# TANGLED THREADS: THE HAMILTON INN SOFA, c. 1830

All objects have histories. They have an immediate history of being made and of use over time, as well as deeper origin stories. These are the histories of the origins of the ideas they represent, of their functions, of the varied forms they assume over time and, importantly, of the materials they are made from. All these histories interact, and, as they wind through time and space, intertwine to produce the unique object.

# FORMAL DESCRIPTION

This part of this document is an exercise in **ekphrasis**. The term comes from the ancient Greek art of rhetoric and the Oxford English Dictionary defines it as "a lucid, self-contained explanation or description." Such descriptions were once thought superior to actual images. Its real value, however, is for the writer, helping them to better understand an object through a detailed description of it. This understanding comes both from the challenge of formulating descriptions that convey the visual and physical characteristics of the object but also from the strategy required to convert the experience of a non-linear physical entity—in this case a sofa—into linear prose.

The Hamilton Inn sofa is a double-ended sofa with a low back, scrolled arms and out-swept or "sabre" feet. It is rectangular and the arms are square to the back and front and retain a continuous profile from the front to the back; sweeping vertically up and then rolling over and outward to form a rounded top and then curling around to form a tight roll. The seat upholstery is a detached palliasse covered in horsehair fabric that rests on wooden slats. The back is vertical, lightly padded and is upholstered in black horsehair.

The Hamilton Inn sofa is designed so that the structural components are disguised entirely, either by the upholstery or by wooden panel applied to the front of the seat, the fronts of the arms and above the back. These panels also serve to disguise the attaching points of the upholstery. The panels are decorated with carved geometric motifs and relief panels. The seat and arm panels are carved to give the appearance of a continuous piece; straight and horizontal in the centre and curving up and then out at the arms, to make a broad "U" shape. This continuous effect is achieved by a consistency of profile, which consists of a fine bead or astragal mouldings on either side of a broad, slightly convex relief panel. This panel is made to appear to run as one piece under a larger flat tablet located in the centre, wide rectangular panels above each leg and the two smaller panels situated midway between them. These have convex vertical sides that give them the appearance of a kind of binding. The raised tablets and panels have recessed, domed 'buttons' that are a kind of diminutive and simplified paterae (a circular decorative motif in classical architecture) in their centres that serve to cover the heads of the screws attaching the facings to the frame. Though made in separate parts, the convex panel moulding is made to continue past the legs, to taper and curve up from the base of the arm to almost vertical. This facing is enriched by three relief panels forming parallel stripes terminating at either end in solid rectangles with domed buttons, at the centres. Past this motif, the convex moulding returns curling out and around as a volute motif with another 'button' at its centre.

and are often elaborately decorated with carving and gilded or painted finishes. Simpler, lightweight upholstered chairs with an emphasis on comfort begin to appear in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, along with extended versions, such as daybeds. Sofas of the type represented by the Hamilton Inn sofa only really arrive in Europe in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century. The design of an English settee from around 1725 is based on a literal doubling of an armchair with an upholstered seat, repeated splats on the back and a shared cabriole leg in the centre. Around this time the modern sofa in its more-or-less completely upholstered form appeared, initially in France. Sofa designs published by Thomas Chippendale in the 1750s and '60s are almost completely covered in upholstery fabric, except for delicately carved legs and carved trimming located at the fronts of the arms, along the lower seat rail and on the 'cresting rail' at the top of the back.

While printing in its modern form had been invented in the fifteenth century, books only began to become widely distributed in the eighteenth, partly driven by increases in literacy and a growing middle-class market. Over the course of the eighteenth century there was a rapid increase in the production of books on various subjects, including art, architecture and design, many of which were sumptuously illustrated. At the same time the disciplines of art history and archaeology were being invented, along with many of the names and dates of styles and periods that are still in use, such as the Gothic and Renaissance periods. Thus, historical styles not only became increasingly known, but a vocabulary and systems of classification was developed that facilitated the exchange of this knowledge.

