

THE ZIBBY TRAVELLING FELLOWSHIP

Report by Martin Nadvornik



Wood Graining and Marbling in Furniture Conservation

with Atelier Nadaï, Gers, Southwest France

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Table of Contents

	Page
1. Introduction	3
2. Gers, Southwest France	4
3. Atelier Nadaï	6
3.1 My Routine	7
3.2 Inspiration and Mr. Lassale	8
4. My Aims	9
4.1 Achieving My Aims	10
5. Wood Graining	11
5.1 Italian Walnut	12
5.2 American Oak	13
5.3 Feathered Cuban Mahogany	14
6. Marbling	15
6.1 Campan Marble	15
6.2 White Veined Marble	16
6.3 Portor Marble	17
6.4 Sarrancolin Marble	19
6.5 Lapis Lazuli and Mould Making	20
7. Blue Pigment Factory	21
8. Conclusion	22

1. Introduction

My name is Martin Nadvornik and I am 36 years old. I originally come from Prague, Czech Republic, but I have been living in the UK for over 10 years.

In 2013 I graduated with a BA Honours in Furniture Conservation, Restoration of Furniture and Decorative Arts from Buckinghamshire New University. Since 2012 I have been working as a polisher apprentice at Beechfield Restorations.

Long before university I taught myself different decorative techniques and experimented with a variety of specialised products such as long open-time glazes, colourants, cracking effects, Venetian and other plasters that deceive the eye and create a highly decorative surface. While trying to learn how to imitate organic and mineral substances such as woods, marbles and precious stones I reached the point where I felt the need to study them in more depth. In order to imitate them properly I needed to understand more about their natural growth, structure and evolution.

In 2010 the opportunity to attend the Furniture Conservation, Restoration and Decorative Arts course at Bucks New University arose and that was where I learnt various different disciplines such as French polishing, gilding, cabinet making, marquetry and upholstery and I worked with wood every day. During the course's field trips and in my free time I visited many stately homes and other heritage sites in the UK to observe their fine furniture, and to study marble wall decoration, table tops, and movable objects. To broaden our knowledge about furniture and its history, I and several other students started the Bucks New University Furniture History Society, inviting guest lecturers

and arranging site visits to museums, workshops and small independent furniture factories to meet curators and craftsmen involved in conservation, manufacturing and design. We also undertook fund-raising for the society and volunteer work for the community.

My tutor, Paul Tear MBE, informed me of the grants available from Zibby Garnett Travelling Fellowship. This award (£2,150) and my savings (£ 750) allowed me to undertake a specialised painting course at Atelier Nadaï in France. My ultimate aim is to gain an expert practical and theoretical knowledge in surface treatments.

2. Gers, Southwest France



Fig. 2. Map of Europe¹. Arrow points at Southwest France.

¹ Google maps, <<https://www.ncetm.org.uk/resources/36053>> (accessed 8 March 2015)



Fig. 3. The Gers region, France². Arrow points at location of Atelier Nadaï.

Gers is a very peaceful rural area of Southwest France. The region is full of chateaux and ancient towns with high streets full of shops where traditional crafts still exist, attracting tourists and locals alike. Even smaller villages have houses fitted with shutters and balconies full of flowers to take your breath away. It is home to Armagnac and foie gras therefore one sees never-ending vineyards and numerous duck farms as well as many sunflower fields. The people are passionate about their food, every restaurant offers wonderful home-cooked meals made with fresh produce.

² Google maps, <<https://www.google.cz/maps/@43.7837512,0.4906874,8z>> (accessed 8 March 2015)



Fig. 4. Armagnac distillery with vineyard

3. Atelier Nadaï

I first came across Atelier Nadaï online while I was comparing courses of specialised surface treatments in the UK, Belgium and France.

I focussed on courses' outcomes, tutors' experience, history of the establishment and price.

The Atelier is located in a small town called Vic-Fezensac in the Gers region of France. The owner, Michel Nadaï is an artist who specialises in decorative painting, trompe-l'oeil and portraits. His passion and hard work earned him the prestigious French award of 'Un des Meilleurs Ouvriers de France'

(The Best Craftsman of France) in the category of decorative painting in 1994.

3.1 My routine

The atelier's office manager, Kyoko recommended a very laid back gite (B&B) within walking distance from the atelier where I stayed for the whole two weeks. The owner, Madam Soulan was a great host and made me feel welcome.

