Abstract

A late eighteenth century Chinoiserie interior at the Johan de Witt house in The Hague, was severely compromised by a fire in the spring of 2005. A conservation project was commissioned by the Government Buildings Agency to explore revival scenarios. A multidisciplinary team of conservators specialised in stucco, wood, paint, marble and wallpaper design, in collaboration with technicians for climate control and security, developed several scenarios to conserve, restore and reconstruct the intrinsic quality of this room and to meet twenty-first century user requirements. At the same time it was intended that the project should serve as a reference project for future conservation, maintenance and care of interiors within the context of historic houses owned by the Government Buildings Agency. We will describe our experiences in trying to achieve our goals and present initial thoughts and ideas. The project resulted in new opportunities for safeguarding the decorative room and its unique colour scheme.

Keywords

Architectural decorated surfaces research, Chinoiserie, eighteenth century interior decoration, Johan de Witt house

Preserving and Maintaining a Fire-damaged Eighteenth Century Chinoiserie Interior by Adapting its Appearance, Use and Function

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Introduction

Safeguarding an eighteenth century Chinoiserie interior, after it was damaged by fire in the spring of 2005, required an unconventional conservation approach (Figure 1). The need for conservation was not created by negligence or by a ‘natural need’ for maintenance; it was not budgeted for, and certainly not planned by the Government Buildings Agency [1]. The whole process of planning, choosing, installing, conserving and restoring took almost two years and was completed in 2007. Five years after the conservation project the authors evaluate how the project team defined the goals and describe the options within the conservation process [2].

Chinoiserie interiors were made in all kind of shapes and forms, especially in the period between the late seventeenth and the early nineteenth century. These interiors were often made with either the (re-)use of oriental objects directly imported from the Far East or products which were especially made for export to the West [Bergmans, 1991; Jacobson, 1993; Reepen and Handke, 1996; Morena, 2009]. More recent examples show another popular method, by copying and transforming the decorations into a European presentation, resulting in a style only vaguely resembling the original. Most of the Chinoiserie interiors have disappeared due to modernisations and overpainting; in The Netherlands only a few examples have survived [3].
The Chinoiserie room in the Johan de Witt house

The Chinoiserie room described in this paper is at the Johan de Witt house in The Hague, which is a mid-seventeenth century house that was modernised in the early eighteenth century by adding two small wings onto the garden side [4]. Oak panelled rooms, measuring 4.4m x 8.2m x 3.2m (hxlwx), were created with window shutters made of long grained pinewood, and ornamented stucco ceilings. In the late eighteenth century, probably in the 1780s, another modernisation was commissioned for one of those dark panelled rooms [Brouwer, 1988]. This resulted in a Chinoiserie interior painted with vivid colours and gildings painted on a slightly greyish, lead white-based oil paint [5]. Archival sources for the creation of this room are limited, but its scale, use of materials and colour scheme indicate the use of local materials and production methods [Jongsma and Verweij, 2002].

Fig. 1. Interior after the fire in March 2005. © Edwin Verweij

Fig. 2. Artistic impression of the chinese cabinet on a 1837 watercolor by Augustus Wynantsz, ©Georg Janßen Germanisches Nationalmuseum, Nürnberg, Germany.
The earliest known depiction of the room is on a watercolour drawing from 1837 by Augustus Wynantsz (1795-1848) painted approximately fifty years after the room’s creation (Figure 2). The room can be recognised in the background of the watercolour, with a Chinoiserie pendant lamp hanging from the ceiling. The wall decoration, however, cannot be identified. His Royal Highness Prince Alexander of the Netherlands, Prince of Orange-Nassau (1851–1884) used this interior in the late nineteenth century. He collected fashionable Japanese and Chinese objects, and displayed them probably in a monochrome white painted interior.

An abandoned room with contemporary floral wall hangings is shown on a photographic black and white image, dated in the 1920s (Figure 3). This image proved to be crucial for interpreting the eighteenth century interior style and atmosphere, especially since it provided information of the mouldings.

