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Robert S. Lorimer and the Rijksmuseum

The Influence of Dutch Furniture on a Scottish Designer

The reputation Robert S. Lorimer (1864–1929) built for himself was as reviver of the Scottish tradition of architecture and design. While the work of his contemporary, Charles Rennie Mackintosh (1868–1928), has gained a more international appreciation, Mackintosh himself complimented Lorimer as *the best domestic architect in Scotland*.¹ Although Lorimer's contribution to the development of Scottish architecture was to be all too soon forgotten, shortly after his death he was lauded as having created *a style for Scotland*.²

At the same time as encouraging Scotland's architectural self respect, Lorimer also helped galvanize crafts in Scotland, through his patronage of local craftsmen, and through his own designs for furniture and the applied arts. As might be expected, some of these designs for furniture drew on traditional Scottish work, yet a substantial number were influenced by continental design. Extant correspondence makes clear the strength of his attraction to Dutch design; his studies in Holland, particularly at the Rijksmuseum, and the furniture designs resulting from these studies, provide an illuminating example of his method of translating elements from continental design into his own work. A parallel could be drawn with the work of the more progressive Scottish painters during the 1870s and 80s, inspired by the Hague School. Some travelled to Holland to study, and the activities of discerning Glasgow dea-

lers such as Craibe Angus (1830–1899) and Alexander Reid (1854–1928) helped disseminate the taste for contemporary Dutch painting among artists and collectors at home.³ As a Scotsman, Lorimer's empathy for Holland was therefore unsurprising, given the artistic climate, and the commercial and religious ties existing historically between the two countries.⁴

Trips to Holland in the company of the Glasgow shipowner and art collector Sir William Burrell (1861–1958), with whom he enjoyed a close friendship, seem to have been especially formative. Burrell was already collecting the work of the Hague School when Lorimer and he first met in 1897.⁵ During their friendship Burrell exhibited a keen interest in Dutch antiques, and Lorimer admitted he had an enviable knowledge of antique shops. After his first trip in the company of the Burrell family to Amsterdam, he wrote in 1898 to his friend Robin Smith Dods (1868–1920): *spent several days (but not half long enough) in the Ryksmuseum, the finest place I have been in next to S[outh] K[ensington], and it has the additional interest of being almost purely Dutch. There is a great range of rooms devoted to furniture, hangings, brasswork, every kind of domestic object, and a.I. in almost every department...I half filled a book throughout the tour with the roughest notes, but useful, I think – then also, I always think it is so useful even to get entwined with a country like Holland – to know where the stuff*

Fig. 1. Bench, c. 1900, designed by Robert Lorimer. Height: 46 cm, length: 137 cm., depth 46 cm. Walnut veneer, upholstered with horsehair. National Trust for Scotland, Kellie Castle. (Photograph by Peter Adamson).

