



# Short Notice

## Breytspraak: A Dynasty of Amsterdam Cabinetmakers

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We know of so few pieces of old Dutch furniture that bear a signature or label, or can on other grounds be securely attributed, that the emergence of even a quite simple example may cast new light on a chapter of furniture making in Holland. Thus, a games table with the label of Carel Breytspraak Junior (1796-1858), recently discovered and bought by the Rijksmuseum, leads to a re-evaluation of the output of this well-known cabinetmaker. It also occasions a renewed investigation into the work of his father and grandfather, both of them celebrated in their time.

### Carel Breytspraak Junior

In 2022 the Rijksmuseum acquired a mahogany table which bears in its interior the trade label of Carel Breytspraak Junior (figs. 1, 2). But for this label this attractive, well-made piece of furniture might well have been regarded as English. Its construction, with a revolving, folding top that allows it to serve as a side-table when not in use for playing cards, and its model, characterized by a baluster-shaped shaft resting on a podium with four outstretched, curvaceous legs, are directly based on English examples, while the ornament, consisting of gadrooning, rosettes and palmettes in a late Neo-Classical style, also reflects English fashions of around 1810-30.

< Fig. 1  
CAREL BREYTSPRAAK  
JR, *Games Table*,  
Amsterdam,  
c. 1825-30.  
Oak and mahogany,  
74.7 x 88.5 x 44 cm.  
Amsterdam,  
Rijksmuseum,  
inv. no. BK-2022-95;  
purchased with  
the support of the  
Ambaum Haks Fonds/  
Rijksmuseum Fonds.

Fig. 2  
The trade label of  
Carel Breytspraak Jr  
in the games table  
(fig. 1).

There is an attenuated crispness to the carving, especially of the vegetal ornament, that deviates from English practice, but this only reveals itself upon close scrutiny.

On his label, Carel Breytspraak Junior proudly proclaims his status as supplier to King William I (r. 1815-40). He had probably had this label printed around 1825, when he participated at the National Exhibition held in Haarlem. Previously, the workshop was run by his mother, Hendrina Elisabeth Scheffer (1767-1827), who had taken over on the death of her husband, Carel Breytspraak Senior (1769-1810). Up until 1821 she made a number of deliveries to the royal family; Carel Junior must have assumed the direction of the firm shortly after.<sup>1</sup>



Fig. 3

CAREL BREYTSPPRAAK JR, *Armchair*, Amsterdam, 1838. Pine, walnut and rosewood, upholstered in silk velvet, embroidered with gold thread, h. 171 cm. Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum, inv. no. BK-R-5033; on loan from the Koninklijke Verzamelingen, The Hague.

No other piece of furniture made in Amsterdam in the eighteen-twenties that is equally obviously indebted to England is known. Thus, this games table adds a revealing aspect to our very patchy knowledge of early nineteenth-century Amsterdam furniture, especially as it is a fairly modest, unexceptional object that probably represents a significant proportion of Breytspraak's output, rather than being the result of a special commission. It has long been recognized that Breytspraak's best-known work, a set of six ungainly 'queen Chairs' supplied

in 1838 to the Prince of Orange, the future King William II, is based on an engraving in Augustus Welby Pugin's *Gothic Furniture* of 1835, but this has been interpreted as a result of the prince's marked predilection for the English Gothic style (fig. 3).<sup>2</sup> For his card-table, the cabinetmaker probably also made use of engravings from England, such as George Smith's *Collection of Designs for Household Furniture and Interior Decoration* of 1808, or the illustrations in Rudolph Ackermann's *Repository of Arts*, published from 1809 onwards.<sup>3</sup> The table does not appear to follow a particular image, however, and it is equally possible that Breytspraak had first-hand knowledge of furniture from England.

