The Decorator

Fall 2011 Vol. 65 No. 2

Journal of

The Historical Society of Early American Decoration, Inc.

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Contents

Front and back cover: Album owned by Dolores Samsell.

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The Historical Society of Early American Decoration

A society with affiliated chapters organized to carry on the work and honor the memory of Esther Stevens Brazer, pioneer in the perpetuation of Early American Decoration as an art; to promote continued research in that field; to record and preserve examples of early American decoration; to maintain such exhibits and publish such works on the subject of early American decoration and the history thereof as will further the appreciation of such art, the elevation of the standards of its reproduction and utilization; to assist in efforts public and private, in locating and preserving material pertinent to our work, and to cooperate with other societies in the accomplishment of purposes of mutual concern.

Vision: HSEAD will be, and will become recognized as, a preeminent national authority on early American decoration.

Mission: HSEAD will maintain a core membership of practicing guild artists supported by active programs of education, research, and exhibitions to perpetuate and expand the unique skills and knowledge of early American decoration.

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Letter from the Editor

Our first story is about papier-mâché cases for cards, portfolios and daguerreotypes. I always loved the cases that daguerreotypes came in, along with the cases for the tintypes and ambrotypes. When I started to research these, I found that card cases and portfolios for writing paper were all made the same way. Little did I know, until I started calling around, the wonderful examples of all of these that our members had acquired. I hope you enjoy the beautiful pieces that are shown.

The Fall issue of the *Decorator* is always eagerly anticipated by our members because of the award pieces in it. Our members have not disappointed us because they have provided many lovely pieces for us to admire. Of course, at the last meeting in Albany, penwork was introduced and that added to the collection of great pieces.

When we had our grand opening of our research center at Sturbridge, Old Sturbridge Village had an ongoing exhibit that was fireplace related. Part of it was overmantels and fireboards. Knowing that our members would be interested in both of these, I was able to get permission to print several examples of each of these.

Yvonne Jones is back with her piece entitled "Digging Through the Layers". It certainly is a long story that has evolved trying to trace the history of japanned papier-mâché and tinware. Many times it includes the task of trying to correct the myths from earlier writings and rewrite the new story after further historical research.

Sandra Cohen's book review finds Linda Carter Lefko and Jane Redcliffe's book entitled *Folk Art Murals of the Rufus Porter School* doing the same thing as Yvonne's article. They have written about their journey of finding new facts and correcting old myths concerning Rufus Porter. Perhaps this will shed new light on the Rufus Porter School.

Lynne Richards,
Decorator Editor

Papier-Mâché Cases for Cards and Daguerreotypes

by Lynne Richards

The year was 1839, and photographic methods were just being introduced. "On September 30, 1839, the *New York Morning Herald* describing the first public display of the newly invented photographic process, wrote, 'It is the first time that the rays of the sun were ever caught on this continent, and imprisoned in their glory and beauty, in a Moroccan case with golden clasps'"[1]. What a wonderful device! Think of the possibilities that previously had not existed. Until then, only miniatures painted by an artist could be had, and the likeness of the client depended on the skill of the artist. With the advent of this new process came the increased need for small cases to hold these dear photos.

From the late 1700s to the early 1800s oval frames had been used for miniature oil paintings, but by 1839 frames had evolved into rectangular. "By 1840, general size proportion for the rectangular case was a ratio of four-fifths of an inch in width to each inch in length. In thickness, it was generally five-eighths of an inch."[2] There were three types of mountings which could be ordered for the photographs: lockets which could be worn around the neck, frames of wood which could be hung on the wall, and leather and/or papier-mâché cases which could be put into a pocket.

Portfolio and two cases with mother-of-pearl decoration owned by Shirley Baer. Note: Some photographs in this article are from the HSEAD archives, with no or minimal information available.

In America, daguerreotype cases resembled books, but in England they remained as flip-top cases. In the early 1840s, a single piece of leather, embossed by a brass cylinder die, was used for the outside. The leather was then glued directly onto wood which in most cases was pine. Henry Clay's method of making papier-mâché replaced the leather. Clay took ten sheets of rag paper pasted on both sides with a mixture of cooked glue and flour, and then pressed it into a metal mold. "After trimming the edges, the sheets were covered with linseed oil for 'waterproofing' and baked at one hundred degrees Fahrenheit."[3] This was known as the "best" papier-mâché as opposed to the "common" papier-mâché made from macerated pulp.[4] They then subjected the cases to pressure to make them more durable. Sulphate of iron, quicklime, glue or the whites of eggs made them somewhat waterproof. To make them fireproof, they added borax and phosphate of soda[5]. In the middle of the nineteenth century when daguerreotypes were the most popular, Henry T. Anthony invented a new method for covering miniature cases and eliminated the labor intensive process of plying and sticking the many sheets of paper into the mold. He invented a press that could compress the papers and therefore create the papier-mâché from molds much quicker.

Papier-mâché case with floral and gilt decoration owned by Lynne Richards. Approximately 2½" x 3½".

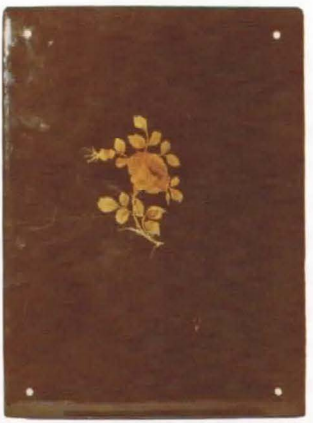
Many of the papier-mâché cases consisted of two shallow boxes hinged on one side with a fastener on the other. Early inside covers were lined with padded silk, while later covers (around 1843) were lined with impressed velvet. The velvets with impressed roses or harps sold the best. On some, if you were to lift the velvet, the name of the firm that produced them could be found.

