

An Empire Style Furniture Set at Nedkovich House, Old Town Plovdiv

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Abstract – The paper considers the interior and furnishing of a Revival Bulgarian house built in 1863. The aim of this paper is to present the architecture and to give a closer overview of a part of the furniture collection belonging to this house: the French Empire style furniture set in the South East drawing room of the upper floor. The aim is to perform the analysis of stylistic features as well as to make a hypothesis concerning the cabinet maker.

Keywords – Revival townhouse, residential architecture, French Empire style, china display cabinet, tête-à-tête, armchair, *guéridon*.

Plovdiv is a Bulgarian city keeping a rich legacy of Late Revival townhouse architecture. Symmetry is the most typical feature of these representative buildings owned by merchants and bankers. They feature Baroque concave-convex elements, bow pediments, bow-jetties on the façade and symmetric layouts organized around large reception halls with stairs on both levels. Nedkovich House, built in 1863 [1], is a brilliant example of the symmetrical townhouse type from the second half of the 19th century. The owner Nikola Nedkovich, a rich merchant from Karlovo town, built the house in 1863 in a different architectural style than his neighbours: a flat neo-classical façade with a triangular pediment and a symmetrical formal plan were chosen by the builder. This concept was followed by the architectural detail in windows, doors, ceilings, as well as furnishings: today among the eclectic pieces from the second half of the 19th century we can see a genuine French Neo-Classic and Early Empire style set.

I. ARCHITECTURE

The house situated at 3, Tzanko Lavrenov Str. next to Georgiadi House in Plovdiv Old Town is erected on a levelled courtyard behind a high stone wall and is resting on a large basement with separate access from the steep street. In the courtyard, paved with stone slabs, there is a well with a cistern (underground rain water reservoir) and fruit trees and vines along the wall (Fig. 2). From the street a visitor can see the gate and the high wall; a number of steps is leading to the gate; it is covered by a bow pediment and flanked by two plastered white bays, jutting out of the stone wall; these were built as observation security spots. The builder has shown reasonable compositional skill: in order to evade competition with the mighty high facade of the neighbouring Georgiadi House on the street line, he has erected the building behind the wall in the courtyard (Fig. 3). Thus, these two neighbouring houses cannot form an ensemble, in fact they are perceived as two different individual buildings. Nedkovich House stands out among its neighbouring buildings with its neo-classical rectangular silhouette, four-columned portico with round arches crowned by a triangular pediment above three win-

dows, each with a triangular pediment over the flanking pilasters. The portico is embellished with painted medallions (Fig. 1) and so are the window pediments. The steps lead the visitor to the gate with two door leaves decorated with neoclassical oval fan-shaped motifs. The entrance to the building is an official gate centered in the middle column span under the upper floor prolonged ahead to form a bay area. After climbing another set of stairs the visitor finds himself in a large *hayat* (or vestibule (Fig. 5)); opposite of the entrance a stair leads to the second floor. The vestibule on the second floor is much larger (Fig. 6), with a recess for the musicians built half a level higher over the stairs. According to Christo Peev [2], the height of the ground floor is 3.50 m, and on the second floor it is 3.30 m. Today's half-level platform for musicians did not exist, as can be seen from the drawings made after the original survey of the house in 1950-s; it was added after partial restoration in 1964–1969.



Fig. 1. Façade of Nedkovich House [10].

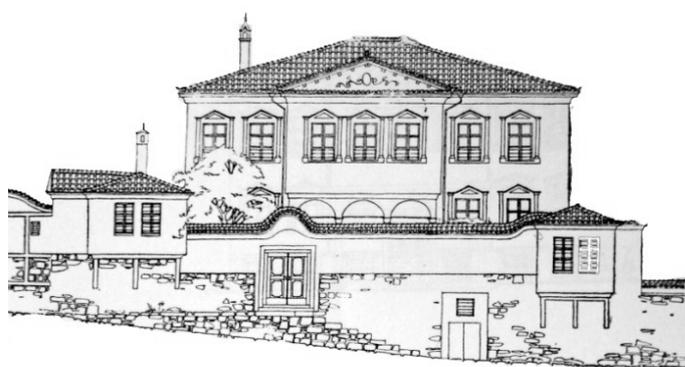


Fig. 2. Street façade of Nedkovich House [2, 219].

