MAKING FASHIONABLE FURNITURE IN ENGLAND AND FRANCE DURING THE AGE OF ELEGANCE

Chapter V
English and French Case Histories

On the cover:

- Top Picture: This is reported to be a portrait of Thomas Chippendale the senior, however this has not been verified and there is reason to believe that this might be a portrait of his son. This portrait could have been executed by either Thomas Proctor or J. T Barber. Currently this portrait is owned by The Chippendale Society - See C. Gilbert, *The Life and Works of Thomas Chippendale, Vol 1*, Studio Vista/Christies, London, 1978, p. 299. And p. 4 in Volume 2. (Taken from http://www.antique-marks.com/antique-terms-c.html - Accessed 03 March 2010).

- Lower Picture: This is a portrait of Jean-Henri Riesener seated at one of his own writing tables. This portrait was by Antoine Vestier, 1786 (Musée de Versailles). Taken from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Riesener - Accessed 03 March 2010).

V. CASE HISTORIES

A. Introduction

This chapter details the ways in which two pieces of furniture – the English Harewood Library Table by Chippendale and a French *secrétaire á abattant* (F302) by Riesener - were made. [1] It then integrates these findings with what we know of the culture and fashions of the day (as discussed previously).

The chapter begins by recapping the theoretical approach. This is followed by a comprehensive description of intrinsic data as well as some pertinent background information. The case histories follow, discussing in turn history, constructional methods, materials used, stylistic components and function; together with a number of special topics that have not been addressed above. As wide-ranging conclusion section will be presented as a separate chapter (Chapter VI, p. 332).

The primary purpose of this chapter is to mark out, in detail, the construction techniques used to make both the Harewood Library Table and the Riesener *secrétaire á abattant* F302 from The Wallace Collection. In doing this, it is hoped to accomplish two objectives. Firstly to begin the process for identifying the key characteristics that defines each of these makers of fashionable C18th furniture. As will be discussed in the next chapter (Chapter VI, p. 332, this is but the start of this process as there are a number of other areas that need to be included in order to complete this task. As part of this objective, this thesis will present these characteristics in a format that will then be useable to identify other pieces of similar furniture made by these makers.

This chapter's second objective was to take the first step towards setting up an objective system for identifying the maker of any particular piece of furniture. The entire system

[1] As discussed previously, the number F302 is referring to the inventory number at The Wallace Collection Catalogue by Watson in 1956 (See F. Watson, *Wallace Collection Catalogues. Furniture,* William Clowes, London, 1956.)

would consider all aspects of the furniture such as the actual metals used in making the screws, the decorative elements, the handles and hinges and the locks, identifying the dyes that were used[2] (if any) to colour the wood, analysis of both the surface treatments (the varnish or other surface coatings) and the glues[3] that were used. It would also take into account more of the joints by either taking the piece apart (at the time of conservation) or by the use of x-rays. It would also include wood identification and dendrochronology to determine both the type of wood as well as when and where it was sourced. Because of financial and accessibility limitations, the research reported in this thesis was limited to the drawers, the internal drawer cavities, overall measurements, observational data and the contents of files covering past conservation [4]efforts. Where available the work conducted by prior researchers was included. One example was an extensive application of XRF technology[5] that was used to identify the base metals used in the ormolu (while this was in the files at The Wallace Collection, prior to this they have not been published.) As discussed in the conclusion section, it is the desire of this author to conduct this subsequent research.

From these two sets of findings, the result will be an indispensable tool for identifying other pieces of furniture produced by these two makers and it will mark the start of the process to learn how to identify furniture made by a variety of different makers, but again, this is but a first step much in the way of expanding and re-defining this task needs to be accomplished as will be discussed in the last chapter (Chapter VI, p. 332).

[2] The recommended approach is the UV/VIS-absorbtion spectrometry which is a a non-destructive method for dyes identification that has been developed by Dr. Heinrich Piening (reference: (H. Piening, UV/VIS-Absorbtion Spectrometry: A Non-Destructive Method For Dyestuff Identification, Presented at conference: Marquetry - Past and Present 2nd Scandinavian Symposium on Furniture Technology and Design Vadstena, Sweden May 10-12, 2007).

[3] One process is one in which the type of animal used is identified by an analysis of the proteins present in the glues. See: A. Heginbotham, V. Millay, M. Quick, The Use of Immunofluorescence Microscopy (IFM) and Enzyme-Linked Immunosorbent Assay (ELISA) as Complementary Techniques for Protein Identification in Artists' Materials, *WAGPostprints*, 2004, Portland Oregan.

