



THE ARTIFACT, ITS CONTEXT AND THEIR NARRATIVE: MULTIDISCIPLINARY CONSERVATION IN HISTORIC HOUSE MUSEUMS

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Abstract

Decorative finishes in historic interiors can vary enormously in material, rendering techniques and three-dimensional aspects. The appearance of the interior is also formed by a unifying element that is not necessarily the result of a tangible decorative finish. Conservation or restoration of a historic interior is not only about treating a single element. It is about understanding the synergy between decorative, architectural and spatial components that enables the historic interior to tell its story. In this paper we investigate the synergy of three interiors in the seventeenth century Dutch castle Keukenhof; the castle with its interiors is nationally listed for its unique decoration. Crucial details were revealed while the authors conducted paint and materials analysis to support the initial conservation proposal. The unifying, intangible aspects that became understood while conserving and restoring these interiors are examined. The understanding of these intangible characteristics, that the authors have named 'synergy', substantially changed the direction of the Keukenhof project. The authors argue that this aspect is too often overlooked and needs to be central to the conservation and restoration process.

The Walls Can Speak - Understanding the Narrative of the Historic Interior as an Architectural Artefact

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Introduction: Kasteel Keukenhof

The name 'Keukenhof' can be best translated as 'kitchen garden', reflecting the castle's original function in the fifteenth century when the grounds were used for growing food for the local nobility. In 1635, a classic brick villa was built on the estate, and was named after the grounds: Keukenhof. Nowadays, Kasteel Keukenhof is closely associated with the world famous tourist attraction park, which shows more than seven million tulips, daffodils and hyacinths in Spring each year.

The original villa was built for Jan Maartenszoon Block (1581-1661) who was a commander in the Dutch East India Company (VOC). This villa, with a rectangular floor plan, was the basis of the current castle. It was altered and enlarged in the following centuries and now has a predominantly nineteenth century appearance. The immediate surrounding grounds were transformed into a formal French garden in the late seventeenth century, and again remade as an English landscape garden around 1809. In 1857, the garden was further developed in the landscape style to a design by the famous Dutch landscape architect Jan Zocher (1791-1870). [Breure-op 't Hof, 2007]

Over time the castle has known several alterations and refurbishing campaigns. An extensive modernisation of the castle took place in the latter half of the nineteenth century. The architect Eli Saraber (1808-1878) was assigned to turn the seventeenth century rectangular villa into a neo-gothic nineteenth century castle, complete with several towers (Figure 1). In the 1920's a second campaign took place, at that

Keywords

Conservation historic interiors, nineteenth century decorative interior, wallpaper, architectural paint analysis, decorative synergy, conservation process, holistic approach.

time the façade was altered and a large part of the interiors were redecorated. In the 1950's, after the Second World War (WWII), some rooms were in need of redecoration again.

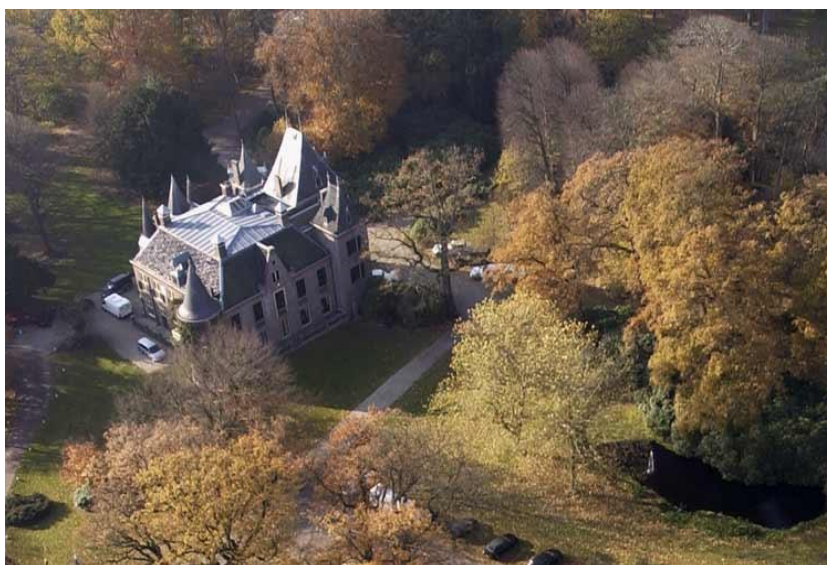


Fig. 1. Aerial photograph of Kasteel Keukenhof. www.basenmandy.nl (accessed May 2011)

