

The “Unknown” Maker Of Marquetry Is Attributable As Buchschmid & Gretaux.

I hope you will publish this for your readers because it answers a question regarding an “unknown” maker of pieces owned by your previous readers. Like all antiques, these objects were made in the context of their times, and that context stays lost until somebody interested in it digs it up later.

My wife and I purchased a piece of marquetry in 2018 from an online auction, local to Northern Virginia, in a lot with other home décor, described as “Germany scene wood inlay picture” shown in the attached pictures.

Fig 1: Front of “Hildesheim Knochenhauer-Amtshaus”, 9 x 12 inches framed.



Fig 2: Rear view of original frame; note two labels, paper taping, horizontally grained wooden back, and two-pin triangular hanger.

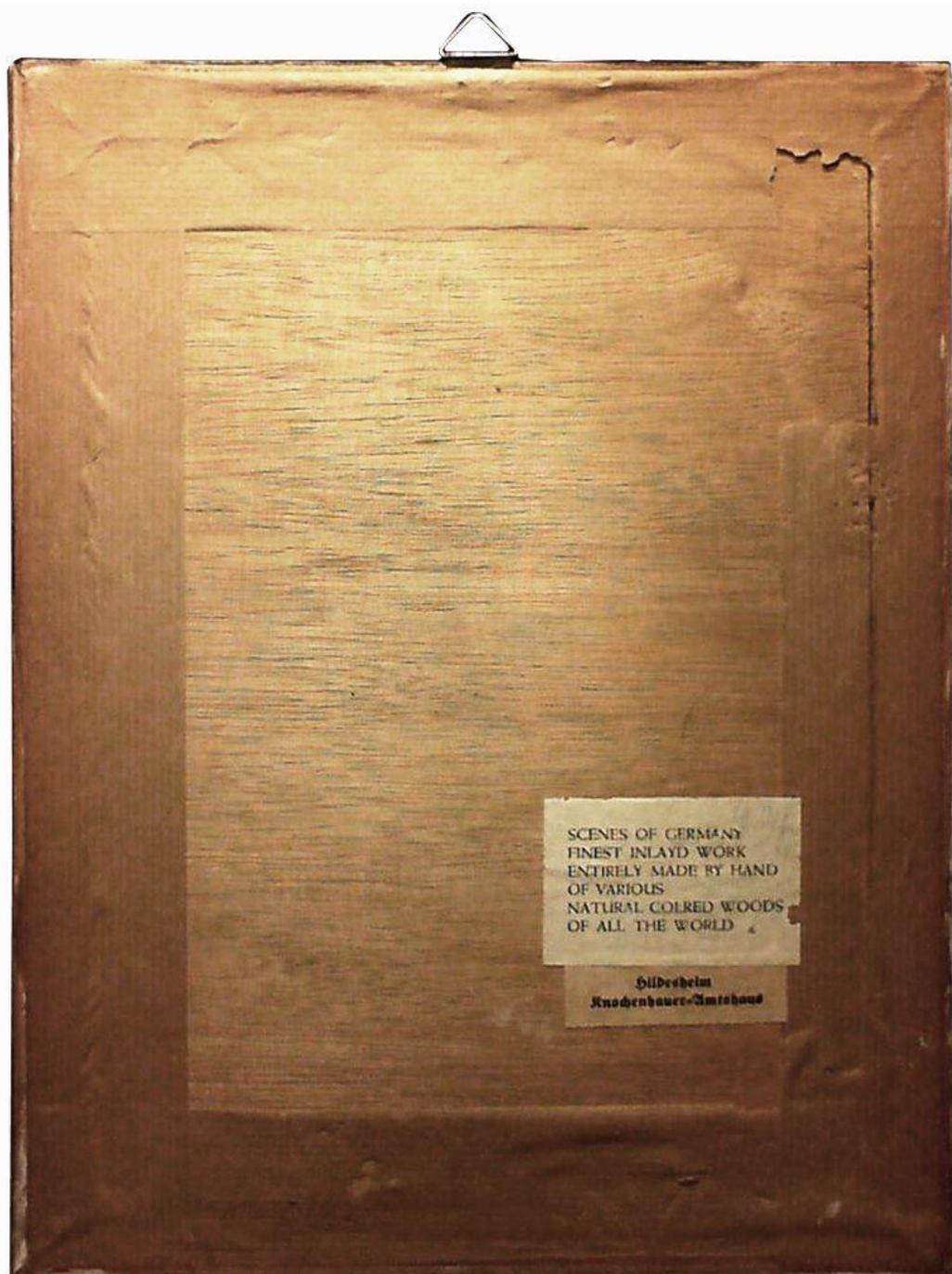


Fig 3: Close-up of labels.



