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Working Group n° 10

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Objects

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on the Treatment of and Research into
Leather, in Particular of Ethnographic Objects

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The Collection of the Egyptian Department of the Musée du Louvre: Primary Results of the Study

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(translated by L. Gartenne-Marot)

Within the view of the rearrangement of the Coptic exhibition rooms of the Louvre Museum in 1997, and, in particular, the renewal of the exhibited collections, the presentation to the public of objects in leather not displayed up to now was made conceivable. Most of them were still as they had been excavated at the end of the last century, and thus it was necessary to plan some restoration interventions.

The selection of objects to be presented was rapidly incurring major problems such as: lack in the inventory, misknowledge of the restoration interventions done before, ignorance of the date as well as exact provenance of most of the objects.

As a matter of fact, most of the artifacts belong to the old collections of the museum (gathered mainly in the XIXth century as well as in the beginning of the XXth century), and most of the people that intervened previously on the object, whether finders, curators or conservators, have worked according to the principles of their time. As such, a lot of informations judged essential nowadays (such as an inventory with a description and a code for each piece) has not been recorded. As an example, we may cite the donation made by the Doctor Clot-Bey in 1853, recorded in the inventory books under the following mention:

“2397 objects en matières diverses formant la seconde partie de l’acquisition Clot-Bey, dont le détail et la désignation sont portés sur l’inventaire particulier de cette collection. La seconde partie, dont il s’agit ici, comprenant les caisses 16 à 37”.

(“2397 objects in diverse materials making up the second part of the acquisition Clot-Bey, the detail and the designation of which are written down on the specific inventory of the collection. The second part, which is being dealt with now, including the boxes 16 to 37”).

That is why, at the first January 1994, the collection could be said not to be composed of a precise number of objects duly registered but of many hundreds of fragments mixed up in one lot from which only rare pieces which have kept their registered number could be miraculously pulled out.

As a preliminary step to any restoration, it was urgent to do a sort of diagnosis of the collection, firstly by comparing inventories with existing pieces, secondly by evaluating the degree of deterioration of the objects.

This study, planned for four years, was organized in sets of operations, spread over years. In order to give a unity to all of the research, programmes have been set for each of the periods of intervention.

Thus, 1994 was devoted to recognition of the pieces and to the cross checking between objects and inventory books. This stage of recognition of pieces that can be pieced together may be looked upon as long and tedious when the number of elements is high. For this collection it has been quite rapid; the leather pieces have kept their original dies and could be more easily gathered together by families of colour.

Decorative techniques as well as iconographic motifs then helped to refine this first sorting. Together with this sorting, a typological identification was done. Thus groups such as the shoe group were created (itself divided into secondary groups like the sandals, the boots etc.) and the belt one, the basket one, the case one, the one registered as ‘bookbinding’, the clothing elements ones, and so on.

However, if, in the majority of cases, these associations of fragments were found out, still some elements remain of which the origin could not be determined. Still, recognition through types, colours and ornamental techniques has made possible a regrouping by sets.

To compare isolated elements to the rest of the collection in order to find out possible associations, was too much time-consuming; it was thus decided to put those elements temporarily aside and to conduct this type of research only within the realm of secondary groups.

1. Leather conservator and specialist into the technical and historical study of the collections.
Considering an isolated object, one often sees that its inventory number is gone and ought to be searched for. However, the sources of the Louvre collections are much diverse. Along the archaeological pieces taken to the museum as soon as they were excavated, we find private collections donated or bequeathed, objects bought either from antique dealers or in auction sales, transfers from other French museums... The majority of those pieces bear a double, sometimes even a triple system of numbering: some corresponding to succeeding owners, others to the Musée du Louvre codes. For a donation or the purchase of some private collections, the museum staff opened an account book where the pieces were numbered according to their location in the boxes.

In parallel to this an official inventory was done, but the definite number of the Louvre was not systematically transcribed on the temporary book and, in the registers of the Museum the descriptions are too laconic. So, when an object lost one of its labels, such cross-examination of both existing objects and inventories contents is made impossible.

Certainly in order to give more spice to the works of future researchers, it was decided from 1849 on to change the way of the inventory of the museum. Pieces up to then inventoried using a code N (for: Napoléon III) followed by a number were registered with a new code of E (for Entrée) followed by a number. Part of the items classified according to the former system was, by mistake, inventoried all over again and therefore, no cross checking was established between the two registers...