The house was privately owned and occupied by the same family until the last Count, Baron Van Lynden, died in 2003. [Viersen, 2008] He left the castle, after his death, to the Keukenhof Foundation. This foundation is now responsible for the maintenance of the castle, and chose to market it as a wedding and events venue. Conservation projects have been ongoing since then: a number of smaller projects took place in 2008, and a large-scale one took place in 2010-2011. This latter was initiated after a one year detailed research of the interiors, and after work on the interiors and exterior of the castle was completed.

Understanding tangible and intangible decorative elements

In general, the conservation of a historic interior involves an element of searching for the decorative entity (or harmony) of the room. In order to preserve or reinstate this entity, a holistic approach is essential: the interior needs to be treated as a complete artefact, rather than a composite of separate elements. In their own conservation practice, both authors try to take this one step further. An interior can only undergo a holistic conservation process when the characteristic unifying element in the room is both recognised and fully understood. The actual decoration of an interior can be unified by the homogeneity of decorative elements, for example in a specific decorative scheme. This can be a repetition of a certain texture, or a contrast in colour or

sheen; for example, when a specific colour scheme or fabric has been used throughout. A single colour can be employed to connect individual interior elements, such as a dye that is used both as a colourant for textiles and (precipitated onto a substrate) as a pigment for painted schemes in the same room. Thus, colour, texture or fabric can be used to create an aesthetic unity in an interior, and a wide variety of research methods and material analyses can help in understanding the tangible aspects of a room.

However, it is not always a tangible finish that pulls an interior together, more often it is an intangible decorative aspect that defines the atmosphere or ‘feel’ of a room, and is responsible for the actual visual coherence. The understanding of these intangible decorative aspects are difficult to communicate when stakeholders become too strongly focused on the individual (tangible) details of the decorative scheme. This is especially true for interiors from the second half of the nineteenth century, where often prefabricated products were used. The use of manufactured decorations with their multitude of components and materials, make it difficult to understand a decorative finish as a whole, if their origin, coherence and interdependence (intangible aspect) are not investigated. By not recognising this, the room is not understood as a total concept and thus runs the risk of losing its original identity in the conservation or restoration process.

In this paper, the authors will discuss the importance of researching the tangible details in order to understand the intangible elements of the same interior; the authors identify this as the ‘synergy’ of a room. The challenges and issues involved in doing such a holistic analysis will also be discussed. Three different rooms in Kasteel Keukenhof are used to illustrate this process and to demonstrate how defining and understanding synergy resulted in dramatic changes in the conservation process.

The conservation process

The 2010 campaign initially focused on badly needed structural repairs of the roofs and walls. This renovation also provided an opportunity for the conservation of several interiors. With the renovation well underway, the conservation architect Leo Wevers (Vlaardingerbroek and Wevers) commissioned the authors to carry out a systematic paint investigation and research into wallpapers used in the castle (a significant number of rooms are papered). [Keppler, 2010; Geldhof and Keppler, 2011] Understanding the relation between the painted architectural elements (window frames and wainscoting) and the papered walls, proved essential for understanding the sequential decorative finishes. Neither a paint investigation by itself, nor an independent study of the wallpapers present would have yielded the required level of understanding. Instead of choosing one of the finishing phases as a basis for restoration, the entire story of each interior was considered and used as the primary criterion for planning treatment. This reflected the desired holistic approach. This is about understanding the sequence of all the different decorative schemes in order to choose one scheme, which does justice to the origin and identity of the room; and, in doing so, understanding the synergy that exists between the elements.