# Style

In the eighteenth-century Britain experienced what has been described as a 'consumer revolution.' This meant that, increasingly, what were once luxury goods became available further 'down' the socio-economic strata, to the growing middle classes. In furniture, the growing demand and subsequent competition in this market led to the need for differentiation through an ever-increasing diversity in design. This took two forms. There was a development of different styles of furniture driven by the availability of illustrated texts and the historical and visual literacy they enabled. This meant that furniture could be decorated in a gothic, Grecian, Egyptian or other historical style and recognised as such by consumers. There was also a concurrent diversification of functions, leading to a multiplicity of novel furniture forms. These included various types of chairs, including sofas as well as elaborate cabinet furniture.

As a substantial investment in the decoration of a room which often served as a centrepiece, the sofa inevitably became a site for stylistic experimentation. One of the most important means for the transmission of fashions in the first half of the nineteenth century were illustrated books of designs, generally known as pattern books. Covering fields such as architecture, garden and furniture design, these books began to appear in the early eighteenth century and as the century progressed, they became more affordable. The number of publications and the variety of subjects continued to increase well into the nineteenth century. What made pattern books revolutionary was that they enabled the accurate transmission of ideas and designs over considerable distances. They served to reinforce the authority of the imperial centre in matters of taste and style but also made these available at its periphery as never before. In this sense, the colonial port cities of Hobart and Launceston were not that much further from the centre—London—than were the provincial cities of northern England, Ireland or Scotland.

strong or as finely grained as mahogany, it is easily worked, has a deep red colour and finishes well. NSW cedar was imported into Van Dieman's Land from a very early date, with the first advertisement being placed in the newspapers in Hobart in 1817. From that date ever larger quantities were frequently advertised, and it would be fair to say that most Tasmanian colonial-period furniture is made from cedar imported from NSW. As mentioned above, cedar did have its limitations and one of these is its strength compared to mahogany sourced from the Americas. Cedar is a significantly lighter timber with a more open grain structure. This explains the failure of the 'sabre' legs on the Hamilton Inn sofa and also suggests the makers of the sofa were unfamiliar with the wood and not entirely aware of its limitations.

#### **Tasmanian blackwood and bluegum**

The Hamilton Inn sofa is constructed around two substantial beams that run along its width, supporting the seat. The four legs are attached to it near either end with large dovetail joints and screws. The framing for the arms is jointed into the ends of these beams. The back of the sofa, which is framed separately to match the profile of the seat and arms, is screwed directly onto the back. In the nineteenth century there was a sharp distinction between the 'show' wood and that used for the carcass or nonvisible parts of a piece of furniture. Wood was expensive and was mostly broken down from logs and worked by hand, so furniture makers were very economical in its use. They saved the best timber for the most obvious places and would even use odd bits of different material for the hidden parts in upholstered furniture. The show wood for the Hamilton Inn sofa is Australian red cedar. However, as with most sofas, it is built around two strong beams running along the front and back, to which all of the parts such as the arms, the feet and the back are attached. These provide the strength necessary to support the sitters. Here, the sofa's maker has chosen to use Tasmanian blackwood (*acacia melanoxylon*), a stronger wood with a superficial resemblance to cedar. The other hidden part of the seat—the shorter seat framing members running from back to front at ends of these beams and the slats running from the front to the back—are made from Southern blue gum. For most of the nineteenth century hardwoods such as blackwood and eucalypt were seldom used by cabinet makers because they were difficult to work with the tools available, which had softer steel blades that were quickly blunted. Also, for the manufacture of quality furniture, the wood used must be stable and free of splits, checks and other defects. This is achieved through careful sawing and drying, for which an intimate understanding of the material was required. Later, as Australian hardwoods were better understood, and cabinetmaker's tools improved, eucalypt wood began to be used more extensively. The maker of the Hamilton Inn sofa was, however, clearly aware of the strength of these woods, especially when used in larger sections, such as the structural parts of the sofa.