What was to happen, happened. Labels came off and that is why 64 shoes or sets of shoes are mentioned in the different inventories known to the museum, whereas only 54 objects have been identified. When the same identification did correspond to shoes of different types, it has not been possible to recover the whole of the lot. Thus, 51 pieces did not bear any registration marks and it could well be either objects that had never been inventoried or items for which the description is too concise to make the identification of the number on the books possible. In such case the pieces are given a special code, AF followed by a number, and are reported in another register book.

In the course of this austere and little gratifying work, we are sometimes faced with a more detailed mention, specifying dimensions, colours, type of the decoration together with its location. It concerns pieces whose exceptional nature seemed to warrant a less concise description, but, at different periods of time, some articles have been submitted to conservation attempts and very often the result does not prove equal to the expectations (i.e. the colour became black even for originally red coloured items). Moreover, when documents relative to treatments do exist, they are very concise, and do mention neither the whole of the performed operations, nor the precise nature of the used products.

In two months, most of the fragments have been reassigned among themselves: 175 articles were listed, including 115 shoes, 5 clothing elements, 24 'mummy braces', 12 belts and straps, 5 scabbards, 2 baskets, 5 music instruments, 1 bookbinding, 4 undetermined articles. Computerized inventory cards were established for each object. Among all the elements mentioned in the inventories, 10 have not been identified (Table 1). They certainly correspond to objects found without any serial number, but their description is not sufficient to identify them undoubtfully. The study was carried on in 1995, essentially focussed on the shoes, including footwear manufactured in other materials than leather, e.e. 19 objects among which 9 articles of wood and 10 of plant fibre. Because of the unknown accurate dating of most of the articles, it was impossible to distribute the collection in chronological groups and to study each of these successively.

We have therefore chosen to perform a general study of the collection in order to determine if, in the course of the inquiry, a distribution according to shapes, manufacturing techniques, together with iconographical parallels, as well as with comparison with similar collections from other museums, could allow to suggest a dating of the Louvre collections. The typological headfamilies had already been established in the course of the first part of the work; in order to identify subgroups, we selected as predominant features the general shape and manufacturing technique of the article, that is the number of constitutive elements as well as the technical construction.
Some pieces are decorated, but we only considered the decoration as a recessive feature of the classification. As early as the beginning of the work it appeared necessary to perform, when the state of conservation made it possible, a technical drawing of the article. This pattern is not meant to be an accurate drawing of the object, but is a flat representation of its different constituents. Indications relative to the manufacturing technology, such as the stitches, the shape and decoration technique, are reported on this sketch (Fig. 1).

If the fragments are too much deformed to be drawn, or if a doubt remains about the accurate shape of an element, we do prefer to represent the different parts being connected and to indicate the differences of levels and materials by using different drawing pattern codes (Fig. 2). In the case of some articles, like boots, it is very difficult to visually project volumes on a plane. In this case, a drawing is made first on a taped last. Then the taped main form is removed from the last and flattened according to the techniques used nowadays for shoe pattern cutting. Drawing is a time consuming stage and to this day only the sandal family could be drawn.

Leather is the best represented class, with 33 articles out of 48. It has been therefore decided to begin with this typological series, for which we have selected only the pieces corresponding to the definition of the ‘Technical Dictionary for the Shoe Industry’ written by Rama, where we can read for the sandal: ‘simplified shoe made up of a sole, more or less wide, and variously joined straps or bands, between which the foot remains visible’.

At the time present we have only worked on the 33 leather pieces whose classification has been made as a function of the design of the junction point of the straps behind the foot. It seems that three groups have to be distinguished:
- one for which sole and junction are integral and constitute only one object;
- one for which the junction clip is a strap which either is sandwiched between the two soles, or crosses the first sole by means of splits set out parallel to the border;
- one for which straps are directly fixed on the sole, without the aid of a clip.

The technological and typological study of the collection, although at its early beginning yet, allows to foresee encouraging results. This work will lead to a better knowledge of the articles; we hope it will allow to select among them the most representative items of the collection, and to conceive the best restoration and presentation respecting the wholeness and the integrity of the object.

References


Table 1. Comparison between the descriptions in the inventory books and the objects rediscovered in 1994.

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Descriptions of objects in the inventory books N, E and AF</th>
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<td>Inventory</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>E</td>
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<td>Inventory</td>
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<tr>
<td>N</td>
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<td>E</td>
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<th>book binding</th>
<th>bracelet</th>
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Fig. 1. Drawing of sandal no E 12 562 (c Louvre, Ch. Larrieu, La Licorne).
Fig. 2. Drawing of sandal no E 13 887 (c Louvre, Ch. Larrieu, La Licorne).