Hampton Court Palace

Conservation of the tester belonging to Queen Charlotte’s State Bed

From Monday 16 January, Historic Royal Palaces’ textile conservators will be working in the Queen’s Drawing Room, conserving the tester from Queen Charlotte’s State Bed. The treatment will take two weeks, during which time there will be the opportunity to find out more with presentations being given by conservators every weekday at 11.30 and 14.30.

BACKGROUND
Queen Charlotte’s State Bed dates from 1772-8 and is thought to have been designed by the architect John Yenn. It is a sumptuous union of richly adorned textures, with very fine gilt wood carving and intricate silk embroidery. It has been in storage since 1992 and is currently undergoing conservation in anticipation of a State Beds exhibition to be held at Hampton Court Palace in the near future.

DESIGN
The tester is the canopy or roof of the bed and is constructed of two parts: the dome and the board. The dome is made up of eight mahogany panels with limewood carving of the finest quality, featuring scrolling acanthus and palmette ornaments. The only gilded wooden elements still visible in their original state are found on the dome.

The embroidery, designed by the celebrated flower painter Mary Moser, was executed on to gold silk satin, lined in paper and adhered to the panels.

CONDITION
The embroidery is in good condition as it has received minimal light exposure and the colours remain largely true to the original. However, the structural stability of the dome has been causing some concern. The mahogany panels have shrunk due to dry environmental conditions, causing gaps to open between some segments, breaks in the gilt wood and tears in the silk satin.

The silk satin ground varies in condition. Towards the centre of the dome it is largely sound, with some staining. However, the silk around the edges is very fragile and in some areas has become detached from the wooden structure. The adhesive (probably animal glue) has penetrated the silk and, together with the degradation of the paper lining, has resulted in stiffness and staining.

CONSERVATION
An approach of minimal intervention has been decided upon as unnecessary handling of the objects may cause further damage. Ingrained dirt will be carefully removed using chemical sponges. This is a gentle method that removes surface dirt without abrasion, whilst leaving no residues. Soft brushes will then be used with a low suction vacuum to remove any further dust or dirt particles.

In areas of detached silk, a conservation grade adhesive will be brushed on to the mahogany wood before re-applying the silk satin. Gentle finger pressure creates an effective but reversible bond. It may be necessary to gently humidify the stiffened silk before adhesion, using a very fine nozzle attached to an ultrasonic mister.

Once the textile and gilt wood elements of the tester have been conserved, a micro-climate will be established in the storage room to ensure that no further distress is caused to these objects. Further improvements to the environmental conditions of the room will be made in advance of the exhibition.
TESTER DOME SUPPORT
The tester dome has not been dismantled in many years and to ensure its protection, a suitable form of support is required. As the dome is an unusual and irregular shape, the support needs to be amorphous and flexible. Ideally the dome should be stored as positioned when in place on the bed, but this would cause problems with access to the fragile silk. Therefore, a support is required that will cradle the entire dome as it lies upside down, reducing the pressure on it.

A design was selected that would comply with all these specifications and a pattern taken so that a bean bag cover could be made from cotton ticking.

160 cubic feet of polyester beans were poured into the bag, which needed to be two thirds full in order to sufficiently cushion the dome. A readily available textile conservator was used to assess the 'bean dispersal ratio'!

The bean bag was given inserts of corset boning to stiffen the sides and webbing Velcro strips were used, rather like a belt, to pull in the excess fabric and prevent the bean bag from sagging.

Kate Orfeur
Conservation and Collection Care