



Tortoiseshell cabinet
Oak, ebony, walnut, shell, ivory,
brass
17th century, Artwerp



Tortoiseshell cabinet
Oak, ebony, mahogany, box,
shell, brass
17th Century, Artwerp



Details of the 2nd cabinet
Madonna and child

Tortoiseshell cabinets

The technique of veneered furniture appeared in Germany and The Netherlands. It paved the way for the profession as a «carver of ebony», which would later be called «cabinetmaker». New materials such as coloured wood, ivory and tortoiseshell were used inside as well as outside of those luxurious furnitures.

Tortoiseshell, a natural material, comes from the carapace of a tortoise, which is commonly called «hawksbill». It is found in the Bahamas archipelago (Atlantic Ocean), the Galapagos islands (Pacific Ocean) and the Seychelles (Indian Ocean); it arrives through European ports such as Antwerp.

“We would buy a cabinet in the same way as we would have bought a painting. However, it was used, as proved in inventory listings, to preserve jewels or minor objects of curiosity.”

Daniel Alcouffe, *Un temps d'exubérance*, 2002.

Those pieces of furniture, which were first made for the nobility, found their place in the houses of the rising class, namely the business bourgeoisie (tradesmen and shopkeepers) who massively ordered them.

Prestigious furniture

This one dates back to the 17th century, it is in Baltic oak, covered by reddened tortoiseshell, ebony, corrugated mouldings and bands of ivory. The central part is framed by two rows of four bossed drawers, and topped by an interrupted pediment as well as a little mirror. It can be opened by 2 flaps on a polygonal niche, whose bottom is covered with marquetry that produces in its centre a star with eight ivory branches. The surrounding little mirrors, which are separated by 2 little columns and 4 half columns, reflect the decoration endlessly. Two cherubs are holding an imperial crown for a character who needs to sit down right underneath.

The supporting platform is also inlaid and has the shape of the niche's star. On the cabinet there is a crucifix, also from the 17th century, which is veneered with ebony, tortoiseshell and ivory. A sun, also made of ivory, can be seen behind the Christ's head, which is an uncommon detail. Mary, Jean and the two cherubs' heads in embossed silver are found at the foot of the Christ. The cross is probably a processional one. Everything is set on a 6 feet socle.

The 2nd cabinet is more imposing, its configuration is similar to the previous one. In a niche in the centre a Madonna with Child was placed on a little socle, which is covered with ebony, strass and tortoiseshell. The niche's ceiling is supported by arches based on six little twisted mahogani columns and a boxwood spire. The mirrors form the walls and reflect the statue as well as an ivory and wooden parquet.

Under the niche there is a big drawer with a shelf underneath which can be pulled out and be used as a writing case.

The bottom platform is supported by eight twisted columns and shows marquetry in chequered patterns.