By 1825, a mother-of-pearl inlay technique had been developed by Jennens and Bettridge (1815-1864). They had taken over Henry Clay's papier-mâché box making company in 1815. Henry Clay was the first papier-mâché box maker to hold the Royal Warrant. Many of the papier-mâché designs were florals made with mother-of-pearl. The mother-of-pearl designs were laid on a soft ground of black varnish (japan) with which the papier-mâché board had been coated. The variety of mother-of-pearl used was known as "Aurora" because it was particularly colorful. They also used "the rainbow colors green and blue of the ear shell, especially for the floral designs"[6]. White pearl oyster

Portfolio case owned by Mildred Ayers. Approximately 6" x 9".

Portfolio case with floral bouquet and interestng coral-like motifs. Shirley Baer.

shell was also used for inlay. The mother-of-pearl was sliced into thin layers (0.2-0.4mm) by a process patented in 1833 and was usually cut with scissors and knives, although some forms that were used many times were stamped by a press[7]. Another way to get the design on mother-of-pearl was to paint the design with asphaltum through a stencil, and then dip the pearl into hydrochloric acid. The hydrochloric acid ate away all the pearl except for the



Front and back views of a case owned by Ruth Coggins, having an elaborate mother-of-pearl border and urn of flowers.

Front and back of papier-mâché case with floral and gilt decoration owned by Sara Tiffany.

areas with the asphaltum[8]. With the design on, corresponding to the size and the shape of the stencil, the board was then hardened in an oven. It was next rubbed down with pumice stone and water, re-varnished and placed in the oven to harden again (280 degrees F). The higher temperature made a glassy surface. This process was repeated until the varnish came up to the level of the mother-of-pearl. Most of the pearl flowers were then painted with transparent paints in a varnish medium. As can be seen from the photos, many times the thin layer of transparent paints wore off due to the slickness of the pearl.

The gilding and painting were often applied after the pearl. "Bright" gold was applied principally by water gilding an area larger than the intended figure, and the pattern was then stopped out by asphaltum painted on with very fine brushes. The excess gold was whisked away using cotton mops, and the asphaltum was removed by turpentine, exposing the desired pattern. The final step was 'sprigging' which consisted of painting in small flowers, foliage, and butterflies with gold size and then gilding them"[9]. The edges of the "book" were then also gilt-painted to simulate pages and the hinge was usually inscribed with gold.

The cast brass hinges of some papier-mâché cases were mostly held together as a hook and eye. Sometimes two fasteners were used to prevent warping. They were riveted through the front rail of the bottom part of the case.

Inside, the daguerreotype cases originally had a glass and a paper mat. Soon, these paper mats turned into stamped brass mats done in many shapes:

Papier-mâché portfolio with elaborate fantasy landscape in mother-of-pearl and gilt decoration, owned by Sara Tiffany.

Elliptical which had a curved top, Nonpareil which had a rococo ornateness, double elliptical which had rounded corners on the top and bottom, ornate elliptical, oval and octagonal. In the 1840s, the most popular mat was the octagon, but by the 1850s the ornate border became the mat of choice.

When all of these processes were done, the mat, glass and daguerreotype were bound together with gold beater's skin or gummed paper. The sandwich was then pressed into its case and with the velvet inner lining made a tight fit.

Besides daguerreotype cases, stationery folios and writer's blotters were also made using the same processes for the papier-mâché. These would have originally contained blotter pads made out of an absorbent rag paper into which a quill-pen written letter or document would be pressed to blot the ink

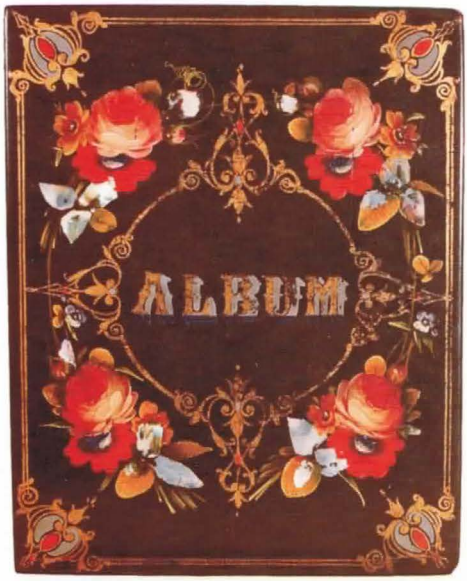
Examples of the sprigging designs used on japanned papier-mâché wares. From English Papier Mâché *by Shirley Devoe.*

so it would not smear. There are some references to ink blotting paper in America as early as the late 1700s, but it was not until the 1850s when Joseph Parker and Son started manufacturing blotting paper that it came into common use in America. The sizes of the stationery folios ranged from 6 x 9 to 9 x 12 inches.

Papier-mâché portfolio owned by Shirley Baer with mother-of-pearl "Greek key" border surrounding a portrait of a terrier.

Calling card cases were another object that was made in papier-mâché. According to *English Papier Mâché of the Georgian and Victorian Periods* written by Shirley Spaulding Devoe, "card cases were made as early as 1826 and were carried by ladies and gentlemen throughout the Victorian era. The embossed calling cards were kept clean and smooth in the hinged cases lined in plush silk or paper. Those cases made for ladies' use were a little larger than those for gentlemen, whose pockets must not be made to bulge more than was absolutely necessary. Ladies were instructed to hold the card cases in plain view while opening them to extract a card. It was also suggested that a fancy handkerchief be carried as an appropriate backdrop to the case"[10]!

Even though there were some small paper industries located in New York City as early as 1771, by the mid nineteenth century a large company known as The Litchfield Manufacturing Company was begun at Litchfield, Conn. circa 1849-1850. "Directors brought japanners from Wolverhampton and Oxfordshire in England to direct the work and to instruct the local women in japanning and painting. Experienced workers were paid six to ten dollars a day. At first, the company made letter holders, card trays, pierced hand and standing screens. Instead of moulding the entire article, small sections of the sides were pressed into shape and were then seamed with wire, the seams being covered over with black strips"[11]. Litchfield eventually concentrated more on decorative clock cases because of the proximity of the many clock companies



in the area.

