The Decorator

Fall 2005 Vol. 59 No.2



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Front cover: A bronzed silhouette by John Field, painted on plaster. Courtesy of Denise Habib. Back cover: A bronzed silhouette by John Field with typical frame by William Miers. Courtesy of Denise Habib.

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Bronzed Silhouettes

by Denise Habib and Shirley Baer



Unsigned bronzed silhouette, painted on card, papier mâché frame, c. 1830. See page 15 for full silhouette.

The near-century from 1770 to 1860 was a golden age for the art of silhouette. In this era before photography, silhouettes provided quick and recognizable likenesses that were affordable to average people. They were far less expensive than miniatures painted with precious pigments on ivory or vellum, and a skilled artist could take a profile in one sitting of just a few minutes. The outline of a sitter's head and shoulders could be traced by a mechanical device or snipped from paper by a skilled silhouettist. Multiple copies could then be made from the original.

Silhouettes are produced by one of three methods: cutting and pasting, hollow-cutting, and painting. The silhouettes featured in this article are either cut and pasted or painted on card or plaster. All are English.

Up until 1800, most silhouette artists painted profiles on card, paper, plaster slabs or glass. Most used a thinned watercolor on card or paper, working in shades of black. Faces were almost always a dead black, but below-the-neck might be done in deep shades of gray.

Embellishing in gold, known as "bronzing," became fashionable after 1800. After a silhouette was cut or painted, the "bronzed silhouette" was embellished with a gold color to highlight features.

Gold was most likely applied by dipping a fine brush in gum Arabic, allowing it to become slightly tacky, and then stroking the leaf and applying it onto the profile. Some silhouettes appear coarser than others, and some much more yellow.

By the middle of the 19th century, some sort of gold paint became available, and one can differentiate between the quality in these later silhouettes because of their coarseness and poor color. Yellow ochre and deep cadmium pigments were also used for bronzing, and the artist probably mixed in a little thinned gum Arabic. Also, yellow and gold paint were combined, and a sitter's hair could be painted in shades of yellow with gold highlights. Gum Arabic was used frequently, and could be mixed with pigment or applied alone to also show detail. This technique gave a sheen to the finished profile, and different artists used it in varying degrees. Gold leaf available today probably would not produce such fineness as seen in the embellishments of John Field.

In 1800, John Field started as an apprentice to John Miers (1758-1821), who was considered to be the best and most successful of the British profilists. While Miers was renowned for his profiles on plaster, Field was responsible for most of the bronzed embellished silhouettes from the studio. Many consider Field the greatest artist in the technique of bronzing.

When his mentor died, Field continued the business with Miers' son, William, a frame maker and engraver of metal and seals. William's ormolu miniature frames and ormolu leaf hangers help identify his work. Additional identifying features of papier mâché frames coming from the Miers-Field studio include the brass leaf hanger with an attached embossed circular brass loop, and an embossed oval matting surrounding the silhouette (see page 8).

Other bronzing artists include Hinton Gibbs, Charles and Alfred Herve, E. Whittle, and the Hubard Gallery, but none rivaled the talent of John Field.



My sincere thanks to Denise Habib, who so generously shared her silhouette collection with us. And a special thank you to her son, Cameron, who photographed them.



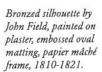
Unsigned bronzed silhouette, cut and pasted, papier mâché frame, c. 1830.



Unsigned bronzed silbouette, painted on card, papier mâché frame with leaf and plain circle hanger, 1818-1821.



Bronzed silhouette by John Field, painted on plaster, embossed oval matting, papier måché frame, 1810-1821. See back cover for full silhouette.







Bronzed silhouette by John Field, painted on card, papier mâché frame, c. 1820.



Bronzed silbouette by Alfred Herve, cut and pasted, papier mâché frame, c. 1840.

Fall 2005



Bronzed silhouette by John Field, painted on plaster, a William Miers papier mâché frame, 1810-1821.







Unsigned bronzed silhouette, painted on card, papier måché frame with ornulo leaf and acorn, 1811-1814.