My parents emigrated from Germany to the U.S. in the 1950s and eventually brought back lots of ‘German stuff’ passed through our family, that I grew up with. So what follows is based on not just objective facts, but also on the context of those facts that I experienced through immersion in a culture that my parents brought with them to the U.S.

As with every piece, the question is always “who made it, and when?” Here, by answering the “when” first, the “who” becomes apparent.

I. “WHEN” it was made

Every detail is an important clue, but I draw your attention first to the labels on the back of each of the five (5) pieces, noting the following:

- 1) the misspellings of “INLAYD” and “COLRED” – this identical wording appears on two pieces found on your own website. I have found three additional pieces online that have the identical label, (herein called the “English label”), each pasted directly above the lower label in German;
- 2) the “AltDeutsch Schrift” or font -- which was used almost exclusively before WWII found on, herein called, the “German label”;
- 3) the penciled price of “\$ 34,-” – note that it uses the dollar currency symbol, and, a ‘comma’ or downward pencil stroke, consistent with German writing conventions for monetary amounts (i.e., a comma is a decimal to us);

- 4) the difference in paper texture and ageing -- the thinner whiter paper of the English label contrasts with the thicker, more fibrous yellowed paper of the German label;
- 5) and the obvious use of two languages, English and German.

The importance of these clues will become apparent as the timeline unfolds.

Next, the subject matter of the front image includes a major clue to date the piece. The Hildesheim Knochenhauer-Amtshaus, or “Butchers Guildhall,” is a historic building originally built in 1529 in the middle of the town of Hildesheim, facing the market square with a fountain. Under the tree branches in the marquetry, the edge of the Bakers Guildhall is partially shown. In particular note the arched ‘portal’ below the timbered walls and windows seen in Fig. 6 below. All of these buildings are well documented, particularly in postcards or “ansichtskarten” very popular in Germany before WWII.

As documented online, each Amtshaus on the market square, and surrounding buildings, were completely destroyed by incendiary bombs in WWII, and nothing but the cellar remained -- in the 1950s houses stood in that location; in the 1960s, a hotel; and not until the 1980s did the town reconstruct a replica of that square. The architects in the 80s did not recreate the Bakers Guildhall exactly – before it was destroyed, the plaza level of the guildhall included a wide portal or picture window suitable to display wares. In the 80s it was replaced a standard vertical window to match the upper floor windows. The comparisons can be seen in Figures 4 and 5.

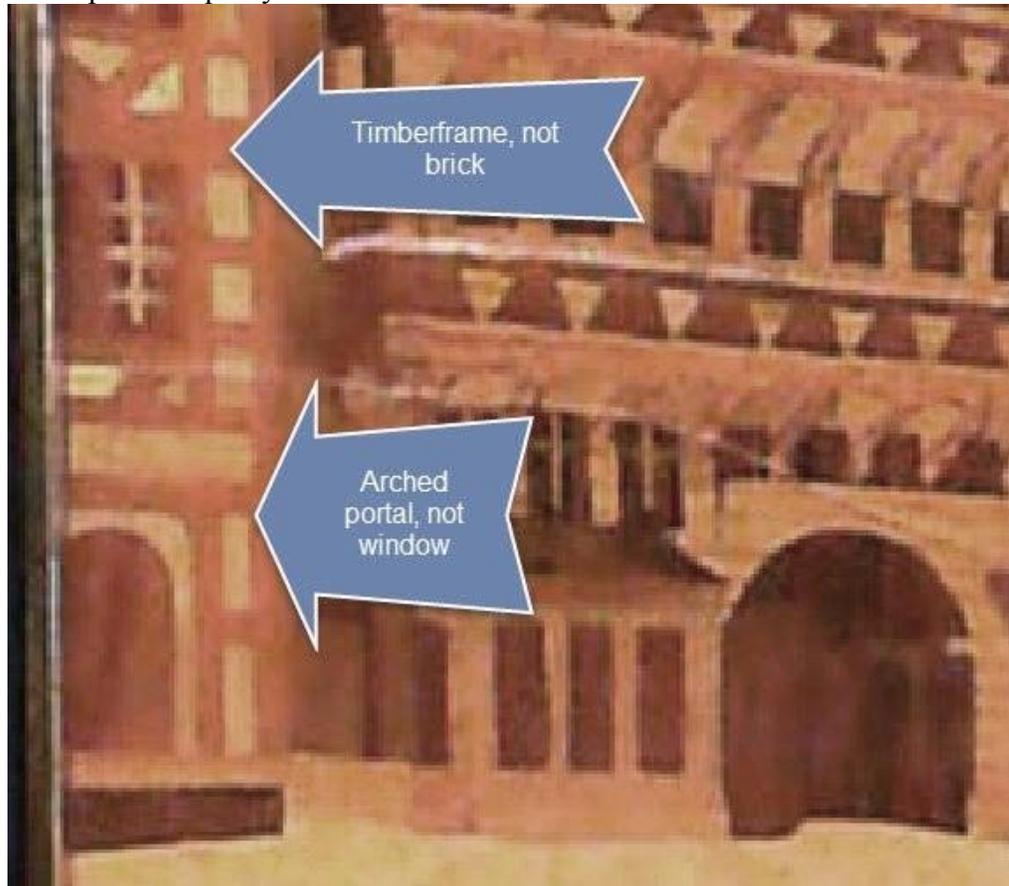
Fig. 4: Butchers Amtshaus and market square circa 1985 postcard (added arrow locates change).