The centre tablet in the seat rail corresponds to the one in the cresting rail running above the back of the sofa; both are veneered with highly figured mahogany framed with strips of dark-stained pear wood. The grain of the wood in the lower, smaller panel is oriented vertically, that in the larger upper panel is horizontal.

The panels located above the legs have a recessed rectangular panel with angled corners in the centre with recessed domed patera to either side. The base of the legs where they are attached to the seat rail is wide and there is a short, curved spur on the inner side which continues from the convex profile of the inner edge of the leg and dips to a rounded horn before curving sharply back to the seat rail. The leg proper is relatively short and sweeps vertically down and outwards in an arc to become almost horizontal at the base. The sweeping part is relieved by a shallow panel carved into its centre corresponding to the approximately triangular profile of the leg. The rear legs of the sofa are located directly behind the front legs and have the same profile without the relief panel. All four legs terminate in cast brass lion's feet with integral swivel castors. The castors are secured to the legs with steel screws.

The back of the sofa is constructed as a separate frame which is attached to the base and arms of the sofa with large steel screws from the back. The upholstered part of the sofa back is level with the top of the arms on either side and curves slightly down toward the centre. There is a cedar cresting rail above it, this forms an important part of the object's decorative program. As mentioned, the creating rail features a large rectangular veneered tablet framed in black at its centre. The remaining rail takes the form of long brackets to either side of it. These have a convex upper edge and rise to support the tablet on either side with a volute motif. At the outer ends of the sofa back they rise slightly to terminate in a fan motif and a rounded end. The centre volute motifs are not true continuous spirals but rather consist of domed patera in the centre of two raised concentric circles with a third outer circle with two partial spiral mouldings springing from it to widen out and continue to form fine bead or astragal mouldings along the bottom and top edges of the creating rail. The flat parts of the creating rail have a shallow relief panel in the centre that follows the profile of the brackets, the raised part forming a narrow fillet moulding around its edges.

Although furniture pattern books varied considerably in their auxiliary content—some sought to raise the intellectual status of the trade by including instruction in drawing, perspective and geometry and illustrations of the classical orders of architecture, while others included practical business advice they all essentially contained illustrations of furniture designs. It is known that such books were readily available in the colony from an early date: a Mr Brennard advertised books on architecture, cabinetmaking and joinery in Hobart in 1830, and in 1836 Henry Dowling, a Launceston stationer advertised "Smith's Cabinet Makers Guide," describing it as the "latest edition" with "beautifully coloured illustrations".

These were not "how-to" books. They did not provide detailed instructions for construction or, for the most part, the dimensions of the pieces illustrated. Such knowledge was assumed on the part of the cabinetmaker and would have been considered irrelevant for their clients. Equally, the designs were rarely followed to the letter, but rather functioned to convey possibilities and alternatives, acting as a starting point for both cabinetmaker and client. Not only could costly details such as carving be left out or reduced, but other adaptations could readily be made in response to practicalities or taste.

The style of the Hamilton Inn sofa would have been described at the time of its production as "Grecian", referring to its source in ancient Greek furniture. This furniture was entirely known through sculptures and images on decorated vases. Images of these, in turn, were circulated in publications, such as the catalogue of Sir William Hamilton's famous collection of ancient Greek ceramics. One of the distinguishing characteristics of early nineteenth century "Grecian" seating furniture is the out swept or "sabre" legs that are inspired by the klismos chairs often illustrated on such vases. The legs of these chairs—usually side chairs or hall chairs swept elegantly toward the back and front. In the design of sofas and couches, these sabre legs are rotated ninety degrees so the curved surface faces the front and sweep towards the ends of the sofa. They are also located well in from those ends, as can be seen on the Hamilton Inn sofa. The manufacture of these components required a high level of craftmanship and a very strong material such as good-quality mahogany. In Australia the widespread use of the much weaker Australian red cedar as a substitute for mahogany meant that sabre legs are very rare. Indeed, the legs of the Hamilton Inn sofa have all been broken and repaired, indicating that the makers were not entirely familiar with the new wood.

