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More Gothic Furniture: MS Bodl. 264

Chris Pickvance's note in the Autumn 2020 issue of the RFS newsletter 'A Gothic boarded stool in a Burrell Collection tapestry' resonated particularly with my interests. One of the questions that he addresses is the authenticity of furniture depicted in medieval/early modern art. Indeed, this notion of authenticity plagued Georgian architects and designers from around 1800 when people like William Porden attempted to create 'modern' Gothic furniture informed by a 'true' understanding of the medieval. With limited pieces of domestic medieval furniture surviving—unlike ecclesiastical examples—Georgian Gothic furniture designed for domestic spaces often possessed the structural and ornamental characteristics of church architecture and furniture. A.W.N. Pugin in particular felt this to be a fundamentally flawed approach leading to 'inauthentic' furniture characterised by ornamental excess: his retaliation against this type of modern Gothic design is contained in his 1841 publication, *The True Principles of Pointed or Christian Architecture*, in which he lambasted Horace Walpole's Gothic villa, Strawberry Hill, for such microarchitectural excess.

The early sixteenth-century Flemish tapestry discussed by Pickvance depicts a relatively plain stool that would hardly have offended Pugin. Nevertheless, a significantly more ornate table with complex architectural decoration is found in a Flemish illuminated manuscript, the Romance of Alexander, now in the collection of the Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford, as MS Bodl. 264. Characterised by its important borders, initials, and miniatures, the manuscript's text was finished in 1338 and the illuminations by Jehan de Grise (*fl.*1325–45), from Bruges, were completed in 1344. Particularly of note is the miniature found on the top left of fol.142v. A table, set at the entrance to the tent in this miniature, is of a wholly different type of Gothic compared with the stool in The Burrell Collection tapestry. With a plain top, the panel set between the legs is the primary vehicle for ornament. At the centre is a Gothic 'rose window' divided into quadrants by horizontal and vertical bars; these bars are filled with church-like twin-lancet trefoil windows with an encircled quatrefoil at the head. Each window points to the centre of the rose window where the intersecting panels are filled with a quatrefoil, the rose window's quadrants also include an encircled quatrefoil (hence a sub-rose window) and the spandrels are trefoil cusped. In the border to this rose window is an array of pierced tracery: a quatrefoil on each of the vertical and horizontal axes, and the outer spandrels are trefoil cusped and further ornamented with sub-cusping. Finally, the apron also features cusping in the form of pendants.

The adoption of architectural forms in medieval furniture, particularly ecclesiastical examples, makes this illuminated representation of a domestic table an important example modelled upon the ornamental characteristics of High Gothic and subsequent architecture. Its value was recognised in the nineteenth century and Shaw and Meyrick included it in their *Specimens of Ancient Furniture* (1836) on Plate IX and described it as a 'beautiful little table [...] although not from any real specimen, [and] was too valuable to be omitted'.¹ Whilst taken from a manuscript, and, hence, not a 'real' example to them, it is presented alongside the Glastonbury Chair; a piece of supposedly historic furniture acquired by Horace Walpole that lacks the necessary provenance to trace it back to the sixteenth century and Glastonbury Abbey. This table consequently demonstrates the range of architectural ornament that fourteenth-century domestic furniture could be endowed with.

¹ Henry Shaw and Samuel Rush Meyrick, *Specimens of Ancient Furniture Drawn From Existing Authorities*, (London: William Pickering, 1836), p. 31.

Captions

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