Breakout Session Record

Amanuensis/Student name: Paula Hung

Date: 14 July 2005

Institution: Victoria and Albert Museum

Title of Breakout session:
The use of indigenous and exotic woods in French furniture

Name(s) of Breakout session leaders:
Dr. John Cross (London Metropolitan University)
Dr. Carolyn Sargentson (Head, Research Department, V&A)

General themes discussed at the Breakout session:

The session discusses the business of luxury furniture making during the course of the 18th century and examines the mass supply of exotic and indigenous woods. It also provides objects that showed examples of the original colours of this furniture, and finally Dr. John Cross demonstrated the hand-sawn technique of cutting a pattern off a piece of wood.
Object (A) information

Object Title: (see attached handout)
Object Date:
Museum accession number of object:

Description of object (please attach any information received from breakout session leaders to this sheet):

The surface of the drawers of the commode is a very complex design that could be reflected under candlelight. The different pieces of wood were cut off from different angles and were combined again to make this luxurious appearance. From the economic perspective, the wood was cut remarkably thin to save the cost of the precious material. The veneer of this commode is mainly pine whilst walnut is used for the inside of the drawers. The bottom of the commode does not touch the ground, which is unusual.

What questions did the audience ask about this object?
Q: Did the woodcutter make the patterns or did the furniture-makers put them in?

A: The main difference between the furniture makers in England and France (or London and Paris) in the 18th century or even earlier, was the degree of specialization. Paris was called the ‘Venus specialized cross economy’ in the continental Europe. It developed a very clear programme of economic development. From the 1540s to the 1560s this programme led to the establishment of factories for the luxury production and market place. Paris thus had the tradition of being the center of the production and the international distribution of luxurious products. In Paris there was a huge amount of specialization; therefore, the tools one could use, the materials one could get involved with and the skills one could practice was very highly controlled. The persons who cut the veneer were the wood merchants whilst the veneer-licensed men worked for them in the factories cutting pieces of patterns in the shape of flowers or triangles. However, because every piece of the veneer is hand-sawn and interlocked together, when the product finished, the design can then finally be seen.

It would be interesting to see how a ground was marked down, how a pattern was found out and when is it being adopted by an institute.
Register No. 1083-1882
Negative No. 47115

Date of Receipt
From whom Received
John Jones Esq.

How acquired
Request.

Registered papers
Condition

Measurements
H.2'9", L.4'10½", W.2'3".

Description

COMMODE
FRENCH (Paris), about 1710
Fine veneered with parquetry of kingwood; gilt bronze mounts.
Slab of "Campan Mélange".
This is an early example of the commode, a largely ornamental piece of furniture developed from the essentially practical chest "of drawers". The bold mounts are here not merely decorative but perform the function of protecting vulnerable points.
It has been suggested that this impressive piece of furniture came from the workshop of the royal cabinet-maker, André-Charles Boulle (d. 1732) since it is believed that drop-handles backed by circles of mosaics and oak leaves may have been a feature exclusively used by him.
The marble slab appears to be original. Stone from the Campan Valley was exported on a large scale during the period of Louis XIV.

Jones Collection

Label 1971.

1922 Cat. of Jones Coll:  
12. COMMODE, fitted with two narrow and two long drawers, with cross-hatched veneer of kingwood, mounted in ormolu with heavy angle pieces on legs' feet supports, drop-handels, escutcheons and a mask. On the top is a slab of variegated purple marble.

FRENCH. Period of Louis XIV; first half of the 18th century. PLATE 5.
H. 2 ft. 9½ in., L. 4 ft. 10½ in., W. 2 ft. 3 in.

1882 Inventory:
COMMODE. Marquetry of kingwood or rosewood, with four drawers, heavily mounted with chased ormolu. The top slab is of red variegated marble. FRENCH. Period of Louis XIV. H. 2 ft. 9½ in., L. 4 ft. 10½ in., W. 2 ft. 3 in.