#### Horsehair

The Hamilton Inn sofa is upholstered in horsehair or "haircloth" fabric. Curled horsehair is also used for some of the padding. Haircloth is made from hair taken from either the tails or the manes of horses woven with another fibre such as linen, silk or cotton. The hair, which is less than a metre in length, is used in the short weft of the fabric while the longer fibre serves as the warp. Horsehair was valued for upholstery in the nineteenth century because of its deep, lustrous black colour and because it is very hardwearing and resistant to staining. The horsehair used for the Hamilton inn sofa has linen as the warp fibre and has been made using a satin weave, in which the weft fibre skips over several warp fibres. While this makes for a weaker fabric it also produces a high gloss finish.

Curled horse was a standard upholsterer's material in the eighteenth and nineteenth century. It was used as a substrate for softer material and provided a springiness that lasted for many years. For this reason it is often still used in quality upholstery.

## Linen

There is a layer of coarse linen lining stretched across the back of the sofa beneath the frame. Linen is made from the leaves of the flax plant (*Linum usitatissimum*) and is the oldest known fibre to have been manufactured, with fragments found in Georgia dating back 30,000 years. The flax fibres are ideal for weaving, being fine, long and strong with a smooth lustrous surface. The material has been used to make utilitarian cloth such as this lining as well as fine decorative objects such as damask tablecloths.

The sofa lining is stamped with a crown motif and with the word 'TECKLENBVRG.' Tecklenburg is a city in Germany where such cloths were manufactured. Tecklenberg linens were imported in large quantities into Britain; it was also widely used in British colonies in the West Indies and may have been imported into Van Dieman's Land from either country. The stamp itself was part of a system of marking designed to ensure the quality of linen imported into Britain. The requirement for such marks ended in 1823 and it is likely that the linen lining was made before that date.

#### Wool

In addition to the curled horsehair stuffing used for the upholstery on the arms and back of the sofa, there is an upper layer of wool wadding. This was a conventional technique to provide a softer layer immediately below the sitter that also enabled the final finishing fabric to sit more easily in place. Cotton was most frequently used for this purpose, but here wool has been used and it is likely to be the only locally sourced textile material in the sofa. Wool was one of the colony's earliest industries, with the first sheep arriving in 1803. An export industry—exploiting land already farmed by Tasmania's First Peoples—was well established by the 1820s. In 1836, the Launceston cabinetmaker Robert Bell advertised for 'coarse wool, principly (sic) for stuffing.'

The cresting rail is dry jointed to the top of the frame of the back of the sofa with tight fitting mortice and tenon joints (the tenons are in the seat rail and the mortices in the cresting rail). This enables it to be lifted off and for the upholstery fabric fixing points be hidden. Damage to the upper part of the central tablet suggests that a part of the cresting rail is missing. It is impossible to guess the form of this important ornamental element, however, given the austerity of the sofa design it is likely to have been quite simple.

The sofa has fixed upholstery on the inner and outer surfaces of the arms and on the front surface of the back of the seat. The inner, seating surfaces are padded and slightly convex. The fabric is simply stretched straight over the exterior end surfaces. The sofa has a loose fitted palliasse upholstered in horsehair. This is a thin rectangular cushion the length of the sofa. It tapers toward each end to accommodate the cylindrical bolsters that would have been part of the original upholstery and were integral to the design of the sofa. The palliasse is supported on thirteen plain wooden slats jointed into the back and front seat rails.

The Hamilton Inn sofa was designed to be placed against a wall and the back is undecorated and unfinished. It would have been coved with a light cloth to prevent the entry and build up of dust.

#### HISTORY

## Origins

What is a sofa? How is it distinguished from a couch, a settee or a chaise longue? Perhaps the first thing to be said about the names of many objects is that they can be ambiguous and that this is often further complicated by changes in usage over time. "Sofa" is a relatively recent introduction into the English language from French, with its ultimate origin in an Arabic word, "suffa," which denotes a raised section of floor covered with carpets and cushions for sitting or reclining upon. Of course, the adoption of an Arabic word by Europeans in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries was freighted with orientalising notions of comfort and decadence (which is perhaps made more strongly suggested in the related French term *sultane*).

