

# SMALL 18<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY HANDICRAFT CHEST

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## INTRODUCTION

Regardless of a period people had been living in, the one's private space and intimacy always have been essential. It is especially observed in furniture of the 17th and 18th century, when secret compartments were made with unlocking mechanisms hidden in a body of furniture. When such an item gets into a restorer's hands, a master is compelled to explore and comprehend mechanisms to reach hidden compartments. It is a challenge to a restorer to explore deeply and recognise the signs of showing existence of a mechanism and its undoing options. Characteristic mark indicating the existence of a secret compartment and mechanism in an item, is an abrasion or a scratch at an atypical spot of the item. There can be visible marks of mechanical damage such as an intensively picked edge and inner size of an item is comparatively smaller than it looks from the outside. If drawers or a door can't be opened for unknown reasons, it is a sign of an existence of the secret mechanism which secures the item locked. Admittedly, these marks are not often visible good enough and hidden compartments are sometimes observable only during disassembling.

The small handicraft chest is interesting with its mechanism of a lock and hidden drawers. It has an open lid decorated in intarsia technique and a double underside (lost) of the interior hiding 4 drawers. The outside of the bottom of the small chest is decorated in intarsia technique as well, which makes one wonder why there was time and resources spent on the invisible part of the chest. There is a simple explanation- a special mechanism for unlocking the lock without a key is made, and a button of the mechanism is hidden in the bottom intarsia of the small chest.

## TECHNICAL CONDITION OF THE ITEM PRIOR TO RESTORATION

The small chest was made in Germany in the second half of the 18th century and had been specially commissioned as a gift. The surface of the item was covered in dust and a layer of grime. There was deformation, and also losses in the initials and handicraft symbols that had been incorporated in the lid's central part using an intarsia technique. These were filled in with white putty. In the central part there was a split right through it, both parts being held together by the intarsia. The front part of the little chest has been glued in a skewed fashion with a mechanism incorporated in it which unlocks the lock through the pressing of a button under it. The brass lock's carapace and the lid's hinges have oxidized. The slats have come unstuck from the body. Nail spots have been filled in with epoxy resin. The double underside, under which there are four little drawers, is missing from the interior. There are deformations in the intarsia on the bottom of the little chest. Four little metal plates that have been fixed on the interior to secure the drawers are corroded. Two walnut slats have been damaged.

## DESCRIPTION OF THE RESTORATION PROCESS

Inspection, documentation and photo fixation was undertaken for the item. A visual inspection established that there was a mechanism in the body of the little chest. The item was disassembled, and cleaning of the surface was undertaken, polishing it with a fine polishing felt and wiping it down with a cotton tampon soaked in ethyl spirit. In areas where there had been a loss in the veneer, new wood and corresponding thin veneer inlays were inserted using gluten glue for their adhesion. The steaming method was used to attach the veneer and to eliminate lifting. The slats were removed from the sides and reglued. Any mechanical damage, small losses of veneer and cracks were filled in using putty from the TIKKURILA firm and a water base. After the application of lacquer, they were toned to suit with an ethyl spirit base stain. The brass parts were cleaned chemically in an ethylenediaminetetraacetic acid solution (trilon B), the metal plates - mechanically. After assembly, the item was varnished with shellac.

**KEYWORDS:** SMALL CHEST, WOOD, INTARSIA, UNLOCKING MECHANISM

**MATERIALS:** WALNUT, MAHOGANY, MULBERRY THIN VENEER, SHELLAC, BRASS, METAL - LOCK MECHANISM

**SIZE:** HEIGHT 11.8 CM, WIDTH 31.3 CM, DEPTH 23 CM

**OWNER:** RUNDALE PALACE MUSEUM

## THE UNLOCKING MECHANISM OF THE HIDDEN DRAWERS



Fig.11 The front part of the chest after disassembling, the incorporated lock mechanism visible, the lid opens by pressing the button



Fig.12 Side view of the small chest before the restoration, cracks visible



Fig.1 The small handicraft chest after restoration



Fig.5 The small handicraft chest before the restoration



Fig.13 Fragment from the bottom of the small chest. By removing the bottom, 4 little metal plates appear which fix the drawers to prevent the opening