The Blue Salon (Blauwe Salon)

The Blue Salon is the most representative room of the castle. The architectural outline of the room is part of the seventeenth century floor plan. The room is situated on the *piano nobile*. Its most prominent features are the early eighteenth century mantelpiece decorated with a blue veined faux marble, and the coffer ceiling in which twelve paintings by Johannes Stortebecker (1821-1899) are recessed. The decorative strap-work (painted in a dark faux-wood on linen and cut out) is glued on the painted light yellow wainscoting. This dark linen strap-work on a light coloured background on the panelling is mirrored in the ceiling. Here, a light coloured decoration is painted on the dark wood imitation of the beams in the ceiling. (Figure 2) The current light

yellow scheme is a touching-up done after the WWII, based on the previous underlying light yellow phase that is mainly the result of a redecoration in 1860. Initially, at the start of this project, the first light yellow phase was thought to be applied in the early twentieth century. Architectural paint research, together with understanding both the tangible and intangible aspects, has changed these earlier assumptions about the decorative scheme in the Blue Salon.



Fig. 2. Blue Salon: detail of the ceiling and walls with the decorative strap-work. ©E. Geldhof/R. Keppler

Before research even started, both the conservation architect and the castle administrators declared the light yellow finish on the wainscoting unwanted. They were looking for something more exciting, as this room is now used for wedding ceremonies. Architectural paint research and analysis revealed that, prior to the two consecutive light yellow phases, a monochrome dark green phase was apparent. [1] One of the main questions during the conservation process was whether this dark green colour scheme could be reinstalled. In general, dark green was extensively used in the nineteenth century. Therefore, the conservation architect and the castle administrators wanted to have the room repainted in this ‘characteristic’ dark green colour. The light yellow phase appeared to them to be from a later date, and they disparagingly called this a ‘custard colour’ that they claimed needed repainting. However, this decision was primarily based on personal taste and a misinterpretation of previous research and analysis.

Further paint analysis showed the presence of finely ground zinc white pigment in the light yellow paint layers. Zinc white is thought to be in use since the late 1850s. [Kuehn, 1986; Gettens and Stout, 1966] Finding this pigment seemed to be fresh proof that the yellow phase must be dated after the 1860 renovation of the castle. The fine grind of the zinc white also seems to date this pigment to post industrial production. It was argued that if this yellow layer belongs to a later period, then the underlying dark green scheme could be

linked to the 1860's redecoration. The dark green scheme would thus connect to the ceiling paintings with the painted decoration on the beams and with the mirrored decorative strap-work on the wooden wainscoting.

The authors strongly rejected these ideas and argued that the Salon consists of more elements than only the painted wooden panelling and the ceiling paintings (tangible aspects). We questioned how the decorative strap-work could be connected in an historical context to the dark green scheme, supposedly applied in the 1860s. More importantly, we also doubted if the decorative strap-work on the wainscoting could be associated with the dark green colour scheme in an aesthetical context (intangible aspects).



Fig. 3. Blue Salon after conservation. This room is now often in use for wedding and conferences. Here the large mantle piece is visible together with the ceiling paintings and the reinstalled replica eighteenth century Caspar Wolff landscape paintings. May 2012. ©E. Geldhof/R. Keppler

If the aesthetical values of the room are observed, it is clear that the linen strap-work on the wooden panelling has a three-dimensional purpose. The dark strips applied on the light background, enhanced with a painted shadow line, give the panelling its architectural three-dimensional features. This pattern is repeated, but mirrored in the ceiling where the decorative motive is painted directly on the wooden beams. Thus, the decorative strap-work on the panelling forms a unity with the painted decoration on the ceiling. If the strap-work was initially glued on dark green painted panelling and later replaced on the light yellow panelling, traces of dark green paint on the reverse of the strips might be expected. Investigation of a few loose linen strips did not show any residues of green paint. Stylistically, it also seems strange to have a dark green panelling with dark decorative strips on it. This would not give as much of a visual three-dimensional effect in the room as it has now (intangible aspects - the synergy). Understanding and clarifying this stylistic aspect of related decorative elements allowed the authors to preserve this light yellow colour, maintaining this decorative scheme and the synergy of the room for future generations.