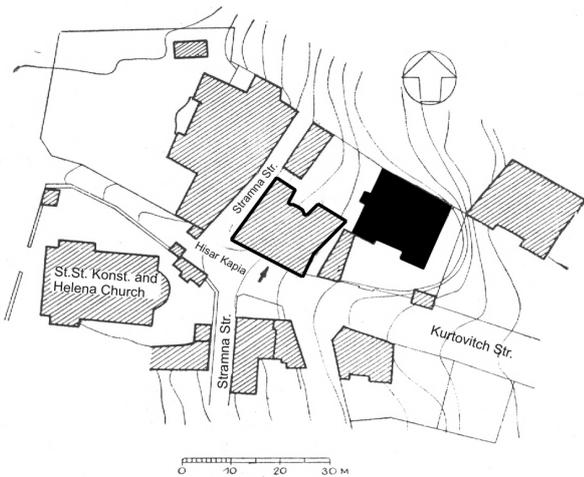


Fig. 3. Site plan of Nedkovich House, marked in black [2, 218].



Fig. 4. Yard façade of Nedkovich House [2, 218].

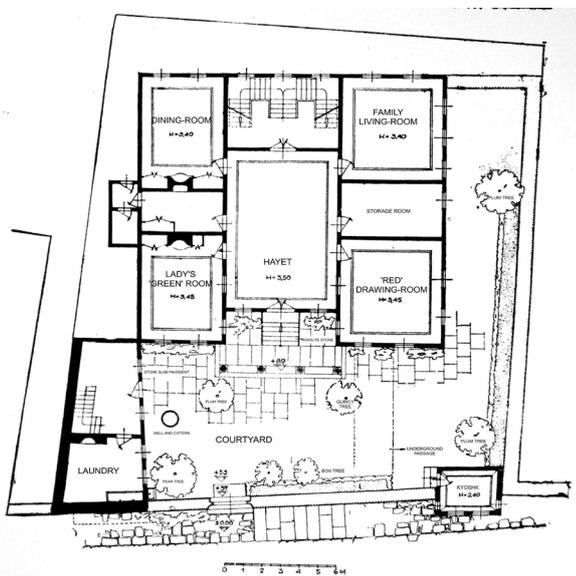


Fig. 5. Ground floor plan of Nedkovich house [2, 219].

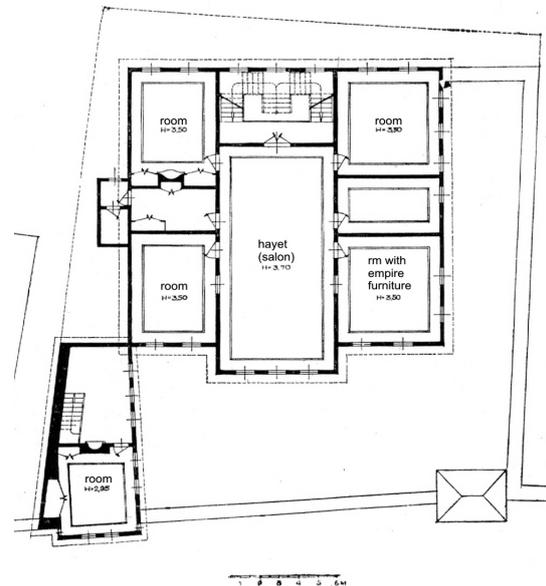


Fig. 6. Second floor plan of Nedkovich house [2, 220].