Bronzed silbouette by E. Whittle, cut and pasted, papier mâché frame with acorn and leaf hanger, 1810-1820.



Unsigned bronzed silhouette, cut and pasted, mahogany with gilt liner, c. 1830.



Unsigned bronzed silhouette, cut and pasted, mahogany with gilt liner, c. 1830.

Unsigned bronzed silhouette, cut and pasted, rosewood frame, c. 1840.

By the 1830s, artists started using rectangular wooden frames veneered in bird's-eye maple with a surround of gilded wood. They were especially favored by the Hubard Gallery. Mahogany and rosewood with gilt surrounds were also used.





Bronzed silhouette by the Hubard Gallery, cut and pasted, bird's-eye maple frame, c. 1820.



Bronzed silhouette by John Field, painted on card, signed below bust "Field 2 Strand" (2 Strand was the address). Turned oval pear wood frame with convex glass (which was used through the 1790s). Embellishing appears to have been done with yellow ochre, c. 1830.



Bronzed silhouette by Charles Herve, cut and pasted. Bird's-eye maple frame with gilt liner does not appear to be original, c. 1850.



Unsigned bronzed silhouette, painted on card, papier mâché frame, c. 1830. See close-up on page 5.



Unsigned bronzed silhouette, cut and pasted, rectangular papier mâché frame, c. 1840.

Members' "A" Awards: Charlottesville, Virginia



Carol Heinz

Glass with Border



Doris Hynes

Stenciling on Wood (top and front)



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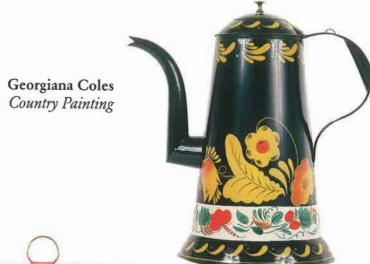


Mae Fisher Glass with Border





Mae Fisher Pontypool

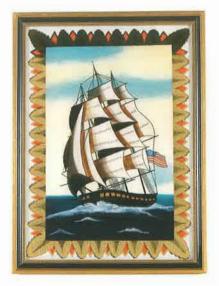




Danielle Lott Country Painting



Alexandra Perrot Freehand Bronze



Alexandra Perrot Glass with Border



Georgiana Coles Country Painting

Charlotte Read Stenciling on Wood





Parma Jewett Country Painting



Connie Misener Freehand Bronze

Martha Springett Metal Leaf





Lorraine Harrigan Stenciling on Tin

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Danielle Lott

Metal Leaf



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Linda Cohen Dorothea Colligan

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Patricia Ley Valerie Long

Patricia Oxenford Pat Seeberger

Gary Sokol Kathi Stingle

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The Bookshelf

Antique Boxes, Tea Caddies & Society 1700 – 1880

by Antigone Clarke & Joseph O'Kelly, HC,

Published by Schiffer Pub., 2003, 304 pgs., 905 color plates.

Reviewed by Sandra Cohen

Marbled end papers immediately suggest that this tome of decorated boxes will be a visual feast. The charm and appeal of decorative arts lie in the conversation between the piece and its audience, a story about its time and place, and the craftsmen who brought it into the world, as well as the society and its values. The objects d'art are about life. The look and lore of these boxes is a delight.

Antigone Clarke and Joseph O'Kelly walk us through the 18th and 19th centuries and the craft of decorated boxes in twenty-four handsomely illustrated chapters. The times and artistry of these craftsmen produced chests with decorative embellishments that captivated the senses and imagination. The authors have chosen this two-century interval because the increase of international trade in the previous two centuries brought an awareness and appreciation of cultural and aesthetic differences, and subsequently an integration of styles and elements of design. Form and function were married, and utilitarian objects such as boxes were fashioned both to serve a purpose and to please the senses. Clarke and O'Kelly have dressed their pages with the best examples, and the "most important consideration is that the object has survived with its integrity."

