

## Decorated paper on the inside of an eighteenth-century writing cabinet

■ Tirza Mol



Figure 1 Upper case of an eighteenth-century writing cabinet.



Figure 2 The inside of the object lined with decorative paper.

Figure 3 The locations of the brocade paper (pink arrows) and chintz paper (green arrows).



Decorated paper is the collective name used for paper that is coloured or patterned by hand or with the aid of a press. It was used principally on book bindings and endpapers and on the back of playing cards, but is also found as a lining in chests and cupboards.<sup>1</sup>

After Johannes Gutenberg developed his system of moveable metal letters, in the middle of the fifteenth century, the number of printed books increased rapidly. In the sixteenth century decorated paper and cardboard were often used as a cheap alternative for parchment or leather for the boards of books.<sup>2</sup> From the seventeenth century, decorated paper was also applied to the inside of furniture. The technique became quite popular in the eighteenth century when a variety of new manufacturing processes made the papers more readily available.<sup>3</sup>

The use of decorated paper as an imitation of luxurious materials was in full accord with the Baroque period. Illusion and *trompe-l'oeil* effects are examples of some of the theatrical aspects characterising the art produced in this period.<sup>4</sup>

An example of the application of decorated paper in furniture can be found in an eighteenth-century writing cabinet (figure 1). The object is of South German or Austrian origin, and can be recognised as being from the late Baroque period.<sup>5</sup> The inside of the upper case is partly furnished with decorated paper (figure 2).

Inside the writing cabinet, three different kinds of paper have been applied. A brocade paper had been applied when the object was first assembled.<sup>6</sup> It lines the central part of the object and the inside of the drawer above the central door. At some later time, this brocade paper was partly covered with a chintz paper (figure 3). The outer drawers are lined with this chintz paper only (figure 4). The drawers in the internal drawer case are lined with a marbled paper (figure 5). The papers and their production are briefly discussed below.

### Brocade paper

Brocade paper is used as an imitation of gilt leather or brocade (figure 6). Its production started in the late seventeenth century in Southern Germany. As



Figure 4 One of the outer drawers, lined with chintz paper.

with gilt leather the patterns depict mostly flowers, foliage and animal motifs.<sup>7</sup>

The production of this embossed paper requires the use of a press. The paper is painted and placed on a piece of felt. Next, the sheet is covered with a layer of egg white. The paper is dampened and covered with metal leaf (usually brass or tin). An engraved metal plate is heated and laid on top of it. With a rolling press, pressure is applied so that the thin foils attach to the raised parts of the paper. The egg white applied in the previous phase serves as an adhesive. The remaining metal is brushed away and the paper is now decorated in so-called silver or gold.<sup>8</sup> Brocade paper lost its popularity towards the end of eighteenth century. In the Rococo period chintz paper came into favour.<sup>9</sup>

#### Chintz paper

This decorative paper is suggestive of chintz textiles imported from India (figure 7). Original Indian chintz was very much sought-after. It was a printed cotton fabric, typically decorated with floral and foliate patterns, with complicated details. From the seventeenth century, European colonial powers were very active in the trade in textiles from Asia. Initially they traded the textile, but gradually started to produce their own. However, during the eighteenth century, economic circumstances forced many European cotton printers to start printing on paper, which was a cheaper material. The same technique and designs were used, hence the name chintz paper.<sup>10</sup>

The production procedure is similar to that of textile printing: the high parts of a wooden block with a specific carved pattern are covered with paint and pressed on the paper. To make sure the prints line up correctly, repeat pins are fitted in the corners of the blocks.<sup>11</sup>

#### Marbled paper

Several countries, such as China, Japan and countries from the Middle East, claim to be the origina-

Figure 8 Detail of the marbled paper in the internal drawer case.



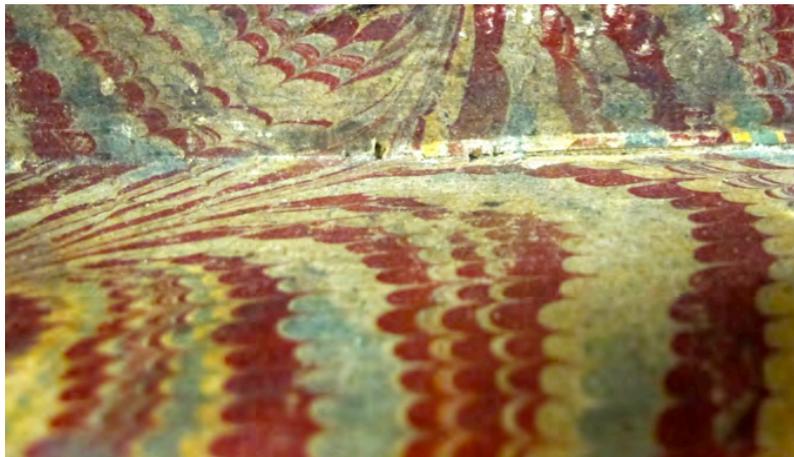
Figure 5 The drawers of the internal drawer case, lined with marbled paper.