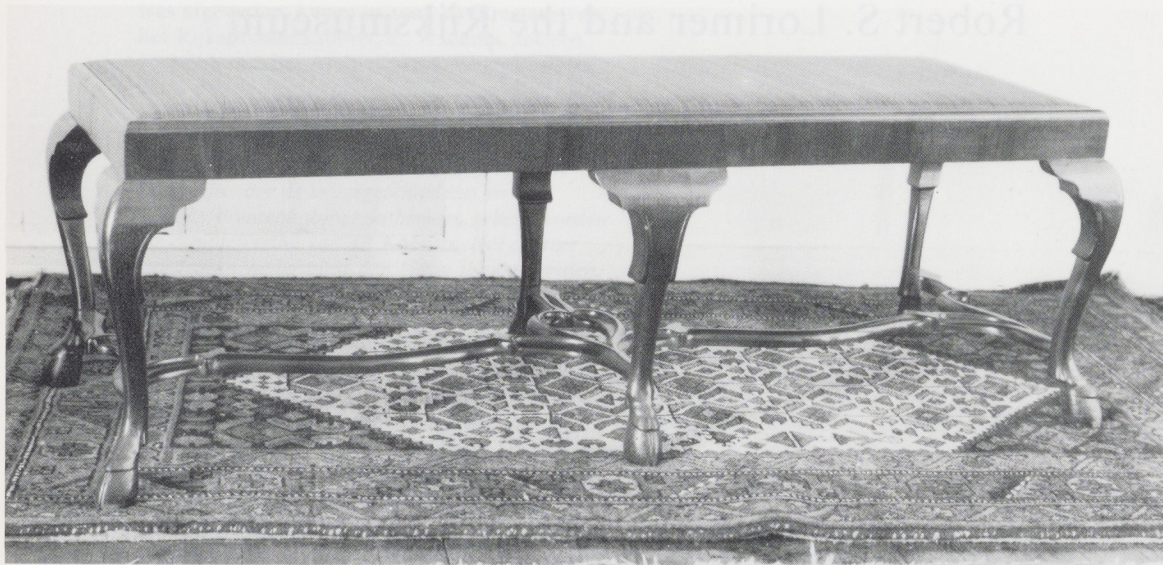


Fig. 2 (below). Sofa. Dutch, early 18th century. Walnut, with petit point embroidery. Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum.

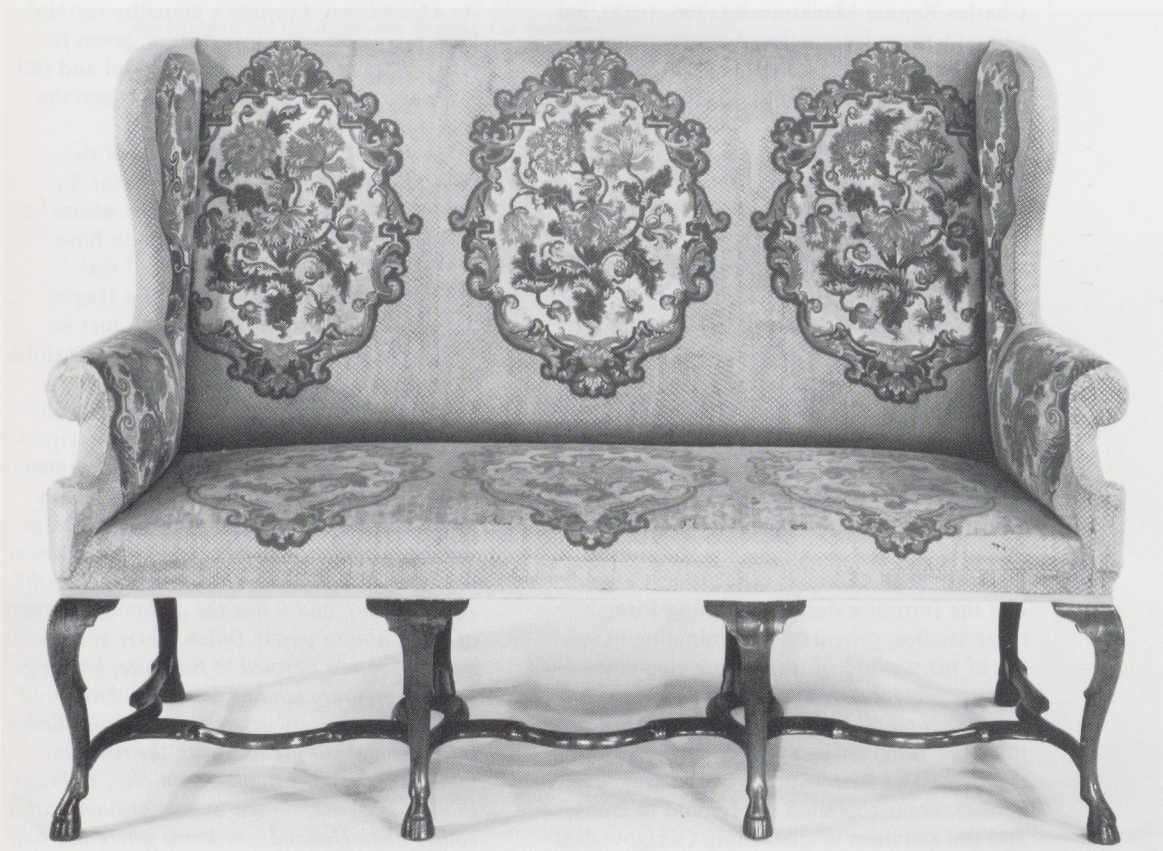


Fig. 3 (below). Sketch, by Robert Lorimer, 1899. Detail of stretchers from Dutch sofa, Fig. 2. Royal Incorporation of Architects in Scotland.

