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Hanging of a XVIIth century Italian gilt leather at the musée des Arts Décoratifs in Paris.

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Résumé:

Dans la cadre de la réouverture du musée des Arts Décoratifs à Paris en 2006, une tenture en cuir doré, ciselée et polychrome, a été restaurée afin d'être exposée dans les nouvelles salles. Après nettoyage et consolidation, l'assemblage des carreaux a été réalisé par couture selon la technique d'origine. Puis s'est posé le problème de l'accrochage. Malgré les bonnes conditions environnementales, on a choisi de procéder à une suspension souple, permettant une tension contrôlée du cuir. Le système combine un accrochage fixe avec des ressorts fabriqués sur mesure et réglables lé par lé. La communication présente l'histoire et le style de la tenture, sa restauration et son mode d'exposition.

Abstract:

For the reopening of the musée des Arts Décoratifs (Paris), a gilt, engraved and painted leather wall-hanging was restored to be exhibited in the new galleries. After cleaning and consolidation, the assembly of panels was realised by sewing according to the original technique. Then the problem of the way of hanging raised. In spite of the good environmental conditions, we chose to proceed to a flexible suspension, allowing a



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controlled tension of the leather. The system combines a fixed hanging with springs made to measure and adjustable strip by strip. The paper will present the history and the style of this Venetian gilt leather, its restoration and its way of exhibition.

History and pattern:

This wall-hanging is conserved by the museum of Decorative Arts in Paris since 1905 (E Peyre legacy). It is now 2,10 meters high and 2,90 meters broad; it consists of a central part of fifteen squares, plus two side edges of three squares each and a higher horizontal border of seven squares; there is thus a total of 28 squares. There is no border on the low edge.

All the panels have a dark green background on which are detached the gilt pattern of the decoration. The panels of the central part all have an identical design contained in a quadrangular medallion with curved side edges; the medallion is limited in its periphery by a plaited pattern bordered on both sides by a narrow gilt strip. The strip is decorated with sheets of acanthus foliation regularly laid out. A flowered vase is represented in the centre of the medallion. On the belly of the vase is reproduced a human head; the foot and the collar are decorated with pearls. Flowers with long stem, especially tulips, carnations and foliages pop out of the vase. At the top, couples of birds are laid out in the centre and at the bottom. The motifs represented are arranged in an almost symmetrical way. It comprises many and very fine punching like parallel ridges or ocellus, all obtained with small irons.

Each vertical border square is decorated in its average part with a spherical vase on small pedestal; this vase has two large side handles, in form of "S", whose ends finish into flowered foliation. The vase rests on sheets of acanthus foliation. Foliages and flowers escape from its collar. The decoration of the horizontal border is made of a succession of fluted truncated columns; each column rests on a quadrangular base and is surmounted by a capital. The columns are decorated in their lower part with sheets of acanthus and are surrounded with sinuous ribbons in form of "S". Between the columns are laid out cruciform motifs and rosettes.

Gilt leather which constitutes this wall-hanging has all the characteristics of Italian gilt leather: it is flat, without relief. The various patterns are clearly underlined with a black stroke comprising abundant punching with small irons. Finally the gilt reflection keeps a particular intensity.

The decoration shows a double inspiration. The Renaissance influence is recognised in particular in the form and the ornamentation of the vases like in the abundance of the foliation. It can also be found in the architectural representation of the balustrade illustrated on the higher border. But we must also recognise in this design a middle-eastern influence which is expressed in the way of representing the flowers, in particular the carnations and especially the tulips. Indeed the narrow and pointed aspect of the tulips corollas (Fig. a) points out Syrian ceramics and especially Turkish ceramics of Isnik (Fig. b) as well as Turkish fabrics (Fig. c) of the same period.



Figure a. Details with tulip on one of the square.



