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Conserving LACMA's Schindler Furniture Suite

LACMA RARELY ACQUIRES furniture in its original state. Reupholstering, revarnishing, and long-term use are often responsible for dramatically altering the appearance of period pieces, with the consequence that even intensive conservation treatment is limited in its ability to restore them to their former condition.

Elements of a furniture suite designed and built between 1936 and 1938 by modernist architect Rudolph M. Schindler were prime conservation candidates. Commissioned by Ruth and Milton Shep for use in their Los Angeles residence, the austere yet elegant furniture suite—comprised of living room, dining room, and bedroom ensembles—became part of LACMA's permanent collection in 1995. Designed to be low, wide, and horizontal, many of the suite's components are multi-functional and reflect standards of economy of space espoused by Schindler.

LACMA conservators Don Menveg, Catherine McLean, and Irena Calinescu welcomed the acquisition with conservation treatment that entailed an examination, documentation, and interpretation of historical evidence found on the furniture. They supplemented available information by studying photographs taken of the suite in the 1930s. These period pictures depict the suite's upholstered armchair, ottoman, and three-section sofa covered with their original finish fabric; they also reflect Schindler's original design for the suite's radio end table and other wood pieces. The photos consequently became key factors guiding the conservators in restoring the upholstered units and refinishing the wood constructions.

A preliminary investigation of the upholstered furniture involved de-upholstery and documentation of the armchair, ottoman, and sofa, as well as one of the suite's four stools and four dining chairs. The investigation revealed that the suite had been reupholstered at least twice, with little regard for its original appearance. Dating from the 1970s, the most recent edition used a covering of royal purple "Swedish frieze" ribbed wool fabric, an inappropriate choice both in color and style. Robert Shep [Ruth and Milton's son] recalled a childhood memory of "steely blue" wool fabric on the upholstered units. The original fabric—a blue-green nubby wool—was indeed preserved beneath later editions on the chairs, yet the front corners and corded piping had been cut away, perhaps to reduce bulk during subsequent upholstery. These alterations rendered the chairs unsuitable for exhibition.

The armchair, ottoman, and sectional sofa no longer retain their original finish fabric, perhaps due to extensive wear or soiling, as these units were likely to have been used most often. Nevertheless, the spring units and most other under-upholstery materials are original, the exception being several thick layers of cotton batting. While these layers were added to redefine shape and compensate for compression of padding, they produced an over-stuffed, unduly rounded and bulky appearance in the armchair, ottoman, and sofa units.

Having discussed their findings with assistant curator Jo Lauria and exhibition designer Bernard Kester, the conservators selected appropriate fabric; made deci-



Above:
Conservator Don Menveg removes over-varnish from a dining chair.

sions about profile, form, and finish details; and ordered custom dyeing to match the exact color of the original elements. They removed all non-original materials, refurbished and rebuilt under-upholstery with stable materials, reinforced flimsy plywood seat structures, and squared worn corners with a rigid, inert paper-like material. They sewed new fabric covers with piping according to evidence of the original configuration. In accordance with the conservation principle of "minimal intervention," these covers were then attached over the remains of the upholstery with a minimal number of metal fasteners. The armchair, ottoman, and sofa units thus recaptured their original appearance as much as possible.

Unlike the upholstered components of the suite, all but one of the constructed wood pieces were structurally sound and unaltered. The conservation treatment thus focused on reconstituting the original finishes and varnishes of the wood.

The one element in need of extensive conservation was and continues to be the radio table. The conservators gleaned from the 1930s photographs that the radio's large, rectangular metal intercom grill with a 1950s or 60s toggle switch had replaced a discrete vertical art deco radio dial that had been flanked on either side by a single knob. They also learned that an original speaker in the central void beneath the cantilevered shelf had been removed. Since the original radio dial was not available, the conservators decided to leave the intercom grill untouched until further research could be dedicated to reviving the original design.

All the constructed wood elements of the suite were originally finished with a soft spar varnish that wore poorly and showed numerous areas of loss, particularly on corners and edges. In a previous attempt to refurbish the suite, a thick coat of shellac had been applied over the original varnished surface. The shellac darkened the appearance of the wood, but it also consolidated and protected the original surface from further damage.

Due to light exposure over time, the figured gumwood shifted in color: the dark brown figure in the wood—which had been especially evident on the radio table and dining table—faded dramatically and the overall cool tan color of the wood turned a warm, buttery orange-yellow. To conserve the wooden elements, the conservators removed the shellac over-varnish, thus exposing the somewhat fragile but intact original varnish layer beneath. They subsequently applied several layers of a blond polish, allowed the surface to harden, and rubbed it out to achieve an even satin finish much like the original one.

A selection of the conserved Schindler suite is on view in Section 3 of the *Made in California* exhibition through February 25.



Both:
Rudolph M. Schindler (Austria, active United States, 1887–1953)

Opposite:
DINING CHAIR WITH BACK
1936–38, gum wood with wool upholstery (replaced), 29 x 18 x 25 in., LACMA, gift of Ruth Shep Polen

Bottom:
RADIO END TABLE
1936–38, gum wood, 22 x 26 x 15 in., LACMA, gift of Ruth Shep Polen

Below:
Conservator Irena Calinescu rebuilds under-upholstery with stable materials.