[4] The process for selecting these two particular cabinetmakers and these two types of furniture were discussed in the opening chapter (See section beginning on p. 25) of this thesis.

[5] These XRF technologies essentially involve projecting x-rays on to the ormolu then reading the resulting pattern of energy that is returning. The energy produced can be read in such a way that the materials can be identified with some degree of accuracy. As shown in the results, two measures taken off the same piece of material can produce slightly different findings, however the major ingredients can clearly be identified and to a large degree quantified. See for example: B. Beckhoff, B. Kanngieber, N. Langhoff, R. Wedell, H. Wolf (eds), *Handbook of Practical X-Ray Fluorescence Analysis*, Springeer-Verlag Berlin Heidelberg, Berlin, 2006.

These tests were conducted at The Wallace Collection on their C18th furniture

The last objective of this chapter is to look for what clues the construction of these pieces provide for the culture of the late C18th in these two countries.

B. Theoretical Overview

The approach taken in this chapter follows Fleming and Zimmerman and the methods described in detail in the introduction.[6] The following recaps the steps in this process:

- IDENTIFICATION: To identify and detail the key constructional characteristics of these two cabinetmakers
- EVALUATION: To evaluate these two pieces relative to each other and relative to similar pieces made by the same workshops.
- CULTURAL ANALYSIS: To relate these two pieces of furniture to the cultural trends in England and France in this time.
- INTERPRETATION: To analyse how these two pieces of furniture relate more broadly to one another and to the wider social context

A 'Structural analysis', as Zimmerman calls it, will be conducted as an overlay of each of the last three steps.

The intended outcome of this analysis is intended to provide the following:

- A greater understanding of the standard practices of the workshops of both Chippendale and Riesener, from which we can develop an improved model for identifying each workshop's products and a base for evaluating new pieces of furniture which may relate to them.

- A greater understanding of how artefacts can inform us about the important concepts and cultural events of the late 18th Century. This should reinforce the

[6] This model is based on that put forth in E. Fleming, Artefact Study: A Proposed Model, *The Winterthur Portfolio,* Vol. 9, 1974, pp. 153-173 and was adjusted by the writings of P. Zimmerman as detailed in P. Zimmerman, Workmanship as Evidence, *The Winterthur Portfolio,* Vol. 16, No. 4, Winter, 1981, pp. 283-307.

importance of studying objects to better understand of our culture and the way in which it operates.

C. Identification and Evaluation

What follows here is an extensive series of measurements and descriptions, together with a review of all the available information in order to understand how these pieces were designed and constructed. Measurements were also taken on similar pieces. While some concluding remarks will be reserved for later, identification and some aspects of the evaluation will be combined here.

In the case of Chippendale's Harewood desk, all other pieces of writing furniture by him that were available for viewing were subject to the same level of measurement. Similarly for Riesener, the *secrétaire á abattant* used as the central focus of this study was compared to all other *secrétaire á abattants* that were available for study.[7] Chippendale was also known to have made two so-called a 'Lady Secretaries' in the style of the *secrétaire á abattant.*[8] Structurally similar, one was subject to the same level of detailed scrutiny in order that it might be directly compared to the Riesener work and provide additional insight.[9]

Following is a chart listing the furniture studied in detail for this research (note that the entries in grey are the primary pieces addressed in this research.)

[7] There was one known exception to this, which is the Japanned *secrétaire á abattant* by Riesener which is currently at the Metropolitan Museum in New York City (See Page 454 in Appendix C.).
[8] In order to reduce any confusion, these two pieces will be referred to as *secrétaire á abattant*s since they are essentially the same design as those produced in France. In all likelihood the design for these two Chippendale pieces were inspired by the French models.
[9] A. Coleridge, *A Tale of Two Secretaires, Christies Sales Catalogue for sale 3 July 1994*, London, 1994 (Taken from Proof for Job No: 4897 Christies Creative Services, in Harewood House Files.)

