

6th TECHNICAL DAY, 1st DECEMBER 2001 THE HISTORY AND CONSERVATION OF PAINTED FURNITURE

TREATMENT OF PAINTED HISTORIC FURNITURE by Gregory Landrey

Gregory Landrey introduced us to the pioneering seminar organised by the Winterthur Institute in November 1994, titled *'Painted Wood Surfaces'*. Much of the work in this field since that time has focused on examining painted surfaces using advanced microscopy techniques. These include fluorescent microscopy which involves the use of an ultra violet light source which enhances the different layers of paint. Such techniques facilitate an examination of the structure of each layer, the extent of surface degradation and subsequent layer applications. Case studies examined a painted multiple shield-back rush seated settee and a fancy floral painted tablet back chair made by John Finley in 1810.

Enzyme-based paste has proved useful in the cleaning of degraded or opaque surfaces. This process is often performed prior to the restoration of missing areas or as a guide to the likely make up of absent patches. Such an approach had assisted in the restoration of a card table originating from the Baltimore area. Similar treatment had also proved useful in removing intrusive or unacceptable recent renovations prior to modern reversible conservation. The use of acrylic paints for the replacement of lost or damaged surfaces was discussed in view of the reversible nature of such applications.

Ultrasound is another exploratory technique now being used to evaluate obscure or encrusted paint finishes.

With respect to original painted rushwork on American fancy chairs, white, ochre and stone colours have been recorded and due care in their conservation and display is required to avoid any further loss.

CONSERVING PAINTED FINISHES by Alexander Schouvaloff

This lecture proved an excellent counterpoint to the work of Gregory Landrey and his team. A number of general conclusions had been drawn from an analysis of work carried out for clients, often within predetermined financial constraints.

Within such a context Alexander's work followed an interesting mix of conservation and restoration which was clarified in considerable detail by reference to a case study relating to the treatment of a japanned table.

A PAINTED CABINET IN PERSPECTIVE by Hans Piena

Hans Piena's lecture had been previously presented to members on the recent Dutch visit which was reported in Newsletter No. 36 on pages 4 and 5.

GILLOW'S PAINTED FURNITURE by Susan Stuart

The Gillow archives provide numerous references to painted and gilded surface treatment of furniture, made in their workshops, during the 18th century.

The 1770 records refer to the use of gilding on a set of Windsor chairs supplied at a price of seven shillings each to a

Mr Hyde of Manchester. The vulnerability of such chairs to transit damage was evident in a subsequent request to supply similar Windsor chairs to another Manchester client, but gilding was to be executed on their arrival in Manchester.

A dressing table with a simulated satinwood finish over a deal carcass was a typical example of the use of simulation to create the look of a more expensive timber. Gillows records include a number of references to the cost involved in retaining skilled painters on their workshop staff. The relatively high costs of oil finishes versus rapid drying finishes, utilising spirit stains together with a copal varnish overcoat, was also discussed; the latter finish being one used by coach makers.

It was suggested that the scarcity of mahogany during the 1770s may have influenced the introduction of simulated paint finishes on alternative timbers. However the adverse aspect of such an approach was the fragility of such painted surfaces, the limited availability of skilled painters to execute the work, the cost of such work and the cost of repainting; sometimes within a relatively short timescale.

Several gilded chairs attributed to the Oxford Street workshop and made about 1805 – 1810 for the Earl of Darlington were shown. They had the signature of 'Mr Jones' or 'Peter Jones', who was probably Gillow's gilder painter, on their seat rails. In the case of the 'Stewart pattern' chair made out of mahogany, a bill of 1801 indicated that the paintwork was the most expensive item, listed at 11 shillings, which represented one third of the total cost.

We were also introduced to another important set of painted chairs which were made in the London shop for Broughton Hall in 1803; a similar pattern was known in Lancaster as the 'Montgomerie pattern'. In 1792 Thomas Wilkes was named as the painter of a cornice supplied to a North Lancashire customer. It is interesting to note the use and significance of the term 'Trafalgar' used to describe a painted version of a cornice which had been supplied in 1807 to Lord Montgomerie.