is that you really like if I wanted it for something I was working at, it is of course nothing to nip over there for a week and make a B-line for what you want to study.⁶

Indeed, the following year he returned, and the days spent sketching in the Rijksmuseum reinforced his opinion of it as a wonderfully instructive collection of domestic things.⁷ In Lorimer's attitude to museums is the application of the principle by which such collections as that at South Kensington (now the Victoria and Albert Museum) were formed: works of art from former periods were shown at the South Kensington Museum with the primary aim of inspiring contemporary designers and craftsmen. Lorimer indeed approached exhibits in museums as educational tools, considering how they might be plied to shape his work. One of the results of this process was a

design for a bench, originally conceived for his mother's home in Edinburgh, but subsequently reused on several occasions (Fig. 1). In a letter to Dods he sketched his design, explaining: *legs and stretchers largely cribbed from some I saw in the Riksmuseum at Amsterdam last year. The point about the thing is the stretchers...you can imagine that these things swung about in the most beautiful spokeshave manner are a.i.*⁸

His sketchbook recording the trip to Holland in 1899 contains a drawing of a sofa in the Rijksmuseum, which was obviously the point of departure for the bench design.⁹ The sofa, an eighteenth-century Dutch piece in walnut, upholstered in *petit point* embroidery, had been acquired by the museum in 1893 (Figs. 2 and 3).¹⁰ The arrangement of the stretchers with their pierced heart motif is almost identical in Lorimer's design, though Lorimer

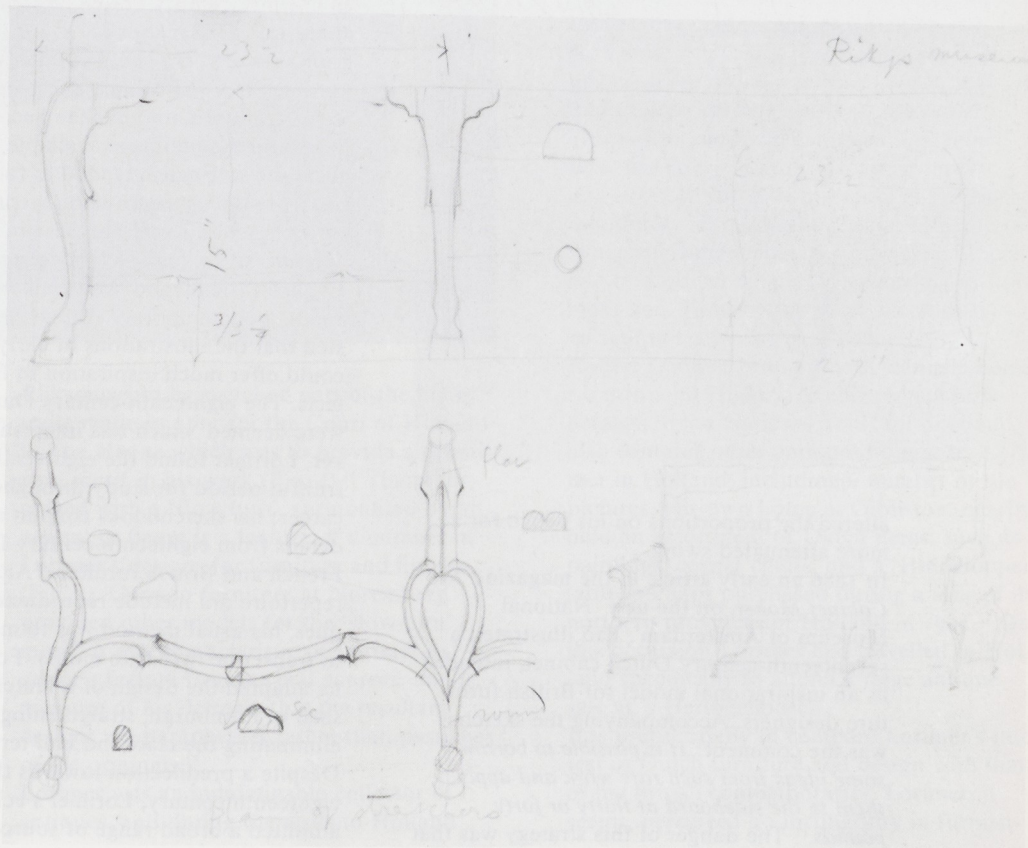


Fig. 4. Sketch, by Robert Lorimer, 1899. Detail of early sixteenth-century balustrade exhibited at the Rijksmuseum. Royal Incorporation of Architects in Scotland.

