

A NOTE ON THE USE OF THE WORD "BALUSTER" AS A GENERIC WORD FOR THE DESCRIPTION OF ORNAMENTAL OR FANCY TURNED LACE BOBBINS.

INTRODUCTION.

From my now, fairly considerable, research on the historical aspects of bobbins, I have become curious as to the origin of the term "baluster" to describe the turned decoration of lace bobbins. To be quite honest I do not think that we can use this term correctly in describing the decoration of even some bobbins.

My original interest was kindled by a letter from one of the "long suffering individuals" Whiteley (1996), that I bombard with questions from time to time. In her letter she said,

"The County town of Aylsebury is situated in the center (measured West/East) where there are many stately homes, and where the people worked mainly on growing fruit like cherries in orchards, (it is the main cherry growing area in the British Isles) and in furniture making. Many of the lighter wood South Bucks Bobbins were made from off cuts of wood after making of items such as chair legs" (1996)

As a starting point for my investigation of this term I looked for a reference by Savage (see below) relating to glass wine stems and chair legs, which I recalled reading some time ago, which in turn led to the following discussion on the use of the term "baluster."

DEFINITIONS.

I first came upon the term "baluster" in a series of articles by Denys Bellerby (1976)

Bellerby describes the baluster as "the generic term for turned shaped bobbins and the choice of shapes and thickness are almost unlimited." (p 21)

The next occurrence I found was in Huetsen, Lace and Bobbins (1973) where he uses the term in the following context.

"The beautiful turning, which rivals the baluster stem of an eighteenth century English wine glass, lovely colours and the shades of the many different woods are a never ending source of pleasure." p107.

This and Whiteley (1996) who also referred me to the term as being the generic term to describe fancy turned bobbins encouraged me to discover more about just what the term Baluster was meant to convey.

Knowing we are dealing with an Architectural term, I searched for a dictionary that was nearest to the time that we are dealing with and found "A dictionary of Architecture and Archeology of the Middle

Ages." Britton.(1838) His definition is as follows.

BALUSTER. Corruptly Bannister. From the Italian Balaustro; Columella, Lat. Ballustre, Fr. Bala-Huotes, Sp. Deeke-zun, Gelender, Ger.

A small column or pillar used in a balustrade. The lateral part of the volute of the Ionic capital termed by Vitruvius polventa is denominated a bolster.

The Greeks and the Romans, who invented and some might say worshipped the baluster column, emphasized the importance of form in their architecture, the underlying structural design was more important than the external ornamentation. They looked for symmetry, which is the balancing of parts which is well illustrated by the architecture of the classical temple of the Parthenon.

If we take this a little further we could speculate that that the pleasure of form described by baluster is that it is beautiful in a somewhat cold, hard, formal way, rather than something that appeals to our emotions.

The Wordsworth Dictionary of Furniture (Bryce. 1966)defines baluster in two ways:

1.Turned or carved upright post or pillar, commonly curved in outline, incorporating a vase or pear shape. It may appear in a chair back below the crest rail or in a column supporting a CORNICE on a cupboard. A group of balusters supporting a rail form a balustrade. The term baluster is also used for a stout turned member of any shape. A split baluster may be used as an applied ornament.

2.Turned member incorporating section shaped like a large, widemouthed vase. This section is usually carved after turning, often with GADROONING along its long axis, giving it an undulating shape. The term BALUSTER also denotes a stout turned member of any shape.

How do we come to a consensus on what we have heard so far? Baluster is

- an architectural term,
- a small column,
- a vase or pear shaped turning as part of it,
- a stout turned member of any shape,
- a turned vase shape that is often carved after it is turned.
- a generic term for fancy turned bobbins,
- a description of a wine glass stem.

Perhaps we don't try at this time to synthesize these into a single whole, but turn our thoughts to the issue of the wine glass stems.

EIGHTEENTH CENTURY GLASS.

Glass has its origins in Egypt as early as 4,000 B.C., though the first glass vessel as we would know them probably date from Egypt in 1500 B.C.. It is disputed whether glass was made in Roman Britain at the beginning of the occupation but by the time of the decline of the Roman Empire it was certainly being made in the north of the country.

The time that we are interested in, circa, 17th. century was a time of a revolution in English glass making which was driven by a desire to be different from the Italians who had dominated the techniques and the designs of glass for many centuries. The description "baluster" seems to have commenced as a description in English glass from the second half of the 17th, century, but baluster, being a architectural term, and glass making being so dominated by the Italians it could well have been a term used as a description used in glass for some time.

However, it appears to described a taste in glass that was, in its overall impression, essentially simple and of fine proportions rather than ornate. [I use the term "ornate" here as a comparison to the previous *very* ornate period of Italian glassware.] Honey, in his book English Glass, when talking about glass of this period says:

The typical creation of the period was the wine-glass with solid "baluster" stem formed of discs and knops [swellings]. These stems are of immense variety, showing an admirable judgment in the assembling of the globular, cylindrical, urn-shaped, and true-baluster knops and their proportioning to the size and shape of the bowl and foot. The baluster stems were sometimes made to enclose a bubble of air, and a decoration of such "beads" was for long popular. A well placed ribbing of bowls and feet, with gadrooning and reeding ("incising") sometimes twisted spirally, were other favorite forms of simple decoration. p 26.