Table 5-1 Furniture Included in Detailed Analysis[10]		
Maker	**Name/Description of Furniture[11]**	**Current Location/Comments**
T. Chippendale	Harewood Library Table	**Temple Newsom (near Leeds) – the primary object of this study.**
	Dumphries Library Table	Dumfries (National Trust), Scotland.
	Wilton House Library Table	Wilton House (National Trust), England.
	Nostell Priory Library Table	Nostell Priory, Leeds, England.
	Corsham Court Library Table.	Corsham Court near Wiltshire, England. This piece was probably made by Chippendale's son who took over the business after the elder Chippendale died in 1779.
	Harewood Dressing Table	V & A, London. Although this is not a Library table, it had some very interesting characteristics that made it useful for this study[12].
	Gerrick Dressing Table	Cambridge. Although this is not a Library table, it had some very interesting characteristics that made it useful for this study.
	Harewood *Secrétaire á Abattant*	Harewood House (Leeds). Although this is not a Library table, because it was a *secrétaire á abattant* it was very useful for making comparisons to the similar furniture by Riesener.
J.-H. Riesener	***Secrétaire á Abattant* F302[13]**	**The Wallace Collection (Inventory no. F302) in London – the primary object of this study.**
	Secrétaire á Abattant F303	The Wallace Collection (Inventory no. F303), London.
	Secrétaire á Abattant F300	The Wallace Collection (Inventory no. F300), London. One of 8 identified as being modelled after Oeben.[14]
	Waddesdon Manor *Secrétaire á Abattant*	Waddesdon Manor (near Aylesbury). Similar to F300 at The Wallace and another one of 8 identified as being modelled after Oeben.
	Les Arts Décratifs – Paris *Secrétaire á Abattant*	*Musée des Arts Décoratifs,* Paris (Inventory number GR 824)
	Versailles Secrétaire á Abattant	Versailles (Near Paris).

[10] More details about each of these pieces as well as other known pieces that were made by these two cabinetmakers are available in Appendix C: *Overview of Library Tables by Chippendale and Secrétaire á Abattants by Riesener.*

[11] The primary pieces for these case studies are represented in grey boxes.

[12] While this will be discussed in more detail later in this chapter (See p. 324), the interesting characteristics concerned how this particular piece was not consistent with the other pieces by Chippendale that were included in this study.

[13] In most instances, this *secrétaire á abattant* will be referred to by the inventory number F302. There will be exceptions, such as the 'primary object' the 'primary *secrétaire á abattant* by Riesener, but even they should be clearly referenced. These, for example, included the use of a lower quality of wood, the use of different kinds of locks, the use of different dovetails, the lower quality of marquetry cuts.

[14] This classification has been used by a number of authors, but fully described in Christies Catalogues whenever one of these pieces of furniture come up for auction (See No Author Given, *Christies Sales Catalogue for July 5 & 7, 2000: Works of Art from The Wernher Collection*, Christies, London, 2000, and P. Hughes, *The Wallace Collection Catalogue of Furniture,* Vol II.,Trustees of the Wallace Collection, London, 1996.). This classification will be described more completely within this document at a later in this Chapter, see p. 250.)

As stated above, these pieces represent all of the writing tables (by Chippendale) and *secrétaire á abattants* (by Riesener) available to the public. Chippendale was thought to have produced approximately 10 Library tables (to the best of current knowledge) - 5 were included in this research.[15] According to the *Journal du Garde-Meuble, Riesener* made 51 secrétaire *á abattant* for the Royal family. In this study 6 are included for the comparisons - this leaves 45. Appendix G, Page 561 provides more details about the different *secrétaire á abattant*s that were produced by Riesener.[16] The problem of such a seemingly small sample will be discussed later in the conclusion section (Chapter VI, p. 332).

The process of identification and evaluation will begin by relating the known historical facts around these two pieces of furniture. The next step provides much new knowledge by detailing the overall measurements, together with observations, measurements and pictures that relate to the construction of the drawers and other components.[17] However, before discussing the overall measurements, just how specific measurements taken and why they needed to be taken is discussed. Clearly an approach had to be determined that could be applied across all of the different pieces included in the case study. A discussion follows around how library tables and *secrétaire á abattants* were constructed in general.

Two drawings of the different approaches that Chippendale used to construct his library tables are also provided here to offer insight into the problem of establishing criteria for measurement[18].