Every working day I arrive at the spacious, professionally equipped and well organised atelier before 9am. After Michel had taken me through the day's tasks, we studied the subject I would be replicating. This was either from a literary source, his own samples, or samples of Michel's mentor which are now decades old. Observing the samples was very informative, allowing me to see how different techniques has changed or involved over time.

Every new painted sample started with Michel's step by step demonstration so I could observe, make notes and ask questions. Then it was my turn to practise and Michel watched me and lead me through. Then we wiped off our surface and Michel carried out another demonstration where he improved his technique or added a new step. Then I practised and wiped off what was applied until I was capable to create a replica from start to finish. When the layer I was working on was finished the sample was put aside to dry and we started a new sample. Our working language was English, although Kyoko was on hand to translate between us when needed. Since I paid for one on one class there were not any other students in the class. However, during the first week Pierre, a decorative painter, was around who was tutored by Michel to compete for the Best Craftsman of France. Pierre was very passionate and knowledgeable in the conservation field, so we spent most of our free time exchanging experiences.

It was a great opportunity for both of us to learn from each other. We often had a coffee or cup of tea while we were working and we usually stopped for lunch around 1pm and finished for the day after 7pm. Michel and Kyoko often join Pierre and I for lunch and dinner. I normally returned to my gite at around 9pm where I read through the notes I had made during the day and filled in any missing areas. During the weekend I travelled around Gers. It was a very intensive two weeks of training.

3.2 Inspiration and Mr. Lassale

Michel Nadaï and I are inspired by the English decorative painter Thomas Kershaw whose work is displayed in the V&A and Bolton museums and whose life was devoted to wood graining and marbling. His talent is greatly respected by artists in Britain and internationally.

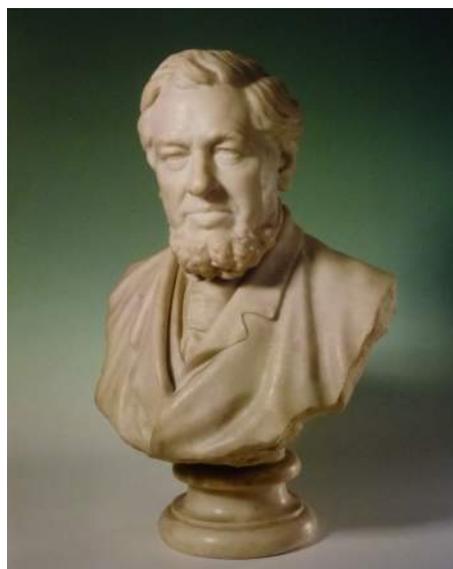


Fig. 5. Thomas Kershaw, marble bust, Bolton Museum³

³ Copy of a photograph from Bolton Museum archives

One afternoon, one of Michel's friends, Jacques Dubarry de Lassale came to the workshop. He is the author of the book 'Identifying Marble', as well as being a master cabinet worker, a member of the legal committee for furniture and art objects (Comagnie des Experts Judiciaires "mobilier et objects d'art") and a lecturer at the Institute of National Heritage. He briefly talked to us and gave positive feedback on our drawings of marble and timbers.

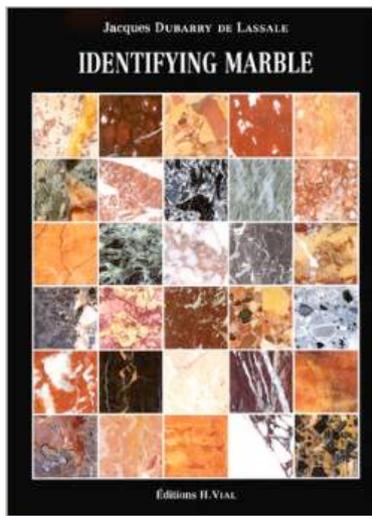


Fig. 6. A book by J. D. de Lassale



Fig. 7. Mr. Lassale and myself

4. My Aims

- to gain traditional and fundamental skills in wood graining and imitating marble
- to be able to produce painted samples as a point of reference for the future
- to become proficient in the use of specialised brushes and wood graining tools
- to gain extensive knowledge of oil paints, varnishes and related products
- to meet peers from the industry and be able to discuss future conservation requirements

4.1 Achieving My Aims

Through attending the course at Atelier Nadaï, and under the supervision of Michel Nadaï I have achieved all my aims.