Figure b. Ceramics dish with floral decoration (in particular tulips), diameter: 0,34 m, Isnik (Turkey), 16th century. Castle of Ecoeuen (France, Val d'Oise), musée national de la Renaissance.

The Renaissance influence is usually found in the design of Italian gilt leather of the 16th and the beginning of the 17th century. The influence of the Middle East is on the other hand less usual there and must evoke a Venetian making. Everyone knows the profusion of the commercial exchanges which existed between the Venetian Republic and the eastern part of the Mediterranean area between the 14th and the 17th century. At that time in Venice, these Eastern influences were variously expressed, in particular on fabrics, paintings and also in the work of leather, in particular in the decoration of gilt leather. These stylistic considerations make it possible to conclude that the gilt leather wall-hanging of the museum of Decorative Arts of Paris, dating from the end of the 16th or the beginning of the 17th century, is doubtless of Venetian origin.



Figure c. Lampas, silk and gold wire, 0,68 x 0,32 m, Turkey, 16th century. Lyon (France), musée des Tissus. Inv. n° 29420.

Condition:

The museum originally conserved 28 panels grouped by two or three. By looking at the seams, it was possible to reconstitute the wall-hanging such as it was when it was made. Indeed this wall-hanging keeps its original dimensions (292 x 212 cm) according to the reading of the patterns which are in perfect continuity. It is an assembling of 28 squares originally sewn together to make a total surface of a little more than 6 m². It forms a complete decoration which included squares of standard size surrounded on three sides by a narrow border (Fig. d).



Figure d. Three squares before restoration.

First, each square was individually photographed and numbered: a letter followed by a number makes possible to quickly know its place. A very detailed report of the conservation state was realised using the PowerPoint software. All the images thus could be annotated: presence of tears, flaking, deformation, retraction, etc. The operations of restoration supported by each panel are also reproduced on these cards.

By the past, the wall-hanging underwent an important restoration process which consisted in gluing leather lining on the flesh side. These clear colour leather patches are exceeding from approximately 1 cm on all the periphery of the wall-hanging and allowed its attachment with nails.

The leather patches are of several forms (Fig. e):

- tensioning strips glued on the edges of the squares
- small square or rectangular pieces glued at very many places
- lining covering completely the back of three squares.

If certain squares were certainly fragile at the time of this restoration, one can hardly explain the number and the presence of some of the patches on areas apparently in good condition.



Figure e. Back of a square with modern leather patches adhered during a past restoration.

These backings caused severe degradations on ancient leather. First due to the adhesive, they involved a general stiffening of the old leather. They also weighed down the wall-hanging and deteriorated the seams. And they caused extra thickness in the area of the seams. Finally, unable to move, ancient leather tore while following the edges of modern leather patches.

We in addition noted a rather bad mechanical behaviour of this new leather, with a tendency to delamination. It would have been useful to make physicochemical analyses of this leather but it was not possible to find the technical means within the time limits.

It is important to notice that there are no important gaps on the gilt leather. On the other hand, long tears are visible. They are most probably the consequence of climatic variations and mechanical constraints: the tears precisely follow the edges of modern tensioning strips. These cracks present sometimes important wrenches and openings. It is difficult to replace it edge to edge without causing surface deformations.

The seams date certainly from the same time as the leather linings: curiously, they were achieved with a machine. After being sewn, the edges of the squares were folded up under constraint, probably with heat. Very solid, some of these seams were cut off at the time of the last dismantling.

The dust contamination was very important. The painting surface was very dirty. It was overall in good condition but sometimes shows flacks. There are important differences of conservation and aspect between the squares. The silver foil is apparent within very few places and it does not have oxidised. The gold varnish is not abraded.

Restoration process:

The restoration process and each individual operation were initially tested then explained and approved during a meeting with the curators. Removing all the leather linings was considered to be too long and too complicated. It was then decided to leave it or to remove some of the patches when it was absolutely necessary.