#### Carel Breytspraak Senior

In the eighteen-thirties Carel Breytspraak Junior made some more furniture with features culled from historic styles for the royal family, but those pieces are more indebted to Parisian models, albeit interpreted with considerable freedom.<sup>4</sup> A dependence on Paris is in line with what is generally known about the work of his father, Carel Breytspraak Senior, who may be considered the foremost Dutch cabinetmaker of the early nineteenth century. He certainly is the most famous one, since as the leading *ébéniste* of Amsterdam, he was the principal supplier of veneered furniture for the transformation of the seventeenth-century Town Hall into a palace for King Louis Bonaparte, which took place in 1808-09. In 1953-55 Theo Lunsingh Scheurleer published an account of this campaign, in which he identified a number of items delivered by Breytspraak that have remained in the palace. His survey has since been expanded by others, ensuring that Carel Breytspraak Senior is the only furniture maker of early nineteenth-century Amsterdam who can be appreciated as an artistic personality.<sup>5</sup>



For the royal palace, Breytspreek created furniture in a consciously Parisian Empire style. Presumably admonished by the officers in charge of the commission, he based himself on French prototypes, so that his contribution was in accordance with the gilt bronze furnishings and other items sent from Paris, and with the work of other Dutch suppliers who also adhered to French fashions.

Breytspreek's ability to produce furniture in the latest French style was doubtless an important factor in ensuring his pre-eminence amongst

his Amsterdam colleagues, and was not just appreciated by Louis Bonaparte and his court. He also worked for Willem Philip Barnaart, who rebuilt his large town house in Haarlem in 1806-07 as a veritable showcase of French-inspired innovations; moreover, Paul van Duin has recently established that he was responsible for the case of a mechanical organ, an orchestrion, made for an unknown patron by Dietrich Nikolaus Winkel of Amsterdam. This case all but copies a drop-front secretaire which Breytspreek supplied for the royal palace in 1808 (fig. 4).<sup>6</sup>

Fig. 4

CAREL BREYTSPPRAAK  
SR, *Case*, for an  
orchestrion by  
Dietrich Nikolaus  
Winkel, Amsterdam,  
c. 1808-10.  
Oak, veneered with  
mahogany, gilt-  
bronze mounts,  
187 x 122 x 68.5 cm.  
Amsterdam,  
Rijksmuseum, inv. no.  
BK-NM-14353-A; gift of  
J.H. Brackmann van  
de Water, Amsterdam  
(on long-term loan to  
Museum Speelklok,  
Utrecht).





Fig. 5  
 CAREL BREYTSPRAAK  
 SR, *Sideboard*,  
 Amsterdam, 1805,  
 opened up.  
 Oak, veneered  
 with mahogany,  
 mounted in brass,  
 93 x 117.5 x 51 cm.  
 Amsterdam,  
 Rijksmuseum,  
 inv. no. BK-1989-1.

Given Carel Senior's established 'French' persona, the emergence in 1988 on the Swedish art market of a more characteristically Dutch piece of furniture signed by him was of particular interest (fig. 5). It is a sideboard whose top lifts to reveal fold-out flaps and ledges for dining utensils, a typical *klapbuffet* of a type that was probably established around 1760. It is signed and dated in pencil, underneath a drawer: *C. Breytspraak| vyselstraat| te| Amsterdam| 1805*. Its shape is traditional, and the use of mahogany relieved by brass mouldings can be paralleled on much Dutch furniture of around 1800-10. In the same way that the games table provides an idea of the standard output of Carel Junior, this *klapbuffet* probably exemplifies that of Carel Senior, in contrast to the furniture in the courtly French style which may have constituted only a

relatively small part of his production. Because of that exemplary nature it was acquired by the Rijksmuseum.

