



Historical and Methodological Aspects of the Restoration of a 18th century French Gilt Leather Tapestry in an Historic House: the Maison Mantin project (Moulins, France)

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Abstract

Louis Mantin was a collector from the upper middle-class in Moulins (France), who lived during the second half of the 19th century. In this beautiful home, built in a mixture of two styles, the Néo-Gothic and the Louis XIII revival, Louis Mantin laid out his encyclopaedic collection of approximately fifteen hundred objects. In accordance with his will, it was planned to make this residence a “house-museum”, but its opening to the public was made possible only hundred years after his death. In 2005, the complete conservation of outside and interior began. The room of Louis Mantin is one among the many treasures within this house. The walls are entirely covered with a gilt leather tapestry made up of polychrome panels manufactured in the Boissier workshop in Avignon around 1712. The gilt tapestry was largely modified and added to at the time of its installation in the house at the end of the 19th century. In the current project this exceptional decoration was entirely demounted and conserved in line with the wishes, expressed by Louis Mantin in his will, that have conditioned most of the conservation options.

Keywords

Louis Mantin, gilt leather, Boissier, wall-hanging, historical house.

Introduction

Louis Mantin was born on 14th January 1851 into a family, which had made its fortune as cabinet makers. He made a career for himself in government administration in various prefectures in Gap (Hautes-Alpes) 1879-1880, in Montpellier (Hérault), in Embrun (Hautes-Alpes) where he was a sub-prefect between 1880-1882. It is very likely that it was in Embrun that he first met Louise Gabrielle Allaire who was to be his life's companion, but the fact she was married prevented them from legalising the relationship or from having any public life. As an only child, Mantin inherited his father's fortune in 1881, then his uncle's in 1886. He subsequently requested a leave of absence, which was granted in 1893, from his position as Secretary General, sub prefect in the Limoges prefecture (Haute-Vienne). He was a person of private means and a Chevalier of the Légion of honour. When he returned to Moulins he devoted his time and energy to managing his estate as well as to building, decorating and furnishing his house which was to be his life's work. Mantin had inherited the family home built by his grandparents, on the ruins of part of the prestigious palace belonging to the Bourbon dukes. He decided to replace the building, which was old fashioned, with a house in line with every modern facility. He entrusted the construction of the house to the architect René Moreau (Moulins, 1858 – id., 1924). Moreau incorporated a section of the "ancestors' house" in the new design. The "new house" was designed to be a mixture of various styles – a medieval manor house, a mountain chalet, a sea-front "art nouveau" villa and a Renaissance chateau; the latter being in total contrast to the systematic layout of the neo-classical section. Work on the foundations and main walls were started in 1894; and the decoration of both the interior and exterior of the house was finished in 1897. From the beginning of the project the house was designed to be a showcase for the objects the master of the house had bought and collected during his tours of duty and travels:

“ Rooms were designed to house his early Aubusson tapestries or the gleaming Cordoban leather, plaques from Limoges and examples of tin glazed earthenware were set in mantelpieces; one room was entirely decorated with nearly every type of early “French faïence”; chest and sideboards line the entrance halls ; furniture of various styles from the Renaissance to Louis XVI filled the house [...] display cabinets were installed for enamels, miniatures, coins, medals, numerous examples of finely crafted locks and a multitude of other curios” [Tissier, 1905].

La Maison Mantin

On his death on 3rd October 1905, Louis Mantin demonstrated his philanthropy He left to the town where he was born a large sum of money to set-up a museum in the Anne de Beaujeu pavilion, as well as his house and his collection: “[...] to give visitors in a 100 years time an idea of what a 19th century house belonging to an upper middle class family was like”. On 5th June 1910 the new museum was opened with great pomp and ceremony, and the house, linked by a covered passage way, was opened to the public for a short time. The house, closed from 1914 because of the war, was never reopened due to a misinterpretation of Mantin's will. It was thought that he had not wanted the house to be visited before a hundred years had gone by, thus taking the opening date of the house to 2005. However the building was in no condition to be opened in 2005: both the fabric of the building and its collection had deteriorated and the electrical instillation required replacement to conform to modern safety requirements. Due to the financial obligations involved in supervising, restoring and adapting the house, the town of Moulins gifted the property and charges linked to it to the Allier Regional Council.