Fig. 5: Butchers Amtshaus and market square circa 1930s postcard



Fig. 6: Close up of marquetry



Taking into consideration artistic license, the subject matter, i.e., the Guildhalls, exactly matches the pre-war buildings destroyed in 1945, and not the present day structure. However, looking at the piece as a whole, even to the unexperienced eye, the overall aging of the piece, e.g., the manufacturing characteristics and materials, all place the age of the piece well before 1980 when the Butchers Guildhouse was resurrected. Hence, it is not hard to conclude that piece is ‘old’, and so a reasonable ‘guess’ would be that it was made in the 1950s or 60s. However, that guess would not be old enough.

The fact that subject matter was destroyed in WWII logically suggests, but does not prove, that the manufacture date of the piece must have been before its destruction, not after. This then serves as a working hypothesis, a starting point, rather than a conclusion, because one might simply argue that the marquetry image was made after 1945 copied from early images of the building, possibly postcards, as could be done at any time, even today.

However, if the latter were true, then a stickier question becomes obvious: “why would a skilled woodworker in the 1950s or 60s choose this particular subject matter, more specifically choose it as art to sell as part of a business enterprise, if the subject was non-existent?” The place did not

exist for anyone to tour, to see, or perhaps even remember, and so the choice makes little sense as a souvenir item. And if the choice was made even earlier, e.g., in the late 40s, what benefit or motive would the maker have?

The labels on the back, together, help answer that question.

First, the whiter label is in English, and it offers a price in “Dollars” (i.e., “\$34,-”) which is U.S. currency; i.e., the price is not English Pounds, and not “Deutsche Mark” (post war) or “Reichsmark” (pre-war). The English Label also markets the images as a series, i.e., it refers to “Scenes” around Germany, as further proven by the other pieces mentioned herein with the identical labels. Hence, the intended buyers of these pieces spoke English, not German, i.e., persons that had “Dollars” to spend, and not post-war “DM” (when the U.S. Dollar was king in Germany), and certainly not the pre-war defunct “RM” currency. Online calculators estimate the value of \$34 in the late 1940s adjusted for inflation today ranges around \$400, a reasonable price for such art and work. And the persons with that much cash were largely military personnel after WWII.

Combine that with the knowledge that the German Label in AltDeutsch font was heavily used in the 1930s. As a genealogist of my family tree in Germany, I have viewed thousands of pages of “AltDeutsch” typefont from pre-war city directories, and in my opinion this label is ‘stereotypical’ (right down to the = sign used as a dash) and practically diagnostic for the period of pre-WWII. An example from a German Reich postcard is shown in Fig. 7, using the AltDeutsch font, for the very place shown, the “Hildesheim Knochenhauer Amtshaus.”

Fig. 7: 1935 Postcard in AltDeutsch typefont from Hildesheim; note hyphenation at bottom by date.