John Jones, 1981.
Commode 1083-1882 French, Early 18th Century

Mainly dark brown-red with aligned irregular white veins up to ⅛", some of which are broken. The veins cross the grain of the stone. A pale pink patch is present with grey green and large calcite blobs. Some fossils seen.

Match: Campan Mélange from Campan Valley, Haute Pyrenees, France.

This stone from Campan Valley was exploited on a large scale during the reign of Louis XIV. It probably originated from nodules of limestone which became cemented together. The spaces between the nodules have been cemented by a mainly greenish matrix. The brownish colour is due to later staining by iron rich compounds. It has been used for pillars at Versailles and in Westminster Cathedral.
Supplement (B) Alphabetical Table

Object Title:

This alphabetical table comes from:

_The Art of the Cabinetmaker_ (III section of the III Part)
M. DCC. LXXIV
By M. Roubo son, Master Woodworker

Description of object (please attach any information received from the breakout session leaders to this sheet):

Although there are errors (such as No.2 Mahogany does not come from Malabar — Malabar only produces Amber), the table reflects the need to supply exotic woods at that time. The reason exotic woods were needed for the veneer market was because they were hard, dense, stable and contained beautiful colours. Some of the indigenous woods stained very easily or changed colour when applied with glue, and therefore were seldom used by the veneer furniture workers. However, the supply of exotic wood was not readily available and was quite expensive. This table is a very useful guide as a snapshot of what was available to M. Rouboson, the Master Woodworker in the 1770s. Some of the wood supply diminished as years pass by, for example, sandalwoods were abundant in the 1780s (imported by the East India Company), yet the supply gradually diminished after 20 years. Not only sandalwoods, but other various timbers were disappearing. We can see the ‘poverty of French luxury furniture makers’ as the materials became restricted and were of limited availability to them.