It is with great admiration to all of the inventors who produced these papier-mâché objects which were made to hold our ancestors' most dear photographs and likenesses. Without all of these processes we would not have all of the beautiful and irreplaceable historical objects that we collect today.

Papier-mâché "Album" case with mother-of-pearl decoration owned by Doris Fry.

Endnotes:

1. Rinhart, Floyd and Marion American Miniature Case Art p.17.
2. Ibid. p. 17.
3. Devoe, Shirley English Papier-Mâché p.27
4. Rinhart, Floyd and Marion American Miniature Case Art p.41.
5. Ibid. p. 42.
6. Ibid. p. 42.
7. Papier-Mâché Furniture…Its Conservation and Care p.29.
8. Ibid. p. 30.
9. Devoe, Shirley English Papier-Mâché p.116.
10. Ibid. p.169.
11. Ibid. p. 16

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Devoe, Shirley Spaulding, *English Papier Mâché of the Georgian and Victorian Periods.* Wesleyan University Press, 1971.

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Reyden, Dianne van der, Williams, Donald C. *Papier-Mâché Furniture…its Conservation and Care*

Rinhart, Floyd and Marion, *American Miniature Case Art.* A.S. Barnes and Company/Thomas Yoseloff, Ltd, 1969

Johnson, Dale, *American Portrait Miniatures in the Manney Collection*, Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1990. (Published on the occasion of the exhibition Tokens of Affections: The Portrait Miniature in America.)

Members "A" Awards
Albany, New York 2011

Special Class
Roberta Edrington

Stenciling on Tin - *Linda Mason*

Reverse Glass
Anne Dimock

Theorem (Watercolor)
Mary Avery

Reverse Glass
Anne Dimock

Penwork
Polly Bartow

Penwork
Polly Bartow

Special Class
Roberta Edrington

Theorem (Oil)
Robert Flachbarth

Penwork
Lois Tucker

Theorem (Watercolor)
Alexandra Perrot

Penwork
Nancy Corcoran

Reverse Glass
Anne Dimock

Country Tin
Deborah Fitts

Country Tin
Linda Brubaker

Country Tin
Lucia Murphy

Clock Dial - *Ursula Erb*

Country Tin
Linda Mason

Freehand Bronze- *Roberta Edrington*

Gold Leaf- *Laura Bullitt*

Freehand Bronze- *Dorothea Colligan*

Freehand Bronze- *Lois Tucker*

Freehand Bronze- *Linda Brubaker*

Freehand Bronze- *Polly Bartow*

Theorem (Oil)
Mary Avery

Theorem (Watercolor)
Linda Brubaker

Theorem (Oil)
Diane Tanerillo

Theorem (Oil)
Dianne Freiner

Theorem (Oil)
Joanne Balfour

Theorem (Oil)
Dolores Furnari

Theorem (Oil)
Joan Bradford

Theorem (Oil)
Joan Dobert

Applicants Accepted as New Members

Spring, 2011 - Albany, NY

Martha Dolan (2029)
Bonnie Smythe (2030)

Members "B" Awards
Albany, New York 2011

Penwork
Susan Redfield

Clock Dial
Carol Buonato

Penwork
Maureen Morrison

Reverse Glass
Betty Nans

Gold Leaf
Janet Wolk

Theorem (Oil)
Joan Dobert

Theorem (Watercolor)
Joanne Balfour

Reverse Glass
Linda Mason

Reverse Glass
Anne Dimock

Gold Leaf
Janet Wolk

Overmantels and Fireboards at Old Sturbridge Village

by Lynne Richards

During the opening of the HSEAD Research Center at Old Sturbridge Village in October, I visited their newest exhibit, "By the Fireside". It was a wonderful exhibit and I asked Ed Hood if we could share some of the exhibit with our members. These are just a few of the great pieces that OSV had in their exhibit.

This first fireboard is made of two pine boards joined by 3" cleats with hand-forged nails. The edges of the board are beveled on the sides, to fit the fireplace opening. Stylized floral and geometric motifs are stenciled in green and black on a cream colored background. A stylized plant with green leaves having black veining and black buds is along each side. Two double bands of a geometric motif form an "X" dividing the space between these two stylized plants. In the upper and lower quadrants is a nine-leaf spray, in the side quadrants are stylized flowers and leaves with a sunburst center. Another double band of geometric motifs joins the lower ends of the X at the bottom of the fireboard. The base with cut-outs for andirons is a 20th century addition, made of machine planed lumber and attached with machine planed cleats secured by brass woodscrews. It appears

Stenciled fireboard circa 1820 by an unidentified maker. H: 27 1/8"; W: 37".

Top: A partial view of the gallery installation. Photo courtesy Joseph Rice.
All other photographs courtesy of Old Sturbridge Village, Inc.

to have been made and painted after the opening for the andirons were cut, then the openings were widened about 1/8" (no paint but handsaw marks) to fit. The mantel did not originate with this piece. This is circa 1820 by an unidentified maker.

Unidentified fireboard ca. 1830. H: 36", W: 44 7/8"; bottom border is 8¼" wide.

The fireboard shown at right consists of three boards tied together with wooden cross bars on the back. On the front, a border is made by thin boards on all sides, painted a blue-green. This scene has three green hills in the background and there is a house on the crest of the middle hill. The home is painted white with red trim and has a gable end to the front. There is a door in the middle with windows on either side with a round window in the gable. You can also see a faint path from the front door which divides and disappears around the hill. There are three pointed evergreen trees on either side of the house at the foot of the side hills and also a rail fence below the trees at the foot of each side hill. The sky is a reddish-yellow with heavy thunder clouds across the top. This is circa 1830 by an unidentified maker.