Rubbing dust was carried out using a vacuum cleaner. Facing of certain areas was necessary in order to consolidate the fragile parts and to position back the tears. For consolidation, we used a light non-woven polyester material. Small portions prepared with a film of Beva 371 were reactivated with low heat.

Cleaning tests on the polychromy had shown that the best results were obtained in aqueous phase, thus avoiding the use of organic solvents potentially dangerous for gold varnish. In order not to make penetrate water in leather and to limit cleaning to the painting layer, we tested the use of a gel coating. The best result was obtained with the following composition: demineralized water, Klucel G and Symperonic N (wetting agent). Cleaning was carried out with the selected method, followed up a rinsing with demineralized water.

Support consolidation of each square has been done according to three techniques

- readhering flacks with a film of Beva 371 inserted below and reactivated with low heat,
- filling of the gaps or the opening of the tears with a coloured beva 371 paste. The paste is laid on the flesh side to avoid excess then supplemented by the face if necessary,
- consolidation of the tears and of the seams using strips of non-woven polyester material adhered with a film of Beva 371.

The assembly of the panels was done by hand reproducing the seams. A polyester thread was used. We proceeded while pricking in the original holes. The difficulty was to work on the back and to fix the squares gradually the ones with the others. The more the seam advanced, the more surfaces became important what required to work with a scaffolding.

A temporary wooden support was made to receive the wall-hanging after its restoration and before its final suspension in the exhibition room. Slightly inclined, the support is provided with handles and is easily movable: it is laid out on a resting place on casters.

Hanging at the museum:

The way of exhibiting the wall-hanging was studied in detail. Mounting gilt leather is usually very complicated. For its exhibition, the museum wanted to have the wall-hanging flat.

Hanging with Velcro had initially been proposed, but the risks for the modern leather linings to wrench was too high. In the ten past years, other methods had been proposed in the literature. In 1995, for example, Andreas Schulze had tested on tapestries the use of aluminium pivoted tubes with springs inside (Schulze 1995). In 1996, Maria Nimmo and Mariabianca Paris used a similar technique to attach an altar frontal and made a lot of tests to understand the mechanical behaviour of gilt leather (Paris 1995).

These tensioning systems are very interesting when you want to follow the artefact's movements during environmental changes. That's why we finally proposed a flexible suspension, allowing a controlled tension of the leather. The system combines a fixed hanging + springs made to measure and adjustable strip by strip (Fig.f).

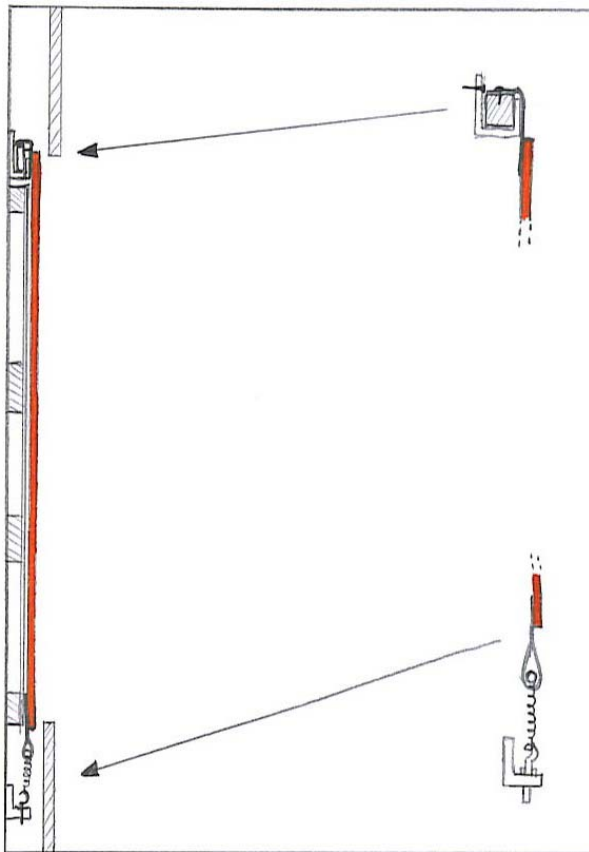


Figure f. Outline of the hanging system.

