

VOBOAM: inside perspectives

This brief article intends communicating to all our colleagues interested by the making as well as the history of an instrument some observations that we made « *in situ* », that is, looking inside guitars made by this illustrious family of luthiers.



Guitar made by Voboam, transformed in six strings in the 19th century; we can note that the head has been radically modified to hold mechanics and shows a “Panormo” profile. The original bridge as well as the “mustaches” have disappeared and substituted by a 6 string bridge piercing the soundboard, which leads us to suppose important modifications inside... This guitar was modified back to baroque at the end of the 20th century.

The conversion to six strings was a violent modification for these guitars. The head was modified or even changed and the bridge, now useless, was replaced by another to hold six strings, sometimes piercing the top, sometimes not. The neck, its heel, and the fingerboard had to be enlarged to match the new playing area on the soundboard. Very often, the “mustaches” were kept. Silk strings, covered with metal, were supposed to be more resistant and allow for a greater tension over gut strings, therefore bracings were also modified.

The luthiers, opening these guitars to make modifications, were probably surprised in front of the extreme simplicity of the original construction and assembly. They did not hesitate in changing the number of bracings on tops as well as on backs and, probably persuaded that the instruments would not hold the new tension of six strings, affixed supports of all kinds inside.



Each time a Voboam arrived to our workshop it was like those presented here : covered with apocryphal material (cloth, papers, cleats, stops, parchments, etc.) with an incoherent number of bracings (sometimes even up to six on the back), impressive counter bridges, etc.

In our capacity of « archeologues » exploring in the field of lutherie we have to remove, layer after layer, apocryphal or strange materials found. The instrument has to be cleaned thoroughly but we must avoid to wash it entirely and thus leave the wood "naked", as it would loose numerous marks and indications of its history and successive modifications.



The top has been entirely washed, the linings are apocrypha, the bracings lie on a posterior parchment, the lower part of the top is blocked by a large later parchment. Almost all marks have disappeared. (Private collection)



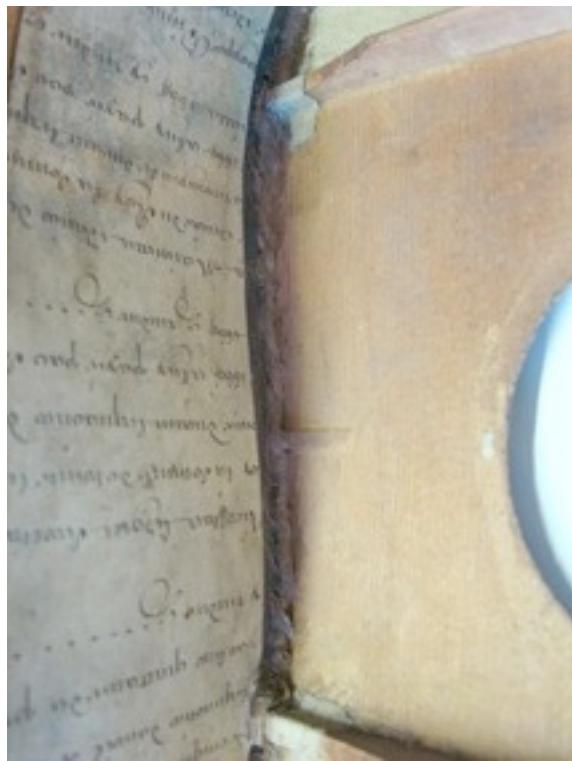
The top has been washed, some positioning cleats are still visible, but marks of twine or linings have disappeared. Purflings and pistagnes are not fixed anymore. (Collection Musée instrumental de Nice – Palais Lascaris)

We exclude that a luthier, during the construction of an instrument, had the idea of covering with glue and heavy cloth (sometimes very thick) the inside of the resonating box. Parchments glued inside, even if “old”, are apocrypha as well and serve as economical reinforcements easy to apply during restorations. Only the purfling joints, back and ribs, are sometimes covered by strips of cloth or parchment, as light as possible.



On this piece of rib, we can see the different materials added during restoration or remodelling such as cloth, wood, paper. Underneath the successive layers the pistagnes located on the top appear. Everything is completely drowned in glue.

Soundboards, during the construction, liberated from ribs and blocks are positioned thanks to small cleats glued at regular intervals all around the guitar top. We observed this practice in all Voboam guitars that we had the possibility to inspect.



