

HISTORIC SURFACE FINISHES ON FURNITURE

R.F.S. Technical Day, June 1st, 1996

Twenty five years ago this course could not have happened. Our Society had not been invented and the studying of furniture making, history and appreciation was by people who seemed to be separated by opaque walls.

On June 1st there met in Wycombe a group of eager learners of varied ages; full time restorers, lecturers, antique dealers, curators, auctioneers, amateur seekers of knowledge and furniture students. We were divided into three groups so that we fitted into the demonstration rooms. Each group changed places so that we learnt in turn about:

- a. methods of colouring woods
- b. surface finishing with shellacs
- c. final polishing with waxes

These dealt with new surfaces and of course the repairs to old surfaces. I say learnt but of course this included a certain amount of 'unlearning' information received from not very good books or from not very well informed friends and fellow workers. One well known personality for whom I have the greatest respect said at lunch time well I did not think there was so much to learn.

On returning home in the evening I felt a little attack of the 'if onlys'. The information which is available at colleges such as Buckinghamshire was not possible when many of us were young. Had it been then many more of us would have worked in this field. Students work full time for three years and we were free to see their projects and work (students still working at 12.30 on a Saturday!) tables of all sizes, chairs of all types, chests of drawers, chaises longue either new or renovations. But to my delight there was someone making a single sculler with fine mahogany veneers. I used to row as a student and my mind pictured the maker of this boat sitting on it for its first outing on the river. Full marks for the college for recognising that a seat (albeit in a boat) is definitely a piece of furniture.

Some years ago I was involved in a technical appreciation day with the FHS, I must congratulate the members of our Council on making June 1st such a successful day. I very much hope that this will be but the first of a number of such courses.

To paraphrase Shakespeare in Henry V 'You who were not there have no idea what you missed'. Pester them for a repeat.

John Plowman

AN OVERVIEW OF MATERIALS USED ON SURFACE FINISHES

by Leslie Charteris

The afternoon got off to a brisk start with an illustrated talk by Leslie Charteris, a London-based furniture restorer, on the subject of '*An overview of materials used on surface finishes, their uses, advantages and disadvantages and their long-term deterioration.*' In fact, a new and highly stimulating critical look at the materials we tend to take for granted.

Starting with a historical overview, he pointed out that much of what we read in standard texts is reworking of earlier information which is often misleading (perhaps deliberately so!) or frankly wrong, and is bedevilled by changes in language use and nomenclature.

Moving on through the various materials, he pointed out that problems occur with wax finishes because they remain soft at modern room temperatures. Many materials in fact never change, hence the continuing mobility of bitumen added to varnish; he made the point that furniture finishers tended to follow artist's varnishing techniques (Sir Joshua Reynolds mixed bitumen into his paint, with brilliant but subsequently disastrous results).

The only oils that actually dry are Tung oil and boiled linseed: raw linseed remains forever mobile and will re-soften in time. He showed a table of the moisture-excluding effectiveness of various varnishes, demonstrating that while they may seal surfaces against liquid water penetration, all are in varying degrees ineffective in excluding water vapour, so varnished and French polished furniture will still respond to changes in relative humidity. In fact, linseed oil actually attracts moisture, the reverse of a seal!

Using slides, he showed some examples of deterioration. Specially interesting was a pew-end from a London Synagogue, 17th.C but refinished in 1800 using a varnish containing Asphaltum (bitumen). Part had been preserved perfectly under a screwed-on strengthening piece, but most had crazed into minute islands of bitumen. In the workshop, the 200yr. old bitumen was on the move again.

In addition to these fascinating facts and examples, he gave a comprehensive survey of the various varnish resins (natural and synthetic) and solvents, and the nature and composition of the traditional oil and spirit varnishes. He answered our questions, and provided a bibliography.

Altogether, it was a highly stimulating session, challenging those established notions about finishes that have, like the finishes themselves, 'deteriorated with age'.

Luke Millar

HISTORIC SURFACES WITH REFERENCE TO AMERICAN FURNITURE: SOURCES OF INFORMATION, THE CRAFTSMAN; STAINS, DYES & STAIN PAINTS; OILS, WAXES AND VARNISHES; ANALYSIS AND IDENTIFICATION by Robert D. Mussey, Jr., Boston, Massachusetts.

We were very fortunate to have Robert D. Mussey, Jr., a highly-respected furniture and upholstery conservator from Boston, Massachusetts, with us for the Historic Surface Finishes day at High Wycombe. Mr. Mussey had a wonderful selection of slides from his work in the States which illustrated common problems in identifying surface finishes as well as current methods of repairing classical finishes. Mr. Mussey and his associates often utilize advanced methods of microscopy and X-ray techniques to determine the original finish and alterations to the piece. Such methods are quite similar to those used to identify paint colours. Utilizing tiny flakes of the finish taken from crevices in a piece of furniture that have are least likely to have been altered (for instance in the crevice of a joint), they are set into a resin support and the number of coats and types of finish can be determined by examining the layers. His slides illustrated the operation, including the microscopy slides taken from the flake. He then determines the least evasive method of refinishing the piece is order to 'restore' its original appearance. The Client's preference is also important in determining the treatment; many clients in the States prefer a surface treatment that does not harm the original surface (if it survives). Mr. Mussey and his team can 'coax' an original surface, such as beeswax, 'out' by using gentle heat and solvent application to eliminate or reduce the crackle appearance.