Figure 6 Detail of the brocade paper in the central part of the cabinet.



Figure 7 Detail of the chintz paper in the central part of the cabinet.



tors of marbled paper. The accepted theory is that European craftsmen learned the technique from the Turks; marbled paper is sometimes referred to as Turkish paper.<sup>12</sup> The variety of marbled papers is almost unlimited. There are stone marbles, combed marbles, feathered marbles, fantasy marbles, and so on. The marble paper in the writing cabinet is a combed marble (figure 8). This was the most commonly used variation in the seventeenth century and was mainly realised in the colours red, yellow and blue.<sup>13</sup>



**Figure 9** Details of two pieces of chintz paper. The chintz paper in the central part (above) has lost colour compared with the paper in the drawers (below). The paper in the central part of the cabinet has probably been more often exposed to light.



**Figure 10** The brocade paper is loosening, cracking and has suffered material loss. It has accumulated surface grime.



**Figure 12** The restored woodwork of the cabinet.

Hand-marbled papers are made by floating paints on a liquid surface. The water-based paint layers stay afloat on the surface of water that has been made more viscous by seaweed extracts or gums. Ox-gall soap was traditionally added to improve the rheological quality of the paint.<sup>14</sup> A rake or comb is used to mingle the paint. After the desired pattern is achieved, a sheet of paper, previously treated with alum, is laid gently onto the surface of the bath. When the paper is lifted off, the paint has stuck to it. A new paint layer has to be created for each new sheet, which is why no two hand-made marble patterns are ever the same.<sup>15</sup> The nineteenth century was marked by industrialisation. Hand bookbinding was diminishing and the production of hand-decorated paper declined sharply. Only in the 1890s, with the ascent of the Arts and Crafts movement, it once more became popular.

The past few decades have seen a new surge of interest in the technique. A very positive development, as most of the old paper that we encounter in cabinets and chests is in poor condition. The paper in this writing cabinet, for example, is locally discoloured, it is buckling, cracking and loosening. Lacunas show the bare wooden support. The paper is stained and has accumulated grime on the surface (figures 9, 10, 11). The woodwork of the object has been restored (figure 12). The paper, however, has not yet been treated. Hopefully it will be treated in the near future.

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**Figure 11** The marbled paper is stained and has accumulated surface grime. It is loosening at the edges and some lacunas are visible.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> A. Meincke, C. White and K. Nichols, 'Decorative and functional use of paper on furniture', Arlington, Virginia: WAG postprints, 2003, p. 2.
- <sup>2</sup> G. Grünebaum, *Buntpapier. Geschichte, Herstellung, Verwendung*, Köln: DuMont Buchverlag, 1982, p. 20.
- <sup>3</sup> Meincke, White and Nichols 2003, p. 2.
- <sup>4</sup> J.F. Heijbroek and T.C. Greven, *Sierpapier. Marmer-, brokaat- en sitspapier in Nederland*, Amsterdam: Uitgeverij De Buitenkant, 1994, p. 36.
- <sup>5</sup> The Baroque was introduced relatively late in Germany. The thirty-year war (1618-1648) may have contributed to this late adaptation even in court circles.
- <sup>6</sup> Meincke, White and Nichols 2003, p. 3.
- <sup>7</sup> A. von Haemmerle, *Buntpapier. Herkommen, Geschichte, Techniken, Beziehungen zur Kunst*, München: Callwey Verlag, 1977, p. 155.
- <sup>8</sup> Heijbroek and Greven 1994, p. 63.
- <sup>9</sup> Heijbroek and Greven 1994, pp. 63-64.
- <sup>10</sup> R.J. Wolfe, *Marbled paper. Its history, techniques and patterns. With special reference to the relationship of marbling to bookbinding in Europe and the western world*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990, p. 13.
- <sup>11</sup> I. Hesse and S. Kraus, *Über handgemachtes Buntpapier, eine Zusammenfassung*, Hamburg: Buntpapierverlag, 2007, p. 33.
- <sup>12</sup> F. Tiquet, *Korte onderrigting en leer, van zeer fraaye geheymen. Diverse Edel-Gesteentes daar men de natuur in Steenen vindt of ziet, na te Bootzen als Lapis Lazuli, Jaspis, Agaat, Porphit etc.*, Antwerpen: Philippus van Overbeken, 1741, pp. 31-33.
- <sup>13</sup> Meincke, White and Nichols 2003, p. 3.
- <sup>14</sup> Meincke, White and Nichols 2003, p. 2.
- <sup>15</sup> Hesse und Kraus 2007, p. 25.

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