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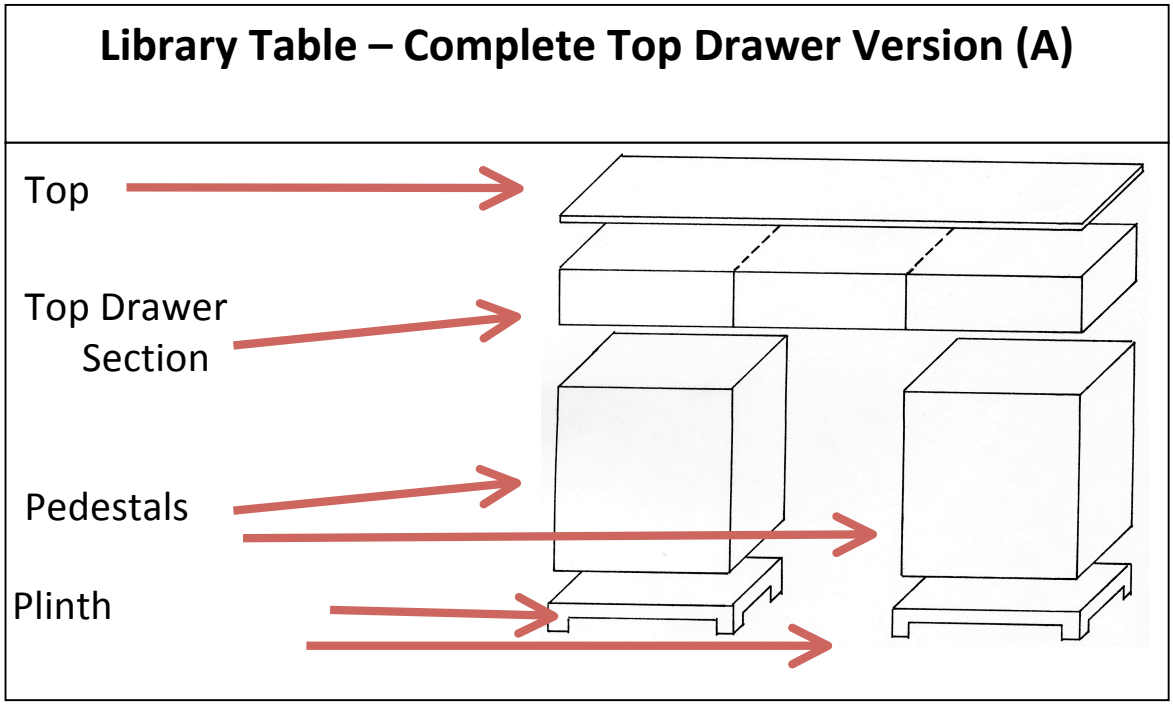
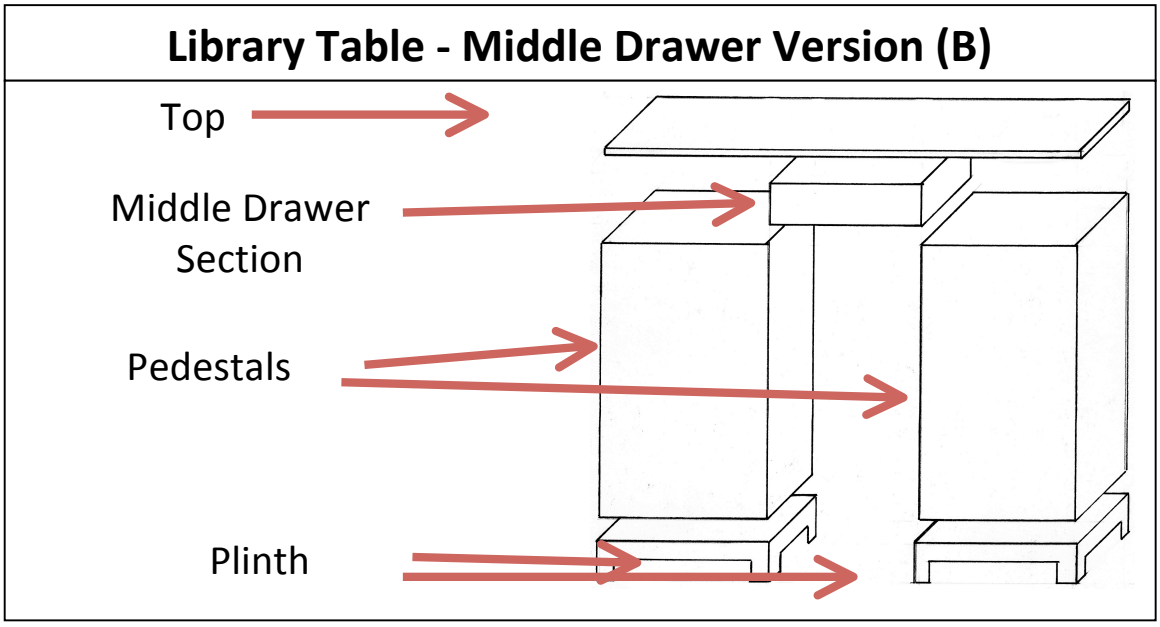
[15] See C. Gilbert, *The Life and Works of Thomas Chippendale* for pictures and summaries of billings for Thomas Chippendale. These pieces of furniture are summarized in Appendix C: Overview, see page 471. The numbers presented here were taken primarily by reviewing the billings for each of the houses that Chippendale worked for and by cross checking with the list of furniture that is also included in the same text. Of course, if any other piece were identified in the literature it would have been considered for inclusion in this listing.