Landscape fireboard ca.1830. H: 31" W: 42"

This two-piece fireboard has two vertical battens and a burn mark on the back. The front is painted with a landscape, the major part comprising a horizon line of low hills against which stand three depths of trees and grass painted in a sponge-like manner. Three large trees dominate this fireboard and convey a sense of motion through the light, feathery technique with which they were painted. At the center bottom is a line-drawn federal house with an arch door shed attached in unfinished form, apparently set upon piers but having a chimney with arched cover. The house has green solid painted windows and an arched door. A belt line goes across the front and side. The foundation shows three windows with a gable end attic window as well. The off-scale house was probably a later addition. The possible date for this is 1830.

The next fireboard is made of two wide boards joined horizontally by two battens attached to the back. On the left of the vase is a round hole for a stove

pipe. The fireboard is painted with a blue/green background with the urn-like base sitting on a grassy landscape. Tulips, roses and other flowers are arranged in the vase. The upper edge and two sides are bordered with a leafy vine and stylized bows in each upper corner. This probably dates to 1800-1820. It came from the Bannister House on Fiskdale Road in Brookfield, Mass.

Top: Fireboard from Bannister House on Fiskdale Road in Brookfield, Mass. H: 24⅜", W: 36" Fireboard found in Pope House, Spencer, Mass. H: 34", W: 48", Kickboard: 5"

The central motif for this fireboard is a tromp l'oeil effect of a fireplace with a blue two-handled urn holding blue foliage. The edges of the fireplace and urn are scribed as well as painted. The central motif is bordered on the top and sides by painted delft-type tiles which show one or two blue trees painted in a round cartouche. There is also a moulded kickboard at the bottom painted red-brown. This fireboard is made of two wooden boards jointed horizontally, and was found in 1959 by Frank Spinney in the attic of the Pope House in Spencer, Mass.

This intricate scene displays a gentleman and the trappings of prosperity in the 18th century. The overmantel originally hung in the Moses March House in Southbridge, Mass. The home depicted in the painting, however, is seemingly from the artist's imagination, as it does not resemble the March House. The panel is oil on wood and is circa 1755. It was removed from the Moses March House, circa 1915, which stood where the Notre Dame Church is now located.

Overmantel from Moses March house, Southbridge, Mass. Outside dimensions: H: 41½", W: 27 7/8"

There is a bold, distinctive eagle painted in oil on this wood overmantel from Exeter, New Hampshire. The patriotic image has

Eagle overmantel circa 1800. H: 35", W: 62"

a gray/greenish-blue background with the eagle displaying a shield in the center with seven stars above flanked by two sponge-painted trees in each corner. The probable date for this is circa 1800.

A circa 1800 overmantel shows sweeping landscapes, either realistic or imagined, which was one of the most popular themes in overmantel paintings. In this idyllic, and most likely imaginary seaside town, a forest of ships' masts, with pennants streaming, is visible above the roof tops, confirming that this is a coastal village or city. A range of mills in the background suggests that this is a snug, inlet harbor. In the foreground are additional houses, barns, a grist mill with water wheel, and trees and hedgerows. Four very small and out-of-scale cows are grouped in the center foreground, while a slightly larger white horse gallops from right to left in the field above. Two women, larger than the houses they stand behind, converse at the center, while in the lower right-hand corner a uniformed soldier holds hands and converses with a young woman. A flock of very small sheep grazes in a field at the left. Trees, large rocks, and hedgerows are drawn and painted in a very stylized manner and the whole is painted in an unskilled manner but with compelling charm and imagination. The handling of the trees is reminiscent of the style of Rufus Porter, but none of the iconographic conventions usually associated with his work appear in the composition. The piece originates to the Perez Walker House that stood near the Walker Pond in Sturbridge, Mass., far from any coast or port. It is painted on pine boards.

Overmantel from Perez Walker House, Sturbridge, Mass. H: 39", W: 43 ¾"

This exhibit runs through May 28, 2012. If you would like to see the on-line exhibit, go to OSV.org and click on "By the Fireside" exhibit. It also includes andirons, bellows and many more overmantels and fireboards.

Digging Through the Layers

The History of Japanned Papier Mâché and Tinware

by Yvonne Jones

Banknotes are a good guide to how a nation sees itself and its past. Britain's, new £50 banknote features portraits of Matthew Boulton and James Watt and commemorates their profound influence on the Industrial Revolution.

Matthew Boulton (1728-1809) was an industrial pioneer, and one of the leading manufacturers of his age. As well as his partnership with Watt in developing the steam engine, he engineered radical advances in the minting of the world's coinage, and also introduced the first ever insurance scheme for factory workers. Boulton's other achievements included the manufacture of Sheffield plate, the making of exquisite ormolou ornaments and, for a short time, he experimented with japanning - an interest which, coming from a man of his stature and vision, spoke volumes for the potential of this relatively new industry which would, within a few years, become an important, staple manufacture of the English Midlands.

Plate 1: Table with a tin tip-top; English or Welsh, late 18th century. H: 58.5 cm. Top: 76.5 x 56 cm. Courtesy of Neale Auction Company, New Orleans.

The surface of this early period of japanning has barely been scratched. In large part, this is because information about the later period, following Henry Clay's so-called 'watershed' patent of 1772, is far more readily accessible. It has rarely been asked what preceded Henry Clay and led him to the point at which he would achieve such success in the early 1770s. Innova-

tion always has a heritage. The research presented in my forthcoming book, *Japanned Papier Mâché and Tinware c1740-1940*, shows that the japanning industry was both very lively and productive in the years leading up to 1772.

In his patent, Clay outlined his method of producing what he called 'panel' ie. large sheets of papier mâché for making '...Roofs for Coaches, and all sorts of Wheel Carriages and Sedan Chairs, Pannels for Rooms, Doors, and Cabbins of Ships, Cabinets, Bookcases, Screens, Chimney Pieces, Tables, Teatrays and Waiters.' The sheer breadth of this list amply explains the potential that Boulton saw in the industry. Such ambitious ideas could only have stemmed from a lengthy period of experimentation, of trial and error on Clay's part. So highly developed a workshop could not have just mushroomed overnight.