### Johan Jacob Breytspraak

The aptness of this acquisition may be demonstrated within the Rijksmuseum's collection itself, as a link can be established with another *klapbuffet*, providing a clue to a possible further important group of pieces by Breytspraak. Veneered with marquetry of dark and light woods, deftly employed to achieve striking contrasts, this latter sideboard is closely related to the signed one through its proportions, its mouldings and other decorative features (fig. 6). The Rijksmuseum conservator Jan Dorscheid, who worked on this sideboard and who studied both in detail, has observed that the two pieces have so many technical characteristics in common,

down to minute idiosyncrasies, that they are likely to have originated in the same workshop.<sup>7</sup> However, on stylistic grounds the second *klapbuffet* should be dated somewhat earlier, towards the last decade of the eighteenth century. Thus, it points to the work of Carel Senior's father, Johan Jacob Breyspraak (1739-1795). Born in Leipzig, the son of the furniture maker (*Tischlermeister*) Andreas Christoph Breitsprach and Catharina Elisabeth Binger, the eldest daughter of another *Tischlermeister*, Christian Bünger (not Binger),<sup>8</sup> Johan Jacob was elected a member of the Amsterdam St Joseph's Guild in 1769-70. He rose to be one of the principal cabinetmakers in his adopted city, where over half his colleagues were also of German origin. By the time of his death in 1795 his workshop had grown to an exceptional size and

counted many of the most prominent citizens and institutions of Amsterdam among its clients; moreover, Breyspraak had by that time amassed a considerable fortune.<sup>9</sup>

With its elegant ornamentation of husks, arabesques and strings of pearls (fig. 7), the earlier *klapbuffet* belongs to a large, distinctive group of late eighteenth-century furniture, characterized by the pronounced contrast between pale and dark veneers, and including several pieces inlaid with panels of Japanese lacquer or Dutch imitations thereof.<sup>10</sup> These pieces were undoubtedly made in one of the leading Dutch workshops of the time, and it is tempting to attribute them to Johan Jacob Breyspraak. Unfortunately, examination of the available archival material, including the summary inventory of Breyspraak's

Fig. 6  
Attributed to  
JOHAN JACOB  
BREYSPRAAK  
OR CAREL  
BREYSPRAAK SR,  
*Sideboard*,  
Amsterdam,  
c. 1790-1800.  
Oak and pine,  
veneered with  
fungal-structured  
keranji, satin-  
wood and ebony,  
91.5 x 108.7 x 51.7 cm.  
Amsterdam,  
Rijksmuseum,  
inv. no. BK-1960-166;  
gift of Mrs G. Veth,  
Amsterdam.





Fig. 7  
The top of the  
sideboard (fig. 6).

workshop made up upon his death, has so far failed to yield any conclusive evidence concerning this matter, even though the search was expanded to encompass the archives of families featuring among the cabinetmaker's creditors.

In his will, Johan Jacob left his fully equipped workshop to his son Carel. He also gave him the option to rent his large premises in Vijzelstraat, at the sign of the Turkish emperor, which comprised two houses and a workshop, for six years, at the end of which period he might purchase them; all this was put into effect. Carel, who appears to have become master cabinetmaker immediately upon his father's death, had already assumed the running of the firm prior to that event.<sup>11</sup> This would all suggest a smooth transition, but a major break-up was caused by the fact that the workshop's enormous stock of furniture and timber was left jointly to Carel and his three siblings, with the result that everything was sold at auction.<sup>12</sup> It may nonetheless be surmised that Carel bought back as much as possible, and as he continued the workshop at full capacity he was probably able to ensure that production was not interrupted in any dramatic

way. Indeed, some of the furniture with contrasting pale and dark veneers includes Empire-like features that are hard to imagine before 1800; this group should therefore probably be situated both before and after the takeover of 1795.

However fragmentary and speculative this bird's eye view of the production of one, if not the, leading Amsterdam furniture firm of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries may be, it already represents a notable expansion of what was previously known or surmised. This is typical of the study of old Dutch furniture, which suffers from a lack of documentation, of historic collections that have remained intact, of signed or dated pieces – and of interest and application. Each of the 'pointers' introduced in this short piece could serve as the starting point of an in-depth study that would no doubt yield highly satisfactory results.

