

## **Conservation Issue of a Classicistic French Escritoire, item no. SZMb 1133 from the National Museum in Warsaw**

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**Abstract:** This paper discusses Classicist escritoire from 18<sup>th</sup> century, currently in the collection of the National Museum in Warsaw. The condition of the escritoire was assessed and possible causes of damages were identified. This process inspired discussion of its conservation problems in light of its examination. A study of its construction and materials revealed that earlier conservation work introduced far-reaching modifications to the escritoire. Powers of observation were used to investigate the extent of changes made to the construction and materials, and original elements were separated from those added subsequently.

*Keywords:* escritoire, Classicism, Louis XVI, conservation

### PRINCIPLES OF FURNITURE CONSERVATION IN LIGHT OF THEIR EXAMINATION

Apart from being a functional and utilitarian part of the interior, furniture has also a distinct decorative or representational value. It is often manufactured with great attention to detail, which often makes it possible to identify when and where a given piece of furniture was built. For this reason furniture should be treated with proper care throughout their lifetime, and one conservation method involves preserving their historic substance (Krawczyk, 2006).

Conservation is a rather complex process requiring as much technological expertise as historical and theoretical knowledge covering, for example, popular materials of the time. Construction and decoration are another areas where expertise is highly valued by conservators. Proper conservation, completed or supervised by a professional, ensures an aesthetical and functional effect while preserving its visual appeal, craftsmanship and construction techniques of the time, as well as materials used in a given piece (Swaczyna, 1995).

Period furniture offers a wealth of historical knowledge and as such is placed under legal protection.

Conservation theories has been constantly evolving throughout furniture history. In 19<sup>th</sup> century, it was the form of a given piece of furniture that was thought to have a primary value in conservation, whereas more recently the emphasis has shifted to its “historic substance.” It is now believed that such historic substance should be preserved, while any intervention should be clear, transparent, and kept to minimum. But the principles followed in conservation may also be different: while damaged or missing parts are usually replaced with the type of material originally used in the piece, some conservators make a point of using different materials in order to emphasise that it has undergone restoration work (Sękowski, 2003). The age of the material is as important as the material itself, which is why it should be preferably as old as the given piece of furniture. When one adheres to this principle in their conservation work, there will not be a discernible difference between the restored fragment and the rest of the piece. For the transparency’s sake, however, this should be properly noted in a conservational record. The additional advantage of using old wood is that it is less susceptible to deformation, which is caused by reduced hygroscopicity (Ślesiński, 1995), or relaxation of growth stresses (Matejak, Kozakiewicz, 2000).

While researching a piece of furniture, it is important to identify the country of origin and the period it comes from. Furniture made in various places and in various times differ in structure, shape, and decoration. Conservation work should preserve the original construction of the piece by identifying the type of joints linking various elements, following craftsmanship techniques of the time, and preserving its original dimensions.

A conservator can by no means introduce any improvements or refinements. A given piece may have an irregular shape of joints, which is why conservators should follow proper craftsmanship techniques, but dimensions need not be perfect, so that the quality of the joint or wood processing resembles the original as closely as possible.

It is equally important to preserve the shape and decorative elements of the piece. These are the most visible elements of the object, and while they may not necessarily be of the highest quality, here craftsmanship of the maker is on full display. Vernacular furniture must remain such, and one should exercise proper care to restore its character, because any inconsistencies resulting from the conservation work will reduce the historic value and spoil the visual effect of the piece (Swaczyna, 1995).

It is also important to respect techniques that were used in making the piece: if intarsia was cut with a knife and engraved, restoration work in this regard should not be different. Applying lacquer on a previously waxed piece is one example of improper conservation (Ważny, 1991), although since 1800s up until 1990s it was common for conservators to apply on pre-19<sup>th</sup> century furniture a secondary layer of polish, even if the piece obviously qualified for wax finish. Today, layers of polish applied in past restoration work are sometimes believed to have historical value and are preserved if they are not damaging for the piece, do not drastically disturb its aesthetic appeal, and there is no need for complex restoration work.

A piece of furniture is a complex creation, and apart from its style there are other qualities that strongly speak for its identity: construction, decoration, materials, and craftsmanship techniques. Precisely because of this variety, conservators very much welcome cross-discipline consultations with other specialists (Swaczyna, 1995). If by looking at the existing elements one is not able to independently identify the materials and decide on the proper conservation technique, before proceeding to restoration work one should seek advice of various experts sitting in Conservation Committees. The first principle of conservation is *primum non nocere*, which means that one should not do nothing more than what is absolutely necessary, keep the intervention to minimum, and stay humble throughout the process.

## PURPOSE AND METHODOLOGY

This paper considers the conservation process of a classicist *escritoire* inventory no. SZMb 1133, stored in the National Museum in Warsaw (Fig. 1).

A study of its construction and materials helped establish how much the piece was changed by previous restoration work, provided further insights into technical aspects of classicist furniture in general, and served as a basis for comparative analysis with other furniture in terms of their construction, materials, and quality of craftsmanship. The authors used their powers of observation to investigate how the conservation process progressed over the years. Visual inspection of the *escritoire* was completed to assess its condition and identify possible causes of damage.