Bands of polyester fabric were placed on the back of each square of the top border and also at the bottom of the wall-hanging. These bands are overlapping and are stuck on the flesh side with Mowilith DMC2. At the top of the wall-hanging, the excess of fabric is attached onto an aluminium square rail. The fabric is screwed on the metal. At the bottom of the wall-hanging, the same fabric allows the tensioning of the wall-hanging with 12 springs. Each portion of fabric has a gusset in which is inserted an aluminium rod on which set two springs. (Fig. g)

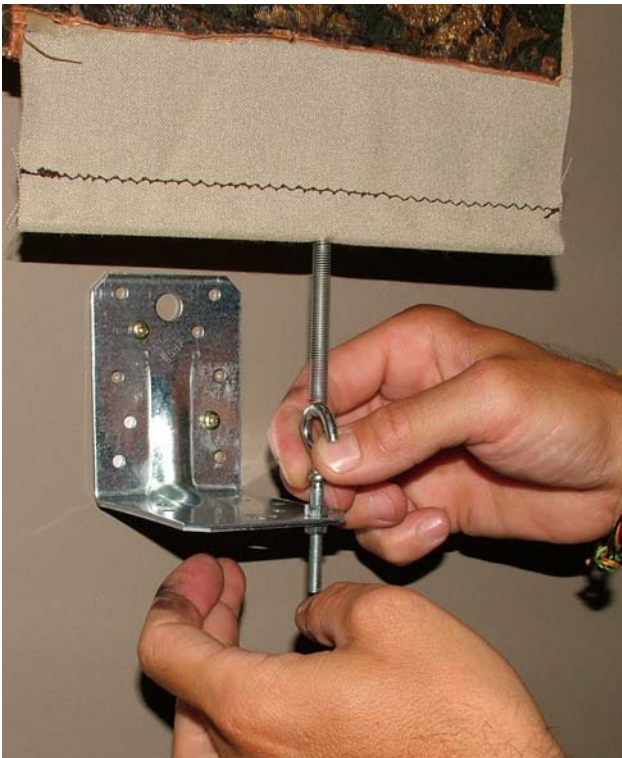


Figure g. detail of one spiral traction spring at the bottom of the hanging.

The wall-hanging is only attached on its top and bottom so the tensioning is only in the vertical direction. It remains free on its left and right sides. The spiral traction springs were manufactured to measure: they are stainless and measure 40mm long for a diameter of wire of 0,5 mm. The tension of the springs was calculated according to literature sources (Schulze 1995, Paris 1995) and to the weight of the wall-hanging (estimated at approximately 6 kg). The tension applied is 1,7 Newton (it means 170 grams) per spring. The variation of each spring is more or less 400 g.

The low ends of the springs are slipped into hooks fixed onto individual plates attached to the wall. The hooks are adjustable with screws: it is very easy to adjust the tension of the leather by screwing or unscrewing. (Fig. g)

The total tension applied is of about 20 Newton or 2 kg. That was enough to flatten the wall-hanging without weighing too much on the seams. (Fig. h)

This system of hanging is positioned to approximately 5 to 6 cm from the wall. The leather is resting on polypropylene sheets attached on a wooden frame (that we kept from the temporary support). The air is circulating easily on the back.

Because the tensioning system is visible on the top and at the bottom of the wall-hanging, a wooden cover was necessary to mask the attachment system (this cover is easily removable to reach the springs if necessary).

To conclude, the design of the system is very simple and cheap (the cost of the springs made to measure was approximately 100 Euros). But the more important, it has complete accessibility which permits easy adjustment of any springs.



Figure h. the wall-hanging after its setting on the wall.

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