In 2005 the Regional Council ordered an initial investigation to be carried out and at the same time made sure that financial aid would be available from the Auvergne region and the Ministry of Culture. The organisation of the building work was entrusted to Jean Bourdet, a National Heritage architect, and the museum technical team was in charge of the technical and cultural project [1]. Although everyone agreed it was impossible to return the building to how Mantin had known it, the aim of the project was to restore the house as near as possible as it was in 1905, placing furniture and objects in their original positions, thus respecting the wishes of the legator: “*The appearance and the layout must be respected as far as possible, especially in the new part*”. In the first quarter of 2007, the house was completely emptied and the collection was given necessary emergency treatment. Day after day, month after month, this “Sleeping Beauty” was gradually brought back to life by specialist craftsmen (cabinet makers, wrought iron workers, master stain-glass makers, etc.) and registered conservators; the 1,500 pieces of furniture and objects making up the collection were patiently studied and restored.

The leather panel decorations

The gilt leather panels are perhaps the most unusual and puzzling decorative elements in the building (Figure 1). In fact, it is exceptional to see this type of decoration in Central France. Furthermore, their iconography has raised a number of questions [Fournet, 2004]. Some panels are intact and are roughly 115 cm high by 55 cm wide, but mostly their size has been altered, at times even being cut into very small pieces. These pieces of leather have evidently been re-used and replaced chaotically without trying to follow the iconography. The various motifs form a balanced whole and are colourful and slightly embossed. They consist of numerous characters with colourful clothing, numerous animals – especially wild beasts and birds - surrounded by examples from the plant world. The gilt backgrounds are fashioned by thin parallel lines bound within triangular forms.

It has been difficult to interpret the decor. Was it simply a question of decorative pictures without any other meaning? Or, on the contrary was there a central theme? These questions were more easily answered because a further three similar decorative schemes could be compared. Moreover, additional information came to light in a document found in the Avignon public library. This document was found a sales catalogue published in 1712 by Raymond Boissier, who was a gilt leather manufacturer in Avignon. It is already mentioned in various publications [Clouzot, 1925], but does not refer specifically to any known work. In this catalogue, the author lists forty gilt leather wall-hangings which were for sale and gives some details about them. Firstly, he states that the gilt background was “*ciselé à la mosaïque*”. Thus, there were small motifs imitating punches, which were most likely geometric in form and slightly embossed giving a more lively effect. He mentions that each panel was numbered from 1 to 40, each number in turn referring back to the catalogue. A precise description of the forty designs follows. The themes could be either mythological or historical or inspired by famous Middle Age romances or “Chinese motifs”. There were also “The Four Elements”, “The Four Corners of the globe”, and “The Four seasons”. Finally he refers to the rather unusual size of the panels: “*... one ell high by half an ell wide*”, roughly 116 cm by 57 cm.

In Moulins, the sizes of the panels, the themes depicted and the numbers painted on the panels enabled the identification of 29 of the designs mentioned. The identification of the small fragments would have been impossible without a possible comparison with designs from other collections. This comparison allowed the further determination of 39 out of the forty designs described in the catalogue; only panel number 40 is still

unknown. Other gilt leather works by the Boissier family have been located, notably in Aix-en-Provence town hall (Bouches-du-Rhône), in the “Museu de l’Art de la Pell” in Vic (Catalonia, Spain), in the Abbeig Foundation in Riggisberg (Switzerland), and in Ascott church (Surrey, England). Thus, the Moulins Museum gilt leather collection dates from the second decade of the 18th century and was sourced in Avignon. These are an excellent example of French gilt leather work from this era. They have slightly raised motifs, created using the embossing technique, on sheep skins; each panel constructed of three skins. The gilt effect was achieved by applying a yellow varnish, consisting of amber resin dissolved in linseed oil, over a silver foil. The aim of this varied decor was to tell a story in pictorial form; a simple but complete story, told by placing two or three characteristic scenes next to each other. Some themes were developed on two or even four adjacent panels which meant they had to be placed in a specific order to be understood. This idea of placing side-by-side several small scenes took its inspiration from contemporary practice in other fields, notably the scenes on fabric(s) and tapestries. The idea of using conventional images and colours was borrowed from techniques used by decorative artists, painters and sculptors [Le Pautre, 1669].