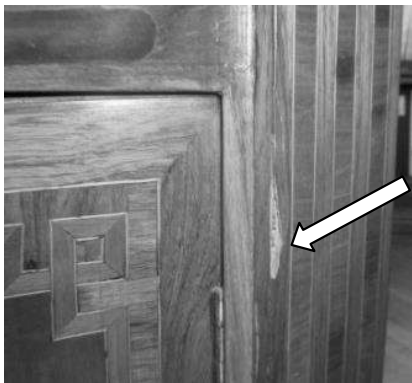


**Figure 1.** The escritoire, no. SZMB 1133, front view

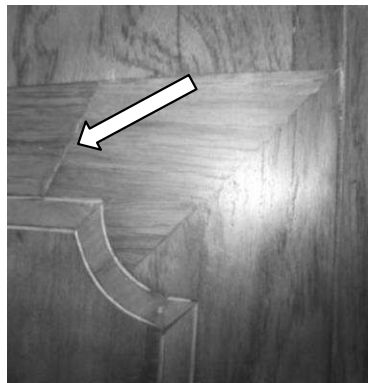
#### THE CONDITION AND CAUSES OF DAMAGE AS A BASIS FOR DELAMINATION OF THE ESCRITOIRE

The escritoire was made at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Considering its age it is preserved in a fairly good condition, ensured by regular inspection and thorough conservation work, which, however, somewhat altered the original construction of the piece.

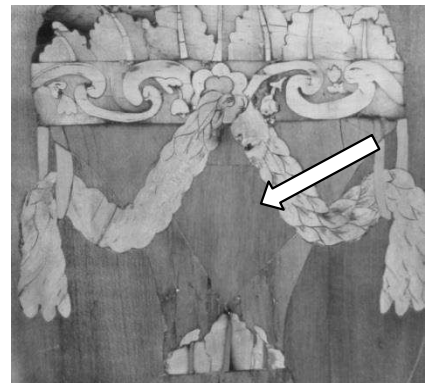
It is a quarter of a century ago since the escritoire was last in conservation, and one should note that its condition has since deteriorated somewhat (Fig.2). Longitudinal damage of the veneer can be seen with a naked eye in the right corner next to a cabinet with a pair of doors. This could be a wear-and-tear damage caused by the veneer separating from the piece, and then coming off (perhaps a result of users', visitors', or cleaners' brushing against it).



**Figure 2.** Damaged veneer on the front corner of the escritoire



**Figure 3.** Upper front corner of intarsia with floral motifs on the left side panel

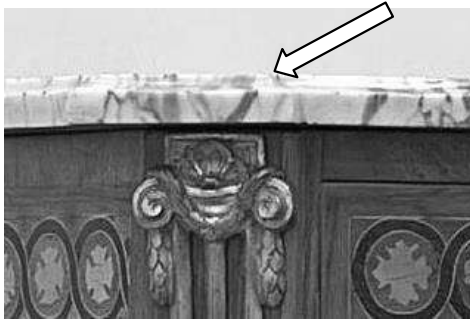


**Figure 4.** Replaced fragment of intarsia on the vase featured on the side panel

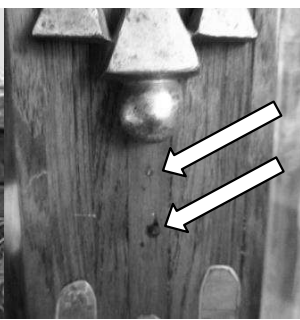
Traces of repairs are seen on the surface of the *escritoire* (Fig. 3 and 4). Figure 3 shows a replaced upper front corner of the upper floral intarsia on the left panel of the piece, while figure 4 shows a replaced fragment of intarsia on the vase of the right side panel of the *escritoire*.

A visual macroscopic examination and an inspection with magnifying glass reveals a surprising and so far unknown history of changes made to the construction and decorative elements of the piece. This paper will cover these newly discovered modifications, beginning from the top of the *escritoire*.

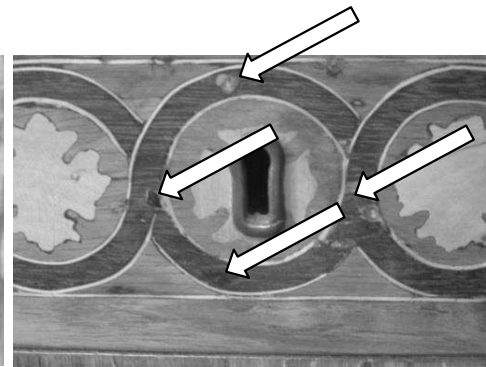
Marble top of the *escritoire* is preserved in a perfect condition, although there is no certainty that it was part of the original furniture. Its profile (Fig. 5), fits perfectly with French profiles of the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century found in the reference literature. (Swaczyna, 1992).



