Furniture from the Netherlands at Ham House

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Ham House is a delightful building on the banks of the River Thames near Richmond, about one hour’s journey by fast rowing-boat from the centre of London. It was built about 1610 but was re-decorated in the 1630s by William Murray, a close friend of that connoisseur of the Arts, Charles I. It was then enlarged, re-arranged and again totally re-decorated in the 1670s by Murray’s daughter who, in 1672, married the powerful Duke of Lauderdale. Most of the furniture from the Lauderdale period survives at the house; the pieces have now been replaced in the very same rooms in which contemporary inventories show that they stood, three hundred years ago. It is a remarkable experience to walk through the house and see the interior looking in many respects so exactly as it was when new that it requires no very great effort of the imagination to complete the image in one’s mind’s eye.

Professor Scheurleer has accompanied me to Ham on more than one occasion and it is of course a house that he is particularly well equipped to appreciate. For the Ham of the Lauderdales, of the 1670s, was created at a time when English taste was under the strong influence of that of Holland. The house thus has many features which are Dutch in character and its furnishing is likewise in the Dutch style. Most of the actual furniture in the house must of course have been made in England but a few items were acquired in the Netherlands and it is these which are the subject of the present brief note.

Among the family’s papers is a record of some money being ‘payed out for the Lady Dutchess of Lauderdale in Holland by Mistress v. der Huva’ in 1672.1 The payment was ‘for a cabinet of black ebonie with a table and two Gadons [guéridons] cost 440 guilders’. Since it is evident that most of the furniture acquired for the house in the 1670s is still present, it seems reasonable to survey it in order to see if the items bought in Holland are still among them. The table and pair of candlestands (guéridons) are likely to be those illustrated in figure 1. They are remarkable for having caned tops rather than tops of solid wood. The conformation of the supports to the table is strongly Dutch in character and it does not seem unreasonable to credit them with a Dutch provenance. It is curious that no looking-glass was associated with this group at the time it was purchased although it was common to have a glass en suite with such a table and pair of stands (it was by no means an invariable rule, however).2 Indeed a looking-glass with an
1  Table and guéridons, ca 1670, Ham House.

2  Ebony cabinet, here shown without doors, ca 1670, Ham House.

The ebony frame was hung above the table when it was placed in the Duke of Lauderdale’s apartment at Ham. One is on rather less solid ground in suggesting that the cabinet shown in figure 2 is perhaps that secured for the Duchess in Holland but, once again, it has the proportion found on a well-known type of Dutch cabinet and may be the one in question. It is a reticent piece but is impressive and extremely well made. For its decoration reliance is placed totally on the brass handleless and key-plates, and the sharp mouldings round the drawer-fronts. Many cabinets are listed in the inventories of Ham House from the period but most are distinguished by their decoration in some way; only one ebony cabinet is listed, on the other hand, and is likely to be the one under discussion. If so, it was clearly much prized for it stood for several years in the Long Gallery which formed part of the State Room sequence at Ham, and was later moved to the Duchess’s own antechamber. There is no other direct evidence that more of the furniture at Ham may be Dutch but the stand of the magnificent lacquer cabinet shown in figure 3 is strongly Dutch in character and is quite unlike the stands of any other cabinet in the house. It is tempting also to propose a Dutch provenance for this cabinet. It too was regarded highly by the Lauderdales; it also stood in the Long Gallery and, if a watercolour of 1886 is anything to go by, it was positioned so that it could be seen as one approached the Gallery along