[16] These counts were taken from the J*ournal du Garde-Meuble*. See: Various Authors, *Journal du Garde-Meuble,* 1761-1784, These are detailed listings of all furniture that was either delivered, ordered or repaired in service for France's Royal Households. Copies are located in The Wallace Collection Library and are available in France's archives. Again, as many as were identified in the literature reviewed for this paper are presented in Appendix 2: *Overview of and Secrétaire á abattants by Riesener and Chippendale and Library Tables by Chippendale.*

[17] The actual documents used for collecting this information is provided for in Appendix K: Data Collection Documents.

[18] Obviously, the best way to take these measurements would be to use a laser scanner however the equipment needed nor the funding necessary for this were not available for this research. See for example a





Figures 5-1 and 5-2: Two different constructional approaches used by Chippendale for his library tables.

use of laser scanners in support of architectural research: K. Cain, Drawing Accurate Ground Plans from Laser Scan Data, *Institute for the Study and Integration of Graphical Heritage Techniques* (INSIGHT), Web site: www.insightdigital.org/PDF%20papers/**Plans**.pdf Accessed 28–December-2010.)

As shown above, there were two different ways in which Chippendale constructed a library table, which led to problems around how measurements might best be taken. While this variation presented other problems in making comparisons, for the moment only the methodological issues will be addressed. [19]

In both constructional approaches there are four major components of the library table that need to be identified. On top of both Version A and Version B, is a large flat platform, which provides the primary writing surface, which is called quite simply the Top. [20] The two variants differ in how the pedestals and the section immediately under the Top were designed and constructed. The Complete Top Drawer Section (Version A) has one section that includes a top drawer which stretches the entire way across the top, pulling out to the front or occasionally with flanking drawers pulled to the side. The next components measured are the pedestals themselves (there are two pedestals to all library tables, and a plinth (attached to the bottom of each pedestal). The version labelled the Middle Drawer Version (Version B) has two taller pedestals that were connected together near the top by a drawer that acted as a bridge, spanning the gap between the two pedestals. This approach differs in that the pedestals include an extra drawer. In the centre, in the space between the two pedestals, the single drawer was added, making a line of three drawers underneath the top. When discussing the measurements the two different types will not be compared directly as potentially this would be misleading.

Of the writing tables studied in detail for this thesis, three used the Complete Top Drawer Section version - Version A. The Harewood Library Table falls into this set as well as the tables at Wilton and Dumfries House. The two that had the Middle Drawer Insert - Version B, included the tables at Nostell Priory and Corsham Court. Whether Chippendale custom

[19] The two different approaches suggest that Chippendale did not have a single constructional approach to making this type of furniture. This adds an additional support to the conclusion that Chippendale did not think in terms of fitting preset patterns to a situation but rather the opposite. He looked at the situation and let that dictate the design approach. Note that this in itself does not suggest this, however as we have seen there are a number of factors that are suggesting this.

[20] Some writing tables have, as shown in Appendix C: Overview of *Secrétaire á abattants* by Riesener and Chippendale and Library Tables by Chippendale have drawing platforms in addition to the primary writing surface.

Figure 5-3: Pictures showing the distinct foot on the Nostell Priory Library Table (top photo) and the continuous plinth as seen on the Harewood Desk (lower Picture).

built each table to the client's specification will be discussed in more detail later (See pp. 176, 191).