**Figure 5.** Marble top profile



**Figure 6.** Holes on the corner



**Figure 7.** Holes on the front end of the upper drawer

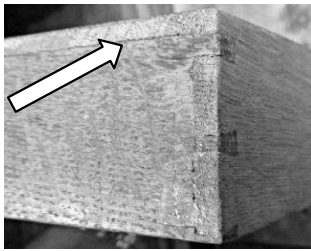
Two blinded holes right below decorative metal fittings featured on canted corners (Fig. 6) could be viewed as damages which were later repaired in conservation. However, their vertical placement on the uppermost part of both front corners suggests a different explanation, namely a replacement of original fittings with smaller ones. This finding is supported by the fact that a middle fluting with intarsia is positioned lower in respect to others, clearly leaving space for some other decorative element previously extending further downwards (Fig. 6).

In a similar fashion, metal fittings were replaced on the drawer front, which is suggested by the traces of the original fittings once fixed around what today is a very modest keyhole fitting (Fig. 7).

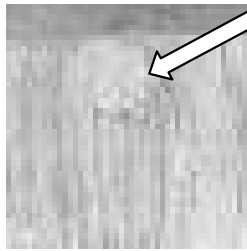
On a frieze decorating the upper part of the drawer there are light-coloured leaves centrally placed inside medallions of the interlace. They are now lacking any ornamental features, but originally they must have been both engraved and coloured with ink. This decorative element was removed during past conservation work which must have involved excessive scraping or sandpapering (Fig. 5 and 7).

The construction of the upper drawer itself also looks „suspect.” The front end and the sides are joined with penetrating dovetails, the same goes for the sides and the back end (Fig. 8). The bottom is inserted into sides, attached through a butt joint, glued, and additionally reinforced with dowel pins nailed through the sides to the narrow surface of the bottom. At its lowermost end, the back end is not as high as the sides, and the resulting gap accommodates the bottom, which is attached with the narrow surface of the back end through a butt joint and glued, with dowel pins nailed from the bottom. On the narrow surfaces of the underside of the sides as well as on the underside of the front end there are holes with dowel pins that were sawed off: they are now useless, but in the original design they were probably keeping the bottom together with the rest of the case (Fig. 9). According to the reference literature on French furniture of the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century (Swaczyna, 1992), the bottom was

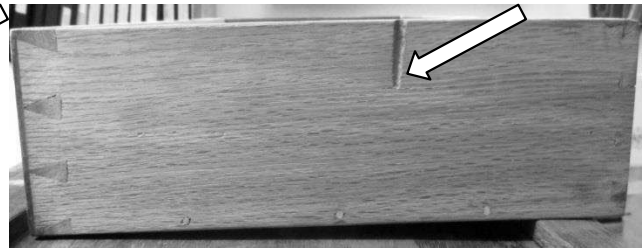
usually attached through a butt joint and nails to the narrow surfaces of the front, back end, and sides, which suggests that the present solution was not used in the original design.



**Figure 8.** Drawer with back end not matching the height of side pieces



**Figure 9.** Dowel pins of the front end of the upper drawer



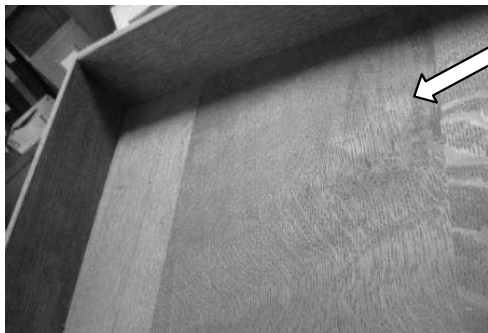
**Figure 10.** Traces of dowel pins on the side of the upper drawer

If the design of the upper drawer was changed, then one also needs to ask whether the drawer front is original. Was it simply so that the bottom, initially attached to the narrow surfaces of the sides, was at some stage relocated and inserted between these two side pieces? This does not seem plausible, because if we were to add the thickness of the bottom to the height of the current drawer front, the intarsia on this drawer front would be too small, and the drawer itself would be too high to fit into the furniture body. This provides conclusive evidence that the entire drawer was replaced and a new drawer front was added, but not before it was fitted with the original intarsia with medallions, similar to those on the side panels of the piece.

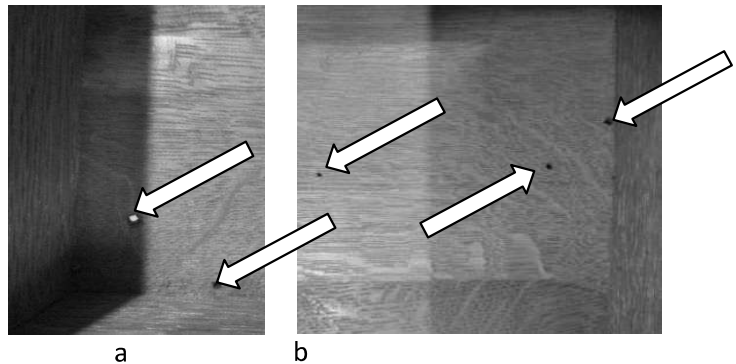
If that was indeed the case, at least the sides and the back end could have been remade from the original material. However, a carving in the side of the upper drawer is undoubtedly what remained of the dowel pin hole (Fig. 10). This suggests that also this element was made of another material. Since about half of the dowel pin hole remained on the side of the drawer, this suggests that the original thickness of this later element was cut at least in half.