JMB

PAINTED FURNITURE FROM BRITAIN'S REGIONAL TRADITIONS by Dr Bernard Cotton

Dr Cotton commenced his talk by emphasising the importance of taking account of contextual factors influencing the design and traditions of painted furniture making. Such factors often include the intention to simulate more expensive timbers onto less expensive softwoods, the commitment of journeymen and their masters to working within inherited or well established workshop traditions and the domestic purpose to be served by individual items of furniture.

Cotton noted that J. C. Loudon's publication *'An Encyclopaedia of Cottage, Farm and Villa architecture and furniture'*, 1833, introduces us to the value of paintwork in terms of surface preservation and the role of ornamentation.

Case studies from Black houses in the Highlands of Scotland, from the 19th century, were investigated in relation to the organisation of traditional domestic interiors with their focus on the central hearth and the role of the dresser with its food preparation surfaces and sloping top above the shelves which provided protection from spots of rain dripping from the roof. Wallpaper was hung on string, away from the walls, up

to the 1960s to act as a modernising feature of the house. There was a noticeable absence of a central table, which is quite familiar within domestic interiors elsewhere in the British Isles.

The skills of the wright encompassed joinery, coffin making, cart building, furniture making as well as the painting and graining of furniture surfaces. Examples of such work, which were illustrated by slides, included a box shaped dresser base and meal gernel from the Isle of Lewis. The meal gernel, partitioned to facilitate the storage of different types of cereals, including oat meal and barley flour, was sometimes constructed in the shape of a bureau with applied decorative split mouldings to the outer edges and painted with simulated finishes, which included rosewood. A food cupboard was also shown with multiple panelling to the doors in the upper tier, which had been painted to simulate burr oak.

An example of a Lowland dresser was shown with a simulated mahogany and satinwood finish, applied split mouldings, sycamore cross banding around the drawer edges and a central row of drawers across the shelves. Another Lowland example from a Carluke workshop was discussed which was vividly simulated as burr walnut.

Painted Welsh dressers similar to the example illustrated on a slide were made during the latter part of the 19th century by workshops such as that of William Morgan of Haverford West, alongside workshops in South Wales that made similar versions out of oak. Simulated oak pollarding and other grain patterns of oak were effects applied to the deal carcass of a rare example shown from the Pembrokeshire region.

Within the English context, polychrome paint finishes were applied to West Country dressers which, in combination with other special design features, make them immediately recognisable as originating from this region. In one instance the configuration of a painted wall dresser was recognisable by the convex shape to the shelves, with pilasters each side and multiple drawers in the base.

The involvement of three generations of the Crispe family of East Dereham, Norfolk, as carpenters, joiners, cabinet makers, wheelwrights, and painters and decorators has produced some valuable insight into vernacular furniture making traditions of East Anglia during the 19th century. A typical example is the cupboard-washstand made by Herbert Crispe using reclaimed wood which he had painted to simulate oak.

The longevity of such traditions into the 20th century is illustrated in the catalogue of Scott and Son of Kings Lynn which was published in 1934. The illustration of a washstand in the catalogue states that it is available in 'light' or 'mahogany' colours at a price of 14 shillings and 11 pence. A similar 19th century version has been recorded with a pencil price tag of 3 shillings applied to one of the under surfaces.

Painted chests of drawers, flour/meal bins, constructed with a bureau configuration, were also typical of the range of furniture made for the impoverished rural population of East Anglia during much of the 19th century.

In the above instances, scumble and graining effects were all produced using oil or water colour based paints to simulate more expensive woods on deal carcasses.

JMB

THE HISTORY AND TECHNIQUES OF PENWORK by Noël Riley

Penwork is the decoration of wood surfaces, usually in black and white, but sometimes in other colours, with designs painted in a reserve or 'voiding' technique. The picture or pattern most often appears on the uncoloured wood in reserves on a dark background, with details of the design worked up with fine pen or brush strokes. Colour slides illustrated a 17th century Adige chest made of cypress wood with a background carved away with details worked up in penwork. We were also introduced to English penwork examples which included cedar wood panels from the Merchant's House in Marlborough (1654), Mauchline ware, a tea canister, a table cabinet and a chinoiserie visiting card case.