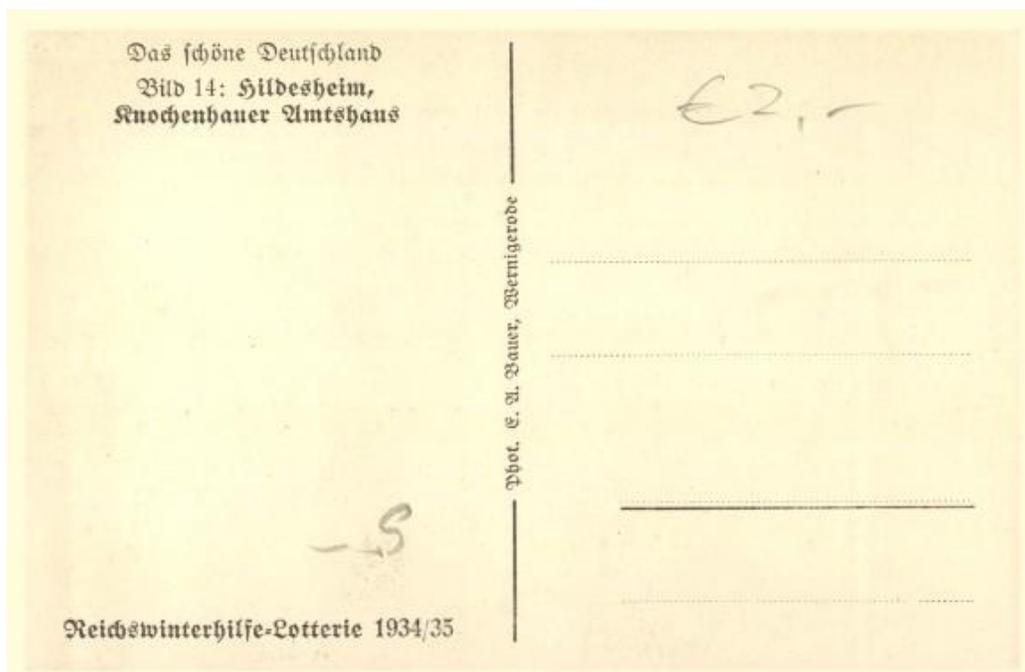
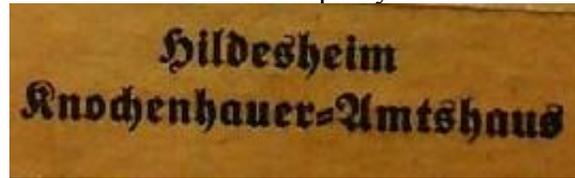


Fig 8: Compare Fig 7 to German Label from marquetry



Moreover, the AltDeutsche Schrift was abandoned post-war, as were most things “Deutsches Reich” often eagerly so. My father was a Kriegsmarine (Navy) medical doctor during the war, and left Germany sponsored by the U.S. Army to become a doctor here. Those left behind were rebuilding, in the ‘modern’ atomic age, when ‘new’ and sleek was ‘in,’ by necessity, since much of the old had been destroyed. On the upside, my parents often joyously complained how nice it was to see the AltDeutsche Schrift abandoned since it was so hard to learn and use. So the font was definitely ‘out’ after WWII, to most being a welcome casualty.

Furthermore, my great grandmother ran a “feather factory” in Berlin for theater stage costuming, started before and operating during the roaring twenties, until 1945 when it too was destroyed by bombing – she too had used labels very similar to these, in similar size, perforations and cardstock, in her business. The ageing of the German label, the thicker paper, and the German font all strongly suggest that this label was applied for a German audience, not a U.S. one, an audience touring the sights of Germany -- just as my ancestors happily did during more prosperous times, taking vacations to ‘tourist’ destinations of historic interest, to ‘spas’ and all the things that tourists do and go to see when they have money to spend ... money to spend on and to bring home souvenirs, like marquetry of the historic Butcher’s Guildhall at the marketplace at Hildesheim. This phenomenon is a constant of human nature, just like U.S. military families later were eager to bring home souvenirs from being stationed in Heidelberg. Such behavior is objectively consistent with statements by a forum user on The eBay® Community that “my parents picked it up in Germany right after WWII” – the forum user was seeking information who made a signed “B.u.G.” marquetry piece of Stuttgart with no attribution labels (“Buchs Schmid und Gretaux”). Hence, both the objective facts, and the cultural factors, point to the German label having been applied during the mid to late 1930s, when Germany was prospering, not after WWII.

So the question is next raised: “Why is the English label overlapping the German label?” Obviously, because it was applied later – but how much later? The German label was applied first, before the war, and the “English” label was applied after WWII, being intentionally in English. But WWII disrupted everything. So how much later? Probably about 10 years had passed.