This settles that the drawer was made of some other material taken from another, not necessarily French, piece of furniture. This other material, however, must have come from *some* drawer, because on the underside of the front end there are the already mentioned sawed-off dowel pins that originally must have joined the bottom with the sides, the back and the front end, all nailed from below. As already mentioned, in 18<sup>th</sup> century European designs, bottoms were usually attached through butt joints with narrow surfaces of sides, as well as placed in the rabbet of the front end, much like in the drawer used as a source of material for the second front end of the *escritoire*.

We have concluded that the drawer bottom is not part of the original construction: this is suggested by different colours of planks, a visible ink stain on just one plank (Fig. 11), and see-through nail holes which currently serve no purpose (Fig. 12).



**Figure 11.** Stains on the bottom of the upper drawer

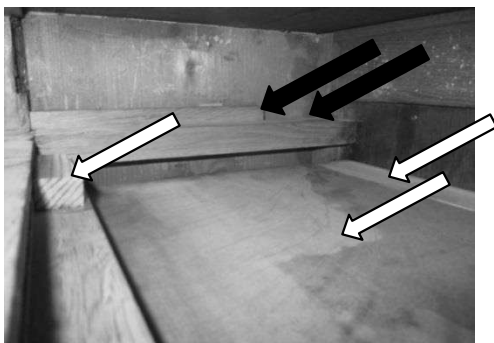


**Figure 12.** Holes in the bottom of the upper drawer: right side (a) and left side (b)

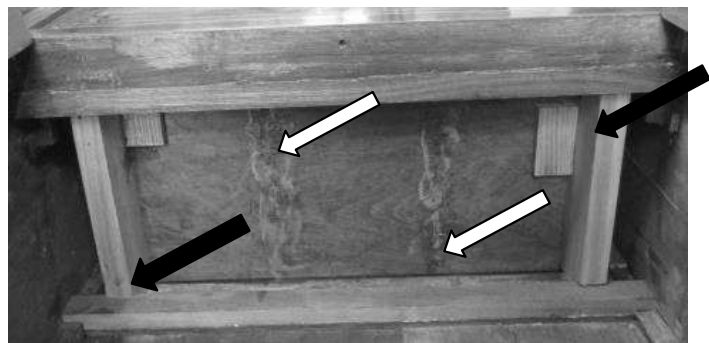
In the past it was not uncommon for conservators to use “salvaged” material when replacing some construction elements of period furniture. It is widely known that old wood has greater dimensional stability than one freshly out of the lumber mill.

When we take the drawer out of the furniture body we can see two slides: a bottom slide and a side slide, one on each side (Fig. 13). While they are not original parts of the piece, it is a usual practice in conservation work to make repairs of side slides since they are the first below-the-drawer elements to show signs of wear (they support the full weight of drawers as they are drawn in and out in the course of use).

After taking the upper drawer out, we can clearly see that the case is permanently fixed to the carcass with cubes made of coniferous wood (Fig. 14), which is a different material from almost every other element of the *escritoire*, including the slides. They were placed there during conservation work to provide stops for drawers which previously were most probably freely removable.



**Figure 13.** Cube preventing the *escritoire* carcass from being removed (white arrow), slides (black arrows), and planed surfaces and a new plank on the top board of the *escritoire* carcass (white arrows)

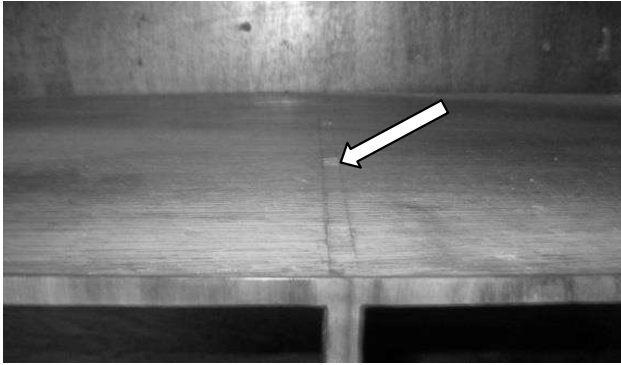


**Figure 14.** A bottom view of the current support system for the *escritoire* carcass (black arrow) and traces of its original (?) mounting (white arrow); visible also small transverse rails supported by a new horizontal middle rail of the back panel, and cubes positioning the carcass

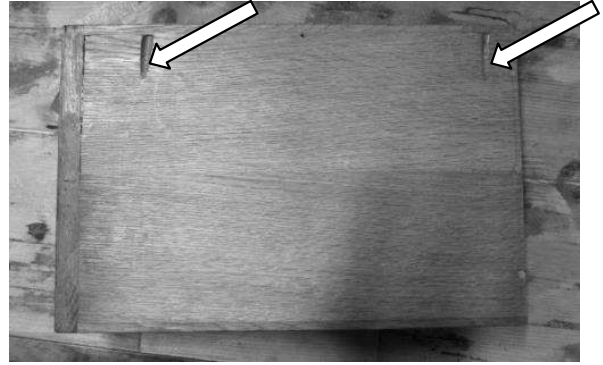
Figure 14 also shows a probable restoration work of the carcass, suggested by a different colouration of a replaced back plank of the top board and planed (a visibly lighter hue of the wood) surface of the top board.