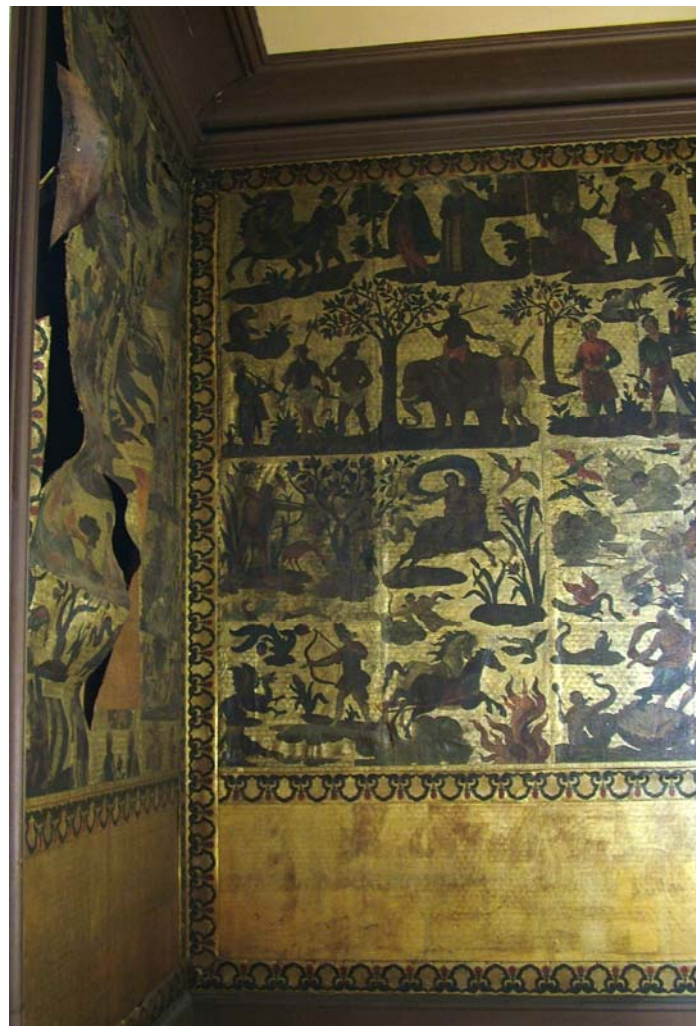


Figure 1: Before restoration. © C.Bonnot-Diconne 2009

The conservation project

Conservation started in 2007. Overall the leather was in quite a bad state (Figure 1). This decoration had suffered significant damage as a result of severe fluctuating environmental conditions, and above all as a result of the restoration and installation work carried out in the 19th century. The leather was fixed to all four walls in Louis Mantin's own bedroom, even around all the openings. The leather panels were on average 300 cm high and between 57 cm to 430 cm wide. The whole surface covered 42 sq. m. The installation desired by Louis Mantin entailed completely adapting the dimensions of the panels to match the format of the room and thus resulting in numerous modifications, which proved to be not only very expensive but also very complex. The craftsmen created the large decorative surfaces required by linking the original panels, attaching them to a backing with glue. The seams between panels, originally sown together, were cut and the panels taken apart. The original leather edges were reduced in thickness in order to maintain an even thickness at the joints. Then these larger sections were fixed with tacks to a frame on to which, for protection, a linen sheet was tightly stretched. The framework was then fixed to the wall. The motifs were generally placed randomly, without respecting the order and symbolism of what was represented. The areas of the décor, which were behind furniture, were not decorated. Here pieces of embossed gilt leather made especially for this purpose in the 19th century were used; these followed exactly the outline of the furniture. This detail proves that the positioning of the leather decoration and the furniture had been thought out logically by Louis Mantin and was an expression of his very precise and personal wishes. Over a period of a 100 years the leather deteriorated considerably: it became detached from the frame in places, resulting in a partial collapse of the panels, which in turn led to numerous tears and to an unevenness in all the surfaces. The major reason for detachment was an increase in tension due to the presence of modern leather used as a backing for the original leather (Figure 2).