Human nature and good business sense also dictate that the chances are very small that an obviously talented woodworker in post-war Germany, in a war-torn economy, would make such a bad decision and be successful at earning a living in the ‘luxury’ trade of selling art -- i.e., to intentionally choose to create a series of “Scenes Of Germany” that include a place virtually unknown to U.S. buyers at that time, also being non-existent for the subsequent 30 years, and having been violently destroyed by such potential buyers to boot. The alternative to “bad business judgement” seems, at worst, morbid, and, at best, nostalgic -- again not at all in the

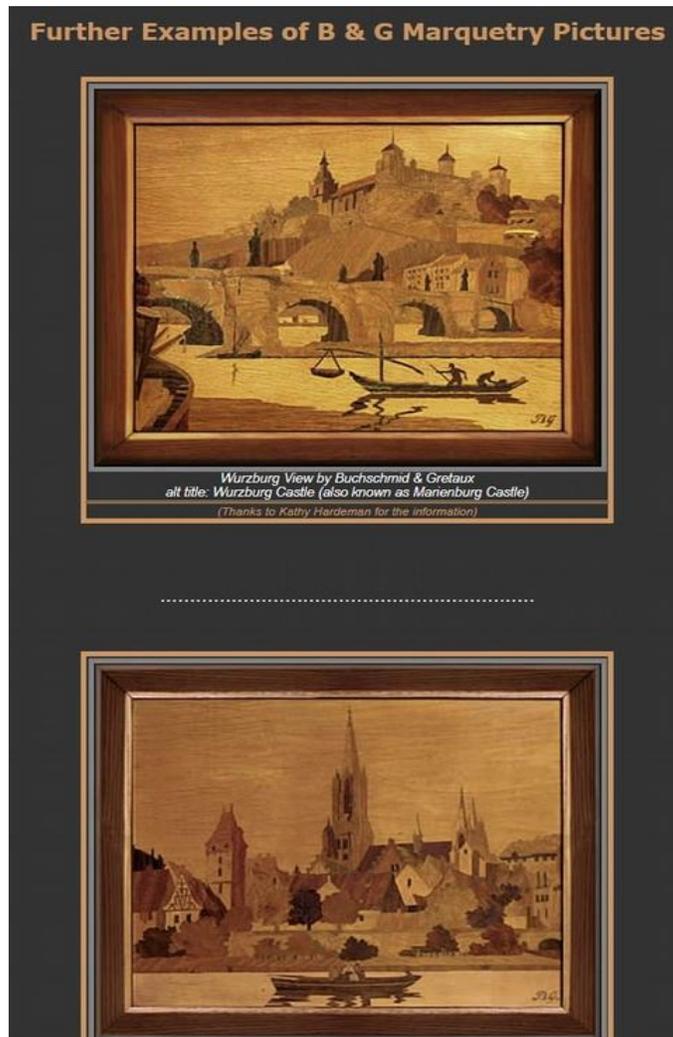
interest of running a business smartly. In short, to have chosen a completely destroyed site from a postcard as an image to create in marquetry, so as to sell it to the occupiers that destroyed it, seems, mildly put, optimistic -- selling art caters to tastes of the audience, and so from a business perspective, to put it bluntly, that would be rather dumb.

In short, the logical explanation is that the marquetry was “old stock” being sold to a new audience with cash to spend. Simply put, the woodworker was recycling the ‘left overs’ from earlier days to those who could now afford to buy it.

Next, even the frame, and the type of tape used, as non-descript as it appears, are further important clues for dating purposes. Anecdotally, my family’s artwork from periods before 1950 are entirely consistent with the tape and hanger used. The triangular hanger was ubiquitous for European ‘small’ art and souvenirs throughout the early 1900’s. But more objectively, the frame is a plaster coated frame -- plaster frames fell out of fashion after WWII and were heavily used before WWII well back into the 1800s. The frame has two distinct areas of damage caused by chipping – the first was repaired by a dab of ‘muddy’ paint, visible on the lower stretcher of the frame, and the second appears on the downward facing side of the same stretcher directly beneath that dab (not visible in the photos), which clearly shows the white, chipped plaster coating used. The white scratches in the photo also reveal the plaster.

Furthermore, the faux graining of the frame, to imitate wood, with a brightly gold gilded inner edge, (herein the “Ugly Frame”), appears on similar pieces of marquetry, some on appearing on your website on Page 11 of “Can You Help” being represented and clearly signed as BG, shown in Fig. 9.

Fig. 9: Two “BG” pieces with the Ugly Frame.



Which leads us from “when” to “who.”

II. “WHO” made it

As noted, apart from my purchase, I found five (5) instances with the identical construction techniques (taping, labelling, hangers, ugly frame appearance, wooden back, etc.), with identical English and German labels and misspellings, wherein, last but not least, the same marquetry style, and sometimes, subject matter, was used. Two of these were found to have BG corollaries, i.e., cut from the same design, if not the same template, and identified as BG pieces.