On the underside, the *escritoire* carcass rests on two smaller rails running to the inside of the *escritoire*, in the original design it was probably supported by a now-replaced middle rail of the back panel. Unfortunately, these smaller rails shown on figure 14 are not original, and neither are battens placed on the middle rail of the back panel or cubes positioning the carcass. Figure 14 quite probably shows traces of original elements that were part of the supporting system of the *escritoire*. Cubes glued to the underside, as well as those glued on the upper side, prevent the carcass from being completely removed and additionally stabilise its side movements.

Inside the *escritoire* carcass there are traces of grooves for dowel pin holes visible in the upper horizontal partition, with penetrating dowel pins stuck inside it (Fig. 15). This is unacceptable in furniture of this quality and may suggest that once there was a vertical partition similar to one featured below, or that these pins were concealed by a drawer taking up the whole space of this compartment. Since there would be some traces of any prior vertical partition, for example dowel pin holes or a groove on the underside of the top board of the carcass (and there is nothing of this sort), the second explanation seems more plausible.



**Figure 15.** Traces of grooving for joints and penetrating dowel pins on the upper horizontal partition of the escritoire carcass



**Figure 16.** Traces of dowel pin holes in the bottom of the small drawer in the escritoire case

Similarly to the upper drawer, carvings in the bottoms of the small drawers in the escritoire carcass (Fig. 16) could be a result of mechanical causes. These carvings were made because dowel pins were originally nailed to a much thicker material, which conclusively shows that the bottoms of these small drawers were made of some other material.

This immediately raises doubts whether these small drawers (all construction elements and reconstructed veneer of the front) are surviving elements of the original piece. It might very well be that at some stage they were replaced, particularly if one considers their unlikely design resembling one that was used in the upper drawer, as well as varnishing of their front ends (Fig. 17), which produced darker and lighter hues of vertical stripes looking as if they were smoked.

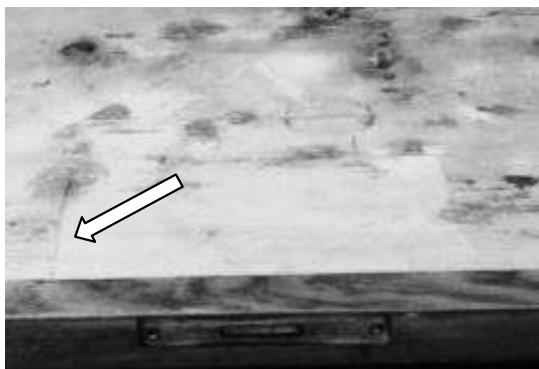


**Figure 17.** Varnished front of the small drawers in the escritoire carcass

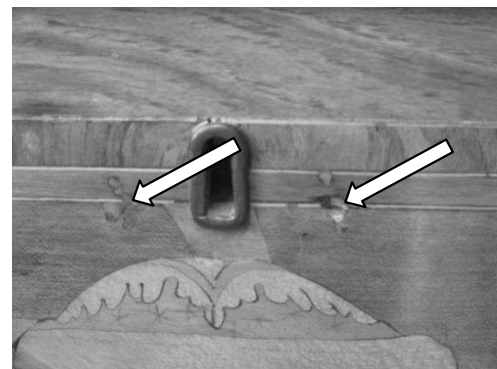


**Figure 18.** The back of the small drawer with numerous glue stains

Small drawers are a sloppy work, with glue and stains all over the place (Fig. 18), uneven spacing of dovetail joints, and the bottom inserted between the sides and the front end, nailed with dowel pins to the narrow surface of the back end.



**Figure 19.** Traces of the original lock

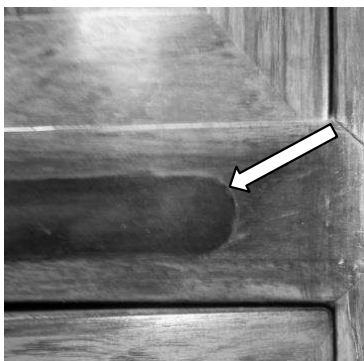


**Figure 20.** Traces of the original fitting

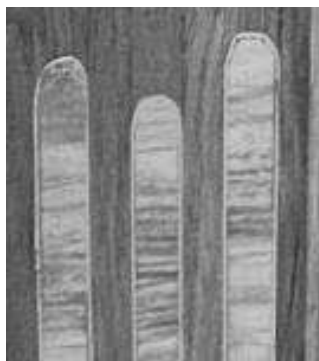
When we open the fall of the *escritoire* we quickly learn that the current lock is a replacement (this is suggested by a light-coloured inlay in place of an originally much bigger and not necessarily inlaid lock, as well as traces of its escutcheon previously mounted on the narrow surface of the fall – Fig. 19). On closing the fall one can notice what is left of the original decorative mount (the current keyhole fitting is a later addition) (Fig. 20).