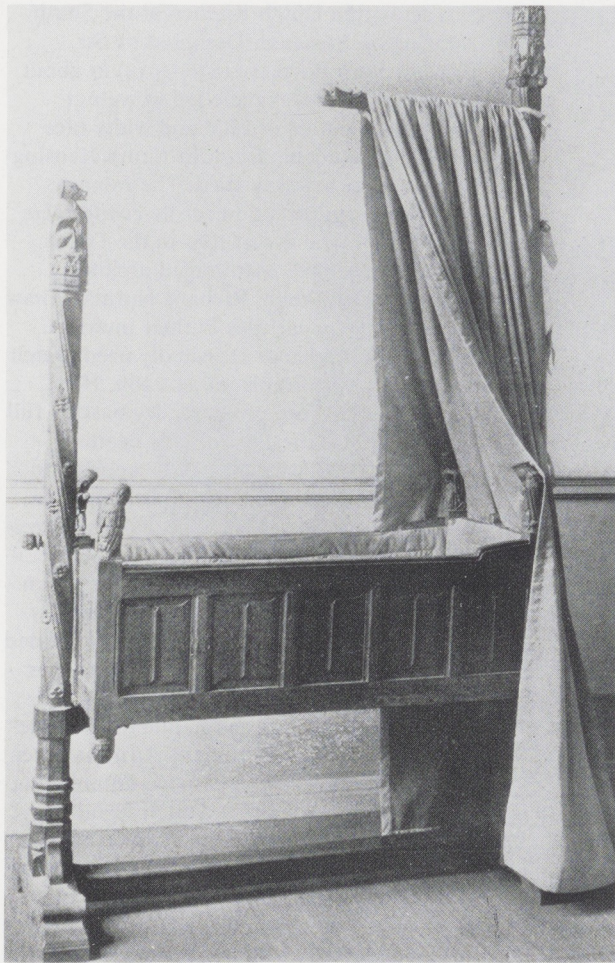


altered the proportions on his bench for a more attenuated swing. In 1886 an early article in the magazine *The Cabinet Maker*, on the new 'National Museum of Amsterdam', had illustrated a seventeenth-century Dutch cabinet, intended as an inspirational model for British furniture designers. Accompanying the sketches was the comment: *It is possible to borrow some ideas from such rare work and apply them to the sideboard at thirty or forty pounds.*¹¹ The danger of this strategy was that

it could encourage designers to respond on a superficial level to such antique furniture, to transfer ornamental motifs to contemporary designs. The use of sketches in journals to communicate designs may have been partly responsible for this, as ornamental detail could be over-emphasized. The furniture designed by the Glasgow firm of Wylie and Lochhead at times suffered from this fault.¹² Lorimer's response to the furniture he studied at the Rijksmuseum was different in that applied ornament was not of primary importance to him. His adaptation of the design of the eighteenth-century sofa is a characteristic example of his concern first with form and structure. He tended to rely on emphasizing the texture of his materials for additional visual interest, rather than on applied ornament.

It is perhaps unusual that Lorimer should have chosen to experiment with an eighteenth-century design, at a time when there was greater interest in Dutch Renaissance woodwork. The Rijksmuseum had no serious policy of collecting eighteenth-century furniture until after the Second World War, and the literature available on Dutch furniture in English tended to focus on pieces from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.¹³ When Karel Sluyterman's work *Old Interiors in Holland* was translated into English (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1908), a contemporary British review suggested that the illustrations of early interiors could offer much inspiration to British architects. The eighteenth-century Dutch interiors were deemed 'much less interesting'.¹⁴ However, Lorimer found the eighteenth century a fruitful period for study throughout his career; his sketchbooks contain numerous details from eighteenth-century Dutch, French and British furniture. Although his repertoire did include reproductions of antiques, his usual method was to modify forms, to transcribe favourite motifs. For example, he adapted the design of a Dutch tea-table seen in Edinburgh, straightening the legs and eliminating the claw and ball termination.¹⁵ Despite a predilection towards the eighteenth century, Lorimer's eclecticism admitted a broad range of sources. At the

Fig. 5. Cradle, designed by Robert Lorimer. After Walter Shaw Sparrow, *Hints on Home Furnishing*, 1909. Reproduced by kind permission of Dr. P. Savage.