A large element in the cost of the woods is that of shipping. Thus one of the factors of the French preference to the particular woods lies in whether they are easily to store in large quantity and does not cost much to ship. (Woods were cut into pieces and then jig-sawed together on the ships.) Mahogany was extremely limited in France, yet abundant in England. At that time the French was developing relations with such exotic oriental countries such as China and Japan (so they drank Chinese tea instead of English tea). After fighting the Seven-year war in 1763, the French who came to England were extremely preoccupied with the woods that originated in England, and suddenly furniture-makers were veneering Mahogany in the later 18th century. Since then, the English style tea tables started to appear in the French market. The veneering Mahogany reached its peak in the 1780s until the revolution, which disrupted the production and market and caused decline in the furniture market.
### ALPHABETICAL TABLE of foreign woods known under the name the Woods of the Indies, & which are appropriate to Cabinetmaking; their colours, their qualities, hard or soft, or aromatic, & the name of the country where they grow.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of Woods</th>
<th>Country Where the Woods Grow</th>
<th>Colours</th>
<th>Qualities</th>
<th>Smell</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Aceja</td>
<td>Ceylon Island. East Indies</td>
<td>Red</td>
<td>Soft</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aloe or Agioscohum</td>
<td>Cochin China. East Indies</td>
<td>Of many colours.</td>
<td>Soft</td>
<td>Aromatic.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aloe or Calabur, or Calabur</td>
<td>Cochin China. Cambaya &amp; Sumatra. East Indies</td>
<td>Russet</td>
<td>Desse ....</td>
<td>Aromatic.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Amaranthe</td>
<td>Guyana. West Indies</td>
<td>Purple-brown</td>
<td>Hard</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Amourette</td>
<td>Antilles. West Indies</td>
<td>Red-brown</td>
<td>Hard</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Anisseed or Anil à L'Etoile</td>
<td>China, Philippines. East Indies</td>
<td>Grey</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Brasil or Sapan wood</td>
<td>Of Fernambuce, Laron Islands &amp; of St. Martha, Antilles, &amp; Jamaica. West Indies</td>
<td>Red</td>
<td>Desse</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Cinnamon or Sassafras</td>
<td>Ceylon. East Indies</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Hard</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Cayenne</td>
<td>Cayenne. West Indies</td>
<td>Yellow, red, veined</td>
<td>Desse</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Cedar</td>
<td>Asia, America &amp; Syberia in Europe. China, East Indies; &amp; from</td>
<td>White-russet</td>
<td>Soft</td>
<td>as above</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. China or Letter wood</td>
<td>Guiane. West Indies</td>
<td>Red-brown, with black spots</td>
<td>Hard</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. Citron or Candle Wood American Islands</td>
<td></td>
<td>Yellow-russet</td>
<td>Firm</td>
<td>Lemon, nutmeg &amp; cinnamon.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. Copalba</td>
<td>From Asia &amp; Middle Europe</td>
<td>Veined-white</td>
<td>Firm &amp; impervious</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. Coral wood</td>
<td>Wind Islands, America</td>
<td>Red, bright, veined</td>
<td>Poreous</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16. Cyprus</td>
<td>From Asia</td>
<td>Yellowish figured</td>
<td>Hard, impervious</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17. Ebony</td>
<td>Madagascar, Maurice Island. Africa.</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Very hard</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18. Portuguese Ebony</td>
<td>East Indies</td>
<td>Black &amp; white, spotted</td>
<td>Hard</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20. Green Ebony</td>
<td>From Tabasco &amp; American Islands. America</td>
<td>Olive brown</td>
<td>Hard</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>with green streaks</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Different Woods appropriate to Cabinetmaking.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Name and Origin</th>
<th>Color and Texture</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>23</td>
<td>White Ebony, Moliocques Islands, East Indies</td>
<td>White, Hard</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24</td>
<td>Epé de Bled, China, East Indies</td>
<td>Brown &amp; reddish, figured</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25</td>
<td>Poreol, Cayenne Island</td>
<td>White, figured with red</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26</td>
<td>Fert, American Islands</td>
<td>Fawn, brown &amp; black, Very hard, somewhat streaked</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27</td>
<td>Pustel, Jamaica, West Indies</td>
<td>Veined yellow, Soft</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28</td>
<td>Gayac or Saint-Wood, San Domingo Island &amp; Port de Paix, West Indies</td>
<td>Green &amp; black, streaked, Very hard</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29</td>
<td>Gum wood, Guadeloupe, West Indies</td>
<td>White with black veining, Hard</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30</td>
<td>India or Campêche, Campêche, St. Croix, Martinique &amp; Grenadine, Baybee, Aromatic, Islands, West Indies</td>
<td>Red, with yellow glazing, Hard &amp; very heavy, Strong scent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31</td>
<td>Jacaranda, East Indies</td>
<td>Marbled white &amp; black, Hard</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>32</td>
<td>Yellow, Pusro &amp; Chairenborg, or Satin Yellow, Antilles &amp; Tobago Island, America</td>
<td>Yellow, golden veined or wavy, Dense</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>33</td>
<td>Lapis, West Indies</td>
<td>Red &amp; bright yellow, Dense</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>34</td>
<td>Nutmeg wood, East Indies</td>
<td>Soft</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35</td>
<td>Partridge Eye, East Indies</td>
<td>Brown-grey, Very hard</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>36</td>
<td>Olive wood, Syria &amp; Middle Europe</td>
<td>Brown-yellow, Figured, Hard</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>37</td>
<td>Orange wood, China, &amp; Europe</td>
<td>Yellow &amp; white, Dense</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>38</td>
<td>Plane wood, From Asia &amp; America</td>
<td>White, Dense</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>39</td>
<td>Stink wood, Cape of Good Hope, Africa</td>
<td>Wavy, Dense</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40</td>
<td>Rhode or Asphalt, Jamaica, America</td>
<td>White, Dense</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>41</td>
<td>Rose or Marblewood, Antilles Islands, America</td>
<td>Yellow &amp; red, figured, Dense</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>42</td>
<td>Red or Blood, China, in the Kingdom of Siam &amp; in the Islands of Solor &amp; Timor, East Indies</td>
<td>Dark red, Hard</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>43</td>
<td>Citron Sandalwood, East Indies</td>
<td>Bright yellow, Hard</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>44</td>
<td>White Sandalwood, As above,</td>
<td>Russet-white, Dense</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>45</td>
<td>Red Sandalwood, On the Coreamdiel coast, &amp; Tarassarion Island, East Indies</td>
<td>Red mixed with yellow &amp; brown</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>46</td>
<td>Red Satinwood, Antilles Islands, West Indies</td>
<td>Red with yellow veining, Dense</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>47</td>
<td>Purplewood, East Indies</td>
<td>Wine-white &amp; purple, Dense, figured</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>48</td>
<td>Palissandre purple wood, St. Lucie Island or Alousia, West Indies</td>
<td>Brown-grey, veined, Porous</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Object (C) information