Another surprise comes when one examines a horizontal partition dividing the secretary compartment and the cabinet below. There are two things suggesting that also this part of the *escritoire* has undergone some modifications: imperfect colouration of veneer shaped as flattened ellipse that is featured on the batten, as well as no traces of boxwood stringing (Fig. 21).

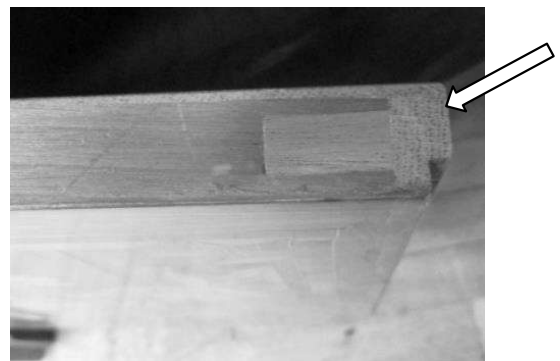
Originally this part certainly had similar ornaments to those on the side panels, that is, rosewood frame and a middle section with flattened ellipse made of tulipwood, separated by boxwood stringing. Curved sides of this section are reminiscent of vertical fluting and could have been designed as a contrasting element with rosewood veneer lined with boxwood stringing, cast against the generally vertical arrangement of rosewood veneer prevailing in the furniture body (Fig. 22).



**Figure 21.** Horizontal partition between the secretary compartment and the cabinet below



**Figure 22.** Flattened ellipses matching fluting on canted corners

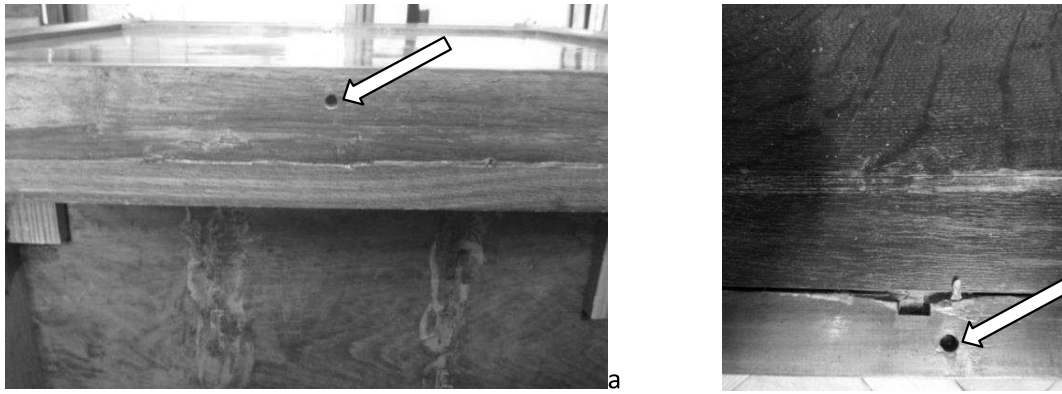


**Figure 23.** Inlays and veneered inner surface of the left-side door

Further changes can be found in the cabinet section of the piece.

When opening the left-side door one notices a vertical batten which was at some point pieced to make the closing of the door possible. It most probably introduced as a replacement for a metal fitting (Fig. 23). Oval holes appearing on the upper side of the *escritoire* bottom and on the underside of the rail attached to the bottom of the *escritoire* carcass serve today no purpose, which is a strong indication that other metal fittings were originally in place here (Fig. 24). The placement of the holes suggests that the metal fitting was once built in the door and could be an *espagnolette* which locked the top and the bottom of the door. When it was no longer there, conservators filled the resulting empty space with a glued batten.





**Figure 24.** Oval holes on the underside of the rail below the escritoire carcass and upper side of the escritoire bottom

Since, as we already know, the inside of the door was at some stage veneered with linings (Fig. 25), and its narrow surfaces were fitted with inlays with profiled rabbets (Fig. 26), even macroscopic examination will not offer conclusive evidence for any structural changes that might have been made to them.

Inside the cabinet there is a shelf dividing the space into two sections (Fig. 28). It is a later addition which is broader/longer than the original (provided such a shelf existed in the first place, because the cabinet could have served as a storage space for larger items). The manner in which the shelf is fixed to the side panels of the escritoire is also suspicious: groove joint on the left side, (Fig. 27), and chamfered joint on the right side, (Fig. 29), which is an unusual solution in cabinetmaking of the 18<sup>th</sup> century.



**Figure 25.** Door viewed from the inside



**Figure 26.** Inlay piece in the left-side door



**Figure 27.** Groove joint on the left side



**Figure 28.** Removable shelf of the cabinet



**Figure 29.** Chamfered joint on the right side

It is the back end of the escritoire which is the most modified element of the piece. Looking at the colour of the wood one quickly notices a lighter hue of inlays in the uppermost section of stiles in the frame and panel construction (Fig. 30). The scale of repair work is enormous.

This finding is supported also by different sizes and placement of dowel pins reinforcing the joints of the upper, middle, and lower rails (Fig. 31).