He then goes on to speak of glass vessels of many kinds that had baluster stems as part of their construction. He continues;

The candlesticks of the period were also of great beauty, with baluster stems showing the same fine taste in assembling of knops, air beaded or plain, or "Silesian" or spirally reeded stems, harmoniously composed with domed, ribbed or "terraced" feet. They are often difficult to date - the beaded knops of the baluster style being sometimes found used in conjunction with the "enamel twist" stems of the following period. p 26.

... The total impression is one of harmony and repose. p27.

We now turn to Savage whose comment in my memory sparked this communication. He brings yet another dimension to the term "baluster." When discussing wine and sweetmeat glasses of the second half on the seventeenth century, he says;

The form was based to some extent on the architectural baluster, but many such baluster stems, and some of the knopped stems related to them, are distinctly reminiscent of the turned legs popular as support for furniture of the period. After 1720 the baluster stems became progressively lighter and smaller, but they

did not disappear entirely until after the mid century. p 106. [my emphasis]

A further comment is made on the following page;

Noteworthy changes in the form of stem begin to appear from about 1725 onwards, and baluster stems were sometimes ornamented with a single large air-bubble trapped in the interior. until then it had been the practice to disguise air bubbles where ever possible. Now they were deliberately introduced ...

Air-twists, introduced about 1745, are long spiral cavities running the whole length of the necessary straight stem that replaced the baluster. ...p107

DISCUSSION.

From what we can glean from the information above we can reasonably say that that Huetsons' comment, "The beautiful turning, which rivals the baluster stem of an eighteenth century English wine glass, lovely colours and the shades of the many different woods are a never ending source of pleasure." p107. appears to be a very acceptable *comparison* (as opposed to a description) of the bobbin to the baluster stem of glasses.

Other phrases quoted above all share the common overall impression of good design. ... "The total impressions one of harmony and repose". Honey p27. ..." showing an admirable judgment in the assembling of the globular, cylindrical, urn shaped, and true-baluster knops and their proportioning to the size and shape of the bowl and foot.". p 26. All of which fits into the Greco-Roman delight in symmetry, form and structure.

Looking at pictures illustrating baluster stemmed glasses in the literature, with an eye for beauty and design, one can only agree with these sentiments, but looking these same pictures as a bobbin maker I am faced with some difficulties as to the actual accuracy of the use of term "baluster" to the bobbins that we turn.. Similarly I have difficulty in accepting the "vase type" of shape, and the "stout" turning that Wordsworth describes in their application to turned lace bobbins.

It is true that we are looking at wine glasses and not bobbins, it is true that there are a great number of similarities in the shapes used, i.e. grooves, Vs, coves, domes, spirals etc. but the knops, discs and other ornamentation of the wine stems, if reproduced on the shank of a bobbin in the same manner, would be disproportionate to the diameter of the shank and they would not to be able to lie easily on the pillow. Even if this statement is rather narrow minded of me and I concede that bobbins could be turned in a manner similar to balusters, I have recently had the opportunity to examine the reserve collection of bobbins in the Luton museum and having this question on my mind looked out for what could possibly be described as a "baluster" turned bobbin. I came to the conclusion that there were none to which I could genuinely apply the term "baluster."

If we now turn to Savage(1965) and his remarks alluded to in my introduction, he makes the comment related to glass wine stems.

"The form was based to some extent on the architectural baluster, but many such baluster stems, and some of the knopped stems related to them, are distinctly reminiscent of the turned legs popular as support for furniture of the period."

This coupled with Whiteley's remark in her letter regarding furniture making, raises in my mind a question of source of inspiration for bobbin makers of that time.

To me, as a bobbin maker, Savage's comment on the similarities of the stem to chair legs, is a much more acceptable comparison than with the wine glass. Though I must say that again, looking at illustrations of chair legs of the time, there are some examples that give rise to the same difficulty as to the lie of the bobbin that I have mentioned above. But only very few. What does appear to be even more a possibility is that the form of spindle turning on the *backs* of chairs could more possibly be a source of inspiration to the bobbin turners of the time. The reason for this I believe is that the form of decoration a turner would have to use on a chair back is one that would be comfortable, ie without over large features that would press into the users back.

CONCLUSION.

I have no difficulty in accepting the term "baluster" as a generic description of the turned ornamentation of the lace bobbin, provided that we accept it as an overall description of the totality of the of the impression of the design, i.e. that it is all in harmony with the function of the lace bobbin and the character of the material used to make the bobbin. It is just that "artistic judgment" that makes us comment on particular bobbins, each of very different design, "that is a lovely bobbin."

I can not accept the term baluster in its strict technical definition as applying to the ornamentation of bobbins in general, though there may be some exceptions to that statement.

Finally I would briefly like to look at another term that we use to describe our bobbins, that is "ornamental." I am sorry to be such a kill joy, but that term in the circles of wood turning refers to a very special kind of wood turning that requires a special lathe or adaptations that allow for special decoration to be applied to the turned object. I would like to suggest that we use term "fancy turned" bobbins, and then described the decoration or embellishments of the bobbin. In wood turning circles it would be called "spindle turning."

The question that I would like to ask those much more informed (and less isolated from original sources) than myself is, Is there any evidence that bobbin makers got their inspiration from the "baluster" stems of glasses? From the legs or backs of chairs of the period? or were they not influenced by any of these things?

Also can anyone give me a reference to the earliest use of the term "baluster" to describe the bobbin decoration please?

Your response would be most appreciated.

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