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Kleurrijk Nederland: Beschilderd Meubilair 1600-1930

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Cover Page



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7. Abstract

Painted furniture has been made in the Netherlands ever since the Middle Ages. Prior to 1600, however, there was no guild specializing in its production. Cabinet-makers, working in oak, had a monopoly of furniture-making. At the same time, peddler craftsmen were allowed to make simple household items like mousetraps, lanterns, birdcages and sliding boxes, using inferior wood such as softwood. In Dutch cities during the 17th century, the economy declined but the population increased which led to a growing demand for cheaper furniture. Gradually peddler craftsmen started to make furniture as well and since they were only allowed to use cheap woods they painted their work. To avoid competition, the traditional cabinet-makers' guilds called for more regulation. Above all, around 1600 a number of Dutch cities became large enough to make specialization economically viable and guilds devoted exclusively to the production of painted furniture were founded in the largest cities, Amsterdam first of all.

In these guilds, these former peddler craftsmen were now called *witwerkers*, referring to their use of softwood, also known as white wood at the time. From 1650 onwards *witwerkers* guilds were founded in an ever-growing number of cities, first in the Noord- and Zuid-Holland provinces, and finally, in the 18th century, throughout the whole western part of The Netherlands. Between 1680 and 1780 *witwerkers* produced furniture for everybody everywhere, selling their furniture throughout the country and abroad. In manor houses their painted tea tables adorned the drawing rooms of the aristocracy and plain furniture was used in the kitchens and servants' quarters. At the same time this simple furniture was in high demand amongst all social strata, the poorer the client, the less decorated the piece.

After the depression during the French period (1795-1813) and the abolition of the guilds, fewer but larger companies developed. Painted furniture never returned to the living rooms of the wealthy but was still used extensively in every other context. From the late 19th century onwards a few of the larger companies, mainly in Rotterdam and Amsterdam, developed into completely mechanised factories. However, mechanisation also meant that oak furniture became cheaper and cheaper, finally pushing painted furniture out of the market altogether around 1930.

Based on extensive archival research, including notary inventories and guild regulations and through a close analysis of hundreds of surviving pieces, Hans Piena has made a detailed study of the development of the production and use of painted softwood furniture in the Netherlands. The late 19th and early 20th century perception of painted furniture as having ancient folk origins is shown to be a myth, and numerous fakes are identified and the time and place of their production made clear.

8. Curriculum Vitae

Hans Piena, geboren te Rotterdam (1964), studeerde af in de Culturele Prehistorie en Middeleeuwse Archeologie aan de Universiteit van Amsterdam (1992). Vervolgens voltooide hij de studie Meubel- en Interieurrestauratie aan de Opleiding Restauratoren, te Amsterdam. Dertien jaar lang werkte hij als meubelrestaurator, eerst voor het Gelders Erfgoed, later als zelfstandige. Sinds 2008 bekleedt hij de functie van conservator aan het Nederlands Openluchtmuseum te Arnhem. In die hoedanigheid doet hij onderzoek naar een veelheid aan objectcategorieën.