Similarly, all planks in the upper panel and the right plank in the lower panel appear to be made of some other material: this conclusion is supported by a different colour of oak, which has a darker hue resulting from the natural aging process. Additionally, the lower panel has a smooth surface, while the upper panel is coarsely scraped.

There are also quite a lot of unexplained damages of the *escritoire*. For example, figure 32 shows one of many cracks at the back of the piece that run along wood grain. The damage is in a close proximity of the nail, the origin or purpose of which remains a mystery. It could have been that the entire lower panel of the back was replaced with some other wood.

Polish finish was added in the course of time, although cabinetmaking principles of the period required that a piece of furniture be covered with wax finish (Swaczyna, 1992).

On the underside, the bottom of the piece and its construction elements were covered with polish (Fig. 33). In furniture made in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, however, the back panel and the underside of the bottom, as well as other hidden surfaces of the piece, were always left unfinished (Swaczyna, 1992).

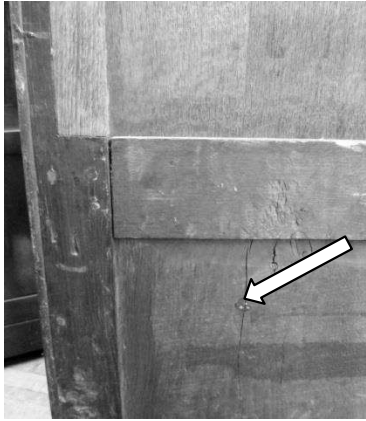
The *escritoire* came with an unattached decorative mount for the apron (Fig. 34). However, it turned out that it cannot be fitted where it belongs because its dimensions and shape are much larger than the apron itself (Fig. 35). This suggests that the lower face batten must have been replaced. If this was indeed so, then the same must have happened to lower side battens, which feature the same curved profile as the apron on the lower face batten.



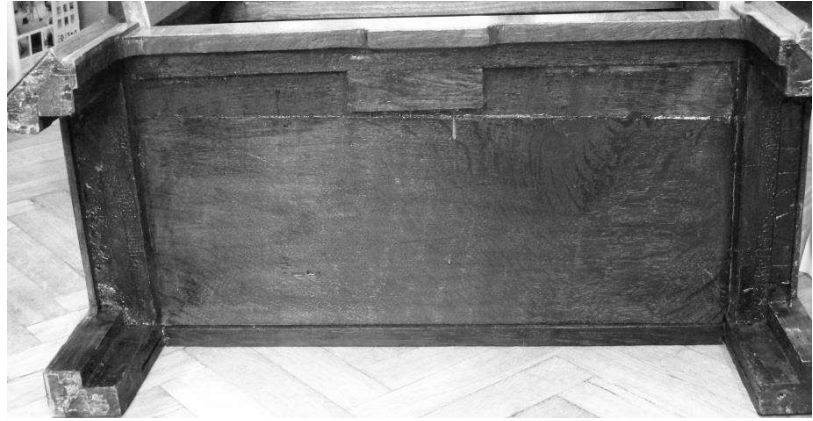
**Figure 30.** Back panel of the *escritoire*