II. INTERIOR

The ground floor plan consists of the following rooms: starting from the entrance, to the right there is the so-called “red drawing room” (Fig. 5) furnished with a set of upholstered pieces including two armchairs, a sofa, four upholstered chairs and a round centre table. The room has five windows overlooking the yard and one window looking inside the *hayat*. Under the windows, a built-in *minder* seating is made. The walls are decorated with wall painting in red and two medallions on the inner wall depicting architectural scenes, a third medallion is painted next to the window. The ceiling is a wooden carved panel of square motifs with reeded surface. The ground floor *hayat* features a decorative ceiling with squares and a carved sun motif made of wooden carved rays nailed to form an oval-shaped central rosette. Today the arrangement of the large vestibule consists of two mirror-stands with console tables, a sofa, chairs, and a

grand piano. To the left from the entrance there is the so-called lady’s “green” room (Fig. 5) arranged with *minder* under the windows, a sofa, two 19th century low upholstered chairs and a rocking Thonet chair. A cast-iron Viennese heating stove is placed in the decorative niche of the inner wall. The room has an elegant wooden ceiling decorated with moulded slats. The wall painting represents a central panel with a round medallion depicting palace architecture on a green background. The ground floor features two more rooms: a dining room and a family living-room which is furnished with a black bentwood furniture set of four armchairs, a round table and *minder* under the windows.

The second floor plan (Fig. 6) with elongated *hayat* forms the portico below on the main facade; with four rooms and a raised musician’s recess above the stairs this is the most important reception space of the house. The *hayat* is furnished with a large seating group of two sets of sofas, armchairs and chairs, a mirror stand and a wall clock above the console. The room to the south-east has a furniture group in



Fig. 7. Armchair [10].



Fig. 9. Chairs [10].



Fig. 8. Tête-à-tête [10].



Fig. 10. Bench with armrests [10].



Fig. 11. China Display Cabinet [10].

the French Empire style. The other room on the same side is a study with black carved furniture: a round table with heavy armchairs, a writing table with an armchair, and a high carved baroque cabinet. The two other rooms are bedrooms.

III. DESCRIPTION OF FURNITURE ITEMS IN THE SET

Of highest interest is the Empire-style furniture in the south-east room of the second floor. The seating furniture consists of three armchairs with rolled backs, a tête-à-tête (or confident), four chairs, a bench with high armrests and two round stools. All chairs have identical leg shape; therefore they belong to a set. The wood is solid mahogany of a slightly lighter shade than that of the case furniture and the table. The armchair has harmonious proportions and a restrained style. It seems to be nearer to French Louis XVI style because of the identical front and back legs, unlike Empire armchairs with back legs of the sabre form and turned front baluster legs. The armchair (Fig. 7) has an elegant backrest of the rolled-over type. The seat is wider in front, with curved front rail. The seat and back upholstery are fixed by means of nails hidden behind a decorative trim. The fabric may have been changed to a new one. The legs are of round tapering section with a gilt bronze Ionic capital above a bronze ring fitted between two ribs; they terminate in bronze cups. The front leg continues above the rail in the form of a block, decorated with gilt bronze palmette. On top of it is the armrest support in the form of a Tuscan column. The armrests end with a short cylinder with a bronze rosette in front. The armrest has a padded *manchette*; it meets the vertical stile of the backrest with a continuous curve that ends at the top roll of the backrest, accentuated by a pierced bronze mount. The seat rails and the top rail of the back are decorated with a twisted bronze rope-like rod.

The tête-à-tête (or confident (Fig. 8)) is a piece of furniture rare for Plovdiv houses. Although it was more typical of the Second Empire, it appeared much earlier in the French Rococo period in mid-18th century; and it was made as part of this set. The confident has a pair of horseshoe-shaped seat frames; its legs are identical with the armchair legs. The back rests on columnar-shaped supports above the legs; a pair of rectangular



Fig. 12. Settee flanked by two pedestals and a mirror [10].

sectioned vertical stiles with bronze *appliqués* flank the splat. The top rail consists of a single large S-curve repeated by two more rails close above the seat. The piece is light and elegant, it features the same gilt bronze mounts on the legs and back splat as the armchairs and the twisted bronze “rope” on the rails.