In the 18th century, in the Low Countries town of Spa, and later in Tunbridge Wells, England, cabinetmakers began translating their furniture-making techniques into the creation of small boxes. A population traveling for both business and pleasure provided an eager and ready

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market for boxes that accommodated everything from toiletries to trinkets, from sewing to silverware. Gentleman and Cabinet-Makers' Director (1754), a guide for cabinet design by Thomas Chippendale and the first serious work on this subject, also featured several boxes, raising the visibility and stature of these decorated works. Here the rules guiding the use of materials such as inlays, veneers, and various fine and rare woods along with the structural and architectural design elements of cabinetmaking were applied to the production of boxes. Chippendale's most important contribution was his "insistence that the cabinetmaker's approach to his work must be utterly professional, adhering to scientific and aesthetic principles and having complete mastery of his materials." Chippendale, a major contributor to the evolution of box styles, helped to initiate classical motifs and structure. A design for "chest shaped tea caddies" is referred to as "Chippendale style." "He worked within the confines of the aesthetic of his period and interpreted Chinese, Gothic, Rococo and Modern Taste in the most elegant way." Just as the exterior architectural elements were in sync with the interior decorative facade, the shape and decoration of these boxes reflected a "purity of form and mind."

Johann Winkelmann's 200-plus engravings of classical designs that he observed first-hand on ancient ruins pave the way for new classical elements of design. Compositions include acanthus leaves, festoons of vines, ribbons and swags. Musical instruments, shells, the Greek key, pen work, and classical figures and vignettes appear as decorative elements.

The intertwining of morality and aesthetics produce cleaner classical designs and scenes that reflect symmetry and precision, a harmonious style implying a moral integrity. Painted boxes and pottery from the 6th century B.C. tell tales from Greek mythology. Others show fluting, echoing carved classical columns, while some display tops of lids with marquetry medallions featuring shells or more naturalistic forms such as flowers and butterflies.

Not surprisingly, the opposite side of the Western classical coin conveyed the fanciful world of the Exotic East. Chapter Five explores the complexity of the Opium and Tea Trade—an honest but not-so-pretty background to the aesthetic picture. The contextual elements of history, social mores, and literary and philosophical references influence decoration. Adding to the mix that mother of all invention, necessity, results in the creation of new objects, their signature styles and decoration. While the authors unfold the events precipitating the establishment of the East India Company, i.e. a flourishing China Trade (tea for opium), the text and colorful annotated illustrations reveal the aesthetic goals of their book. These are abundantly and visually reinforced on every page with color plates of decorated boxes. Chinoiserie, with its dreamlike land-

scapes and Oriental costumed figures, offered a new experience of flora and fauna with seductive cultural nuances that mesmerized Western eyes.

The 19th century was punctuated with change and discovery on every front. With the Industrial Revolution well underway and a growing middle class, demand for goods both utilitarian and ornamental increased. Mechanical methods of production engendered a variety of styles, less costly wares, and an increase in supply. Purpose dictates form, and to some extent style, and boxes were developed for particular uses such as writing slopes, traveling companions, tea caddies, table chests, etc. Designs included inlays from wood to ivory; plentiful inexpensive woods were dressed in veneers of rare tiger-eye maple, rosewood, sycamore and mahogany and facets of silver or brass, gold, mother of pearl and leather. All were valued and priced according to the degree and type of embellishment. There is a range of style and design, but it is more restrained than in the previous century.

The life of boxes is a story of history, fascinating enough to hold your attention for hours. The how, where, when and why of these hand-crafted containers will satisfy your intellectual pursuit. Although such information can be acquired elsewhere, the facts are served here in a deliciously narrative style. What will entice you to purchase this book is the captivating buffet of more than 900 color depictions of master craftsmanship.

Chapter Fifteen is an album of Oriental lacquer boxes and their high-lighted details that will tempt the talented among us. Chapter Seventeen, a virtual education in tea chests and caddies, features a wide range of shapes, designs and techniques: Picture box after box of Penwork and painted Chinoiserie. A box designed with sea shells and roses on a blue green background is a familiar face along with many others, echoing designs and elements featured in our Lending Library of Design. Your eyes will linger on a footed box surrounded with a basket weave around the sides, with roses intermittently leaning over the illusion. The top concave edges reveal a flower border surrounding the center bouquet.