Information about the earlier period is fragmentary and requires piecing together like a patchwork quilt. According to legend, Clay had been apprenticed as a japanner to John Baskerville, and erroneous though this has since proved to be, it provided a useful focus for searching Clay's early life. This line of enquiry revealed other threads of information, which in turn, lead to other strands, until eventually it was possible to trace the start of japanning in Birmingham to about 1740, and in Wolverhampton and Bilston, soon after. Stories emerged of the people involved, of their skills, and the conditions in which they laboured, of the factory-owners and their sometimes flamboyant life-styles. Indeed it is a history as multi-layered as the surfaces of the finest japanned tin and papier mâché.

Contrary to expectations, the early products were not only tin snuffboxes and other small objects, but included much larger, more ambitious pieces. In 1742, for example, when John Baskerville was granted the first patent to be concerned with japanning, he described, amongst other things, how large pieces of furniture could be veneered with japanned metal. By about 1760, he and another Birmingham japanner, Stephen Bedford, were making japanned iron tables with richly painted flower-decoration, alongside the more predictable trays, and small boxes; a later table of this type is shown in Plate 1. As the title of Clay's later patent shows, large pieces of papier mâché furniture were very much the order of the day. Surviving examples are often described as 'painted furniture' and as such their true origins have been mostly overlooked. Now, they are beginning to be recognised for what they are and with their finely painted decoration, they certainly merit further study.

It was to be hoped that a trawl of early records would finally solve the Welsh/English conundrum, but it has served only to prove that the distinction between English and Welsh japanned goods is even less clear than previously thought. Certainly, the long-held tradition for indiscriminately attributing trays with pierced edges to Pontypool, can no longer hold true. Visitors to Baskerville's workshop in both 1754 and 1765, for example, observed that pierced iron waiters were made there, while in the National Museum of Wales,

there is a large and handsome rectangular tray with pierced edge and painted decoration, clearly marked for Stephen Bedford of Birmingham. Moreover, an advertisement in a Birmingham newspaper, in 1796, for the sale of a tin-plate worker's stock-in-trade, included 'a strong one-sided Piercing Press [and] a Quantity of Piercing Tools'.[1] Add to this the small, similarly pierced baskets that were made by Birmingham enamellers in the 1760s, and there is sufficient evidence that japanned trays of this type, were common to both Pontypool and Birmingham. At this distance in time, it is unlikely that a wholly reliable means of distinguishing English from Welsh products will ever become clear, but with conclusive evidence that similar wares were made in both countries, it may be possible to view the products more objectively and to detect some defining distinctions.

Researching this early period shows that other questionable 'facts' must be revised. One such is the frequent assertion that it was John Baskerville who introduced the manufacture of papier mâché into the English midlands. As a celebrated paper-maker, he would have been well-placed to have done so, but the evidence that this distinction belonged to Stephen Bedford, in the late 1750s, is far more compelling. Indeed, together with his well-documented work on producing a copal varnish to rival the clarity of that made by the Martin brothers in Paris, and known as vernis Martin, Bedford stands out as a far more significant player in the commercial development of japanning in Birmingham than previously allowed. If the quality of his papier mâché goods matched that of his iron tray in the National Museum of Wales, then he was clearly a maker of some stature, and one who calls for further study.

Henry Clay, who is justifiably held in high regard for both the quality of his goods, and his contribution to the development of the industry, is often thought to have held a virtual monopoly in the trade. But he was not without credible rivals. Not least among them was Matthew Boulton who set up his japanning workshop at the Soho Works in Birmingham in about 1765. This was a matter of such concern to Clay, that, he felt compelled, through the pages of a local newspaper, to threaten legal action against anyone who infringed his patent. Few of Boulton's japanned goods have so far been identified, but their known quality and the prestigious clients by whom they were purchased, suggest that many will have survived and await identification. Further research will, surely, bring them to light.

Although Boulton was concerned with the industry for only fifteen years, his surviving papers represent the earliest, and largest single set of records of japanning at the time. They are among an extensive archive of papers from the Soho Works, deposited in the Birmingham Reference Library. Although the archive is largely concerned with Boulton's other activities, it includes note-books, correspondence, and inventories relevant to japanning. Letters from the 1770s explain why Boulton, a usually astute businessman, decided to abandon

japanning at so propitious a time in its history, when other japanners were so obviously succeeding. They reveal the causes to have been human frailty and bad management on the part of his japan master. It was a sad outcome for so prestigious a firm, but it is also a valuable reminder that normal, working men were as much a part of the industry's history, as their grander masters.

The novelty of Birmingham's new manufactures attracted the carriage trade, from across Europe and beyond, and visitors were anxious to record details of their factory tours, to comment on the ingenious methods of production they had seen, and to describe the goods they had purchased. Their journals, and letters, provide some of the most vivid and insightful accounts of the state of the japanning industry in the late eighteenth century. The journals of men like R R Angerstein, sent by the Swedish government in the 1750s to 'spy' on British industries, and the La Rochefoucauld brothers, who did the same for France in 1785, are rich in technical detail, even if, at times, their descriptions are tantalisingly ambiguous. But perhaps they may be forgiven such ambiguity: factory owners were frequently warned of such espionage, and may, therefore, have provided foreign visitors with only vague explanations. Alongside these more formal accounts, there are many brief glimpses through the windows of a showroom, or the door of a factory. For example, there is Anne Rushout's observation, following her visit to Henry Clay's factory in 1797, that 'The rooms were so hot, we could not stay to examine the process', which clearly conveys the working conditions of those engaged in the industry.