Michel taught me many different traditional techniques in a very short period of time including how to prepare mediums from scratch and correct tool usage.

Preparation of mediums right before the application permits a longer open time, more efficient glaze transparence and textural effects that create depth to applied layers. Above all however, this glaze preparation method contributes to a realistic appearance. For example, the glazes that I was taught to use during the course included linseed oil, turpentine and alkyd oil colour.



Fig. 8. Products for glaze mixing⁴

⁴ Copy of a photograph from P.Finkelstein, *The Art of Faux*, VG, USA, 1997, p. 25

Prior to the course, I'd had no idea that I would need to focus on so many aspects simultaneously while painting, most importantly having to feel my next moves intuitively which requires a complete knowledge of the substance being painted. Being aware of the correct brush angles and pressure, the saturation points and the ratio of loaded oil colours whilst thinking and planing ahead was also crucial. Michael and I often passionately talked about different paints, solvents, binders and their purpose as well as chemical reactions. We found a similar field of interest and became friends.

5. Wood Graining

Certain species of timber are sought after for their ability to create a warm atmosphere of comfort and well-being. These characteristics have attracted decorative painters⁵ who over the centuries developed numerous techniques to imitate different types of wood and more importantly to replicate the positive impact of the real material. Each wood has strict rules for its depiction that reflect its natural growth patterns. The brush or tool movements for painting wood are usually round and continuous. My wood graining samples, pictured in the following illustrations, were divided into panels while being painted to create a more realistic look.

⁵ Nadaï, M. *Art and Techniques of Decorative Painting*, Editions Vial, 2011, p. 108

5.1 Italian Walnut

The first layer of paint depicts the general growth of the grain including areas where there are burl, knots and mottled effects. The second layer builds up the depth and contrast between applied colours, with the burl being highlighted and mottled and shimmering effects put into place. The third overglaze layer improves the overall contrast and depth of the heart grain, side grain and burl areas.

Tools required: a variety of brushes, steel combs, crayon and folded burlap.

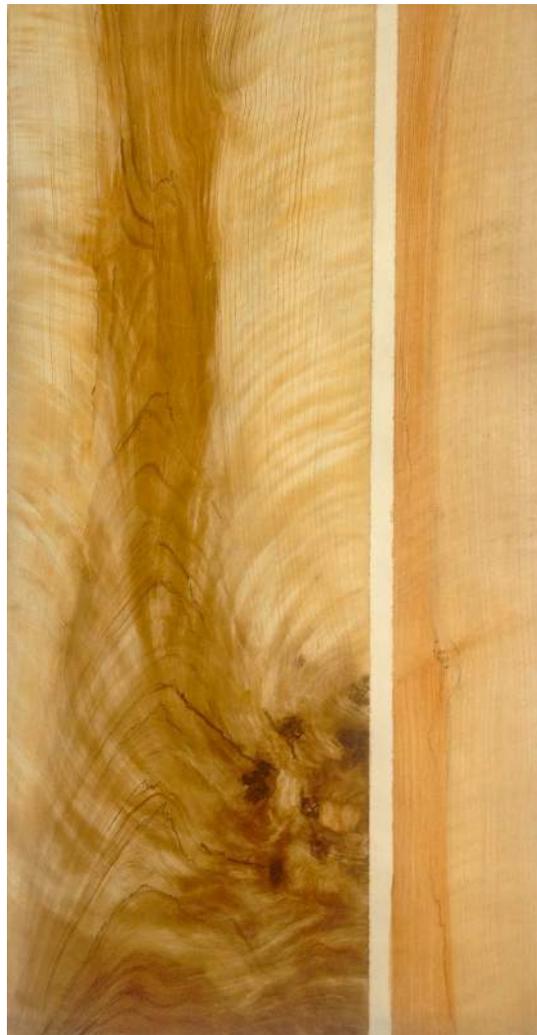


Fig. 9. Sample of Italian Walnut, wood graining method, by author

5.2 American Oak

This technique is more challenging since the applied coloured glaze is removed by wiped-out method. The first glaze layer will form an outline of the heart grain's direction and then the removal technique starts forming the heart grain in detail and continues to create the side grain. Steel combs are used to add characteristic background texture to this timber. A second overglaze layer creates depth and harmony between the heart and side grain as well as giving the chance to add knots surrounded by mottled effects.

