quality, and the *bureaux plats* are among my favourite pieces in the Dunimarle Collection.

It is fascinating to return to Duff House and see how the furniture I restored nearly 25 years ago is shaping up. Only the passage of time reveals the durability of the restoration work. I totally admire the wonderful craftsmanship and foresight that went into making some of these fabulous pieces 250-plus years ago in conditions hard to imagine.



5.8 French marquetry *commode* by Jean-Baptiste Hedouin, c.1750



5.9 *Bureau plat* by Jacques Dubois, veneered in bloodwood and kingwood, c.1745