

Case 4 (2010-11) : A zodiac settle designed by William Burges

Expert Adviser's Statement

Reviewing Committee Secretary's note: Please note that the illustrations referred to have not been reproduced on the MLA website

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1. Brief Description

A settle, wood, painted, stencilled, gilded and inlaid with glass, crystal and slips of vellum, approximately 72 x 72 inches, designed by William Burges (1827-1881) and probably made either by Harland and Fisher, or by John Walden, with painted Zodiac panel by Henry Stacy Marks (1829-1898), and inscription, 'BURGES ARCHITECTUS ME FIERI FECIT ANNO SALUTIS MDCCCLXIX AUTEM ME DEPINCI FECIT APRILIS SALUTIS MDCCCLXX' (Burges the Architect had me made in the year of salvation 1869 however he had me painted in April of the year of salvation 1870), 1869-70, in good condition

2. Context

The settle was designed by Burges for his own use in his second floor rooms at 15 Buckingham Street, Strand, London, and presumably moved to Tower House in or after 1878 when Burges occupied the house and placed opposite the windows in the drawing room, a room unfinished on his death in 1881. The settle remained in Tower House, descending in the family of R.P. Pullan, Burges's brother-in-law, and was subsequently owned by Col. T.H. Minshall, Col. E.R. B. Graham, and John Betjeman who gave it to Evelyn Waugh; Waugh family by descent

Bibliography:

- G.G. Scott, Gleanings from Westminster Abbey, London 1863
William Burges, Art Applied to Industry: a series of lectures, Oxford 1865
William Burges, 'Why we have so little Art in our Churches', The Ecclesiologist, vol. xxvii, n.s. xxv (1867), pp. 150-6
R.P. Pullan, The House of William Burges, A.R.A., London 1886
Henry Stacy Marks, Pen and Pencil Sketches, London 1894
Chesterton & Sons, Tower House 9 Melbury Road Kensington Catalogue of The Contents of The Residence, 16th October 1933, lot 115
Charles Handley-Read, 'Notes on William Burges's Painted Furniture', The Burlington Magazine, Vol. CV, No. 728, 1963, pp. 496-509
J. Mordaunt Crook, William Burges and the High Victorian Dream, London 1981
Bevis Hillier, Betjeman: the bonus of laughter, London 2004
Soane Gallery, London, First and last loves: John Betjeman and architecture, catalogue of the exhibition 8th September – 30th December 2006

3. Waverley criteria

1. Is it so closely connected with our history that its departure would be a misfortune?

William Burges (1827-1881) was one of the most distinguished architects of the Victorian period. Like his hero A.W.N. Pugin, he was a designer of astonishing ability and energy, involved not only in architecture but also in interior design and the design of furniture, textiles, jewellery, ecclesiastical and domestic plate, and stained glass. His elaborate furniture, much of which was painted, was conceived as part of colourful decorative and iconographic interior design schemes and was based on his study of medieval precedents, particularly surviving artefacts and documentary sources.

Henry Stacy Marks and Burges met at Leigh's Drawing School (later Heatherley's) in Newman Street, probably in the late 1850s, and Marks provided painted decoration for numerous examples of Burges's furniture, including fitted bookcases at Tower House and this settle. Marks's main panel shows Sol on a throne in the centre, with the Signs of the Zodiac dancing on either side: Leo, Virgo, Cancer, Gemini, Taurus and Aries on the right, and Libra, Scorpio, Sagittarius, Capricorn, Aquarius and Pisces on the left. The two smaller panels on either side show the Planets as musicians and the lower panels depict St. Cecilia and another female figure below flowering stems.

Burges may have commissioned the settle either from Harland and Fisher, ecclesiastical decorators of 33, Southampton Street, Strand, London, who made earlier painted furniture for him, including the Yatman Cabinet (1858) and Wines and Beers cabinet (1859), both now in the V&A collections, or from John Walden, a carpenter of Maiden Lane, Covent Garden, London, who made the furniture for the guest bedroom at Tower House.

The only contemporary image of the settle, probably taken in Burges's rooms in Buckingham Street rather than in Tower House, was included in an album of photographs published by his brother-in-law, R.P. Pullan, in 1885. This photograph shows the settle with an embroidered panel hanging on the inside back and three shaped seat cushions. [fig. 1]

The settle was part of a group of Burges's painted furniture offered for sale with some of the contents of Tower House by Col. T.H. Minshall in 1933 (Chesterton, lot 115). It was unsold, possibly because although free-standing, it was regarded as built-in and therefore of lesser interest. It remained in the house which was occupied from 1934 by Col. E.R.B. Graham. Col. Graham bequeathed the remainder of the lease, and presumably some of the larger pieces of furniture, to John Betjeman in 1961 (Hillier, 2004) or 1962 (Crook, 1981). Betjeman had already purchased, in a shop in Lincoln, the red washstand, made originally for Buckingham Street and subsequently moved to Tower House. In 1953 Betjeman gave the washstand to the author Evelyn Waugh, who shared his enthusiasm for Victorian architecture and decoration, and for religion (Ref EWA/RC(94)22, now in the Cecil Higgins Art Gallery, Bedford). Betjeman's ownership of other pieces of Burges's own furniture was confirmed in 1963 when Charles Handley-Read, author of the first serious assessment of Burges's painted furniture, illustrated the settle, one of the set of library bookcases, and the Philosophy cabinet, at Tower House (Handley-Read, fig.34). Betjeman subsequently gave the settle, and the Philosophy Cabinet, to Waugh, possibly to placate his wife, Penelope, who apparently did not share his appreciation of Gothic Revival painted furniture (Soane Gallery, p. 62, cat. no. 3).