Penwork is often regarded as a type of japanning but whereas japanning uses pigmented varnishes and is opaque, penwork is a watercolour painting technique, with varnish applied simply as a protection to the finished decoration; there are no attempts at relief in penwork as there are with the built-up gesso and gilded details on many japanned surfaces. In reality, the difference between japanning and penwork is not a clear one, and it becomes particularly blurred in some of the later examples of penwork chinoiserie in polychrome. By the late 18th century the terms japanning and painting appear to have been used interchangeably, which adds confusion.

The decoration of boxes and tea caddies, small items of furniture and occasionally larger pieces with designs in reserves on black backgrounds was a progression from the painted furniture fashionable in the late eighteenth century. As the polychrome delicacy of Adam decoration was blown by the cool wind of archaeological reform in the 1790s and early 1800s, colours were muted into grisaille paintings or dark silhouettes, while the subtleties of shading and perspective gave way to strong outlines and two-dimensional patterns (eg. Flaxman).

The great majority of penwork compositions are of three types: neoclassical, chinoiserie or flowers. Others include coats of arms, shells and butterflies. The figures and patterns on Greek vases are considered to be influential on the early development of penwork, and the technique was soon recognised as a way of simulating Indian ivory inlaid furniture. The designs of brass inlays in fashionable (usually rosewood) furniture of the 1815-25 period have parallels in penwork.

Other inspirations for penwork may also have been derived from papier-mâché and japanned tin-plated wares (tôle), both of which made effective use of black or dark coloured grounds foiled with decoration in lighter colours or gilding.

The developing art of lithography may also have had some impact on penwork. Both techniques were presented contemporaneously by Rudolph Ackermann (Repository of Arts, May 1817, April and July 1819).

Noël emphasised that the term, penwork, is a relatively new one although it was certainly in common use among antique dealers during the 1930s, and probably earlier but the first written reference appears to be in Brian Reade's *Regency Antiques* (1953). During the 19th century, penwork was referred to as 'voiding', 'imitation ivory inlaying' or simply

'inlaying', 'Indian painting to imitate ebony and ivory', 'Chinese painting', and even 'scagliola', which gives a further indication of the variety of sources it drew upon.

The Repository of Arts first alluded to decoration 'on a black ground, in imitation of Indian ivory inlaid work' in 1810, and this may be the first reference to the technique.

Although it is generally thought that penwork decoration originated in the late 18th century, in reality there are few examples prior to 1805 when 'japanning' on the backs of chairs sometimes took the form of Greek vase figures or neoclassical motifs, and simple black painted borders began to appear on sofas and other furniture. Penwork decoration also appears on early 19th century Tunbridge wares.

Deal is the base timber of most of the larger cabinets which are thought to have been constructed expressly for penwork decoration. The Lady's Album of Fancy Work (1850) recommended merely 'common white wood or deal' as the basis for small objects.

Coloured grounds for penwork were introduced in the 1830s. Earlier manuals speak only of black backgrounds. J. Stokes, writing in 1838, refers to the ground as being 'either black or any colour at fancy'. Bright red, and brown simulating wood or tortoiseshell are to be found, but green was occasionally used.

The supposition that a vast quantity of penwork was done by amateurs is underpinned by the evidence of the pastime manuals as well as the references in handbooks, like Nathaniel Whittock's, designed for professional painters and decorators. Even relatively major penwork undertakings display the idiosyncrasies, and sometimes the quirks, of unique objects by amateurs; some show a hesitation in drawing and a naiveté in composition which add to their charm; they are hugely elaborate and therefore labour-intensive in their decoration, in contrast to the repetitive formulas of the known professional pieces (eg Tunbridge wares), and they tend to combine sources and styles of design and pattern far more eclectically and retrospectively than would be likely in professional work.