Object Title: JEWEL COFFER

Object Date: French (Paris) 1775-80
  Veneered with marquetry of largely exotic woods – tulip wood
  Stamped J.H. Riesener

Description of object (please attach any information received from breakout session leaders to this sheet):

Riesener became a Master of the Parisian cabinet-makers’ guild in 1763. This piece shows admirably his late style of the 1770s; it is noteworthy that he produced a table with similar marquetry for the use of Marie Antoinette in 1778. The upper section could be removed from its stand and carried by the handles on each side. The interior contains a series of compartments, some concealed, opened by various manipulations of the key. There is a drawer below with writing utensils. The whole piece is mounted on casters so it could be moved about.

Object (D) information

Object Title: Reading-stand with writing drawer

Object Date: 1785
  Painted Jean-Jacques Pierre bearing the date-letter ‘z’ for 1777 carcass stamped.

Description of object (please attach any information received from breakout session leaders to this sheet):

This type of work table was originally brightly coloured with blue and green; however, the UV natural light caused the rapid decaying of woods and now the colours have all faded.
Object (E) information

Object Title: (see attached handout)

Object Date:

Museum accession number of object:

Description of object (please attach any information received from breakout session leaders to this sheet):

(see attached handout)

Tulip wood. The original colours were extremely bright; different colours were used for the flowers, vase and birds. Different types of wood were used for different colours. What is seen now is a completely different version.

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Object (F) information

Object Title: Corner Cupboard

Object Date: 1773 – 1774  Veneered with King wood

Description of object (please attach any information received from breakout session leaders to this sheet):

The ground wood, Sycamore, was originally silver, but in 1782 there had been reports describing that the ground wood changed colour. Some merchants would even scrape off the top layer of the furniture surface to revive the colour. The leaves and flowers were coloured by dyes, and the bright red and purple colours came from the wood. The fading of colours might be the result of (1) UV light (2) stains or (3) fungus, which makes the timbers turn green.
Register No. 1095-1882
Date of Receipt
From whom Received
How acquired
Registered papers
Condition
Measurements
Description

Label 1971:

PET 1971.

LUIS'S WRITING DESK
HYDISC (Paris) about 1750.
Banded G.R. or G.W. with two V's conjoined, surmounted by a crown. An illegible inscription is also painted underneath.

Vennered with marquetry of various woods. Gilt bronze mounts. Furnished with a mechanism that caused the top to slide backwards as the drawer is pulled forward. Fitted with an adjustable reading-light and two compartments with lids.

The double V mark is that of the Chateau de Versailles; the significance of the initials G.R. is uncertain but may refer to the Marie-Madeleine de la Présé, the Dept of royal furnishings intended for the use of the Queen who, at this period, would have been Marie Leszinska (d.1788). The royal cabinet maker Jean-François Oeben (d. 1753) made a speciality of tables of this type although other craftsmen subsequently imitated the form. The double fillet of light and dark wood surrounding the panels is, however, a characteristic feature of his work that others rarely adopted.

Jones Collection

1822 Cat. of Jones Coll:

18. TABLE, shaped outline and curved legs, fitted with a drawer beneath the top, decorated in marquetry of harewood, tulipwood, sycamore and other woods with a bunch of flowers within a shaped panel on the top, and floral designs in panels on each side; mounted in ormolu with bands and scrollwork feet.

Furniture. Period of Louis XV.
H. 2 ft. 3 in., W. 2 ft. 3½ in., D. 1 ft. 2½ in.
1895-1882.
Banded underneath with a coronet above the letters G.R and W.

1882 Inventory:

TABLE. Marquetry of tulip and boxwoods in lighter woods, and one front rail cut, and contains a table with opening doors. Fitted with feet. The compartments in each side, 1 ft. 2 in. H. 3½ ft. W. 2 ft. 3½ in., depth 14½ in.

1895-1882.
Register No. 1695-1882

Date of Receipt
From whom received
John Jones Esq.

How acquired
Request.

Registered papers
Condition

Measurements
H. 2' 5", W. 2' 8", D. 1' 2".

Description (P.I.C. for photographs.)

FRENCH: period of Louis XIV.
Table with shaped outline and curved legs, fitted with a drawer beneath the top, decorated in marquetry of hardwood, tulipwood, sycamore and other wood with a bunch of flowers within a shaped panel on the top, and floral designs in panels on each side. Mounted in ormolu with beaded and scrollwork feet.

Branded underneath with a coronet above the letters G.R. and W.

The W of the branded mark should probably be read as two W's linked. This may perhaps be to stand for Versailles. It has been suggested that the GR over the two W's was the mark of Charles X (1824-30). There is another illegible French word painted on, after the mark, of which a sketch is shown here:--

Letter from P. Verlet: 1963
Comme vous le savez, W signifie Versailles, G.R. devrait indiquer, me semble-t-il, le Garde-Meuble de la Reine. Je connais cette marque, soit avec le W, soit avec le P de Ponce-Isabeau, sur des meubles Louis XVI. J'ai pensé qu'il s'agissait de meubles considérées comme démodées et secondaires à l'époque de Marie-Antoinette sur lesquels on n'avait pas porté la marque circulaire du Garde-Meuble de la Reine, de la même Marie-Leczynska qui eut un Garde-Meuble dont l'importance n'a rien à voir avec celui de Marie-Antoinette. Par le style des meubles qui portent cette marque, on arriverait peut-être à se former une idée plus nette de cette question.

Letter from P. Verlet (1963, November 16th):
Nous ne nous étions pas compris sur la marque G (ou D) R.W. que l'aviez notée avant la guerre sur la table no. 18 du catalogue Jones, qui signale d'ailleurs cette marque comme jaillissant de manière douteuse.

Comme je soulève cette question, avec des initiales variées, sur des meubles ayant certainement fait partie du Garde-Meuble de Marie-Antoinette et comme la table en question est antérieure à 1770 (ainsi que le sont plusieurs des meubles ainsi marqués), je me demande si cette table ne pourrait pas provenir de Marie Leczynska, non seulement pour la date de fabrication, mais pour l'appartenance primitive. Mais que peut-on dire pour la ressemblance des œuvres d'Oeben? A-t-elle les doubles filets jaune et noir? Je ne le crois pas, mais mon souvenir est très lointain et la photographie que j'ai n'est pas claire. When open the top of this table slides back as the drawer front comes forward with two legs to reveal a writing compartment, coissions and a reading stand:

Top slides back as writing-unit is pulled forward.

coissions each have hinged lid with floral marquetry.
There is one key. The first turn opens a small drawer; the second should push down a tongue which operates the spring catch of the writing-unit which then work on its own.

It has been suggested that this piece is most probably by Ceben. Nicolay, in *l’Art et la Maniere des Maîtres Ébénistes français au XVIII siècle*, p.336, writes:—

Jean-Francois Ceben, of German origin, master circa 1767. Furniture is rarely signed. Of a rich but rather heavy style. The marquetry of cubes of the transition period specialized in mechanical furniture.

See Verlets’ French Furniture and Interior Decoration of the 18th century, 1967, which illustrates a mechanical table attributed to Ceben. Verlet writes:—

Jean-Francois Ceben was probably the inventor of these reading-tables, which have a push-pull mechanism to repel an upper surface decorated with marquetry, the reading-slope (of marquetry, leather or lacquer) situated in the upper part of the interior comes forward like a drawer, and ornamented with waxers and inlays, enclosing the requisites for writing or for dressing the hair. Sometimes there is a small shelf only which comes forward to form the reading slope, for instance, in the centre of a piece taking the form of a bonheur-du-jour designed by Jean-Henri Reisener.

In the Bowes Museum there is a dressing table of similar shape to the Museum’s, with a mirror on a post. Under the carcass is branded with initials of Marie Antoinette with a royal crown above encircled by 'Garde-Meuble de la Reine'. Attributed to Jean-Henri Reisener.

See the Catalogue Van Keulen, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, 1952, No.102, Figs.7i, a & b where a table much like ours is illustrated (see below and opposite). It is attributed to Ceben. Reference is there made to A. Feulner, J.P. Ceben, 1924, p.23, where a similar table in the Munich Residenzmuseum is described.

...underneath on each side of V & A table are a large screw which can be tightened, to change the sliding mechanism of the top.

This table in the Rijksmuseum is also illustrated in *Les Ebenistes du XVIII siècle* Trévisan, Collection Grands Artisans d'Autrefois, p.145 (See next page for photostat).
Object (G) information

Object Title: (see attached handout)

Object Date:

Museum accession number of object:

Description of object (please attach any information received from breakout session leaders to this sheet):

(see attached handout)

A new dyeing technique was used in this commode. After painting the pictures on the cover, a small part of the wood in the picture (e.g. the man’s calves) would be cut out and dyed, then put back into the picture. In so doing it not only prevented the wood from bleaching and staining one another, but it also made using indigenous woods in furniture possible, which saves much money. The covers of the drawers were made from walnut, and the inside was made from Mahogany.

When turning the key in the keyhole, the left front cover and drawers would automatically unfold (like the mechanism of a clock).
(G)

Dyed: domestic wood

[Note: The leg] cut out small pieces -> dye -> put back in
Register No. W.51-1948.  
Date of Receipt
From whom received Sir Bernard Eckstein, Bart., Deceased,  
Epsy Lane,  
25 South Street, W.1.,  
per Messrs Middleton, Lewis & Clarke,  
53/54, Leaden Hall Street, E.C.3.

How acquired Request.
Registered papers 48/1760.

Condition

Measurements H.2'10½", B.2'2½", W.4'5½".

Description

Commode, marquetry of walnut, box, sycamore and other woods, with gilt brass (oromulu) mounts. Rectangular top of grey-veined marble with chamfered corners. In the frieze a long drawer faced with gilt brass plates, with a concealed lock, beneath a rosette in the centre and two handles in the form of laurel swags bound with ribbons. Below the frieze, three cupboards separated by pilasters faced with gilt brass plates horizontally milled. The four corners canted and faced with similar pilasters. Below the pilasters are six short tapering legs, square in section, faced with gilt brass like the pilasters and terminating in square blocks. At the junction of each leg and the base of the commode, a pair of scrolled brackets in gilt brass. The side panels decorated with marquetry representations of musicians; the centre cupboard door with a scene from the Italian Comedie dell'Arte. In the centre of each flanking cupboard door an oval panel showing spectators watching the stage from boxes, all in marquetry. By David Roentgen.