**Figure 31.** Subsequent (a) and original (b) dowel pins



**Figure 32.** A see-through nail hole on the back panel



**Figure 33.** Bottom of the piece in ruby-coloured polish finish; visible reflections

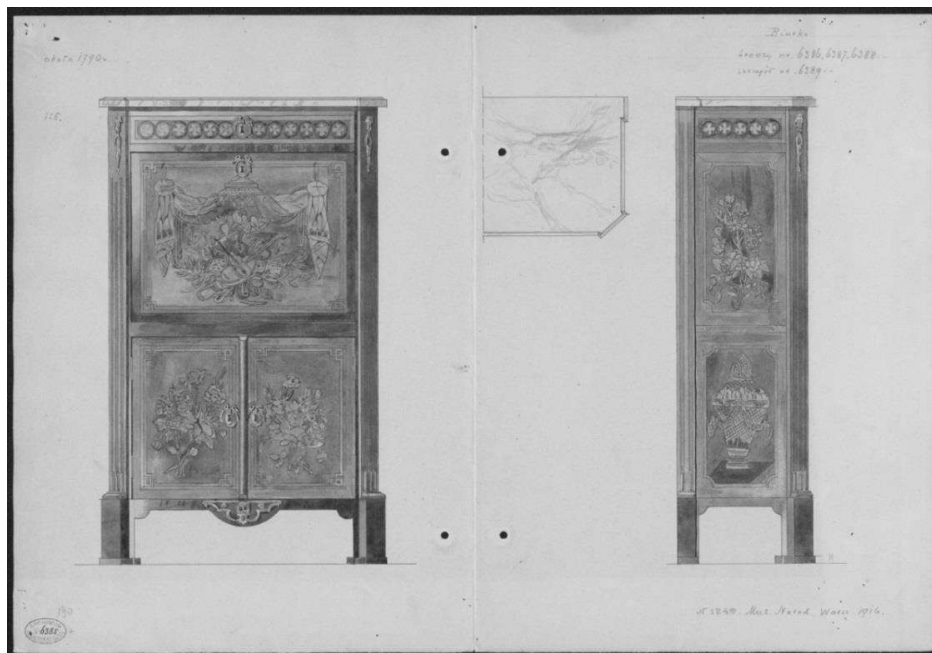


**Figure 34.** Original mount for the apron



**Figure 35.** Lower front batten with a downsized apron added subsequently

This earlier conservation work which resulted in modifications in the construction of the *escritoire* prompted a search for earlier photographic evidence that would shed light on the timing of these alterations. Visual records from ca. 1790 found in the National Museum (Fig. 36) show that fittings in the upper part of the piece were originally much more delicate in shape and form (Fig. 36 and 37a), that the original fittings in the lower part of the *escritoire* shaped as veneered base in fluting of canted front corners went missing, and that the shape of lower battens and the apron was altered (Fig. 36). These visual records from late 18<sup>th</sup> century confirm that the mount of the apron was part of the original design (Fig. 37b), that fittings decorating the upper drawer and the fall were indeed replaced, and, finally, that the doors of the lower cabinet were modified (Fig. 37c).



**Figure 36.** Drawings of the *escritoire*, ca. 1790 (MNW archive)

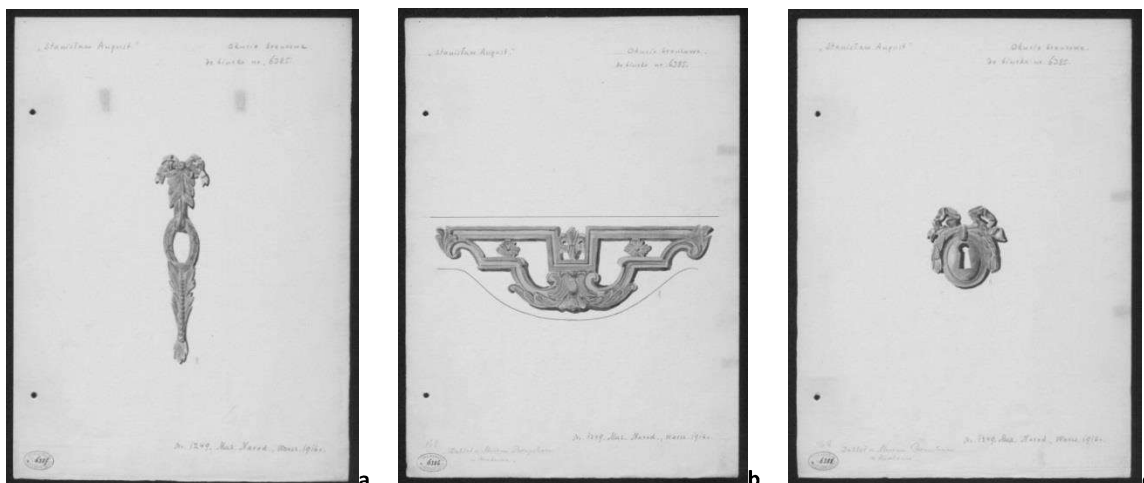


Figure 37. Original mounts as pictured on drawings made in 1790 (MNW archive)

## FINDINGS

A thorough analysis of the present condition of the escritoire and causes of its damages suggests far-reaching modifications of the piece. Conservation work included various repairs, in particular the following interventions (in order of their importance):

- piecing of missing elements or replacement of all construction elements of the upper drawer and small drawers in the escritoire carcass,
- replacement of locks and decorative fittings on the front of the upper drawer, front of the secretary part, in the lower cabinet, and in the corners,
- altered shape of lower battens and downsizing of the apron at the lowermost part of the piece, and removal of its decorative mount,
- repairs of the back panel and replacement of dowel pins in the back panel,
- probable modification of the mounting and/or of the spatial arrangement of horizontal partitions in the cabinet, including a replaced shelf,
- probable modification of functional spatial arrangement in the escritoire carcass, and missing upper drawer,
- varnishing of fronts of small drawers in the escritoire case and varnishing of the front frieze with a flattened ellipse,
- missing marble top,
- replaced uppermost front corner of the upper floral intarsia on the left panel of the escritoire, and replaced fragment in the vase intarsia featured on the right panel of the escritoire,
- polish finish instead of wax finish.

## REFERENCES

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**Streszczenie:** *Problematyka konserwatorska klasycystycznej sekretery francuskiej nr inwentarzowy SZMb 1133 z Muzeum Narodowego w Warszawie.* Obiektem analizowanym w artykule jest klasycystyczna sekretera pochodzące z XVIII w., znajdująca się w Muzeum Narodowym w Warszawie. Zbadano stan zachowania sekretery i ustalono możliwe przyczyny zniszczeń. Stan zachowania mebla stał się podstawą rozważań o jego problemach konserwatorskich w świetle identyfikacji mebla. Przeprowadzone badania konstrukcyjno - materiałowe udowodniły wysoki stopień przekształcenia mebla pod wpływem wcześniejszych prac konserwatorskich. Za pomocą metody dedukcji prześledzono zakres zmian konstrukcyjno-materiałowych oraz rozwarstwiono elementy oryginalne i wtórne.

*Słowa kluczowe:* sekretera, klasycyzm, styl Ludwika XVI, konserwacja

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