In the 1960s the whole house was restored and converted into office space for an insurance-company [6]. A new central heating system was installed in the room under the sash windows and covered by reusing the dismantled eighteenth century dado woodwork. The original floor was covered with new parquetry. In 2002 the interior the colour schemes were documented during an architectural paint survey [Jongsma and Verweij, 2002].

**An unplanned conservation project**

During the fire in 2005, the room burned briefly but fiercely, resulting in the loss of parts of the stucco ceiling, the wood panelling and the floor. Collateral damage was caused by firemen trying to locate the source of the fire and making sure it was extinguished. Certain parts were burnt beyond repair, others damaged by exposure to the intense heat. Initial concerns were for the possible development of fungi and/or growth of mould due to increased moisture content, and about the intense odour of the burnt materials. Two separate groups developed simultaneously. These factions had divergent thoughts about how to handle the situation: those who wanted to ‘throw out the old and order new’ and those who saw this as the ‘perfect opportunity’ to examine and explore eighteenth century in depth.

**Conservation selection process and treatment scenarios**

To be able to make a decision about what to do and how much to do, the project team needed a condition assessment of the interior. To what extent was the wood burnt, the stucco ceiling damaged, the paintwork melted or scorched, the floor damaged, the marble fireplace cracked and discoloured? The condition assessment, made by conservators showed that
40% of the wood was destroyed, although half of this could be reused; 20% of the stucco was lost; 75% of the paintwork was affected; 15% of the floor and 5% of the marble fireplace needed repair (Figure 5).

Fig.3. Interior in 1920 before installing a heating system. © Rijksdienst voor het Cultureel Erfgoed (RCE) Amersfoort, Netherlands.
Four conservation scenarios were presented to the project team:

**Accepting the ‘unfortunate’ incident**

Conserving the current state of the interior by replacing only the most damaged part with new ‘repairs and inserts’. This upfront and direct presentation would show the interior as the victim of an unfortunate accident, a low profile restoration.
Preserving the previous state from the 1960s

Restoring to the situation created in the 1960s, the last known state before the fire. This would involve accepting and respecting the restoration decisions made forty years ago: the introduction of a heating system and the alteration of the panelling under the windows, the parquetry floor and the newly created mouldings around the twentieth century wall hangings.

Back to the monochrome nineteenth century

Repainting the interior in a monochrome colour scheme when all the interiors on the ground floor had been given a less elaborate decorative scheme. This would create a homogenous sequence of rooms on the ground floor, all presented in the same phase in history.

Reinstating the late eighteenth century

Reconstructing the original polychromy with vivid colours and gildings painted on a slightly greyish, lead white-based, oil paint to its initial splendour. This meant undoing all later additions and changes and a reconstruction of the wall coverings with matching mouldings.

Different scenarios would have different impacts on an audience (Figure 4). In the first scenario, for example, finding a partially burnt room, after having seen the other rooms in the house, a sequence of French Louis XIV, XV and XVI interiors, would be an anti-climax. In the second scenario, the historical context of the room would be unclear and time and resources would be spent reshaping an old-fashioned and outdated restoration that had changed the character and the atmosphere completely. In the third scenario, the monochrome painted colour scheme would not ameliorate the interior nor have a relation with the Chinoiserie woodcarvings on the panelling and the mouldings. The project team unanimously wanted to explore the fourth scenario: a conservation treatment combined with a reconstruction of the eighteenth century interior [7]. The conservators tried at the same time to convince the commissioners to reconsider the function of the room. Preserving an eighteenth century interior and simultaneously establishing an office-workplace with twenty-first century requirements would be challenging.

Reinstating the late eighteenth century by detailing the architectural elements

An in-depth study into wallpapers and wall hangings of the late eighteenth century was required, as well as information about colours, designs and drawings that could show ‘suitable examples’ since not all details could be found in the room itself [Geldhof, 2006]. Some extant Chinoiserie interiors where visited for examination and discussion. The wooden mouldings could be redesigned based on the 1920s photographs and an extensive pigment and binding media analysis would provide insight in the painting technique. Furthermore, technical solutions needed to be found for a minimalistic climate control and a sinologist was consulted to interpret Chinese characters and mouldings.

