FURNITURE MARKING

The stamps and signatures so often found on Swedish furniture and mirrors provide invaluable information about the objects and their history. In this way we can tell who made the furniture, or at least which master oversaw the making of it, and also, very often, the workshop it came from and the period it dates from. Sometimes, too, one can detect the previous owners, which is very often of great historical interest.

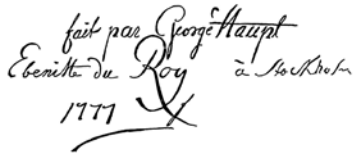
1. Seal of the Stockholm Guild of Carpenters.

GUILDS AND CONFRATERNITIES

All over Europe in the Middle Ages, societies were formed by active craftsmen to regulate production in the towns. Sweden's cabinetmakers did not form a society till 1574. These societies – guilds – were each headed by an alderman and wardens. The guild created a code of rules to be complied with by masters, journeymen and apprentices, the intention being to assure the general public of high quality output but also to safeguard the members' interests by regulating instruction, working conditions and the point in time when journeymen could submit their masterpieces.

Craftsmen, such as the mirror makers, who did not belong to a guild were served by the "Hall Court", an authority which regulated activities and assayed the quality of products. The Hall Court had its own stamp or hallmark.

Although it was already stipulated in 1669 that members of the Stockholm Carpenters' Guild were to sign their furniture, the edict was more honoured in the breach than in the observance, and furniture made before the mid-18th century seldom carries any signature. Ninety year later, in 1759, it was resolved that the Guild's common stamp was to be applied to work by its masters, but once again compliance left much to be desired. (1)



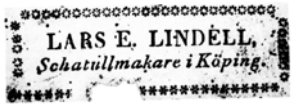
2. Georg Haupt's signature.

3. Branded signature of Petter Liunggren.

4. Punched signature of Johan Erik Höglander.

FROM JOURNEYMAN TO MASTER CRAFTSMAN

An apprentice would have to spend many years in the workshop before he could call himself a master. Only after five years' apprenticeship could he qualify as a journeyman. This was followed by a peregrination in order to acquire further knowledge and influences from abroad or from major towns in Sweden. After completing this journey, the journeyman had to submit proof of his skill in the form of a "masterpiece", for approval by the guild. A prospective master craftsman in the first half of the 18th century was required first of all to present drawings for approval by the guild. He then had to complete a cabinet and a gaming table within an allotted period. During the second half of the 18th century the cabinet was replaced with a bureau or a writing table. If the masterpiece was approved, the journeyman would be admitted as a master carpenter and would then be free to open his own workshop. Moreover, furniture commissioned straight from the master craftsman's workshop was hardly ever stamped or signed.



5. Label signature of Lars Eric Lindell.

6. Nils Dahlin's signature, done in red chalk.

Stamps or marks could be applied in various ways and places and, consequently, are not always easily spotted. On rare occasions the master signed the work personally by writing his name and sometimes further particulars, such as a date, on the wood in Indian ink or red chalk. (2)

In Stockholm during the Baroque and Rococo, it was more common for signatures to be branded with a red-hot iron. (3) Between 1750 and 1800 signatures were punch-marked instead. (4)

Labelling was much used on furniture during the closing years of the 18th century, and during the 19th especially, labels were often applied to the bottom of a drawer. (5)

On furniture with marble tops one can sometimes find a name written in red chalk "red script". The name, written by the mason, was that of the client, who would be either a master carpenter or a furniture dealer. (6)

7. Seal of the Stockholm Guild of Chair Makers.

8. Stockholm hallmark – the version used between 1785 and 1821.

9. Stamped signature of Johan Åkerblad, Stockholm.

10. King Adolf Fredrik's owner's mark.

11. Swedish export mark.

CHAIRS

The Stockholm Guild of Chairmakers, the only one of its kind in Sweden, was formed in 1664. Apart from chairs the chairmakers also produced sofas, stools and small, unveneered tables. After 1765 guild members were required to provide their furniture with a signature and a paper label showing the guild stamp. (7) The label was glued under the chair while the signature, punch-marked, could be applied in various places. With the abolition of the guilds in 1846 the Stockholm Guild of Chairmakers was wound up, with the result that fewer and fewer items of furniture were signed by their makers.

In the case of chairmakers working outside Stockholm and under the jurisdiction of the Hall Court, their work was hallmarked as a token of approval. Hallmarks could vary in appearance, depending on the town the master came from and when the furniture was made.

HALLMARKS

Mirrors could not be sold if they were not hallmarked, unless they had been made to order. Here again, hallmarks vary in appearance depending on period and location. (8)

Mirrors also had to be marked or signed by all craftsmen involved in the making of them, such as gilders, frame-makers and wood-carvers. Unfortunately this rule was extensively flouted. Signatures vary in appearance, but most commonly the mirror-maker stamped his initials on the back of the frame, or in certain cases on the backing of the mirror itself. Mirror-makers by royal appointment would top their initials with a crown. The stamp is not to be confused with an owner's mark. Objects once owned by royalty are often stamped with an upper-case Christian name initial under a crown.(10)

Furniture made for export carried an export stamp. This too is characterised by crowns, three to be exact, and the letters EXP.(11)