Two bracings, cleats, and the twine in their original state; marks of the missing rosette, apocryphal cloth intended to maintain



An old parchment dated 1669, the bracing and its cleat, twine, and an apocryphal cloth to reinforce the top/ribs gluing,

bracings to the top.

another for the bracing/soundboard.

The majority of restorations done on Voboam guitars show the same modifications; tops are joined to the ribs by a series of cleats in the « Spanish style » or by cloth applied “astraddle” over the ribs and the top. Often, stops of various thickness maintain the bracings on the ribs. The joint top/ribs is always hidden under the modifications. When carefully cleaning a very simple Voboam, with no purflings nor extravagant decorations – which prevented it from important modifications – we found on the totality of the gluing top/ribs a twine drowned in glue.

This ancient super efficient process is enough to maintain the top and its pistagnes to the ribs. Bracings are positioned to the ribs, and since those have no linings to block them, the extremity of these bracings has a particular profile, oblique, with a small cleat to fit the bracing against the ribs. Linings against the soundboard – we can see now – were restorations added later. To close the guitar, the luthier – to secure gluing – has put a small lining on the side of the back, thin and narrow, since it does not have bracings. The impressive “buttress” of the upper and lower blocks strongly block the structure, assure the closing of the whole box and anchor the neck. The back of the instrument is the backbone of the guitar’s structure.

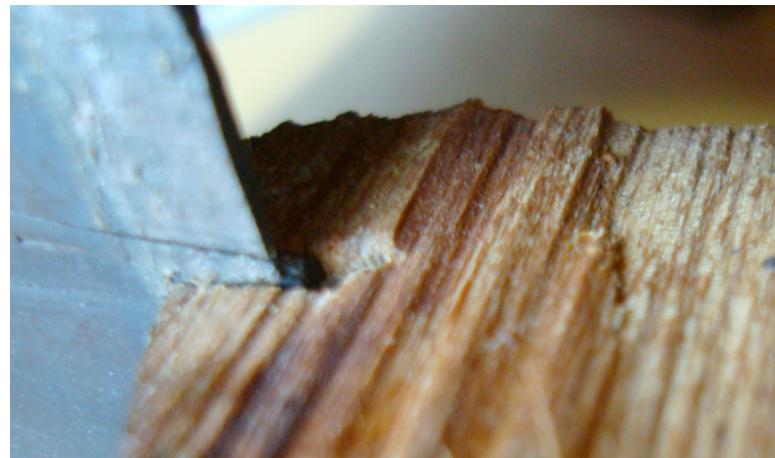


Lower block

The upper block distant from the ribs, and above on the right, a canvas put "astraddle" style over the ribs and the soundboard.

Blocks: the upper block always has an archaic set up, ribs inserted in the block, a long block foot against the back, soundboard and ribs are as free as possible. Sometimes, struts positioned before closing the box solidify the ribs to the block.

The lower block is as thin as possible but with a triangular squaring against the back for a better anchor.



Rib inserted in the upper block

Backs are thick and without bracings even in the case of backs with purflings. Under the soundboard, there are always two braces above the rosette and at least one underneath, sometimes smaller oblique bracings – remembrance of the luth bracings – and always the small positioning cleats. Ribs are very thin, which explains the fact that they can be often damaged and doubled with apocryphal material.



Positioning cleats and bracing underneath the twine

It is evident that the Voboam wanted their guitars' soundboard to be as less anchored as possible to the ribs and blocks to privilege sound first of all. Later, the restorers of the 19th century remodelling those guitars did not understand those craftsmen's techniques, considering them as "primitive" luthiers more preoccupied by aesthetics than sonority. They quickly modified the instruments to adapt to the current fashion, with no curiosity nor respect for their predecessors' knowledge.

All these elements common to the guitars of the Voboam family of luthiers, the luxury instruments as well as the simple ones, thanks to the set up allowing for a certain tension, a particular elasticity, offered a typical "Voboam" sound to their numerous clientele. The major number of guitars constructed by this family of luthiers that can be found in collections testify of the quality of their instruments and the success they obtained amongst guitarists.

In the beginning of the 18th century, these set up processes were abandoned and guitars were constructed like violins: a box to which a neck is adjusted.