W Highfield Jones, the son of a japanner, and himself employed in the industry at a very early age, left three unpublished accounts of his family history which include several passages devoted to the Jones' involvement with japanning in the nineteenth century. Written from the perspective of the factory floor, they provide some of the most moving accounts of a japanner's working day, and in the absence of complete factory records, they are among the most valuable surviving documents about the industry. The Jones', father and sons, were all associated at one time or another, with the Old Hall Works, in Wolverhampton, one of the leading japan manufactories from the late eighteenth century until its closure in 1882. The hardships they faced, their ups and downs, and the brothers setting up of their own workshop in 1854, are described in touching detail, and almost certainly speak for workers throughout the industry. Growing concern in the early nineteenth century, about the dangers posed by factory work prompted the publication of parliamentary reports, and essays on the risks to life and limb and to the health hazards associated with specific industries. They make harrowing reading. The japanning industry was better than most, in this respect, but it had its evils which, given the highly decorative nature of some of its products, such as the trays shown here (Pls.2 & 3), it is easy to forget.

The japanning industry must also be seen in the context and as part of the

Plates 2 & 3: A pair of papier mâché trays with bronze-decoration; Jennens & Bettridge, c1835. 60 x 79cm and 48 x 64cm. Courtesy of Rosebery's, London.

wider attention paid to the decorative arts at the time. In 1837, a School of Design was set up at Somerset House in London, followed by similar schools in Birmingham, in 1843, and Wolverhampton, in 1854. Their effect, together with that of the journal of the Art Union, introduced in 1839, significantly impacted upon the larger, more prestigious japanning factories. The industry became subject to new judgements of taste and quality that would have profound influence on its story, caught between the chattering classes and the market. Never before had there been such a public forum for debating matters of design, and no amount of technical novelty would protect japanners from their detractors. On the one hand, the overload of ornament on japanned ware was a frequent topic of discussion among critics and the new aesthetic academy: on the other, what were japanners to do when the public judged the value of an article by how much gold leaf, or mother-of-pearl had been expended on it? The debates were lively, and sometimes vicious. Almost overnight, they established a wholly new platform for future researchers: the japanning industry viewed from the perspective of contemporary design critics.

Patents are vital to research in any aspect of industrial history. They provide useful and detailed descriptions of complex processes of manufacture and decoration, and, of course, they are dated. However, dates can be misleading and should not be read as anything more than indicative of when a particular method of production or style was introduced. When Baskerville, for instance, stated that his application followed 'many Essays, made by him for the space of several years', there is no guarantee that he did not finish and sell at least some of his earlier trials. Similarly, where the applicant sought only to protect 'improvements' in accepted practise, it would imply that the basic principle was not new. Thus, the title of Jennens & Bettridge's patent in 1825, for 'Certain Improvements in ... Preparing and Working Pearl Shell into various Forms and Devices for the Purpose of Applying it to Ornamental Uses in the Manufacture of Japan Ware ...', would suggest that japanners had already been using pearl in their decoration prior to that date. Patents can hold keys to understanding earlier processes that have often been mysteries to the researcher. This is certainly the case for Charles Valentine's patent of 1809, in which the method he described for transfer-printing japanned ware, also provides startling new insight on the mystery of so-called 'mechanical painting' – a method we know to have been employed by Henry Clay and others (for details, see *The Decorator*, Fall 2010, vol.64, no.2).

Probably the greatest single contribution to understanding the extent of the industry came when japanners recognised the value of marking their goods. Manufacturers marks, make it possible to chart the development of individual factories, to establish likely dates of production, and to observe characteristic workshop styles. They also allow hitherto obscure manufacturers to assume their place in history. For example, without the recent discovery of a tray stamped

Plate 4: Papier mâché tray by Isherwood Sutcliffe, Birmingham, c1850. W: 70cm . Courtesy of P F Windibank, Dorking, UK.

for Isherwood Sutcliffe, his firm would have remained nothing more than a curiosity in a roll-call of japanners (Pls 4 & 5). Yet to judge from contemporary records, it was clearly a firm of some standing: Sutcliffe's work was illustrated in the journal of the Art Union in 1846, exhibited at the Great Exhibition in1851, and two years later, shown at the New York Exhibition. In the absence of this tray, few would have suggested Isherwood Sutcliffe as a possible maker of another similar, but unmarked, example that surfaced at auction a month or so later? Such discoveries remind the collector and scholar today of the many japanners whose names have hitherto been overlooked. Over 80 have come to light as a result of researching the history of

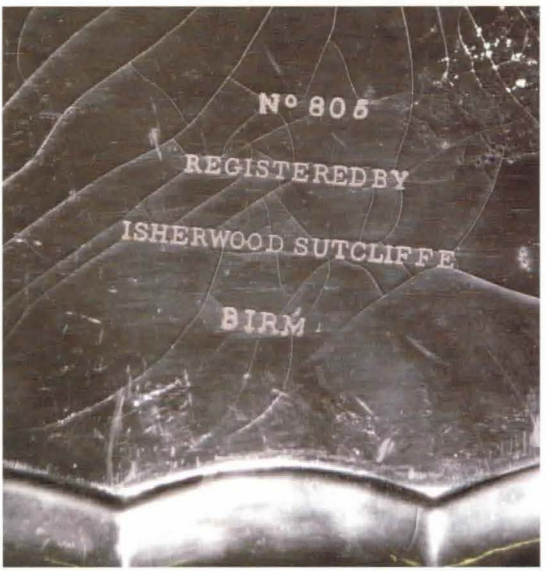


Plate 5: The mark of Isherwood Sutcliffe on the tray shown in Plate 3. Courtesy of P F Windibank, Dorking, UK

the industry. Hopefully, their contributions will now be recognised and collectors, antique dealers, and auctioneers, alike, will be less ready to attribute all the best early wares to Henry Clay, and all the later ones, to Jennens & Bettridge.