Rijksmuseum he sketched part of the balustrade made in 1511 for the Court of Holland in The Hague which was to provide a prominent motif in his work (Fig. 4).¹⁶ The pillar, carved with a 'slow turn', surmounted by an animal or figure is a feature of a number of Lorimer's designs for furniture and fittings (Fig. 5). German furniture at Nuremberg provided other models for the 'slow turn' motif; it was characteristic of Lorimer to adapt a feature from several sources, and a measure of his deftness that the resultant designs are paraphrases rather than pastiches of the originals.¹⁷

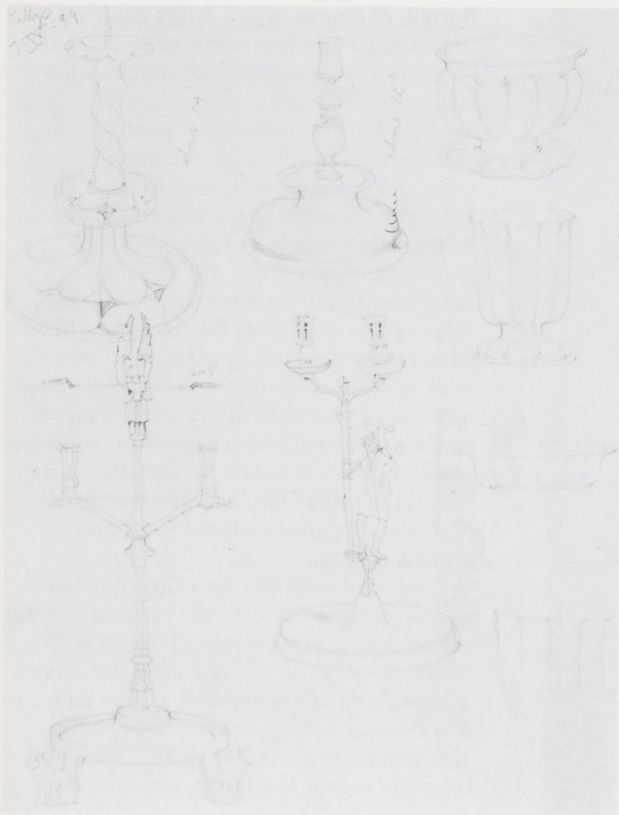
Lorimer was an indefatigable collector of antiques, and during the visits to Holland

Burrell, of course, was a fitting companion. In one letter Lorimer admitted to Dods that they had visited over ninety antique shops.¹⁸ His correspondence conveys his enthusiasm not only for his multifarious purchases, but also for Dutch architecture, landscape, traditions and costume, described in often amusing detail. Some of the antiques bought during these trips were taken to British craftsmen to reproduce. He had the Edinburgh silversmith and jeweller J. M. Talbot make copies of a silver bowl he had brought from Holland, to use as presents.¹⁹ Metalwork comprised an important part of Lorimer's work; the light fittings, doorhandles, andirons and grills he designed were integral features of his interiors. He sketched metalwork at the Rijksmuseum, presumably as potential reference material for future designs (Fig. 6).²⁰

In 1899 his Dutch purchases included antique silver from Meppel, tile pictures, a brass candelabra, and a cabinet which he sketched for Dods: *a splendid severe thing like a piece of Lethaby*²¹ *at his very best... doors and ends and drawers entirely veneered in a pattern. This veneer cut across the grain - no mouldings, fine colour, oak inside, perfect order, £12-10.*²² In the drawing room at the Lorimer family home, Kellie Castle, Fife, are two veneered Dutch cabinets of the type described by Lorimer (Fig. 7).²³ According to Lorimer's son, Hew (b. 1907), an accomplished sculptor now living at Kellie Castle, Robert Lorimer brought both cabinets home from trips to Holland. Kellie, which now belongs to the National Trust for Scotland, also contains other antiques bought by Lorimer in Holland, including a number of tile pictures. His own home at Gibliston, nearby, held an assortment of Dutch items, such as paintings, corner chairs, and a 'Hindelopen' table, perhaps purchased during a tour of the northern provinces of Holland in 1901.²⁴ On this occasion Lorimer had travelled to Holland specifically to attend a large antique sale at 's Hertogenbosch.