The term "couch" is also of French origin, denoting an action to lie down—rather than a thing. As often happens, the verb migrated to certain types of objects and became a noun; initially referring to anything made to lie upon, usually a combination of a wooden frame with textile covering that may or may not have been attached. As the eighteenth century progressed, and more specialised forms of furniture emerged, the meaning of "couch" narrowed to refer a long platform with a low back and an arm or support at one end. It was biased toward reclining. At this time, "sofa" came to refer to a long platform or seat with a low back and arms at both ends, with the implication that it was primarily used by multiple persons sitting upright, but did not exclude the possibility of a single reclining user. The term "settee" derives from "settle," which was a type of wooden seat, often with arms and a high, draft-excluding back. Eventually, "settee" came to refer to sofa-like objects with exposed wooden parts and only a partial covering of upholstery.

The other 'Grecian' characteristic of the sofa is the austerity of its decoration. The decoration of the wood consists entirely of geometric motifs, such as the volutes at the ends of the arms, the fan motifs at the ends of the cresting rail, the concentric circular motifs to either side of the central tablet on the back and the veneered tablets on the seat and cresting rails. The relief panels over the legs, across the front seat rail and in the cresting rail emphasise the sofa's elegant profile. Finally, the cedar would have been a rich, bright red colour that would have contrasted with the deep lustrous black of the horse hair fabric. This contrast is emphasised by the use of removable facings which means that there are no tacks or braids at the edges of the upholstery, just a smooth continuous edge. Many larger pieces of furniture take design ideas from architecture. The two tablets, one located in the centre of the cresting rail and the other in the centre of the seat rail, are such details. They are veneered with richly figured mahogany and bordered with bands of pear-wood stained to imitate ebony, which echoes the deep black of the horsehair.

The sofa is fitted with cast brass lion's paw feet and swivel castors. Zoomorphic feet such as these have a long history in European furniture and such brass feet are the descendants of elaborately carved ancestors. Some pieces of surviving ancient Egyptian furniture have legs and feet modelled on the cats held sacred by that civilisation. Similarly, zoomorphic furniture legs and feet are found in ancient Greek and Roman furniture. They continue to be used in various forms up to the nineteenth century. The brass feet on the Hamilton Inn sofa are of a standard type and would have almost certainly been made in Britain and supplied in quantity by colonial merchants. Nearly all of the furniture hardware used in Tasmania in the nineteenth century was imported from Britain, including locks, hinges and decorative components such as the feet used here. The feet would originally have been highly polished, the bright gold colour contrasting with the deep red of the cedar. They may even have been gilded to enhance this effect.

PLATE 9.

# Brass

Brass, also known as copper alloy is an alloy of copper and zinc. Its first known use dates back as far as 1300 BCE. It is valued for its bright yellow colour which is somewhat similar to gold and its resistance to corrosion. Brass is very easily cast into intricate and detailed shapes, such as the lion's paw feet on the Hamilton Inn sofa. They were made using a process called "lost wax casting" in which wax models of the desired shape are made. From this a mould is made to produce multiple identical models. These, in turn, are encased in moulds and displaced by the molten metal which is poured in and circulated throughout the mould through special channels called sprues. Upon cooling, the mould is broken apart and the casting is removed and the spues are cut off. The whole then needs to be "chased", a process of filing and grinding to remove all of the signs of the casting process.