There are many layers of information still to peel back. But only now that the basic story of japanning has been told, is it possible the see where these lay. The history of the industry, and its commercial significance, grew in the telling. For over 100 years japanning was a major industry in Birmingham, Wolverhampton and Bilston, the products of which were admired the world over. It triggered the start of similar industries in London, Germany, Russia, and Holland, and of course, the USA, which all looked to midlands' japanners for their lead. It attracted important commissions from prestigious designers like Robert Adam, and its products were bought by the grandest houses in Europe.

Shirley DeVoe in her pioneering work drew attention to japanning and its history and I am pleased to be able to advance the work that she began.

1 Aris's Birmingham Gazette, 25 Jan. 1796, p2 col.3

2 The full history, covering processes of manufacture and decoration, as well as the topics discussed above, and much else besides, will be published as *Japanned Papier Mâché and Tinware c1740 -1940*, in Spring 2012.

Book Review

Folk Art Murals of the Rufus Porter School, New England Landscapes 1825-1845

by Linda Carter Lefko and Jane E. Radcliffe; Schiffer Publishing Ltd., PA, 2011; Hard Copy, 256 pgs. with 400+ color pictures.

Reviewed by Sandra Cohen

Preface: This is not just another book about Rufus Porter. It is a paradigm shift in the way that we have looked in the past at these New England landscapes. Admirers of Rufus Porter are grateful to those early authors, particularly Jean Lipman and Nina Fletcher Little, whose books revealed the genius of this truly Renaissance man, an artist, author, inventor and visionary.

However, those who admire the wall murals, some signed and some attributed to Porter, and the popularly accepted information that has been written about him will now discover new ways of examining these works. Their shared interest in this artist leads Linda Lefko and Jane Radcliffe on an odyssey of first hand observation and analysis. Their book is a source of new information based on evidentiary findings ('pictured' for us in great detail) that provides us with a greater appreciation of Folk Art murals of the Rufus Porter School.

"If only these walls could speak"...How often have we uttered these words while walking through historical homes and sites? Lefko's and Radcliffe's odyssey takes us through New England homes in Maine, Massachusetts, New

Top: Mural from the Josiah Stone House in Hancock, New Hampshire

Hampshire and Vermont where walls remain dressed in their 'naïve' painted wall murals, the fashion of the day.

The authors begin with an introduction to these painted walls and two northeastern artists whose work was prolific in the early to mid 1800s, namely Rufus Porter and his nephew, Jonathan Poor.

Jean Lipman, in her biography, *Rufus Porter, Yankee Pioneer,* gives us an in-depth portrait of this Renaissance man. Born in 1792, Porter descended from a wealthy and educated family. Jean Lipman, author/historian, claims that he is related by marriage to William Wadsworth Longfellow and Harriet Beecher Stowe. Porter married twice and fathered sixteen children. His talents ranged from dance instructor and fiddler to scientist. He devised a portable camera obscura, (facilitating his silhouette painting), a wind-powered gristmill, a fire alarm and other useful items including a washing machine! Among his inventions were clocks, a distance-measuring instrument, and a revolving rifle that he sold to Samuel Colt. He wrote for *New York Mechanic* and founded *Scientific American*. His legacy in the arts, for which he is popularly remembered, is his wall mural painting. The authors also write briefly about his miniature portrait paintings. There were few that were signed, although hundreds have been attributed to him.

Linda Lefko and Jane Radcliffe remind us that the American economy was "reeling from the war of 1812," and as the country slowly recuperated, bartering was a common part of trade for goods and services. Itinerant artists like Rufus Porter traveled to wherever they could ply their trade. Porter traveled from state to state. A prolific artist, Porter's murals have been discovered, uncovered and preserved. His work has been found in homes and taverns in New England, and the authors have focused their research on walls in Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire and Vermont.

Jonathan D. Poor, (1807-1845), Porter's nephew, was most likely mentored by his uncle and began traveling and painting with him around 1823. Correspondence about their visits to relatives supports their professional relationship and work together. Aside from his familial connections, not much is known about Poor other than

Mural from Dr. James Norton House, East Baldwin, Maine.

Monochromatic mural in bedroom of Ingalls-Colby House in East Haverhill, Mass.

what has been gleaned from his murals, many of which he signed, J.D. Poor. He died four years after the death of his first wife, at the age of thirty-eight, leaving four young children.

Porter's *Select Collection of Valuable and Curious Arts and Interesting Experiments* provides a precise instructional treatise for painting scenic wall murals. Although many of these wall paintings are unsigned, Lefko and Radcliffe proceed like detectives, analyzing the handiwork in numerous homes and realize that there are distinctive elements that can be called signature or hallmarks of either Porter, Poor or other itinerant artists who painted in the style of the "Rufus Porter school of landscape painting." There were, however, "basic rules." Unlike frescoes, where the artist applied pigments to wet plaster, these artists worked on a dry plaster surface or "a surface of whitewash or paint...The mural pigment was a distemper made of pigment, water and glue (from rabbit skin) ...Paint the walls from the top to within six inches of the horizon line with sky blue..." although examples may not always adhere to these instructions. The colors most often used were "a chrome yellow, yellow ochre, blue, vermilion, lamp black, Indian red or red ochre, indigo and whiting (white)," which, when mixed with other colors, softened them. Other colors, such as greens, were mixed on the palette. Monochromatic murals are attributed to Porter who, it is believed, was the only one to employ this effect.

"Breast high" was Porter's formula for the horizon line. In Porter's words, the fundamental definition of a Porter School landscape mural is... "Every object must be painted larger or smaller, according to the distance at which it is represented... The upper surface of the ocean must be painted as high as the horizon line, and the distant highlands must rise from ten to twenty inches above it." A handsome example of this fundamental guideline is the mural from the Dr. Francis Howe House in Westwood, Mass. One sees a large tree in the foreground; the source of light is consistently conveyed, and here it's reflected on the shore, water and on the fence. A red brick home with smaller fencing, smaller houses on the island and yet smaller elements on the hill in the distance reflect perspective of distances.