The group of five consists of the following:

- 1) Rothenburg Tower; in the Ugly Frame, however, the original frame is retrofitted with a recent ornamental gold frame to widen the frame (herein the “Large Rothenburg”); source – eBay (not shown);

- 2) Rothenburg Tower, different piece; in the Ugly Frame (herein the “Small Rothenburg”); source – Worthpoint (not shown);
- 3) Hamburg; in the Ugly Frame; source –“Can We Help” page 68; “Hamburg Scene by Unknown”/Tammy Marion;



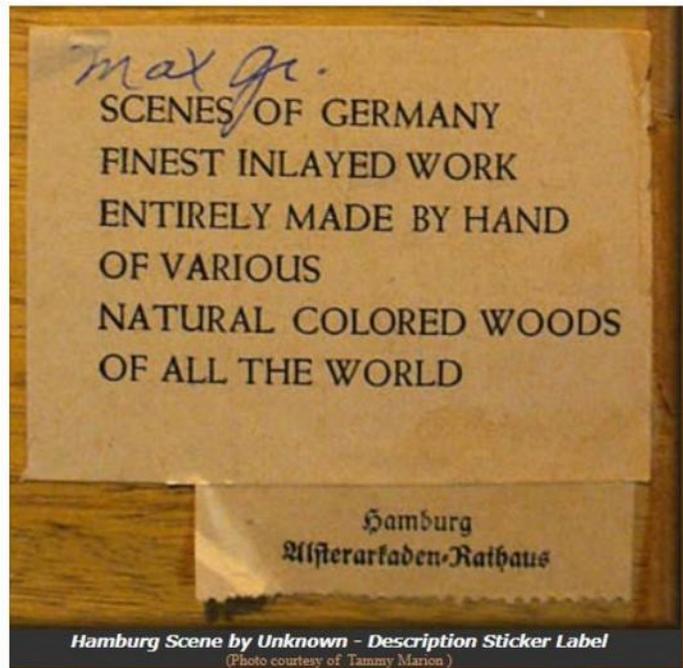
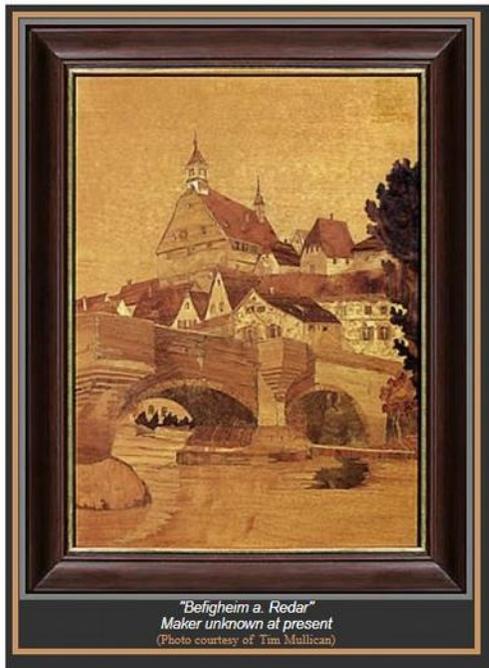
Interestingly, the handwritten “Max Gr.” is a clue without a home -- perhaps being the seller, Max, related to a “Gr[etaux]”?

Your comments about the English Label are noteworthy:

Our next picture is a lovely wood inlay picture of a scene in Hamburg. However, this picture doesn't appear to have originated from the studios of Buchschmid and Gretaux - or even Otto's ABC Studios. The original spelling of the text seen on the label on the reverse of the picture, rather points to the picture originating from perhaps Germany itself. We have adjusted the spelling so that it reads correctly, but the original text is as follows: "Scenes of Germany Finest Inlayd Work Entirely Made by Hand of Various Natural Colred Woods of All The World"

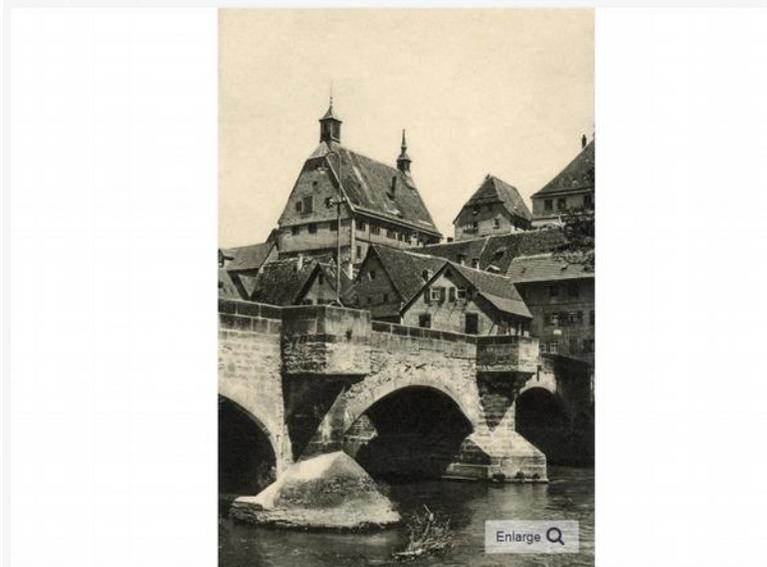
Obviously this is no guarantee that our assumption of the picture's origin is correct, however, it does seem likely given the various clues such as the style of the work and the Gothic nature of the type face used. If you know anything about this picture which could help us to identify the maker and origins of this picture, we would be very pleased to hear from you.