It is useful briefly to compare Lorimer's interest in Dutch furniture and design with that of his British contemporaries. Lorimer, it seems, perceived no incongruity in furnish-

Fig. 6. Sketch, by Robert Lorimer, 1899. Details of metalwork at the Rijksmuseum. Royal Incorporation of Architects in Scotland.



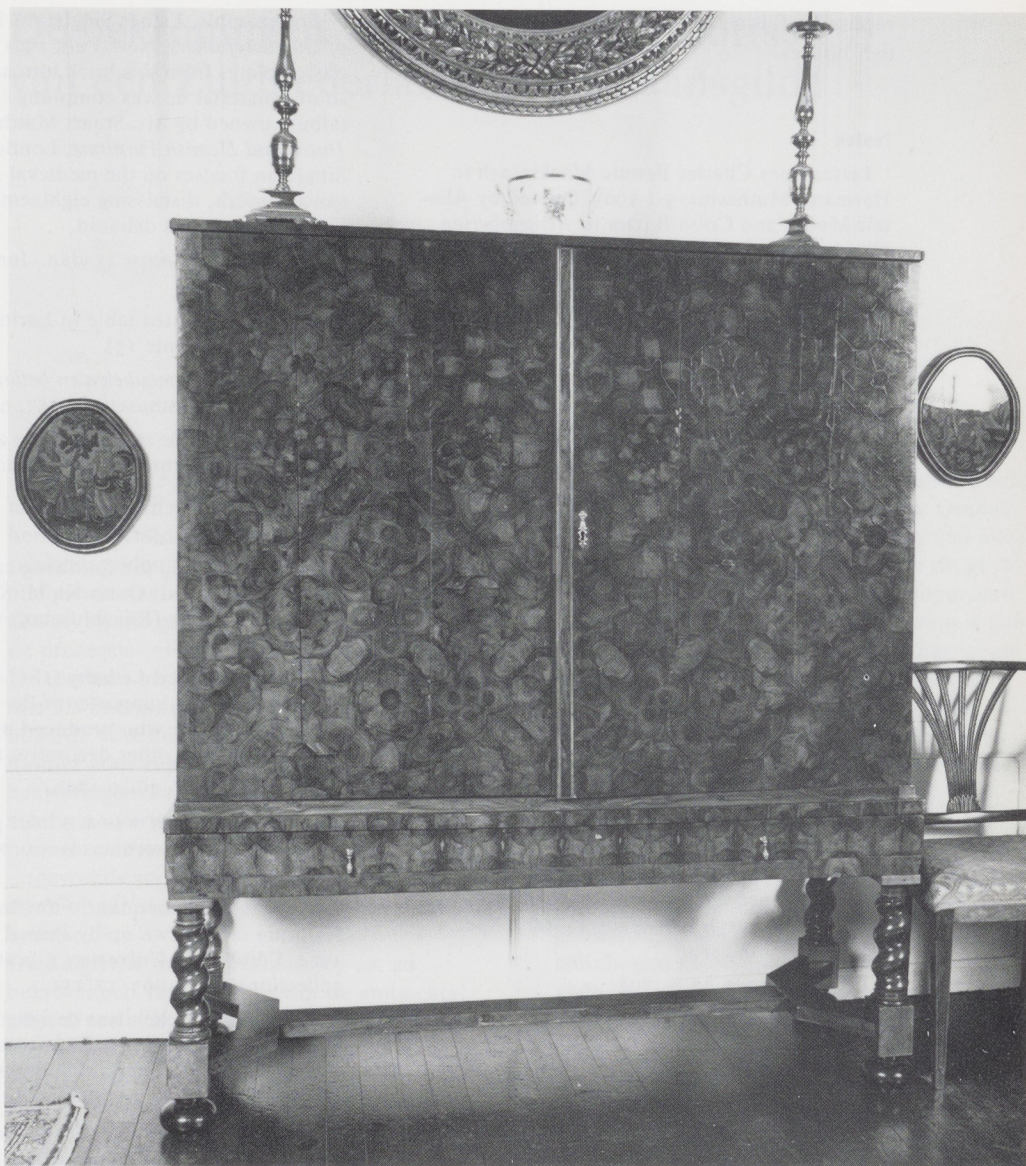
ing houses of a deliberately Scottish character, drawing on that country's vernacular architecture, with continental antiques and furniture inspired by continental design. This eclectic outlook can be aligned with that of mainstream Edwardian architects and decorators in Britain, yet as regards Dutch design, Lorimer's approach was more academic, reliant on close observation and study in museums such as the Rijksmuseum. Contemporary interior designers were significantly more sentimental in their attitude towards Dutch furniture; its perceived qualities of 'homely rusticity' were considered suitable for informal living areas. Even Charles Rennie Mackintosh, Scotland's doyen of modernism, designed a Dutch kitchen in 1906 for a Glasgow tearoom, complete with raftered ceiling, inglenook, tiled fireplace and his version of the vernacular 'Windsor chair'.²⁵ Some precedent for this attitude