The smell of burnt wood and stucco was intense for the first few months after the fire, and the project team considered treating the odour with chemical solutions. Due to the planning process, the conservation treatment started a year after the fire and by that time almost all of the smell had disappeared. All burned parts were either mechanically scraped down or completely renewed and affected areas were impregnated in order to prevent the formation of new odours.
As soon as the project team had collected enough information on a specific architectural element, the conservators tried to reconstruct it as accurately as possible, in both the use of materials and techniques [Brouwer and Verweij, 2009]. For example, the decision to use a lead white-based oil paint on the wood-panelling was made after the results of the architectural paint research were combined with the analysis of the pigment and binding media [Jongsma and Verweij, 2002; Verweij, 2005; Keune and Van Loon, 2006]. The paint was coloured appropriately with pigments and gildings were applied in pertinent patterns. The wooden panelling and floor were restored using the same materials as originally were used: oak and pinewood (Figure 6). The quality of the original floorboards after sanding, local wood fillings and a slight treatment with a natural soap. The ceiling had to be conserved by mechanical fixation of the flat field and by reconstructing the missing stucco mouldings. The marble of the chimneypiece had been restored several times and this required therefore individual cleaning and polishing for each marble slab to establish a uniform appearance.

The presumably original wooden mouldings could be seen on a 1920s black and white photograph and the pendant lamp was artistically depicted on the 1830s watercolour. Both were studied thoroughly for the dimensions, use of material and production method. The mouldings seemed to be symmetrical designed at first sight. However, all corner elements had a different length to compensate for dimensional differences of the wall. The colour scheme and/or use of gilding were discussed in-situ with mock-ups (Figure 7). These carved and gilded mouldings proved to be an essential part in the room and served as an indispensable decorative element. The pendant lamp had Chinoiserie features, but any painted and/or inlayed details could not be identified nor the exact dimensions.

Fig.6. Restoration of woodwork. © Edwin Verweij
The original decoration scheme for the walls and the hand-painted Chinese characters on the ceiling were both unknown and needed to be invented. Examining the construction of the still existing frame on the wall revealed that a textile had been mounted on it. The sturdy construction made it possible to stretch a course fabric, a suitable support for a fine textile or to glue a ground paper on which wallpaper could be mounted. Here, only a few of the original nails used to attach the textile to the framework were found, some with some threads of the coarse fabric but unfortunately nothing over this was found. However, the room’s shape and size gave some precedent. This room, long and narrow, did not allow for a wallpaper to be seen in a single overview. Due to the number and height of the windows a panoramic representation would give more ‘depth and perspective’ and establish a link with the garden. Therefore several hand-painted designs, in various colour schemes, were discussed in-situ (Figure 7). The characteristic purple-brown colour of the marble chimneypiece looked extremely dominant on all photographs when seen against lightly painted woodwork. This made us realise that a darker colour for the walls would mean that the chimneypiece became a part of the wall and was not singled out as a separate feature in the room. Subdued purplish colours matched the aged state of the mantelpiece well and at the same time an affinity with the light purple colour that had disappeared on the ceiling and panelling [8].

In the corners of the ceiling, four areas were decorated with Chinese characters. In the 1960s these characters indicated the cardinal points of the compass. Archival research revealed that in the 1920s a different set of characters had been used. In the Chinese language, predictions are often made out of four characters but here only one could be identified depicting ‘flowers’. A complete saying could therefore not be reconstructed and
now a Chinese poem ‘The sunlight shines everywhere’ is depicted [Shitao, 1976].