The chair (Fig. 9) features an upholstered seat and open back; it shares the forms and materials used for the armchair and confident: the same tapering legs with Ionic capitals, the trapeze-shaped seat; the backrest is designed as a frame with two vertical stiles continued from the back legs, a top rail with a roll and two smaller rails parallel to seat. The splat is decorated with a large gilt bronze acanthus leaf and a laurel wreath beneath. The vertical stiles are decorated with the same pierced long bronze mount that we find on the armchair. The bench with armrests and the two round stools share the same legs and detail as the chairs and the confident.

The case pieces of the set include a China Display Cabinet



Fig. 13. Central gilt bronze mount of display cabinet [10].



Fig. 14. Gilt Bronze Mount on pedestals flanking the settee, featuring two torches with garland, ribbons and a central rosette [10].



Fig. 15. François-Honoré-Georges Jacob-Desmaller (1770–1841), *Somno*, or bedside table, from the bedroom of the Emperor from Fontainebleau [11].

(Fig. 11) and a Settee flanked by two pedestal cabinets (Fig. 12).

The China Display Cabinet is a piece of medium height, of rectangular silhouette and three-partite composition. The central part is wider and the corresponding glass door is crowned by a large mount on top and two drawers under it; this part is flanked by two narrow glass doors with a small niche under each one. The glass doors consist of a wooden frame with a bronze grid, fitted with bevelled glass panels. The central glass door is wider and has two symmetric keyholes (one on the side of hinges) to keep the composition. The whole is flanked by a pair of term figures, topped with a caryatid bust of gilt bronze with wooden Ionic capital; under each caryatid head a palmette bronze mount is placed. The cabinet rests on a base plinth; on top, an architrave and a cornice finish off the composition, surmounted by another convex element with symmetrical bronze laurel branches with a rosette in the middle. The central gilt bronze *appliqué* features a Greek urn flanked by two swags tied with ribbons (Fig. 13). The China cabinet doors and the two bottom drawers do not have a knob, instead a decorative Renaissance-style keyhole shield has been used, so “it was necessary to pull the drawer out by means of a key” [3, 171].

The settee is flanked by two built-in pedestals (of *somno*, or bedside table type) and two tall box-like candle stands (Fig. 13). According to P. Thornton [4, 260] “such composition with built-in pedestals is peculiar to Denmark and Norway in this period” (the second decade of the 19th century). Another mention of a similar furniture composition is made by Maszkovska [5, 273]. She describes it as “the day-bed with its flanking cabinets...”, referring to a piece of furniture from a Russian mansion. Flanking pedestals were also used in Biedermeier style as flowerpot stands with a writing top between them; the analogy also exists earlier in the 18th century in England: the famous dining-room sideboard with two pedestals as a neo-classic group by Robert Adam [6, 203]. The difference is that the central element here is the built-in settee under a large Empire-style mirror. The ped-

estal cabinets are similar in design to the so-called *somno* (or French translation of “bedside table”) and most of them have the same gilt bronze decoration (Fig. 14). This decoration includes two torches connected with laurel swag and tied with ribbons; the knob in the middle is in a rosette. Similar torches (or arrow-cases) flank an Empire *somno* by Jacob-Desmaller made for the Emperor’s Bedroom in Fontainebleau (Fig. 15).

The settee composition also includes high box-like cases used as candle stands with two applied bronze female figures carrying cups and an amphora (Fig. 16) with a frieze of four palmettes on top. The mirror on top of the settee is flanked by two pairs of pilasters with caryatid heads and wooden Ionic capitals (Fig. 17).

The mahogany centre table (*guéridon* (Fig. 18), (Fig. 19)) features a round top on a circular frieze with mounts on three monopodia topped with caryatid heads resting on a triangular base. On the frieze above every caryatid head there is a symmetric gilt bronze *appliqué* with palmettes and stylized lotus flowers. The triangular base is decorated with a chased gilt bronze centre *appliqué* consisting of a flower wreath with a crowned female head in the middle (Fig. 20). This mount is almost identical with another one (Fig. 21) that we found on a French Empire China cabinet dated 1800 [8]. The *guéridon* is typical for the French Empire style. The wood matches the large case pieces and the table; a slightly different-shaded wood species had been used for the seat furniture.