The various finishes used in the colonies were also discussed including shellac or 'lac' finishes, and the more common beeswax surface. Beeswax was probably one of the most common finishes, particularly in the seventeenth and early eighteenth century, largely due to the problem of transportation of lac and other materials from Europe that were not readily available. He noted how many original finishes were quite poor and often 'went off' quite quickly. French polish was not regularly used until early in the nineteenth century. However, many of the colonial surface finishes are repairable and the treatment is tailored accordingly.

Mr. Mussey's relaxed yet professional style of lecturing, his illustrations (particularly the detail slides) and the copious amount of information relayed to his audience was very well received. The Regional Furniture Society was very fortunate to have Mr. Mussey join us. His lecture was a comprehensive introduction to the advanced conservation techniques that are used in discovering more about original surface finishes and their treatment. His lecture complemented the other speakers of the day.

Anne Roger Haley

HISTORIC SURFACE FINISHES

by Simon Feingold

The study of Historic Finishes on British Furniture has been approached in several ways. Analysis of existing pieces of furniture in relation to their dates indicates how finishes have changed with time and inventories help to support this; menus have been published which tell how finishes were made up and how the jobs were to be done; and attempts can be made to reproduce these historic finishes when restoring furniture. Mr. Simon Feingold, a furniture restorer, told us of his work in these areas.

Very early pieces were not highly finished and some were left unfinished. Smoothing the surface and applying wax or paint preserved the piece and produced a harder wearing surface. When furniture was made from mixed timbers or it was desired to produce a uniform finish, then veneering, painting and staining became common. Sometimes the finish was not wood but fabrics or skins. As techniques improved workers moved away from 'onepot' finishes such as beeswax to complex processes such as staining, shellac (a very old material) and waxing. This information can be obtained from close study of the surfaces but when the surface appearance is a combination of the way the wood was finished, its staining, varnishing and polishing, the interpretation can get difficult. If it was subsequently cleaned or repolished then the full interpretation can be impossible. All this adds to the difficulty of restoring damaged furniture and preserving what exists.

The earliest inventory is from Kenilworth in the sixteenth century. This and others show that paint, in a range of colours, was commonly used as well as varnishes and graining/staining to simulate other woods.

Many menus have been published such as those included in Sheraton's Cabinet Directory. However, relating them to modern materials is difficult eg translating 'Dragon's Blood', 'Aloes' and 'Tripoli'. Not all of the old materials are still available. Additional problems exist when following menus as not all the details are always given, possibly to protect a craftsman's secrets. Painters/stainers and gilders also created Guilds to help workers and protect their trades and secrets.

A fascinating talk and many thanks and best wishes for future progress to Simon.

George Freeman

THE UNASHAMED ROMANCE OF PATINA

by Christopher Claxton Stevens

Christopher gave a subjective view of patina in an unapologetic way, pointing out the thin divide between unsightly blemishes and possible deterioration and the aesthetic tactile joy of colour and texture.

He gave an imaginative introduction by studying objects other than furniture, inspired by the definition of patina as a film or incrustation produced by oxidation on old bronzes. The finish on these bronzes, discovered in Chinese tomb excavations in the 12th century, was copied first by the Japanese and later in

Renaissance Italy onto bronzes, to mimic age. We were introduced to the idea that the protective lacquer on brassware also softens its metallic appearance; with the addition of a little red dye, a mellow golden effect was achieved, only to be destroyed by excessive buffing which results in a flat mirror-like surface.

Patina played an important part in the appearance of natural materials, such as the golden colour in much-handled ivory, the velvet lustre of tortoiseshell and horn, or the slight incrustation and iridescence on ancient glass. All of these are not to be confused with disfiguring diseases of decomposition such as crizzling on 17th century glass or the yellowing of paper from light and contact with acid.

With wood, the original definition of patina must now extend to changes beneath the surface. Examples include sunlight on mahogany, changing its new wood redness to gradations of colour tones, and on rosewood changing it from a dark figured wood to one of light honey colour; and oxidation as an addition to patination, hardening the surface by a chemical process. All these changes produce the history of a piece something that cannot be fabricated in a workshop and give the best assurances of authenticity.

Sensitive restoration can distinguish between maintaining a fine old patina and an excessively stained, scratched and dirty surface which obscures fine figuring or inlaid decoration.

Peter Owen

CONSERVATION OF PATINATED SURFACES

by John Kitchin

An interesting and thought-provoking lecture on the conservation viewpoint, in relation to patinated surfaces, was brought to us by John Kitchin. He suggested that, since patina occurred on historic items, which are in themselves a document of the past, the patina became part of this document and any alteration to the patina must be carefully justified. The conservator's approach should involve examination and recording prior to any treatment. Some patination is damaging to the object itself and its removal may help preserve the object. But it must be acknowledged that all objects will patinate with time, and so arbitrary removal of patina to create a more 'as original' finish may be a step our inheritors will decry.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank Christopher Claxton Stevens and Jake Kaner for all their efforts in helping to arrange such an informative and challenging day.

Simon Feingold

AMERICAN WINDSOR CHAIRS

A large audience attended two stimulating lectures given by Nancy Goynne Evans at Buckinghamshire College, High Wycombe on Saturday 12th October 1996. She spoke on her recently published and long-awaited work, "American Windsor Chairs", a review of which is given on p.5. This lecture was jointly organised by the RFS and the British Regional Furniture Study Centre at High Wycombe.