was set by the Dutch Kitchen at the South Kensington Museum. Designed by Sir Edward John Poynter (1836–1919) in about 1866, this room was panelled in walnut above five courses of blue and white tiles painted by students from the South Kensington Museum painting class. The room received a warm reception for its *comfortable home look*.²⁶ The use of tiles in the Dutch Kitchen may have encouraged architects such as Philip Webb, Richard Norman Shaw and Lorimer to use tiles in their interiors. Lorimer in particular repeatedly used Dutch tiles around his fireplaces. His son, Hew, tells of finding forgotten laundry baskets full of Dutch tiles, after his father's death.

At the turn of the century there appears to have been considerable popular interest in Dutch design. In 1899 the journal *The Furniture Record* attributed the present *predisposition to the Dutch form* to a general satiation with *dissipated Grecian and Pompeiian styles*. The *solid and substantial Dutch* provided a welcome change of fare.²⁷ The same year the Dutch style was recommended by *The Furnisher* for a living room, due to its homeliness, comfort and simplicity.²⁸ In the latter journal there was no attempt to differentiate between historical styles. Dutch furniture tended to attract the blanket epithet 'quaint', appreciated in much the same way as British 'cottage furniture'. In the early twentieth century a small group of people held a genuine interest in British vernacular furniture; yet this can be distinguished from the contemporary taste for the cottage style, which was equally satisfied with mass-produced 'country-style' furniture. It is in the second category that the interest in Dutch furniture must be considered. It was valued more for its associational than aesthetic qualities, perceived as emblematic of a standard of moral health from which the present age had lapsed.

Dutch furniture's common associations with old-fashioned virtue seem hardly to have engaged Lorimer. His letters, sketches and notes convey his interest in Dutch furniture for its qualities of form, rather than its potential as a didactic vehicle. A comment made to Dods on the completion of the

Fig. 7. Cabinet, Dutch, one of two similar cabinets in the drawing room at Kellie Castle. National Trust for Scotland, Kellie Castle (Photograph by Peter Adamson).



remodelling of the dining room clarifies his concerns. He wrote of the dining room: *I wanted something as reposeful as an old Dutch picture.*²⁹ His dining room was no maladroit attempt at historical reconstruction, but was furnished with an eclectic assemblage of antiques and furniture designed by himself. Throughout his corres-

pondence, Lorimer stressed the importance to his work of bringing the elements of the interior together to create an overall impression on both eye and mind. Dutch antiques, and designs derived from Dutch sources were included in his interior schemes, because Lorimer perceived they contributed to an atmosphere of visual and emotional

repose he felt was consistent with his Scottish houses.

Notes

¹ Letter from Charles Rennie Mackintosh to Hermann Muthesius, 5-1-1903. Quoted by Alistair Moffat and Colin Baxter in *Remembering Charles Rennie Mackintosh*, Lanark (Colin Baxter Photography Ltd) 1989, p. 40.