Dating and attribution: The date of purchase or acquisition by the museum is not known yet; we can only speculate that the owner bought the set after the house construction was over, i.e. around 1863. The date of manufacturing is also not known, but the stylistic features are clear. Typologically, the pieces are of the 1800 period. They have excellent proportions and details, all demonstrate fine and restrained taste. The seats are perfectly designed, with none of the heavy ostentatious decoration characterizing later 19th century Empire production. The legs are of neo-classic shape, not the Empire formula of turned front legs

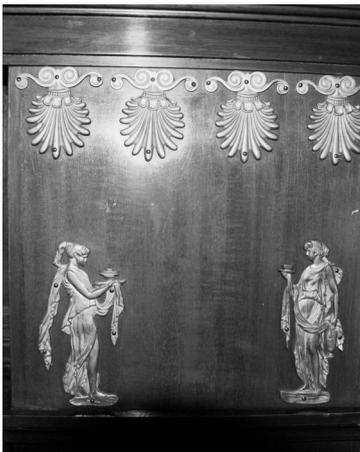


Fig. 16. Gilt Bronze female antique figures [10].



Fig. 17. Caryatid with Ionic Capital Volutes and a palmette. Detail of China Display Case pilaster [10].



Fig. 18. Centre Table (*guéridon*) with caryatid monopodia [10].

with back sabre legs. No Egyptian or Napoleonic symbols are present. The mahogany veneer is lacking any specific peculiarities of the grain. Gilt bronzes are fine and were noticed on other dated pieces by Jacob-Desmalter or other makers around 1800. Therefore, this is our hypothesis of date of manufacturing. Attributing could be made to the atelier of François-Honoré Desmalter or the earlier one with his brother (Jacob Frères) or even his father, George Jacob, the arguments being as follows: good overall proportions of all pieces, fine silhouettes and good detailing; delicacy, typical for neo-classic furniture; identical round tapering legs, which is a feature of neoclassicism. In fact, apart from being the first *menuisier* to produce seats from solid mahogany wood, George Jacob was also known to produce a rolled-over backrest as early as in 1777, in a set of armchairs for the Comte d'Artois [7]. The furniture could have been bought either before 1863, when the house was completed, or later at a shop where genuine empire pieces were re-sold, much later than the manufacturing date. Another option is the furniture from a French residence sold at an auction. According to F. J. B. Watson [9] the firm of Jacob-Desmalter executed commissions for foreign clients, among them the Russian Tsar Alexander I, etc.; but apart from nobility, they supplied furniture after the designs of their clients; because they were also known to have periods of crisis and lack of commissions. The company was active between 1796 and 1825, when Jacob-Desmalter handed the business over to his son George-Alphonse Jacob Desmalter.

The Empire style set belongs to the house (to the original owner Nedkovich who built it) and all pieces were listed in the museum inventory under one common number. According to Chr. Peev, some of Bulgarian merchants had offices in Istanbul, Manchester, Vienna or other European cities [2, 449]. This may explain an analogous Empire set at Balabanov house, with similar "settee with mirror" group, mahogany wood and scarce bronze mounts, a sign for existing commercial channels of distribution of French furniture in the 19th century.



Fig. 19. Caryatid monopodium and gilt bronze mount on circular frieze [10].



Fig. 20. Centre gilt bronze mount from table plinth [10].



Fig. 21. Bronze mount with identical female head with flower wreath from a piece dated 1800 [12].

CONCLUSION

Stylistically the house shows a consistent neo-classical style, where the interest shown to French Empire style is logical. Representation was definitely sought. From cultural point of view, this fine set of French Empire furniture is a proof of taste as well as the wide geographic range of commercial activities of Plovdiv merchants. Concerning attribution, no marks were found of the manufacturer yet, but this does not mean that they do not exist. The large cases need to be moved in order to find the maker's marks on the back panels; the rest of the pieces need a thorough check for marks. The museum inventory should be researched for acquisition dates. All this remains to be done eventually, when all furniture exhibits will have updated data files (or "passports") after an accurate expertise.

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