It should be noted here that there are two different approaches that Chippendale took to supporting the pedestals. The type shown in the drawings show a distinct foot on the four corners of each pedestal. However, on several of the Chippendale Library tables detailed in this study, a continuous plinth is found; including the Harewood Table and the tables at the Dumfries House, Wilton House and Corsham Court. The table at Nostell Priory had distinct feet instead of the continuous plinth. [21]

The following measurements were taken on each of the pieces of furniture:

- On the Middle Drawer design (Version A); the height of the feet, the height, width, and the depth of each of the pedestals, the height, width and depth of the middle drawer, and the same measures for the table top.
- On the Full Top design (Version B) the height of the feet, the height, width, and the depth of each pedestal, the same measurements for the top drawer section and the top of the desk.

[21] Of the tables, that were not included in the detailed review, the two smaller keyhole dressing/writing tables had distinct legs as well as the V & A dressing table.

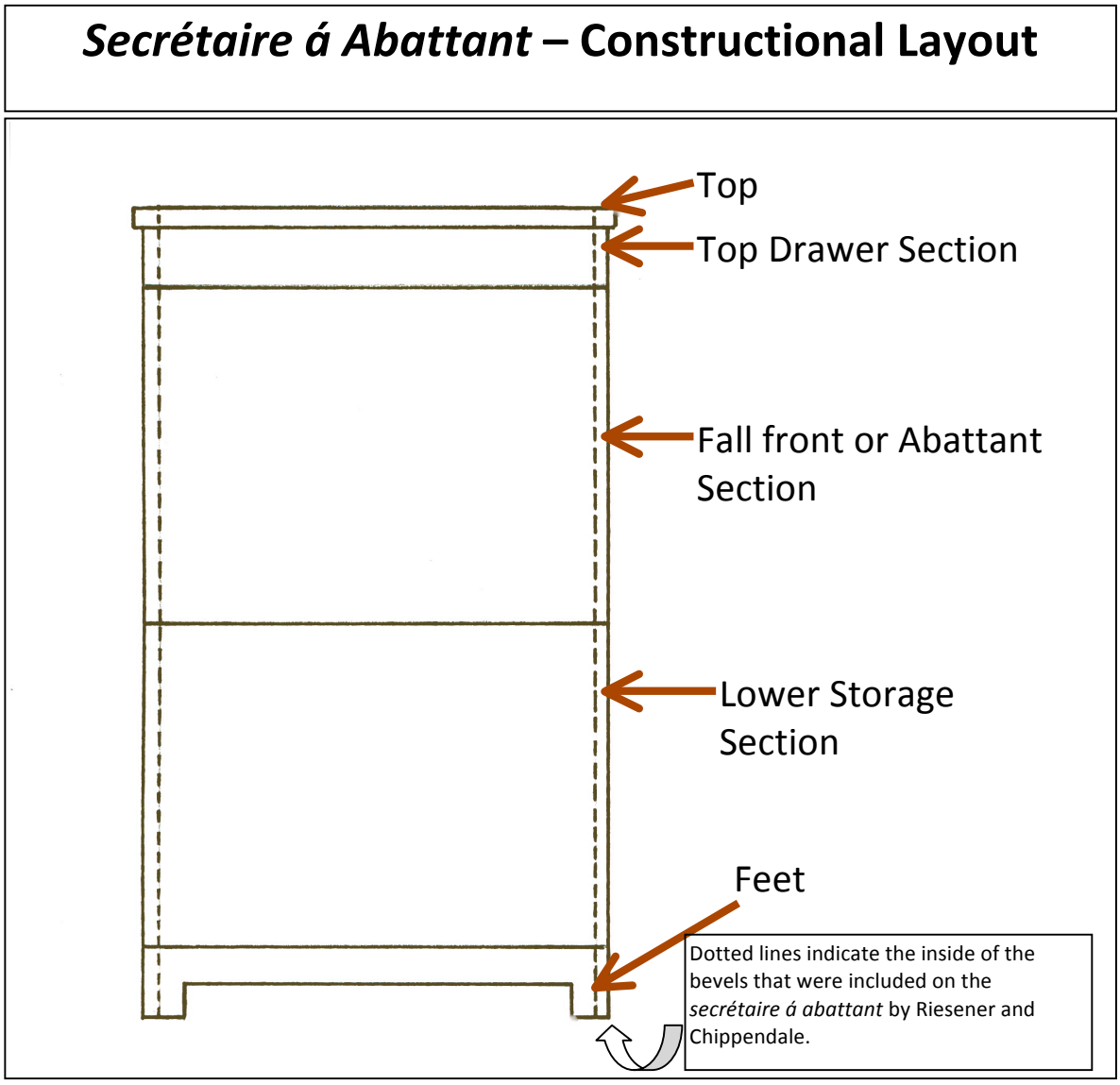


Figure 5-4: Constructional layout for the *Secrétaire á Abattant*.

