

The myth of the patinated Windsor chair

Many a collector has been sold a Windsor chair exhibiting a fine dark colouration, often referred to as 'patination'. This colouration is said to reflect the chair's long-term use under rural conditions. Patination is defined as a dark sometimes glossy surface finish most likely caused by a smoky environment such as a cottage hearth, and/or human contact, grease and dust. However, is this really the case?

In his book on the regional chair, Dr Cotton describes how Thames Valley Windsors were given a surface finish. The process involves an initial stain consisting of alum with either urine or tartar or the application of a commercial stain. When dry a coat of shellac varnish was applied and sometimes polished with beeswax. Note however that this process is unlikely to produce the dark colouration described as patination.

The conclusion from the above is that so-called patination was produced by some other method. In this context it is of interest that fine quality eighteenth-century yew wood Windsors are often lacking any dark colouration whereas contemporary Windsors of lesser quality are often heavily coloured. Unfortunately, there does not appear to be any published information on this topic. Possibly the colouration was done by antique restorers or dealers wishing to give the chairs an 'olde time' appearance.



True patination on a modern handrail. *Photo Bob Parrott*



The back and rear legs of a nineteenth-century Windsor chair showing marked false black patination. *Photo Bob Parrott*

This might have been carried out in the late nineteenth century when there was a fashion for dark ebonised furniture.

Some support for this view is reinforced by the way the chairs have been coloured. While the modern hand rail illustrated shows dark colouration (true patination), where many hands have contacted the top and sides of the rail, by contrast the photograph of a Windsor chair back and legs shows dark colouration on areas of the woodwork not affected by human contact.

Finally, support for the above comes from Andrew Singleton, one of our foremost dealers. When describing an eighteenth-century comb-back Windsor (stock no.9307) he concluded that 'the chair retains some of its black stain paint.' It is also the case that on many Windsors the blackish colouration has probably been produced by the application of a dark varnish either alone or varnish applied on top of a black paint finish. Hopefully, the above will not detract from the enjoyment of Windsor chair ownership!

Bob Parrott