² Christopher Hussey, speaking at the Vote of Thanks and Discussion following F. Deas' paper on 'The work of Sir Robert Lorimer' to the Royal Institute of British architects; *RIBA Journal* 38, no. 9, 7-3-1931, p. 295.

³ See, for example, Elizabeth Bird, 'International Glasgow', *The Connoisseur* 183 (1973), pp. 248-257; exhibition catalogue *A Man of Influence: Alex Reid 1854-1928*, Edinburgh 1967.

⁴ One important difference, though, between the influence of the Hague School on Scottish painters, and the influence of Dutch furniture on Lorimer, is that Lorimer demonstrated no particular interest in contemporary Dutch furniture.

⁵ In a letter dated 12-2-1898, to R. S. Dods, Lorimer mentioned that Burrell had a fine collection, including seventeen paintings by Matthew Maris. Dods, an Edinburgh-trained architect, was a close friend of Lorimer's. After he moved to Australia to establish his practice, the two maintained a lengthy correspondence, now held by Edinburgh University Library, Special collections, Ms 2484.

⁶ Letter to Dods, 17-9-1898.

⁷ Letter to Dods, 29-10-1899.

⁸ Letter to Dods, July 1900. This excerpt is quoted by Peter Savage, *Lorimer and the Edinburgh Craft Designers*, Edinburgh 1980, p. 71.

⁹ Sketchbook no. 63, Royal Incorporation of Architects in Scotland.

¹⁰ *Catalogus van meubelen en betimmeringen*, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam 1952, no. 179. My thanks to Reinier Baarsen for his identification of this sofa as Lorimer's source.

¹¹ *The Cabinet Maker*, 1-1-1886.

¹² Included in Wylie and Lochhead's catalogue of furniture and interior decorations, 1900, are illustrations of sideboards and a library interior, which exhibit this tendency. Glasgow University Business Archives, HF48/11/4.

¹³ For example, Esther Singleton, *The Furniture of Our Forefathers*, New York 1901. Lorimer pasted plates from this book into an album of source material he was compiling from 1900 (album owned by Mr. Stuart Matthew). In her *Dutch and Flemish Furniture*, London 1907, Singleton focuses on the medieval and Renaissance periods, dismissing eighteenth-century Dutch furniture as debased.

¹⁴ *Architectural Review* 25 (Jan.-June 1909), p. 309.

¹⁵ Photograph of tea table in Lorimer's furniture album (see note 13).

¹⁶ *Catalogus van meubelen en betimmeringen*, Amsterdam (Rijksmuseum) 1952, no. 14.

¹⁷ Lorimer records such furniture and woodwork in his furniture album (see note 13).

¹⁸ Letter to Dods, 29-10-1899.

¹⁹ Letter to Dods, 5-11-1898.

²⁰ On this drawing the following candlesticks may be recognized: O. ter Kuile, *Koper en brons*, Amsterdam (Rijksmuseum) 1986, nos. 103, 125 and 142.

²¹ William Richard Lethaby (1857-1931), an English architect, supporter of the Arts and Crafts movement, who produced many designs for furniture and other decorative arts.

²² Letter to Dods, 29-10-1899.

²³ A similar cabinet was at a later period acquired by the Rijksmuseum; inv. no. R.B.K. 1960-19.

²⁴ Gibliston, Kilconquhar, Fife; Inventory of furniture etc., drawn up by Robert Lorimer in 1924. Edinburgh, University Library, Special collections, Gen 1963/17/151.

²⁵ The Dutch kitchen was designed for Miss Cranston's Argyle Street Tearooms, Glasgow. This was one of a series Mackintosh and other Glasgow designers executed for this patroness.

²⁶ Barbara Morris quotes from *The Standard's* description of the Dutch Kitchen, in S. Lambert (ed.), *Inspiration for Design: The Influence of the Victoria and Albert Museum*, London (Victoria and Albert Museum), 1986, p. 37.

²⁷ 'Shop Talks of the Decorative Period; The Dutch', *The Furniture Record*, October 6, 1899, p. 200.

²⁸ 'A Dutch Interior', *The Furnisher* 1899, p. 131.

²⁹ Letter to Dods, 16-11-1903.