

Marquetry Mouldings

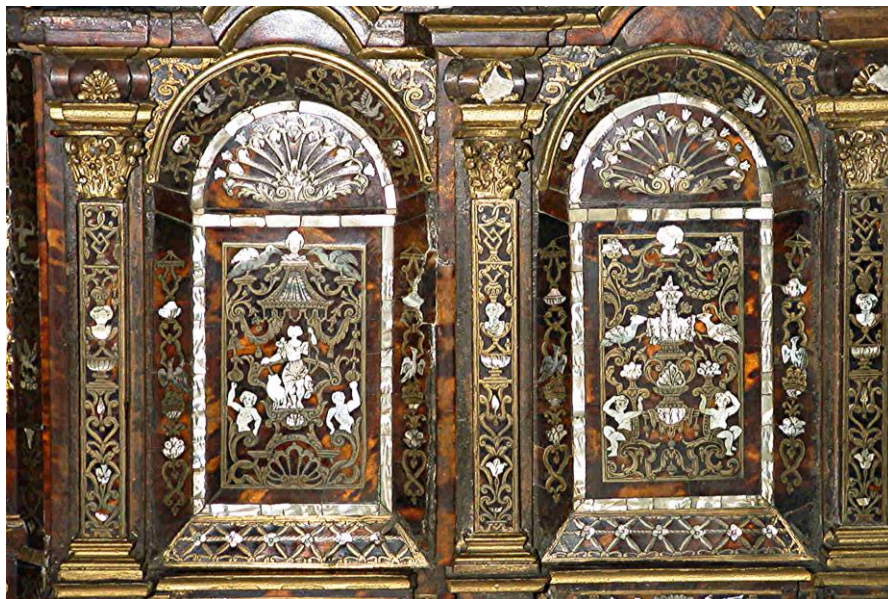
By Richard Higgins,

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There is a small group of very fine late 17th century bracket clocks by various important makers that used cases made by a 1 or more closely linked Huguenot makers. Arguably they could have all come from the same workshop or indeed even from the same maker. They follow very much the form of case normally associated with standard 8 day $\frac{1}{4}$ repeating bracket clocks that were produced in very large numbers at that time.

Although we do see mounts on bracket clock cases at this time it should be remembered that they were simply applied ornaments rather than integral with the design of the case. Mounts would often have very little to do with each other and were often used just to “fill up spaces” and to “lift” a clock’s appearance. It was not until the end of the 17th century and the work of craftsmen under the patronage of William III, newly arrived from Holland that we see cohesive designs of mounts designed specifically for a particular case. Foremost amongst these designers was probably Marrot working alongside Thomas Tompion to produce coherent designs of case and mount.

We are all familiar with longcase clock cases dating from as early as 1675 with marquetry designs, initially with somewhat crude floral panels but quickly developing into all over animal infested floral designs, complex arabesque marquetry and these too often being infested with animals. We see this work also on furniture of similar date but its prevalence was always much greater on clock cases. Although, in this period the marquetry became very highly developed especially when executed by the many imported craftsmen coming from Holland and notably France (the fleeing Huguenots) it was generally never as refined as some continental work of the same date. The finest being produced in Augsburg particularly in the form of gold and silver inlaid into turtleshell (pre-dating the work of Andre Charles Boulle)



Two doors from the front of an Augsburg altar clock (circa 1690), the panels each only 2 $\frac{1}{2}$ " high are inlaid with three colours of engraved metal, mother of pearl into Hawksbill shell backed with gold leaf.

The bracket clocks in the aforementioned group go some way to reaching the heights of superlative craftsmanship seen on the continent. Although at this time the English were the undisputed world leaders in terms of horological design and craftsmanship we fell behind in cabinet and decorative surface work. Without the use of mounts the ornamental designs on these two clocks were designed specifically for the spaces they were to fill and displayed a flair we were not to see again until the great cabinet making firms from the middle of the 18th century emerged.



Fromanteel & Clarke (London)



Gretton (London)

That on the left is particularly flamboyant. Although now a beautifully faded mellow colour its timbers include fustic (canary yellow) padouk (bright orange) and harewood (stained sycamore and holly) in bright reds and greens. There are arabesque designs but also floral patterns which grow from the mouths of men and birds standing upon hidden heads.



Here the tulip which scales the side of the Clock is growing out of a human mask



Although not quite as fine as its Augsburg counterpart this bird standing on a head amongst flowers and foliage from the basket top is on a similar scale.

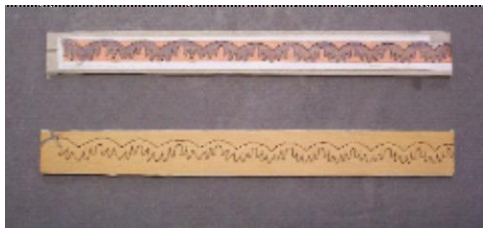
Where the skill of the English craftsmen really starts to show its finesse and on a par with our continental counterparts is in the mouldings to the Fromanteel and Clarke case. The Gretton has fine kingwood cross grained mouldings but the Fromanteel and Clarke has mouldings in which the marquetry runs right through their thickness. On the Gretton every moulding is produced in this way. The marquetry is cut thick (sometimes as much as ¼”) and then glued on to a substrate in the normal way before the moulding is cut. Some were incredibly fine; the marquetry “blank “ for the moulding would need to cut with incredible accuracy, the blade being kept completely vertical at all times or the pattern would become very distorted upon moulding. The pieces would have been impossible to cut in a “pack” (as in normal marquetry cutting) further emphasising the need for absolute accuracy so that the individual pieces fitted together after cutting. They would need to be temporarily glued to their substrate prior to moulding as they would need to be dismantled again to allow for sand shading of relevant pieces. They would then be finally re-assembled and glued ready for fitting to the carcass after the other marquetry had been laid.



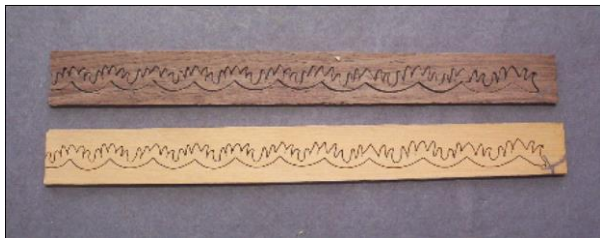
Here the original (top) has been scanned to produce a paper pattern, shown below the original, together with the two pieces of timber (each 4 mm thick) to be to make the moulding.



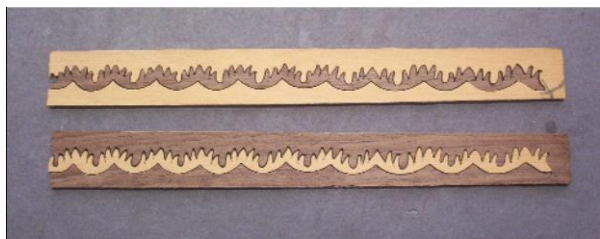
2 copies of the scan are made (1 for each piece of timber) and glued onto the timber.



Both pieces have been cut and the paper pattern removed from the lighter piece



Both pieces cut and ready for interchanging.



The different pieces assembled



Stuck to the substrate and ready for moulding



The moulding is cut



The finished moulding.



This moulding from the back door clearly shows the head on each little figure with a sand shaded top.

This case with over 10,000 individual parts needed for its decorative surface is a tour de force of the marquetry cutters craft which although displaying much continental influence is a very specifically English interpretation of the art.

1. Marquetry mouldings cut by James Pearson
2. Other marquetry cut by Robin Passant
3. Both marquetry clocks courtesy of John Carlton Smith