# PROVENANCE

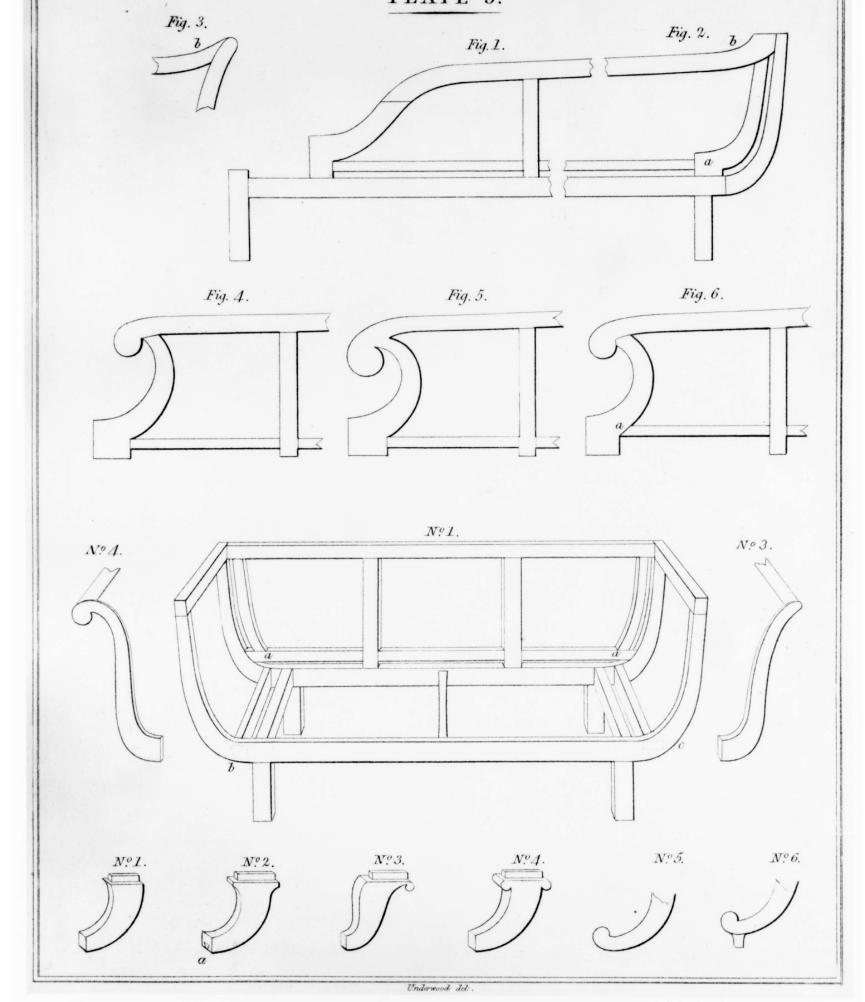
The Hamilton Inn sofa was purchased at Gowan's Auctions in Hobart in 2005. Its history is unknown before around 1890, leaving around 70 years of its earliest history a mystery, including such important information as who made it and who it was made for. Nor do we know the house it was originally intended to furnish, or whether it was located in the country or in town. It can, however, be safely assumed that it had rooms large enough to comfortably accommodate the sofa, which may have been supplied as a pair or with an ensuite couch. There would have been few such houses in Tasmania in the 1820s.

The earliest known owner of the sofa was the great grandfather of the vendor at the 2005 auction, whose family had lived at Hamilton—in the original Hamilton Inn—from 1912. The sofa was originally located there, hence its name. It remained in Hamilton until the early 1990s, when it was moved to Dennes Point on Bruny Island and then after that to Hobart in the early 2000s. As the sofa was handed down through the various generations of the family, most of the broken parts were retained, with the intention to restore it. These were with the sofa at the auction and used in the conservation and restoration treatment.

The modern sofa has two ancestral lineages. The first is the simple raised platform referred to above and its descendant, the lighter and more portable Egyptian wood-framed bed, made possible by an advanced woodworking technology, which included mortice and tenon and dovetail joints. The sofa's other antecedent is the chair. While these appeared in various forms at different times around the world, the ancient Egyptians produced chairs that were very similar to those in use today, some include arms, angled backs and woven or stretched seating material such as rattan or leather to enhance comfort. The sofa is, in a sense, simply a laterally stretched chair.