- 4) Besigheim am Neckar; in the Ugly Frame; source –“Can We Help” page 28; identified as “Befigheim a. Redar Maker unknown at present”/Tim Mullican;



- 5) The title includes a mistake: the “f” (in “Befigheim”) is actually a lowercase “s” in AltDeutsch and thus should read “Besigheim”; and, the word “Redar” should be the river “Neckar.” Each mistake is understandable because this  is an “N” in AltDeutsch, easily confused with an R; and this  is a “k” ... add a “c” in front, and the uninitiated easily see “Redar”. The actual location is “Besigheim am Neckar” as verified by this circa 1910 image from almost the same perspective:

Old Bridge at Besigheim am Neckar. Besigheim stands at the confluence of the Neckar and Enz rivers, Germany.





Again, your comments about the piece follow:

Tim tells us that he recently found this old marquetry picture in an antique mall and purchased it for a very nominal price just because he liked it. Tim appreciated the fine detail and work that went into it and didn't think at the time that it would have much value. Tim also says "this picture doesn't have the B & G label though. It does have paper labels on the back which say, "Scenes of Germany, Finest Inlay Work, Entirely made by hand of various natural colored woods of all the world" and "Befigheim a. Redar".” Tim tells us that he believes Befigheim is a town to be found in Southern Germany. Redar may therefore refer to a river in the town. If any of you, our visitors, can enlighten us with information about this picture, we would love to hear from you.

Of particular interest is that your website also includes another “Befigheim am Neckar”/Sylvia Smith on Page 11 of “Can You Help”, in the Ugly Frame. I have placed the two side by side for comparison:



Note the identical dark tree shape, and essentially identical template. Whereas the Mullican picture maker is “unknown”, having the German and English labels, the Smith image was identified under the heading “Further Examples of B & G Marquetry Pictures.” However, no authenticating signatures can be seen in either, perhaps due to picture size; Ms. Smith may have provided other authentication at the time the image was posted to which I am not privy. Nevertheless, the Ugly Frame appears around both of these, as well as two more images on the same Page 11 with the BG signature, e.g., Ulm view.

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- 6) Heidelberg Castle; in the Ugly Frame, of larger dimension 11 x 14; source –eBay



Again, of particular interest is that your website also includes an image entitled “Schoss Heidelberg” [should be “Schloss Heidelberg”]/Sylvia Smith on Page 11 of “Can You Help.”



The image is again virtually identical to the eBay image and also identified as an example of B&G marquetry.

The correlations for each of the last two works between the “unknown” maker and BG rely on whether Smith’s pieces are verified by provenance or signature.

III. Other Factors: Business Timeline and Markings

From your site, several facts stand out that provide a likely reason why the markings “BG” do not appear on some pieces, particularly on pre-war images for things such as souvenirs.

First, Jean Jacques Gretaux was born in Switzerland in 1908 (Page 8 “The History of Mr Gretaux”). A turning point in his woodworking business came with the installation of a parquet floor in a palace in Ethiopia, in 1928 at age 20, which while still a young man garnered him “international reputation which resulted in getting orders for other projects requiring the precision of Gretaux’s hands.” *Id.* The very next line and paragraph reads “WWII discontinued all planned and projected activities in his field completely” – this leaves 11 years of work unaccounted for on a timeline from 1928 to 1939, a time when for the most part after 1933 the economy had recovered from the Great Depression (1929) and Germans were finally feeling prosperous again, with money to spend. What was Gretaux doing during this time? In your next paragraph, it suggests “J.J. Gretaux changed over to miniature objects and specialized himself in delicate and intricate wood-inlaid presentation, whereby he was gaining fame and recognition. He created a large variety of designs ranging from figurative to architectural motifs.”