As shown in Figure 5-4, there are five different sections of the *secrétaire á abattant* that have been identified and measured. For each section the measurement started at the bottom of the section then moved to the top and included the bridging section. The Base or Feet and the ormolu or wooden border between the feet and the Lower Storage Section were all included in the measurement of the Base. The border between the Lower Storage Section and any upper section was included in this measurement and not with any measurements for the Fall Front section above. For each of the *secrétaire á abattant*

included here, measurements for the height, width, and depth of each of these sections is fully detailed.

Please note that in the top section, if there was a gallery then it was included in the measurements. Another consideration was to do with the canted edge found at the front of all of Riesener's *secrétaire á abattant*s. Measurement was taken at the outside of this bevel, to record the full width of Riesener's *secrétaire á abattant*s. The exceptions to this were the occasions where the width of the front was narrower than that of the back. It was decided that the front measurement was more indicative of the size of the internal structure than the back, since the difference showed how the shell of the piece of furniture widened and not how the width of the internal structure widened.[22] Many of sides of Riesener's *secrétaire á abattant*s were wider at the back than the front.[23]

In addition to the general construction of these pieces, the drawers were examined in detail. The measurements that were taken included the size of the drawers (height, width and depth); the thickness of the timber used for the sides, back, front and bottom; the width of the front and back dovetails and the angle of each dovetail. Note that the width of the dovetail was taken at the end of the dovetail (i.e. toward the centre of the drawer). The drawings showed next (see Figure 5-5) shows the elements that were measured.

[22] As shown later in this chapter (See p. 314), the outside of the side of the *secrétaire á abattant* is a shell within which there is a small distance between the outside walls and the internal structure of the piece of furniture. The inside essentially consists of three boxes (the Lower Storage Section, the Fall Front Section, the Top Drawer Section), which are stacked on top of each other then enclosed in a shell, which holds the decorative surface. This is then set up on a stand, which forms the Base and covered with a top (usually marble and/or a gallery.)

[23] Of the five that were studied in detail, three had a wider structure at the back of the *secrétaire á abattant* than the front and on two versions (the piece at Versailles and the one at the *Musée des Arts Décoratifs.* The origins of this design element seem to have come from the original model that Riesener made under the supervision of Oeben.