2. Is it of outstanding aesthetic importance?

The settle is a particularly idiosyncratic example of Burges's genius in reinterpreting medieval forms and decoration for his furniture. Rather than taking French Gothic as its inspiration, as much of his furniture does, it combines influences from Italian Renaissance and English Gothic sources. Burges's interest in Italian Renaissance forms and decoration was inspired by his studies of secular buildings, interiors, mosaic and painting during his visits to Italy in the 1860s. In a series of lectures, Art Applied to Industry, at the Society of Arts in 1863, subsequently published, he emphasized the importance of contemporary sources, including Vasari's Lives of the Painters, illuminated manuscripts, and surviving examples of furniture, particularly marriage coffers with their narrative painted decoration (Burges, 1865).

The box-like base, fitted with a lid, and the high back with painted panels of figurative and ornamental decoration suggest the form of the *lettuccio* or day bed, a prominent piece of Italian Renaissance domestic furniture. The *lettuccio* provided practical functions of seating and storage but also acted as a symbol of wealth and status, often decorated with inlay or pictorial painted scenes on the back (fig. 2).

Burges combined the *lettuccio* form with a castellated top supported on columns, the detail of these taken from medieval prototypes. The underside of the top is decorated with applied and painted motifs drawn from his work on the decorated ceilings of the medieval Palace of Westminster (Burges, 1865, p. 70). His use of gilded, inlaid, and painted figurative and ornamental decoration on the settle was also based on his observations of surviving examples of medieval furniture in Westminster Abbey, particularly the Coronation Chair of King Edward I, the Sedilia, with painted panels, of 1307, and the late 13th century Retable, all three of which he drew for publication in 1863 (Scott, 1863, pls. xxi-xxvi). However, he admitted in 1867 that 'it is almost impossible for us to conceive the effect of a first-class piece of medieval sacred furniture covered with burnished gilding engraved and punched into patterns enriched with paintings by an artist like Giotto, and glittering with mosaics of gilt and coloured glass.' (Burges, 1867, p. 153)

3. Is it of outstanding significance for study?

The settle represents an early example of Burges's desire to furnish his home with medieval furniture which 'would be covered with paintings, both ornaments and subjects; it not only did its duty as furniture, but spoke and told a story' (Burges, 1865, p. 71). Experimental in form and design, the settle was not a design repeated by Burges for other commissions, unlike his cabinets or bookcases, and it illustrates his scholarly and professional interest in the painted furniture of the Italian Renaissance and English Gothic periods.

As an original object, the settle is clearly important for the study of one of the most significant architects of the mid-nineteenth century. It is also significant for the study of the Victorian revival, personified by two prominent literary figures who were former owners of the settle. The connection between Burges, Betjeman and Waugh also includes at least two other pieces of Tower House furniture: the red washstand (Bedford) and the Philosophy cabinet (A. Lloyd Webber), and potentially a third piece, a painted and gilded Gothic shelf unit also originally designed for Buckingham Street (Waugh family). Betjeman's public role as a campaigner in defence of nineteenth-century architecture (including a BBC television film on Tower House, 1957) was the reason for Col. Graham's bequest to him of the final years of the lease, and apparently of some of the furniture, in 1961 or 1962.

Finally, the settle assumes its greatest importance in the context of Tower House (fig. 3). Tower House was built by Burges for his own use and was one of the most important architect's houses of the nineteenth century. He described it as 'a model residence of the thirteenth century' (Pullan, p. 3). Apart from Sir John Soane's house, Tower House could be described as the most important surviving architect's house of the nineteenth century. It is a tour-de-force of symbolic painted interiors and furniture. Remarkably, the house has been little altered and most of the important painted interiors survive as do many of the pieces designed by Burges specifically for the house, or moved there from his earlier home in Buckingham Street. These include Burges's bed, dressing table and washstand, a pair of cupboard doors and a wardrobe (all at the Cecil Higgins Art Gallery, Bedford); a chest of drawers and shelf unit from his bedroom (Manchester City Art Gallery); the bed and washstand from the guest bedroom (V&A); a bookcase from the library (Ashmolean Museum, now on display at Knightshayes); two tables (Lotherton Hall and Birmingham); and possibly two chairs (William Morris Gallery). The wardrobe from Burges's bedroom and the peacock cabinet from the drawing room survive in private British collections.

The lack of substantial alteration to the house, the amount of extant furniture and the fact that there have been discussions within recent memory about the possibility of opening Tower House suggest that there is a genuine possibility that the settle might one day be placed on public view in situ if it were to be retained by a public collection.

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