Figure 2: Presence of modern leather backings on the panels which led to splits. © C.Bonnot-Diconne 2009

Used extensively as strips or as repair patches, their weight as well as the glue used, caused excess tension and stiffness and as a result splits have appeared. But more importantly the type of leather used played a significant role in how the wall hanging reacted. Analysis has shown that this vegetable-tanned leather did not react to environmental conditions in the manner as the original leather. This modern leather stretched, lost its shape very rapidly and was by nature not very resistant.

The 19th century craftsmen “improved” the decorated side to give the illusion of a uniform surface and to make the coloured motifs stand out even more. The background of each scene was completely repainted; this thin layer of colour, applied with great precision, covered up the original gilt background which remained visible in very few places (Figure 3). Analyses carried out by the Centre for Innovation and Research, Analyse and Marks (CIRAM) have shown the overpaint contained chrome yellow, used only from 1820 onwards. Tin foil, invisible to the naked eye, was discovered on top of this chrome yellow layer. The question posed during the current conservation was whether to keep this gold coloured overpaint or to remove it. Unfortunately, the original gold imitation varnish underneath was extremely fragile and could not be cleaned without taking risks. It was therefore decided to keep this gold coloured wash overpaint.



Figure 3: Chrome yellow based gilt colour on the original backgrounds. © C.Bonnot-Diconne 2009

On the other hand, the decision to remove the a thick coat of varnish covering the paint could be made separately. This varnish had darkened, and while in areas it was flaking off, in others it was powdery. The analyses, carried out by CIRAM, identified a mixture of amber and a resin suggesting that it was a “Chinese varnish”. Although this varnish layer could not be removed safely from the fragile background areas, The removal of this oxidised material from the coloured areas brought fourth their original tonalities uncovered by the 18th century overpaint: clothes in a great number of bright shades and colours; faces with creamy, pink coloured skin etc ... (Figures 4 and 5). Flaking paint noticed in various places prior to treatment, was in fact simply the damaged varnish delaminating. The varnish could be swollen by using polar solvents in gel form

to which a wetting agent was added; it could be removed by rubbing very gently with cotton wool. Using this technique was a long and laborious task because it had to be adapted for each colour and each area because of the differences in the thickness of the varnish and the reaction of certain pigments (notably the blacks and browns). Moreover, the areas covered by the gold coloured wash overpaint had to be avoided at all costs.



Figure 4: Detail of a bird before removal of the varnish on the paint. © C.Bonnot-Diconne 2009



Figure 5: Detail of a bird after removal of the varnish on the paint. © C.Bonnot-Diconne 2009

The extent of the damage as well as the condition of the support meant that the entire wall hanging had to be dismantled and the panels worked on individually. The choices made by Louis Mantin had to be taken into consideration when reinstating the leather panelling. There was no question of repositioning or presenting the mixed up panels in a logical order. Firstly, the strips of 19th century leather used for covering the joints were removed and documented. Then the leather side-pieces were removed individually, numbered and stored appropriately. Facings were sometimes necessary to prevent new splits from occurring. The decoration was placed flat on rigid supports. The treatment followed a well defined protocol which was applied to each of the leather squares or panels. The modern leather backings were removed mechanically, as softening and dissolving the skin glue would have encouraged it to soak into the original leather, risking a further hardening of the leather after it had dried. The leather used as a backing was not strong and was removed relatively easily. On the other hand, the remnants of skin glue were firmly attached, brittle and sharp. At times the only solution possible was to reduce the thickness of the glue with scalpel. The buckled surfaces were flattened using a process of controlled dampening: the panels were pressed flat under Gore-tex® membranes and sheets of Plexiglass.