The restoration took two years. Initially it was planned to be used as an office workplace, but its function has now be changed in a meeting room and is not in everyday use anymore; there are more visitors for the room than actual users (Figure 8). The housekeeping activities are kept at a low profile and only preformed when necessary and mostly depending on the room’s use in the previous week [9]. Now that the room has been in use for five years, the overall condition of the room has not changed; the materials and fabrics show no sign of ageing. Yellowing of the paintwork has occurred but only in areas where daylight is limited, for example behind the window shutters. The painted poem on the pendant lamp, with its supposedly stable, water-based ink, has faded and needs to be replaced. Slight glue stains that appeared during the mounting process of the hand-painted gouache wallpaper have partially disappeared [10].
Conclusion

The restoration and reconstruction of this room with its bright colours and gilding work has given it a new eighteenth century character and atmosphere. Developing realistic conservation scenarios lead to an ‘informed conservation’ decision that gave both the commissioner and the project team an insight into the quality and potential of the original interior. The wishes expressed by the users and/or commissioners of the interior were only partly fulfilled; the function of a fully functional office workplace has now been changed to ‘tête-à-tête’ meeting room, focussing on a more suitable conservation scenario for the interior itself. The need for care and maintenance has diminished, since the user frequency of the room has decreased considerably. The Government Buildings Agency is currently developing a care and maintenance plan for all their objects. Although there is a restricted access to the house, the use of this room and its inevitable decline has been slowed down in a controlled way that requires an ongoing active approach, both now and in the future.

Acknowledgment:

The project was commissioned by the Governmental Buildings Agency in The Hague with Roelf Vos as project leader and Henny Brouwer as senior conservation architect, with specific areas of expertise provided by Jaap de Jonge, Fred Balster, Krijn van Popering (climate) and Bert van Bommel (marble). The conservation, restoration and reconstruction of the room took place between March 2005 and May 2007 [Verweij, 2007]. The team of conservators and advisors consisted of Edwin Verweij (architectural paint researcher and project leader for the conservation work), Piet Blokzijl (paint production), Geert van den Brul (marble), Anton van Delden (stucco), Wijnand Freling (stucco), Elsbeth Geldhof (wallpaper research), Bart Goherman (wood), Anna Hesse (documentation), Frans Hazenbosch (wallpaper), Jurriaan Jongsm (painter), Ruth Jongsm (architectural paint research), Katrien Keune (analysis), Annelies van Loon (analysis), Inez Kretzschmar (sinologist), Tineke Oostendorp (analysis), Maurice and Chris Steemers (wood), Boris Vermeij (painter) and Rogier Zinsmeister (documentation).

Endnotes

[1] The Government Buildings Agency (Rijksgebouwendienst /RGD) is part of the Ministry of Interior and Kingdom Relations of The Netherlands and manages over 2,000 state properties of which 350 have a status as monument. Source: http://www.rgd.nl/english/ [Accessed 19 September 2012].

[2] The project was under the guidance of VERWEIJ | Office for Architectural Paint Research and Conservation in Amsterdam, The Netherlands. The author is currently working as architectural paint researcher at the Norwegian Institute for Cultural Heritage Research in Oslo, Norway.


[4] The house was commissioned by Mattheus Hoeufft in 1652 but is named after its most prominent inhabitant, Johan de Witt, grand pensionary, who lived there from 1669 until 1672.

[5] The Quirijn van Strijen family owned the house at the end of the eighteenth century and it is assumed that Mrs Van den Santheuvel commissioned the modernisation based on similarities in the painting technique that was found both in the La Fontaine room and the Chinoiserie room. It is assumed that these were executed at the same time in the 1780s.

[6] The restoration was carried out under the guidance of architect Royaards.
[7] The scale of the project and the expertise required made the commissioner decide not to publicly tender the project.

[8] A light sensitive purplish colour is obtained by mixing the Prussian blue pigment with a cochineal red dye. During the reconstruction paintwork the dye was replaced by a more stable alizarin dye despite the slight colour difference.

[9] Information kindly provided by J. Dondorp, Johan de Witt house in personal communication.

[10] A new policy on maintenance and care for the whole house is currently under development within the Governmental Buildings Agency.

References:


