Restoration of a Neo Baroque Chest of Drawers

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1. Introduction

The theme of this talk is the restoration of the Neo Baroque chest of drawers. Through the analysis of the materials and woodworking techniques used in the production of the object we will try to understand the nature of the damages it suffered.

2. History

The chest of drawers is of Neo Baroque style from the 19th century, and judging by the stylistic features and the information we have gathered from the owner, corresponds to the Venetian type of chest of drawers. It is made out of fir wood and all surfaces, except backside and inside of the piece, are veneered with a 3 cm thick walnut veneer. The carcase is connected with woodworking joints and nails. All surfaces except the backside and the inside are covered with polish. Of the other materials we found brass locks and handles, as well as decorative paper with the inside of the drawer. Little holes, that are sign of xylophagous insects, are found on legs, back, top and side surfaces. Large difference in RH caused cracking along the veneer of the top surface; there are also parts of the veneer that are missing. Both left and right side of the chest of drawers along with front sides of the drawers are full of scratches, discolorations and small spots of unknown origin. Peculiar
damage in a shape of two irregular holes was found on the front side of the middle drawer. According to the owner, they were caused by a grenade explosion in the Homeland War.

3. Restoration process

Process of restoration began with injecting and putting on chemocide in order to prevent potential infestation. Cleaning included mechanical and chemical approach. Mechanical cleaning was done with a brush and vacuum cleaner, and chemical with triammonium citrate. Backside of the chest of drawers is treated with experimental method of sandblasting, which was a very efficient way of cleaning and also pointed out the need for deep consolidation. During this procedure some of the holes mentioned earlier, increased in their size. Consolidation was done with 10% solution of the Paraloid B-72 in acetone. The spots of the unknown origin were found to be underneath the polish. Acetone, ethil alcohol and mechanical cleaning weren't able to make any effect on the appearance of the spots. It is concluded that the spots penetrated deep into the tissue of the wooden fibres, and removing them was impossible without significantly altering the surface. We were faced with the dilemma of how to restore the aesthetic harmony of the object. Decision was made to neutralize the spots with layers of new French polish. We used 5% shellac solution, combination of shellac rubin (30%) and shellac lemon (70%) to achieve original appearance and neutralize already mentioned spots. Although not neutralized, they were not a threat to the aesthetic harmony of the piece and we also managed to refresh old polish.

4. Reconstruction

Reconstruction of the holes on the drawer, damaged in the War, was also done with a wooden piece. This was the second dilemma that we faced dealing with not only technical but ethical question; how to cover the damage without concealing a part of history. Our hesitance also came from taking into concerns the wishes of the owner. The chest of drawers is not a museum object, its purpose is not to tell a story
to visitors, but a practical one; the one of the every-day use. Also that kind of damage is problematic, because it can evoke unwanted memories and emotions. We had to compromise between these two standpoints, and decided to repair the damage but to preserve distinctiveness. Reconstruction was done with veneer strips, ended up looking like a *trateggio* technique. Reconstruction of the front left, missing parts of the wooden profiles are made with walnut wood. The parts were glued with animal glue and further finished with a chisel and sand paper. Top surface needed repairs on the veneer, reconstruction of the missing parts and filling in the holes with Araldite. That we also did with left front leg. It was necessary to consolidate and reinforce it in order to prevent collapsing of the chest of drawers. Next phase was retouching of the reconstructed parts to blend them in. Retouching was done carefully and with minimum interventions, saving the original coating as much as possible. Kremer colours in Paraloid were used for this purpose.

5. Conclusion

What we can conclude with this work is that is not always easy to decide on proper techniques when treating damages of the object. Not only that we have to think about the best possible way to repair it, but also take into concern the history of the object, owners preferences and our own restoration ethics. Sometimes we have to find new creative ways to compromise between all these standpoints.