Tools required: a variety of brushes, set of steel combs, burlap, piece of cork.



Fig. 10. Sample of American Oak, wood graining method, by author

5.3 Feathered Cuban Mahogany

Instead of using an oil glaze the first layer is made with water, vinegar (solvent), dextrine (potato extract used as a binder) and earth pigments. A chimney-like outline is painted to establish the direction of the heart grain and then the central feathers-like effect and the very centre of the heart grain are drawn. Light counter stripes (lines) converge onto the feathers and continue towards the sides to simulate the grain of the mahogany pattern. When dry, the overglaze improves depth and the fountain or flame-like effect is created. Darker shades are used at the bottom heart grain which adds richness to the timber.

Tools required: a variety of brushes, sea sponge.



Fig. 11. Sample of Feathered Cuban Mahogany, wood graining method, by author

6. Marbling and Semi-precious Stone

Marble is a calcareous rock that crystallised under 4000 metres of deposited sediments⁶ that varies in colour due to clay and metallic impurities specific to its place of origin. Its appearance is determined by the extreme temperatures and pressure that gave the rock its specific design, ranging from simple veins to a surface that looks totally fragmented and scattered.

6.1 Campan Marble

This marble has been quarried in Pyrenees mountains near Campan town in Southwest France.

The painted version is distinguished by reddish masses following a similar direction with small greenish and elongated pebbles that create a network which flows like a river. Some veins are wider, bolder and more intensely coloured than others and tend to be long, roughly following the red masses. When this has dried several fissured veins both large and wide, tiny and elegant are added across the work going parallel with the red masses.

Tools required: various veining and flat brushes, sea sponge.

⁶ Nadaï, M. *Art and Techniques of Decorative Painting*, Editions Vial, 2011, p. 38



Fig. 12. Sample of Campan Marble, marbling method, by author

6.2 White Veined Marble

This type of marble is also known as Carrara and originates from Italy. The first layer lightly sketches the formation of the marble, then establishes a translucent network of veins with an occasional fissured vein running across. Colour intensity slowly increases and chunks of veins are created as the work progresses.

A second layer adds crystallisation (numerous white particles) over the whole surface and builds up on the network of fine veins. This layer is also used to emphasise some veins, giving them a more intensive tint on the other hand random veins are painted very transparently allowing them gradually

to reintegrate and appear again on the surface. The work should stay transparent and brushes should not be loaded too often. This type of marble should be protected with wax rather than varnish since the finish tends to turn yellow.

Tools required: various of veining and flat brushes.



Fig. 13. Sample of White Veined Marble, marbling method, by author

6.3 Portor Marble

Portor is quarried in Italy and the Mediterranean and is admired for its contrasts, clean coloration and unique rendering. To replicate it brush strokes first lay down fundamental forms of each unevenly spaced column-like pattern. There may be lots of dramatic movement, both lateral and from top to bottom in ‘smoke-like

vertical breche' (veins and principal links) while some veins go almost straight down creating a feeling of overall harmony. Each column is different but at the same time has echoes of the forms of the columns that are next to it.

I use a pointed two-headed squirrel bristle brush and a liner brush (a long-haired pointed brush) as the key tools to imitate this marble and choose clean, opaque and intense colours.

The second layer enhances the colour combinations existing in veins and adds both strong and fine fissured angling veins going across the marble. The final overglaze layer refines depth and harmonizes the existing rich and varied colours.

Tools required: a variety of brushes as detailed above.



Fig. 14. Sample of Portor, marbling method, by author

6.4 Sarrancolin Marble

This marble originates from Pyrenees mountains in France. The rock is full of water colour-like masses, with a variety of colour, transparency, drama and detail. Key to successful imitation is good planning of the colour masses and clean tools at the start of each new process.

Firstly the fundamental veins are laid down as well as the long masses of various colours layered on each other (lamè), at different angles but following the same basic direction. Other formations are 'breches' (fractured area), with inverted vein networks. By using layer upon layer I can add drama to the final look of this marble.

Tools required: a variety of brushes and pencils.