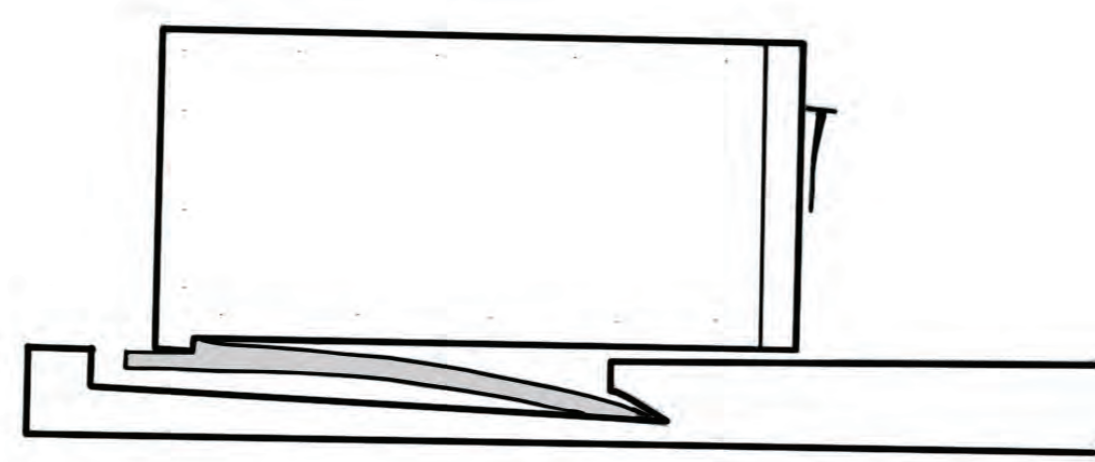


Fig.14 Metal plate immersed in the bottom of the small chest, when the drawer is opened, it catches on the metal plate

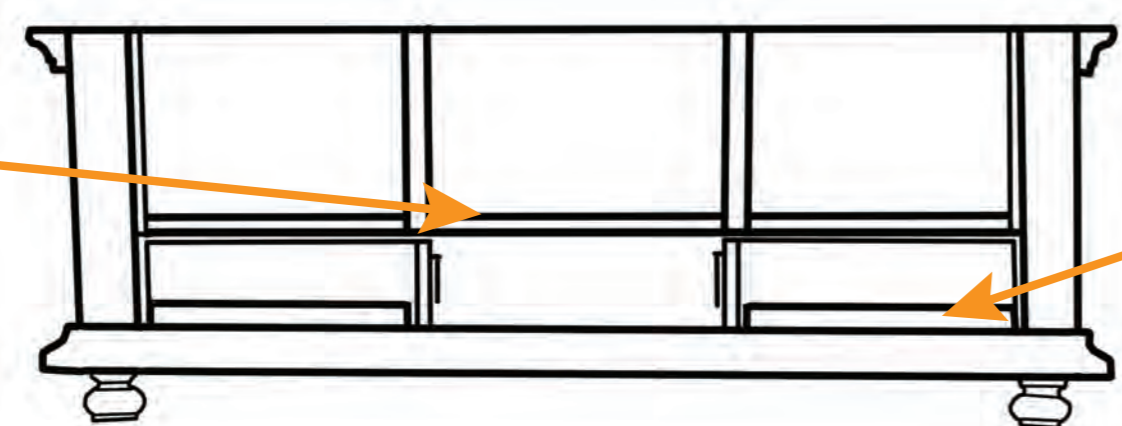


Fig.2 Open position of the restored small handicraft chest. The drawers are hidden under the double underside



Fig.6 Open position of the small handicraft chest before the restoration. Visible defects, lost double underside hiding the drawers

Fig.15 Double underside hides the drawers



Stud fixes the drawers in place to avoid shoving too deeply.

Fig.16 The brass plate appears when the small interior wall is pulled out. The double underside can be removed by lifting up the brass plate