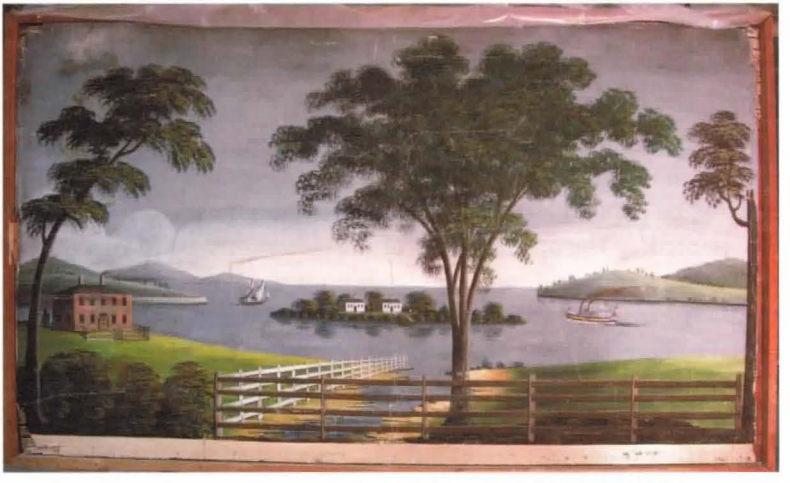
The bedroom of the Ingalls-Colby House in East Haverhill, Mass. is home

to one of Porter's monochromatic murals. Here we see his skill at *chiaro-oscuro*, the Italian term for the contrast of light and dark effectively used by Caravaggio in the 15th century. Again, the light source in the painting is obvious and stunning, with bright areas, seemingly in a spotlight, while larger elements in the shaded denser foreground appear darker.

The authors state that at a first, quick glance, the scenic wall murals of Porter and Poor appear very similar, but their careful observations uncover dissimilarities that distinguish each of them. Porter is precise and almost formulaic in his detailing and his colors are clear and crisp. His trees are open, letting in the sky. Poor's colors are "often less crisp, especially the greens, but he uses a strong variety of colors... [he] used bright cadmium yellow rather than an ochre. Porter's landscapes are 'cultivated' while Poor's compositions are loosely choreographed and creative with "meandering fencing, fuller trees and shrubs and other details on his hillsides.....[and]several different configurations....of the various buildings within the cluster." A farm scene in the Dr. James Norton House, East Baldwin, Maine, shows Poor's skill and attention to details as well as whimsy at their peak.

Chapter Three, Typical Rufus Porter School Motifs, is a useful guide for those who wish to make some observations on their own. It's a very helpful reference with details and elements from wall murals, signed by Porter and/or Poor and E.J.G. (E.J. Gilbert).

Lefko's and Radcliffe's more definitive statements are rooted in the hallmarks of style found in the signed murals, and the tentative language about unsigned works invites the readers to make their own interpretations. One might find the murals similar in the sense that, for the most part, they depict manicured landscapes and seascapes with very few exceptions.



An example of Porter's approach to perspective is the mural in the Dr. Francis Howe House in Westwood, Mass.

These scenes transport us into an earlier time and place. However, the images of the homesteads and landscape are idyllic, reflecting the artist's and/or the homeowners' desired scenes for their walls rather than a more realistic depiction of their actual surroundings. Tracts of farmland are all tilled, farm tools are all stored inside freshly painted barns. Sailors, sailboats and full sails on tall-masted ships and galleons on calm seas, distant mountains and stylized trees all invite reveries to real or imagined places. Homes and little villages, grazing cows and running horses, waterfalls and orchards punctuate the natural landscape while windmills, observatories and steamships seem to echo Porter's scientific ingenuity.

Chapter Four, Unsigned Wall Murals by Geographic Location, is the longest chapter, and entertains the authors' educated deductions. Familiar stenciled elements, characteristic compositions, colors and style tempt earnest speculation and the two authors give their best interpretations based on their combined experience in the field. The Rufus Porter School's fundamentals are ever present although not dogmatically practiced, which makes the landscapes all the more interesting and enjoyable to analyze and enjoy. The Josiah Stone House in Hancock, New Hampshire once boasted stencils by (possibly) Moses Eaton, a resident of Hancock. Its walls show a limited palette, several sailing ships and an island, but without 'Porter's' typical houses. However, rocks and a delineated shore-line indicate Porter's touch, although the orchards and tree shapes show Poor's hand! The authors leave us with their thoughts, not their assertions.

A treatise on these historical treasures would not be complete without a section on the Care and Conservation of Wall Murals. This section is invaluable to those fortunate to live in homes where many of these murals have retained their aesthetic attributes. Detailed steps are offered for professional preservation and conservation, from protecting them in their original sites to removing them (if necessary). Lefko is an artist as well as a researcher and historian, and no book would be complete without her expertise on recording and or reproducing these historically authentic works of art.

In Chapter Six, Calling All Artists, Historic Technique of Recreating a Mural, Lefko complements Porter's instructions in *Scientific American* of "Landscape Painting on Walls of Rooms" 1846-1847. Her side-by-side (along with Porter's) presentation of directions gives us the how-to and the tools available today to recreate a folk art mural in the Rufus Porter style in our own homes.

Lefko and Radcliffe generously share their years of research and experience. Appendix A lists the wall murals illustrated in their book by state; Appendix B is a glossary of terms; Appendix C is the Rufus Porter obituary from *Scientific American*. There is a comprehensive bibliography and index. We owe our gratitude to these two scholars for sharing their years of research and first hand examination of this genre. *Folk Art Murals of the Rufus Porter School, New England Landscapes 1825-1845* is a seminal work on this subject and deserves a place in your personal library on early American art.

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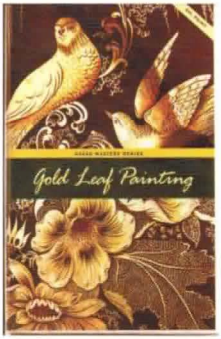

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