Fig. 15. Sarrancolin marble being painted

6.5 Lapis Lazuli and Mould Making

Lapis Lazuli is a semi-precious stone that comes from Asia and South America. Two soft layers of blue on top of each other creates the background and then a few disconnected but harmonious looking veins are added and some areas sprinkled with paint to complete the rich appearance.

Tools required: a veining brush, sponges and copper leaf.

Around the edge of the Lapis Lazuli imitation, a sketch of a chosen moulding was drawn, requiring very accurate measuring. A spectrum of high lights and shadows of blue, white and their colour combinations define the shape of the moulding.

Tools required: a ruler, angled brushes

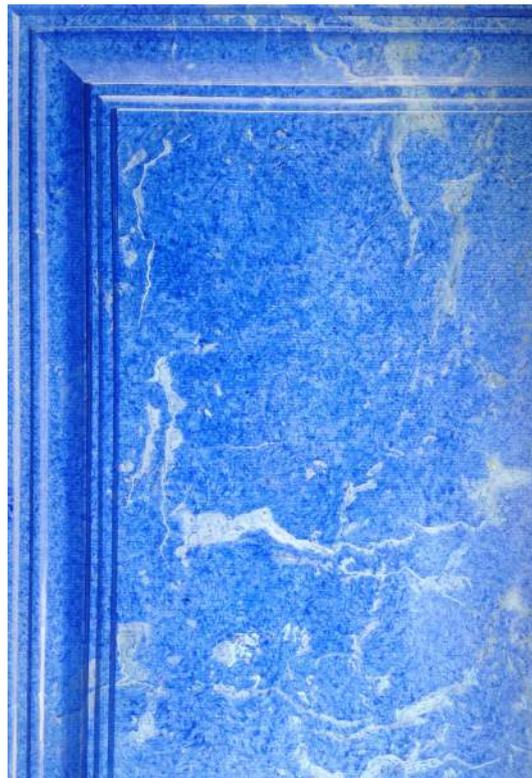


Fig. 16. Sample of Lapis Lazuli with moulding , marbling method, by author

7. Blue Pigment Factory

Over the weekend during my free time I was keen to visit a site that was related to the subject I was studying. The factory ('Bleu de Pastel de Lectoure') is located in the ancient town of Lectoure. They have developed a process for growing and extracting a blue pigment out of woad (*Isatis Tinctoria*) in large quantities using traditional methods.

The current company has been rewarded with the designation of 'Entreprise du Patrimoine Vivant' (Living Heritage Company).

The history of woad seeds dates to the New Stone Age⁷ and the dyeing process using woad dates back to Egyptians while during the Middle Ages it was used for its healing properties. Within France, this ancient pigment brought prosperity to the region during the Renaissance era. Much of the woad or "pastel" as it was known in the past, was used for cloth dyeing in Southern France with the remainder exported to Netherlands⁸, Belgium, Italy and above all to Britain and Spain.

The expensive woad production was gradually replaced by cheaper indigo pigments imported from India in the 16th Century. Its conventional production was re-established by Napoleon Bonaparte who ordered the use of woad as a dye for his armies' uniforms. However the arrival of synthetic dyes replaced woad in the middle of the 19th Century.

7 Wikipedia website, *Woad*, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Isatis_tinctoria> (accessed 5 January 2015)

8 Michael, P. and Facaros, D. *Gascony and The Pyrenees*, Cadogan Guides, London, 2007, p. 314



Fig. 17. Dried and crushed woad

8. Conclusion

Through attending the course at Atelier Nadaï, and under the supervision of Michel Nadaï I have achieved all my aims. I had not anticipated that this course could open so many new mental horizons for me. Now I must practice this craft continually to be able to reproduce and interpret what nature has created so that I can use these skills in the conservation of furniture and interiors.

There is still plenty of study and observation to be made of the different species of timber and marble in order for me to become wholly proficient; I believe one must be totally immersed in the real substance in order to be able to reproduce it to the highest standards.

Additionally, I have met some great people, made new friends and I believe I can say that I've learned the key techniques and traditional skills for replicating

wood graining and painting marble from an artist of the same calibre as Thomas Kershaw.

Therefore, I am very thankful to ZGTF for their financial support that made it possible for me to attend the highly specialised painting course in France. This experience will contribute tremendously to my furniture conservation work as well as adding a very unique skill to my repertoire as a conservation practitioner.



Fig. 18. Michel Nadai and myself