## NOTES

- 1 For a brief biography of Breytspreek, with references to earlier literature, see Reinier Baarsen (ed.), *'De Lelijke Tijd': Pronkstukken van Nederlandse interieurkunst 1835-1895*, exh. cat. Amsterdam (Rijksmuseum) 1995-96, p. 304 (by Dirk Jan Biemond).
- 2 Jan Godefridus Berkhout, 'Neogotisch meubilair in de collectie van het Rijksmuseum', *Bulletin van het Rijksmuseum* 19 (1971), pp. 47-69, esp. pp. 49-58; Baarsen 1995-96 (note 1), no. 4.
- 3 John Harris, *Regency Furniture Designs from Contemporary Source Books 1803-1826*, London 1961; Pauline Agius and Stephen Jones, *Ackermann's Regency Furniture & Interiors*, London 1984. On English Regency furniture, see Frances Collard, *Regency Furniture*, Woodbridge 1985, with references to earlier literature.
- 4 J.M.W. van Voorst tot Voorst, 'Biedermeier-meubels van het koninklijk huis', *Antiek* 29 (1995), no. 6, pp. 34-40.
- 5 Theo Lunsingh Scheurleer, 'De inrichting van het Koninklijk Paleis te Amsterdam onder Lodewijk Napoleon', *Publicaties van het Genootschap voor Napoleontische Studiën* 4 (1953), pp. 243-60 (pt. 1); 7 (1955), pp. 25-38 (pt. 2); Ellen Fleurbaay, *Empire in the Palace*, exh. cat. Amsterdam (Koninklijk Paleis) 1983; Paul van Duin and Aagje Gosliga, 'Carel Breytspreek sr., hofleverancier van Lodewijk Napoleon. De Breytspreek-meubelen uit de collectie van het Koninklijk Paleis Amsterdam', *Bulletin Koninklijke Nederlandse Oudheidkundige Bond* 112 (2013), no. 2, pp. 100-11.
- 6 Reinier Baarsen, 'French Upholsterers in Amsterdam', *Furniture History* 21 (1985), pp. 48-60, esp. p. 51; Paul van Duin and Tirza Mol, 'Het orchesterion van D.N. Winkel, Amsterdam, ca. 1805-1810. Restauratie en kunsthistorisch onderzoek', in Helbertijn Krudop (ed.), *15th International Symposium on Wood and Furniture Conservation: Stichting Ebenist: Louis, Louis, Louis! Origins, Flourishing and Spread of an International Furniture Style*, Amsterdam 2023, pp. 85-98.
- 7 Manuscript report by Jan Dorscheid, March 2011, on file at the Rijksmuseum furniture department.
- 8 Leipzig, Evangelisch-Lutherischer Kirchengemeindeverband, Kirchliches Archiv, baptism book of the Thomaskirche, 1739, p. 48; marriage book of the Nikolaikirche, 1733, p. 52. I thank Herr Klein of the Kirchliches Archiv for providing me with this information.
- 9 Amsterdam City Archives (hereinafter NL-AsdSAA), Archive of Amsterdam Notaries (accession no. 5372), inv. nos. 18430, 178; 16948, 27. Reinier Baarsen, 'Andries Bongen (ca. 1732-1792) en de Franse invloed op de Amsterdamse kastenmakerij in de tweede helft van de achttiende eeuw', *Oud Holland* 102 (1988), pp. 22-70, esp. pp. 34-37, 40-43; Reinier Baarsen, *De Amsterdamse meubelloterijen en de geschiedenis van de meubelmakerij in de tweede helft van de achttiende eeuw*, Amsterdam 1992, pp. 41, 49, 50, 62.
- 10 See Reinier Baarsen, *Meubelen in zilver op de tentoonstelling 'Edele eenvoud, Neo-classicisme in Nederland 1765-1800'*, exh. cat. Haarlem (Frans Hals Museum) 1989, pp. 25-26, no. 126.
- 11 This is apparent from the advertisement in which Johan Jacob's widow, Alida Groenewoud, announced his death in the *Amsterdamsche Courant* of 18 June 1795 (no. 73).
- 12 Advertisement *Amsterdamsche Courant*, 3 November 1795 (no. 132). For some additional information concerning the goods sold: NL-AsdSAA, 5372 Notaries, inv. no. 16949, 27.