

## Dutch painted furniture. Imitation of function, style, construction and material

### ■ Hans Piena

#### Research

The last fourteen years I have conducted research on Dutch painted furniture and its makers. The research included a survey of all known painted pieces in Dutch museum collections. Apart from that, the archives of the major production centres, such as Amsterdam and Rotterdam, have been studied extensively. Although oak examples do exist, the vast majority of Dutch painted furniture is made of softwood. These pieces were produced in cities by members of guilds known as *witwerkers*. 'Wit' means white, and at that time it referred to the unpainted state in which the masterpiece had to be presented, as well as to the pale colour of the softwood.

#### Guilds

Witwerkers emerge in the biggest cities first. Their rise correlates with the size of the city, which also allowed specialisation of craftsmen. The larger the cities the more room for specialists like witwerkers. The first witwerkers guild was founded in Amsterdam in the early seventeenth century. During the course of the seventeenth century, other cities in the most densely populated region followed, such as Dordrecht and Rotterdam. Later, during the eighteenth century, guilds were established throughout the whole northwest of the Netherlands.

#### Number of witwerkers

At the end of the Golden Age the number of witwerkers grew considerably. Through the influx of immigrants there was a need for more furniture. Because of the stagnating economy from 1660 onwards, this furniture needed to be cheaper and cheaper. With softwood and paint, witwerkers offered the solution. The numbers of witwerkers within these guilds vary from city to city. In small towns like Alkmaar and Middelburg only a few were active at any given time. In Amsterdam, between 1600 and 1800 a total of 576 different witwerkers are known by name. These are primarily the masters; the list do not include the anonymous servants. From the French period (1795-1811) we have lists of both masters and servants. These lists

show that the total number of people active in the field was three to four times higher. Within the St. Joseph guild, which headed all woodworkers, the witwerkers formed the third biggest group, behind the carpenters and cabinetmakers. During the eighteenth century more than fifty workshops were active simultaneously in Amsterdam.

#### Trade

Witwerkers sold their furniture in different ways. First of all, there was the guild shop in which all witwerkers could present their furniture to the public. This shop was run by the wives of the witwerkers. Secondly, there were the market places where individual witwerkers could sell their goods. Thirdly, the furniture was traded by ship all over the country into even the smallest hamlets. And finally, painted furniture was, like anything else, sold secondhand at auctions and on the street by private owners and merchants.

The distribution was not restricted to the Netherlands alone. Witwerkers are known to have exported their products to Germany, Russia and to the former colony of Suriname. Nowadays we still find examples in Norway, Sweden, Denmark, England, the Caribbean and the United States.

#### Total production

How many pieces of furniture did they make? The account book of one master witwerker has been preserved. His name was Frans Dirksz Sluijter (1667-1727), from Amsterdam. The account book covers a period from 1706 to 1720. During these fourteen years he produced a total of 11,685 pieces of furniture, ranging from all kinds of tables and cabinets to smaller items like tea trays. Sluijter had a large workshop with eight servants. The average workshop at that time had four. Taking this into account the total national production of witwerkers in the early eighteenth century must have amounted to just under 50,000 pieces of furniture each year.

#### Price

With paint and softwood witwerkers were able to imitate every existing fashionable model, such as cabinets, wardrobes, chest of drawers, tables and

roll-top desks. Although smaller in number than the cabinetmakers, witwerkers probably produced more items per day. Their simple construction and decoration techniques made this possible. Only when really necessary they used joinery like mortise-and-tenon joints. In order to reduce drying time the paints were often water-based and the varnishes spirit-based. Not only could they produce items more quickly, witwerkers could also produce at lower cost, because of their simple techniques and cheap material. During the eighteenth century a witwerkers cabinet cost on average about a quarter of the price compared to the cabinetmaker's equivalent.

### Role in society

It is long believed that painted furniture was a rural phenomenon, and a late echo of city life, a case of *gesunkenes Kulturgut*, but it is not. Throughout the period of research (1600-1900), witwerker furniture and cabinetmakers furniture was used side by side in the same households in every city and throughout the countryside. For instance, the more representative mahogany gate leg table took pride of place in the living room, while at the same time the mahogany grained gate leg table was used in the kitchen. Just like nowadays we have an upholstered set in the living room and a plastic set in the garden.

Both the cabinetmakers piece and the witwerkers equivalent were contemporary.

There are some important exceptions in which witwerker furniture played the leading role. With paint, witwerkers were able to evoke vivid biblical or mythological scenes far better than the cabinetmakers with their veneer. During the eighteenth century tea tables with such scenes were immensely popular in the representative rooms of the aristocracy. In this period one or two beautifully painted pieces were combined with cabinetmakers furniture in the prestigious living rooms. Towards the end of the eighteenth century painted furniture even became a dominant feature in the interiors of the elite. The nobility and aristocracy choose completely painted suites of furniture, including chests of drawers, wicker chairs, gate leg tables, bed tables and canopy beds.

This choice for cheaper furniture was, of course, not only induced by fashion. The stagnating economy, partly because of the frequent wars with England, forced even the aristocracy to look for cheaper alternatives.

Contrary to the above examples, there are two types of furniture that, during the nineteenth century, do form a late echo of elite furniture, illustrated in the following case study.

Figure 1 Roll-top desk, Carel Breytspraak, 1808. Collection Royal Palace Amsterdam. Inv. nr. KP 4183.