By the start of WWII, in 1939, Gretaux would have been 31, likely at a height in his business timeline and output, after gaining a reputation at age 20. The change to miniatures is consistent with pre-war souvenirs, and is entirely consistent with the use of the pre-war German Label on the pieces, if Gretaux was active making such pieces before the war. Furthermore, the war was just an ‘interruption’ in business, and picking up where one left off would be exactly what one would expect when the war ended to regain one’s economic footing. Hence, the type of marquetry sold after the war would be the same as before. For example, both the eBay Community discussion mentioned above about the Stuttgart “B.u.G” piece “picked up right after

WWII,” as well as other references to military personnel acquiring BG pieces immediately after WWII throughout your website, suggest that Gretaux had already been making small pieces before the war, that were then later bought by military personnel immediately after the war. Essentially, Gretaux’s product and skill sets didn’t change, merely the target consumer did.

Your website also states “Although most of their pictures were "signed" with their BG logo, there are many examples of their work that do not possess such an identifying signature.” (Page 2). The important question is when “most” of the “signed” pictures were made, and compare them with the unsigned ones; anecdotally, it appears most were signed post-war. Again, all this is consistent with the big picture.

Gretaux was born in 1908 and died at age 81 (page 8), thus in 1989. Buchschmid died in 2005 (page 5). Your site also states that “The company started its inlay marquetry picture production in the year of 1910. The founders [Mr. B and Mr. G]... have both since passed....” (page 5) Simple math suggests this can’t be true -- the year of founding in 1910 is a virtual impossibility, Gretaux being no more than 2 years old at that time, quite a young age to be handling woodworking tools and starting a business. Moreover, based on the year of death, Buchschmid had to be the younger of the two, perhaps born in the mid 1910’s (living to age 90 would mean Buchschmid was born in 1915). Moreover, Buchschmid probably partnered with Gretaux only after Gretaux was looking for help on his projects as a young man from the notoriety he had earned at age 20 in 1928; i.e., the partnership probably formed not much earlier than 1933, presumably during prosperous times when work picked up, and just 6 years from the start of WWII. If this hypothesis is confirmed with more facts, then it is also likely that the use of “BG”, or any signature at all, did not develop until after WWII. In short, Gretaux may have been ‘top dog’ before the war, but afterwards, all bets were off, because the market had changed so drastically.

It is unfortunate that no interview of Mr. B or G exists on these facts, as some of this information was provided third hand, by Dieter Becker, “a close friend of Mr. Buchschmid in the 1980’s”, but nevertheless not the horse’s mouth. According that source “The firm of Buchschmid and Grétaux made and sold many of their wood inlay pictures and pieces to railway companies and shipping lines for the purposes of decorating railway carriages and the state rooms and cabins of the passenger liners dating from the early years of the 20th Century.” The wording “early years” unfortunately cannot mean 1910s or 20s, unless Gretaux or Buchschmid were sons of “founders” and not the original founders themselves. Notably Anton Buchschmid, relation to Walter presently unconfirmed, is listed in an online digital German archive abstract as a business registrant sometime between 1919 and 1939 in Stuttgart-Vaihingen (where BG operated after WWII) dealing in “holtzkunst” and “intarsien” which is German for wood art and wood inlay -- i.e., the apple didn’t fall far from the tree. Walter may have learned the craft in Stuttgart-Vaihingen in his teens (circa mid 1920s to early 30s) from Anton and made and sold the German and English labelled pieces much later (possibly independently of Gretaux and thus unmarked) presumably provided as an ‘asset infusion’ to the BG business effort after the war to start some cash flow. However, Becker’s information suggests that the ‘railway art’ provided by both Mr. B and G was already underway during the 30s, and hence the unmarked pieces are likely

attributable to both. The earliest verifiable use of “BG” as a mark would be invaluable to help solve this problem, and, short of that, knowledge when the partnership was actually founded.

This leads me to the field of trademarks, that being my professional and commercial expertise. Trademarks evolve too. We have evidence that “B.u.G.” was used immediately after WWII, and then quickly disappeared in favor of BG. My experience suggests the use “B.u.G” is a natural precursor to BG, where the “u” (standing only for the conjunction “und,” i.e., “and”) gets dropped. I see it in my work to this day – marks get shorter, not longer. And it reduces unnecessary work in marquetry to boot, increasing efficiency. By the 1960s, the value of the BG mark was plainly evident to the owners, evidenced by their own statements about BG identifying the highest quality work. By 1989 when Gretaux died, the BG mark had long since solidified as an indicator of source to consumers, just as it is today. Yet, although we know work was already being done before WWII by Gretaux verly likely with Buchschmid as an essential employee if not partner, an example of “first use” of such mark prior to WWII is elusive.

BG is currently not known to have used any marks before WWII, and in that void, and given all the objective and cultural facts noted above, the “unknown” maker of the works is strongly attributable as Buchschmid & Gretaux.

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