This example clearly shows how a holistic approach and a close observation of details lead to the decision to

keep the room as found: a light colour scheme enhanced with three-dimensional decorations, painted on the beams and glued as linen strap-work on the wainscoting. A decoration scheme that the authors think captured the identity and synergy of the Blue Salon. (Figure 3) This outcome emphasises that personal prejudice and interpretation of paint analysis results can obscure proper understanding of the decorative synergy of a room.

The Count's Bedroom (Slaapkamer van de Graaf)

A comparable scenario unfolded in the Count's Bedroom. The conservation architect and castle administration followed a similar rigid strategy, attempting to return this interior to the 1860s building phase. The discovery of a tiny fragment of light blue wallpaper (found on a remnant of lattice-work beneath the existing flowery wallpaper) raised the expectation of an earlier decorative scheme. So the authors were asked about reproducing this wallpaper in order to return the room to an earlier historical vision. The blue paper fragment



Fig. 4. Top: Count's Bedroom: after conservation. © E. Geldhof/R. Keppler

Fig. 5. Bottom: Count's Bedroom: detail of the wallpaper with matching curtains. © E. Geldhof/R. Keppler

was decorated with a now only slightly discernable trellis pattern, and closer examination failed to determine whether the scrap came from a wallpaper or border. Provenance, pattern and position were difficult to establish, and a convincing reconstruction was regarded as impossible.

This dearth of information allowed focus to shift to the existing wallpaper, a colourful paper depicting flowers, and the matching curtains. This more recent wallpaper had been deemed unacceptable and 'ugly' by the conservation architect and castle administration. But the authors had no idea why this wallpaper was considered ugly and wrong for the Count's Bedroom. The authors observed that the wallpaper was block-printed using a coherent pattern and was in excellent condition. (Figures 4 and 5) By happy coincidence, an unused roll of this wallpaper was found in the attic. This find enabled further research into the provenance of this wallpaper. The paper was hand printed in France by the wallpaper manufacturer Paul D{um}AS[2] in the pre-WWII period. The twelve-colour pattern was applied to *papier continu* that was of a good quality as rag fibres could be distinguished. When comparing the unused wallpaper with the paper on the walls, it was evident that the pattern on the walls had barely

faded. Knowing how the castle rooms were decorated in the 1920s and again around 1956, the authors presume that this flowery wallpaper in the Count's Bedroom was installed in the 1950's, but that it probably was manufactured in the pre-WWII period. The decoration in this room thus reflected the personal approach and taste of the count in the most personal room of the castle, his bedroom.

Communicating these intangible findings in their coherent context during many discussions, finally convinced the conservation architect and castle administration to keep the existing wallpaper. Rather than attempting to recreate something from a tiny fragment of which the origin and placement was completely unknown. By doing so, the function and appearance of the room as intended by the count survives and the synergy of the room is preserved for future generations.

The Tower Room (Torenkamer)

The round Tower Room, added to the existing villa around 1859 at the same time as the other towers, is situated on the first floor and has a vaulted stucco ceiling with a faux closed lantern. The ceiling is painted with a geometrical pattern of small squares in perspective, which are highlighted with gilding. This gilding, together with the gilded trim on the stucco cornice, glimmers beautifully in the sunlight. The plaster walls are wallpapered above a low wooden wainscoting, decorated in 1859 to imitate a dark wood grain, which is still preserved. The original 1860s wallpaper has a dark trellis motive with brown shadow lines on a dark blue-green background (Figure 6) and was papered over in the 1950s with a lighter wallpaper with a similar trellis pattern.