### A bureau for the king, groats for the people

In 1808 King Louis Napoleon converted the former town hall at the Dam Square in Amsterdam to a royal palace. For this he ordered hundreds of pieces of furniture. Louis Napoleon more or less imitated the prestigious interior decoration schemes of the palaces of his more powerful brother, Emperor Napoleon Bonaparte. Among the suppliers was Carel Breytspraak, the best paid furniture maker of the king. His most outstanding piece is no doubt the roll-top desk, still in the palace today (figure 1).<sup>1</sup> The construction wood is oak, on top of which mahogany veneer is applied in mirrored fashion. For Dutch standards the mercury-gilded fittings are of exceptionally high quality. The roll-top desk must have made a devastating impression on the furniture makers in Amsterdam and from there on reverberated throughout the country, not only among cabinet-makers but also among witwerkers.

### The affordable echo

The echo of the roll-top desk is clearly visible in witwerkers furniture. Pieces with different functions began to mimic not only its shape, but also the mahogany and even the mirrored veneer. Apart from that, the witwerkers equivalent was also embellished with fittings. Contrary to their royal counterpart cast iron ornaments were used, originally produced for iron stoves. Needless to say, the gilding is not gold but bronze paint.



Figures 2a, b Groats chest, 1810-1850. Size: h 127 x w 115 x d 32.5 cm. Collection Holland Open Air Museum. Inv. nr. NOM.11120-50.





**Figures 3a, b** Peat chest, 1860-1880.  
 Size: h 154 x w 125 x d 47 cm. Collection Holland Open  
 Air Museum. Inv. nr. NOM.40568-71.

### Equality and writing

Let us ponder a little longer on the imitation of writing desks. Ever since there have been differences in wealth and power, people have tried to imitate the life of those one step higher up the social ladder. The Napoleonic era added a political dimension to this. The power of the Dutch nobility and aristocracy and their nepotism got restricted. Guided by the principle of equality one was rewarded for his merit, not for his birth. It meant more class mobility. People from lower strata obtained administrative positions. It is all condensed in Napoleon's own hobbyhorse: '*Chaque soldat porte un bâton de maréchal dans sa besace*', in other words, everyone has a chance to get promoted. The constitutions from 1798, 1801 and 1805 stated that those men who could support their family, who renounced federalism and who could read and write were allowed to vote.<sup>2</sup> (Women, like slaves, were excluded, equality had its limits.) This way one's social status got linked with literacy. Much of this was turned back once Napoleon was defeated. However, having had a taste of equality, the masses, more than ever before, started to copy the lifestyle of those higher up the social ladder. This in essence is reflected in the popularity of the roll-top desk.

### Groats chest

There was only one slight problem in all of this. The king could be expected to need a roll-top desk since he had a lot of writing and reading to do.



The average *witwerker's* costumer had no need for a roll-top desk since he did not earn his living with reading and writing. Particularly during the hard times after Napoleon the majority could only afford the most basic furniture for storage, eating and sleeping. The roll-top desk lookalikes, once opened, turn out to be not bureaus. In reality they serve to store groats, i.e. cereals and beans. The Dutch term for these pieces is *gortlade* or groats chest. Groats chests, disguised as a roll-top desk, were first produced around 1800-1820. The earliest examples reflect the neoclassical style of the late eighteenth century. The youngest examples date from around 1860-1880. They were solely used in the province of Noord-Holland. Some fifteen examples are known to have survived to this very day (figures 2a, b).

#### Peat chest

Another type of furniture that got dressed up like a mahogany-veneered roll-top desk during this period is the peat chest (figures 3a, b). Due to its purpose it was usually placed near the fireplace. Contrary to the groats chest the peat chest was used throughout the Netherlands. Both the groats chest and the peat chest were produced during a 75-year timespan between 1800 and 1875. They were in use by people of average wealth and of all trades. Apart from the roll-top desk, the shape of a fall-front desk was as popular for groats chests as it was for peat chests.

The ironic thing is: the post Napoleonic elite, so those whose lifestyle served as an example for the less wealthy, did not even write at a roll-top desk. Again and again you see that mayors, notaries, doctors, pastors and teachers worked at a flat four-legged table, covered with green fabric. Clearly the factual use of the roll-top desk was subservient to its appearance when it came to imitation by a lower class.

#### Conclusion

Dutch painted furniture is mainly produced in cities. It was an integral part of domestic culture both in the cities as well as on the countryside. It is safe to say that every household owned a piece of *witwerkers* furniture, much like Ikea furniture nowadays. Its popularity can be explained not only by its low price. What is good for king Louis Napoleon is good for everybody. It is in our nature to imitate the material culture and thereby the life of wealthier and more powerful people, each within his own means.

Hans Piena  
Curator Domestic Culture, Holland Open Air  
Museum, Arnhem, the Netherlands  
H.Piena@openluchtmuseum.nl

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> P. van Duin, A. Gosliga, 'Carel Breyspraak Sr., Hofleverancier van Lodewijk Napoleon.

De Breyspraak-meubelen uit de collectie van het Koninklijk Paleis Amsterdam', in: *Bulletin KNOB*, 2013, nr. 2, pp. 100-111.

<sup>2</sup> Staatsregeling des Bataafschen Volks.

Amsterdam: Johannes Allart, 1798, artikel 11; Staatsregeling des Bataafschen Volks (1801.) in eene alphabetische orde gebracht. Den Haag: J. C. Leeuwestijn, 1801, artikel 24; Staatsregeling des Bataafschen Volks. Den Haag: Staats-Drukkerij, 1805, artikel 12.