The couch/sofa began to assume a form that we would recognise upon its migration from Egypt to the classical civilisations of the Mediterranean. An example of an ancient Roman couch dated to the second century of the current era in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York consists of a framed rectangular platform raised on four finely turned legs with angled rests at either end. The latter are not quite arms and are designed for a reclining user. These end rests and the long seat were upholstered with fitted removable cushions. This piece of furniture is best described as a proto-couch, as it is quite high and has a low stool ensuite to enable the user to climb onto it. Similar sofa-like objects as well as chairs are also depicted in ancient Greek art, most particularly the famed 'klismos' chair, to which we will have occasion to return when considering the style of the Hamilton Inn sofa.

With the slow collapse of the Roman Empire, sophisticated seating furniture disappeared from Europe, leaving basic stools and large, immovable ceremonial seats such as thrones: mundane, ecclesiastical and sacred. Upholstered chairs begin to reappear nearly a thousand years later, during the Italian Renaissance of the 15<sup>th</sup> century. These were reserved for the very wealthy



London chairmakers' and Carvers' book of Prices 1923 A cabinetmaker's pattern book that shows the construction of sofas with options for alternative arms and feet.

## MATERIALS

## Australian red cedar

The nineteenth century was truly a century of wood. There was a massive global trade in timber and, over the course of the century as colonialism rendered far-flung forests available for exploitation, a knowledge of the different structural and decorative qualities of timbers grew alongside the burgeoning market. Pine from the northern hemisphere, as well as decorative veneers from various sources were imported into the colony from very soon after invasion. This is reflected in a small way in the Hamilton Inn sofa, which is constructed from several types of wood. The most obvious of these is Australian red cedar (*toona ciliata*), which would have been imported from New South Wales, where it grew from just north of Sydney up into what is now southern Queensland. Despite its name, Australian red cedar is actually a type of mahogany and was favoured by the colonists in part because of its resemblance to the mahogany then used for most fashionable furniture in Britain, sometimes referred to as "true mahogany". That mahogany, sourced from Jamaica, Honduras, and Cuba since the seventeenth century, was in many ways a perfect furniture timber. It was a rich red colour, it was also strong and took a good finish. It could be finely carved and could also yield decorative veneers, such as those used for the tablet decoration on the Hamilton Inn sofa. While Australian red cedar is not as

#### CONSERVATION

Because the Hamilton Inn sofa had not, like most pieces of furniture its age, been reupholstered or restored, it presented the museum with a dilemma. Re-upholstering or aggressive restoration of the wood would have led to the loss of original 180-year-old fabric. The textile and wood finishes are a rare and valuable document of the style and techniques in the colony in the early nineteenth century. At the same time it was felt that the maker's original intention for the sofa as a design object should be respected as much as possible. The underlying philosophy for the conservation was to walk the fine line between these two considerations.

# **Textile component**

After a thorough examination, the upholstery was carefully brush vacuumed to remove accumulated dust. The torn, creased and folded parts were realigned and couched into position. Where areas of fabric were missing a non-matching black fabric was inserted to reduce the visual distraction caused by the exposed pale lining fabric. It was intended that this additional material could clearly be distinguished from the original sofa covering.

# **Timber component**

The timber components had suffered weathering and mechanical damage and could not be 'returned' to an original state without irreversible damage to the original material by removal of the old finish through processes such as sanding. The approach taken was extremely gentle and designed to preserve all of the original material. The first step was a dry surface cleaning of all of the wooden components followed by a gentle wet process to remove grime. The retained original parts were reattached using hot animal glue, a material both sympathetic to the sofa's original construction and reversible. Where the shape of the missing components could be confidently determined through the remaining parts or other evidence, such as the button screw covers, sections of veneer and castor parts, they were replaced. Those parts for which this could not be done, such as the central decoration on the cresting rail, were left as they were. The surface finish was invigorated by dissolving the remnant finish and redistributing it over the whole surface. These surfaces were then protected by the application of a layer of wax. The sabre legs of the sofa had originally split and broken because of the inherent weakness of the cedar. The treatment of this component did not seek to re-establish or improve upon their original strength and the sofa is now supported on a purpose-built metal frame.

— Peter Hughes, Senior Curator (Decorative Arts)