The room has an entrance door that leads to the adjoining Red Salon (Rode Salon), with an allegorical scene with *putti* painted in grisaille (a 'witje'), as a over-door painting. The room has two windows, which are curved with the walls, which show traces of came in the window frames. These came were originally

set in diamond pattern and would have reflected the trellis of the original wallpaper. In this way, the walls and the window comes of the



Fig. 6. Tower Room: wall with original 1860s wallpaper, and later 1950s wallpaper. ©E. Geldhof/R. Keppler

room formed one continuous trellis motive that would have surrounded the visitor just like a garden arbour.

The Tower Room was refurbished as part of the 2008 conservation work (which for the Tower Room was limited to the conservation of the ceiling decoration). The original 1860s wallpaper was discovered during this work, hiding beneath the 1950s wallpaper. It seems that the 1950s wallpaper had been carefully chosen for this room, with its similar trellis pattern enhanced with light green bows against a very light silvery pearl-coloured background. However, the effect of this light wallpaper colour completely deprived the room of its original function and meaning.

The original function of the room was to establish a connection between indoors and outdoors, between the interior of the castle and the beautiful English landscape garden. This was created by carefully leading the eye of the spectator from the dark (the room) to the light (the garden via the windows). The original trellis wallpaper combined with the trellis-patterned windows gave the room its garden arbour essence. This vital, intangible element was lost when the room was redecorated in the 1950s. The new wallpaper with its lighter

background created a lighter room, but caused the room to lose its original meaning. The intense contrast between the dark room and the light exterior was lost, and with that, the synergy of the decorative scheme. Changing the interior colour scheme showed that the function or context of this room was not fully understood when it was redecorated.

The main goal of the second conservation campaign in 2010 was to return the meaning and function of the Tower Room by uncovering the original wallpaper. In this case, there was sufficient time between 2008 and 2010 to carry out a pilot study. The pilot project allowed all stakeholders to assess the proposed result and see how the original appearance would work in reality. This allowed time to discuss treatment options and results before a long and complex treatment began. The function of the decorative scheme in the room as a binding element between the garden and the castle was explained by the



Fig. 7. Tower Room: after conservation. May 2012. ©E. Geldhof/R. Keppler

conservators and understood by the architect, the castle administration, visitors and other people involved.

Conclusion

These case studies show that understanding the decorative synergy of a room is the key to preserving the function, context and aesthetics of an interior. This synergy can be enhanced by a single decorative element in a room which has a unifying role, like the linen strap-work in the Blue Salon. It can be the relationship between a decorative finish and its cultural or material value, as is the case in the Count's Bedroom. It can also be the understanding of the context of the room within the broader setting of the castle and the surrounding grounds, as in the Tower Room. Each of these three case studies show how an initial rigid conservation strategy was revised, by considering and understanding the decorative synergy that is formed by intangible characteristics such as origin, coherence and interdependence of their interior decoration. This was made possible by communicating a collective understanding of the decorative synergy within individual interiors, using a holistic approach, material analysis, material knowledge, and intuition.



*Fig. 8. Detail 1860s pergola on the balcony of Kasteel Keukenhof, showing how the original trellis wallpaper would have worked in the Tower Room.
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Endnotes

1. Cross-section analysis (optical microscopy OM), polarised light microscopy (PLM) and scanning electron microscopy

(SEM-EDX) was carried out by Matthijs de Keijzer en dr. Luc Megens from Rijksdienst voor het Cultureel Erfgoed (RCE).

2. The firm of Paul Dumas began trading in 1906 in Montreuil just outside Paris, selling hand printed papers and textiles. Patterns were based on collection of nineteenth century wood blocks from a discontinued textile printer. The firm flourished in the 1920s and 1930s, and by 1928 had 750 employees. The period after WWII was difficult for many wallpaper manufacturers and the Paul Dumas firm was reduced to 131 employees by 1954. Eventually, in 1978, the firm stopped producing altogether and ceased to exist. Information about Paul Dumas' business in Montreuil can be viewed at: http://www.actuacity.com/usine-de-papiers-peints-dumas--actuellement-hotel-industriel-et-centre-de-formation-professionnelle_m155712/ (accessed 8 January 2011)

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