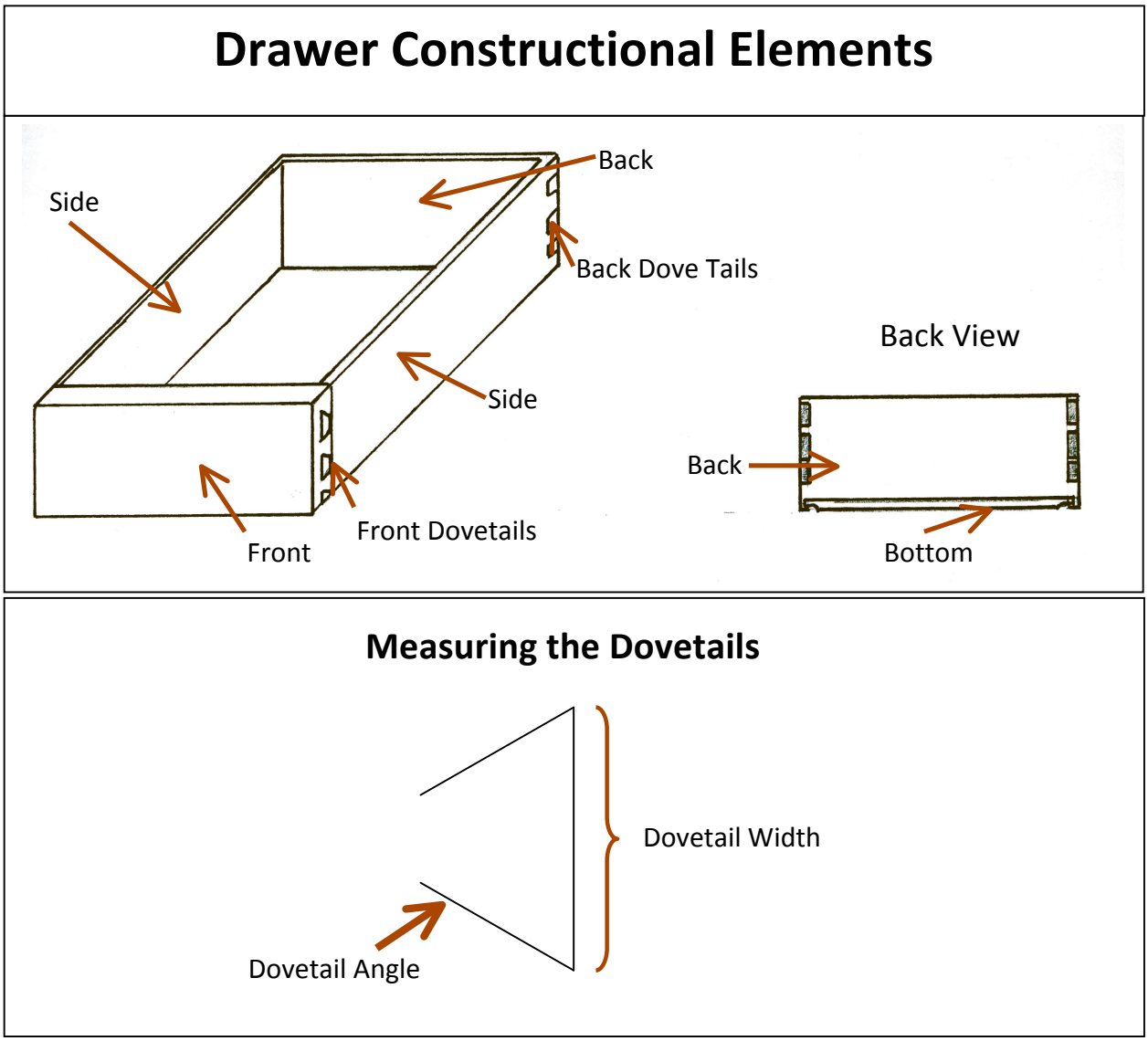


Figure 5-5: Drawing of Drawer constructional elements and measurements.

The following helps to understand how the measurements were taken.

- In the front of the drawers, lapped dovetails were used throughout by both Chippendale and Riesener. This means that the dovetail did not go all the way to the front of the drawer. As a result there was a gap between the dovetail and the drawer face. This measurement was also taken.
- The width of the bottom was taken in the centre of the drawer, as was the measurement of the thickness of the front, sides, and back.

- In measuring the drawer front, there were occasions when there was a piece of ormolu attached to its face. The thickness of the ormolu was not included in the measures of the drawer front.
- The measurements of the dovetails were taken from one of the middle dovetails. While in most cases, the dovetails on a particular drawer or set of drawers were fairly consistent; there were exceptions to this. This obviously excludes both the top and bottom dovetails, which were frequently 'half' dovetails. Considering only the middle dovetails, the variations in either the angle or the width of the dovetails were noted and the statistics represent an average of the set. Inconsistencies provided another observation on which to comment. As both cabinetmakers' workshops were usually very consistent, the fact that a particular case was inconsistent suggests another conclusion about the piece.[24]

In addition, other observations were made on all pieces of furniture; these included:

- Samplings of exposed veneers were measured for their thickness. One needs to keep in mind that this thickness could be different from that of the original veneer - restorers frequently sand down surfaces to revitalize the surface.[25] To attempt to overcome this, areas that were least likely to have been abraded were sought; however it was difficult to find such locations that also had measurable edges.
- Photographs were taken and observations were made about different constructional aspects of this furniture, particularly on the cavities into which drawers were slipped, the tops of furniture, how tops were attached and the construction of doors.
- Descriptions of any ormolu were included (subject matter, design style, quality, etc.) together with details of how the ormolu was attached to the frame.
- Descriptions of locks, hinges, handles and other metal objects were also included.

[24] The most obvious conclusion would be that a relatively new apprentice was working on the particular drawer or that the work was subcontracted to another workshop. These occurrences will be discussed later – See pp 316-330).

[25] In the *Journal du Garde-Meuble* there were several notes stating that Riesener himself had been asked to revitalize the colours of several pieces of furniture that he had delivered. It is believed that he did this by removing the top layer of the veneers by use of either reeds or some other abrasive. There is also a good chance that later restorations included someone applying an abrasive to the surface of the piece in order to improve its appearance.