As a result of removing the modern leather backings, the individual elements were separate and had to be rejoined using strips of non-woven polyester of different qualities (17g per sq. m and 35 g per sq. m) using a layer of Beva 371® glue. In order to hold the edges together, the splits were repaired similarly; then any gaps remaining were filled using a Beva 371® filler coloured appropriately using acrylic paints (Figures 6 and 7). The edges of panels were reinforced with strips of 5 cm wide Velcro® sewn onto a sheet of polyester cloth. The polyester fabric was adhered to the reverse of the leather panels using Mowilith DMC2®. Distilled water

was used to clean the backs of the panels, which were very dirty. Retouching was limited to where a filler had been used because the painted sections proved to be very worn and impossible to be completely restored once the varnish had been removed.

The strips of leather covering the joints were meticulously conserved as they acted as a frame for the leather surfaces and were visible at in front of the decoration. The dust was removed from the strips with a microfiber cloth. Then all the gaps were filled (Beva 371® filler) and afterwards retouched using acrylic paint. Many had lost their original shape and were torn, so these were backed, either partially or completely, with non-woven polyester adhered using a coating of Beva 371® glue. After treatment, the gilt leather panels were fixed back onto the original frame using Velcro® strips (described above) and the leather strips used to cover the joints were replaced in their original position. They were fixed with upholstery nails [2] (Figure 8).



Figure 6: Torn panel before restoration. © C.Bonnot-Diconne 2009



Figure 7: Torn panel after restoration. © C.Bonnot-Diconne 2009

Conclusion

Working in a listed building imposed numerous constraints: the presence of skirting boards, cornices, and electrical points limited the type of fixings that could be used. The lack of an air conditioning system also influenced decisions in terms of long-term preservation. From the beginning of the project, the placement of the furniture and lack of direct lighting, which obscured the leather decoration in the room, were an issue of discussion. After discussion with the conservation team, particular precautions were taken to protect the decoration as far as possible. UV filters were placed on the window panels; there was no possibility of having curtains because of the stained glass. When it was possible, all the new electrical equipment was installed in

the cornices above the leather panels. There are plans to place a humidifier to control the relative humidity within the room. Finally a new LED lighting system was put in the ceiling to be used when there are visitors so that the leather decoration can be fully appreciated.



Figure 8: Decoration being put back into place. © C.Bonnot-Diconne 2009

The gilt leather belonging to the Moulins Museum is important because of its unusual decorative effect and its rarity. It is also an exquisite example of the work of one of the most important workshops in Avignon producing gilt leather. This project allowed further insight and knowledge of the Boissier family workshop. In fact this workshop was in production for more than a century: four generations from father to son worked from 1640 to approximately 1770, from the middle of the 17th century until this style of decoration became outmoded in the third quarter of the 18th century.

The 19th century restoration of this decoration did not stand the test of time, however the contemporary arrangement of the panels had to be respected. Thus, the conservation project carried out in the 21st century was a compromise. The choices made, which are certainly open to question, took into account above all the great fragility of this type of decoration. The project was completed over a period of three years and, just one century after the first visit, this exceptional example of cultural heritage will be handed back to the public at long last in 2010.

Endnotes:

[1] The project was supervised by successive curators: Anne Adrian, then from 2007 Benoît-Henry Papounaud, with the help of Maud Leyoudec, conservation assistant.

[2] The work took place between September 2007 and October 2009. The following took part: C. Bonnot-Diconne, I. Léautey, A. Ingoglia, C. Gamby, CEA/Grenoble, CIRAM

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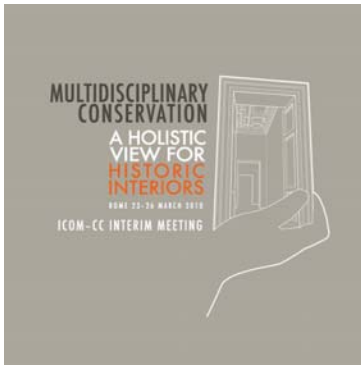
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Jean-Pierre Fournet graduated in 2004 from Ecole du Louvre, where he received a PhD in “Ancient gilt leathers in France”. Since then, he has persuaded his case studies by making a catalogue of all the gilt leather artifacts conserved in France. (226 Boulevard Saint Germain, 75007 PARIS, France, j-p.fournet163@orange.fr)

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