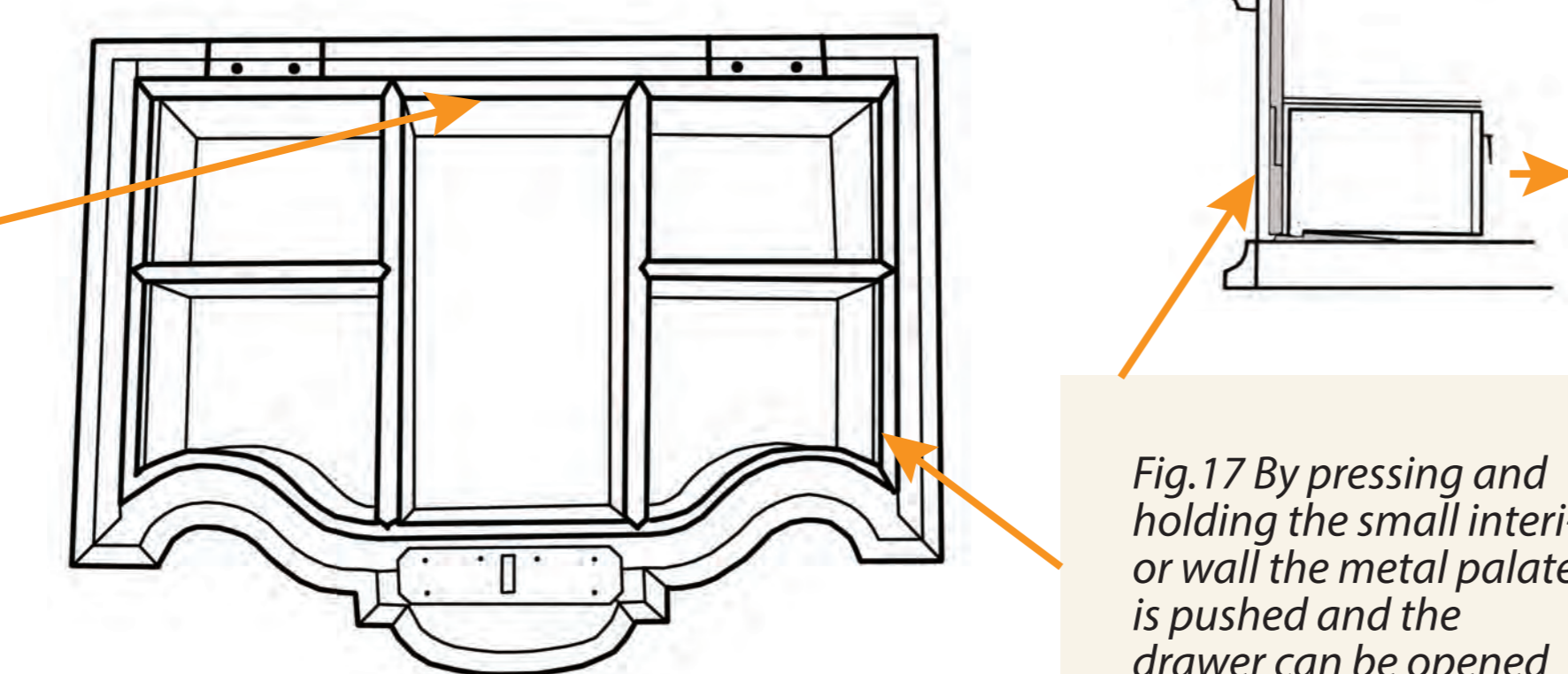


Fig.17 By pressing and holding the small interior wall the metal plate is pushed and the drawer can be opened



Fig.3 The restored lid. Eliminated damages of wood and veneer, replaced losses, renovated finish layer



Fig.7 The lid before the restoration



Fig.4 The bottom after restoration. Eliminated damages of wood and veneer, replaced losses, renovated finish layer



Fig.8 The bottom before the restoration

Forms of damage:

The damage scheme of the lid.	The damage scheme of the bottom.
come unstuck veneer	come unstuck veneer
lost veneer	lifted up veneer, formed rift
gone down veneer	lost veneer
splits of the veneer	gone down veneer
split going through	nail spots filled in with epoxy resin
epoxy resin fill	split going through

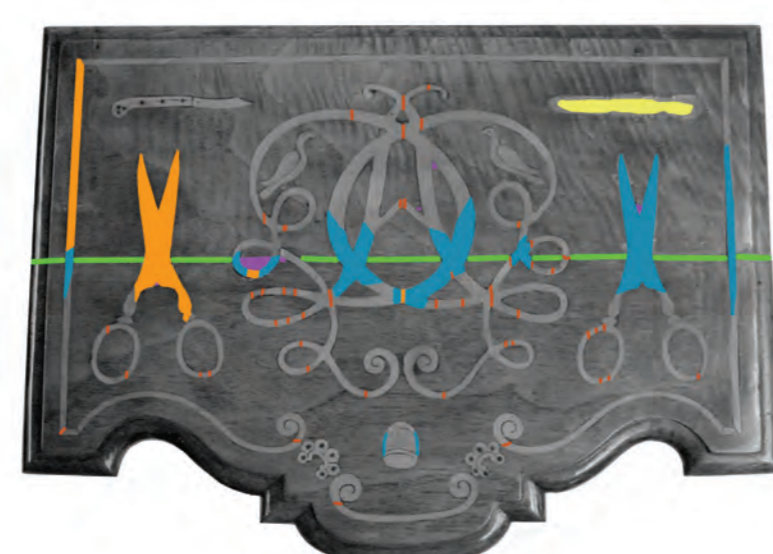


Fig.9 The damage scheme of the lid



Fig.10 The damage scheme of the bottom.