In their thoroughness, the authors include an Appendix of Box Makers, a Select Bibliography, and an Index. Annotations accompanying the featured boxes include a description, size, approximate date, and estimated value. Antique Boxes, Tea Caddies & Society, 1700-1880 generously and handsomely satisfies a need for research and a pictorial review of work in this genre. The scholarship and quality of this publication are testimony to the integrity of master craftsmanship and its consideration as art.

Editor's note: Our Bookshelf editor, Sandra Cohen, owns and operates Legacy Books.

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The Third Jewelry Safe

by Shirley Baer

In the last issue of *The Decorator*, Martha Wilbur's decorated iron jewelry safes were featured. In the article, Wilbur mentioned that Shirley DeVoe had seen just one other safe before. Wilbur recently found the photograph of that safe and the letter from DeVoe. Wilbur said, "this letter was so long ago that we still Mrs. Wilbur and Mrs. DeVoe to each other."



Dear Mrs. Wilbur,

Enclosed is a print of the only japanned safe I have come across. I did not buy it but a friend of mine did. It had no firm name on it but it looked to me like a 20th century product, pre World War 1. So far there has been no mention of them in any thing I poked into in England.

I remember yours and thought it exceptionally fine – some japanner did a fine job on it!

The one enclosed had no drawers, just a metal shelf; I think, perhaps, two. Many thanks for your letter.

Shirley DeVoe

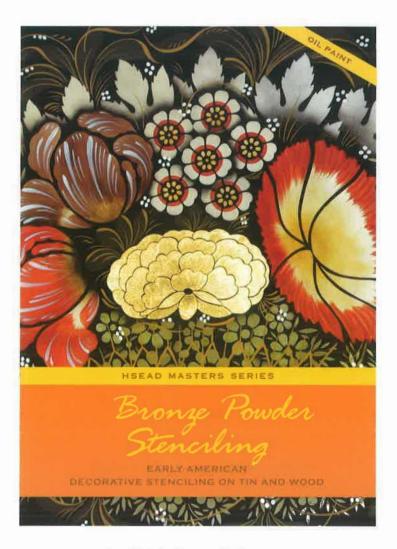


	Future Meeti	ngs
Fall 2005	Killington, VT	September 15-18 (TFSS)
Spring 2006	Warwick, RI	April 21-23 (FSS)
Fall 2006	Killington, VT	September 14-17 (TFSS)
Spring 2007	Rochester, NY	May 4-6 (FSS)

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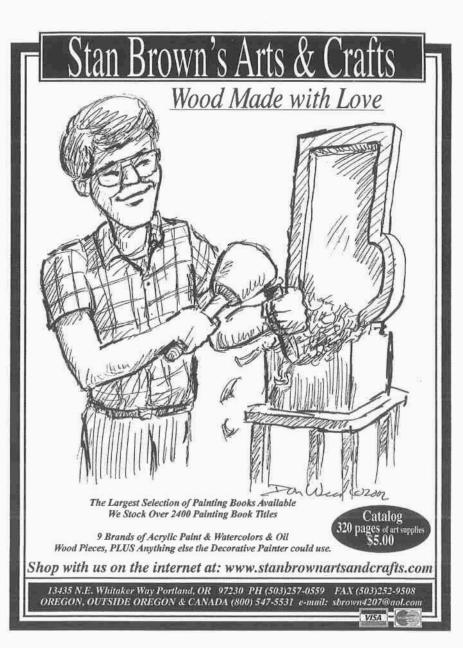


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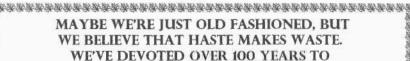
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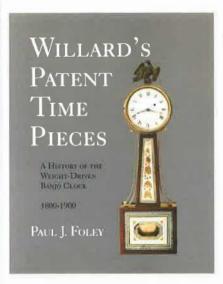
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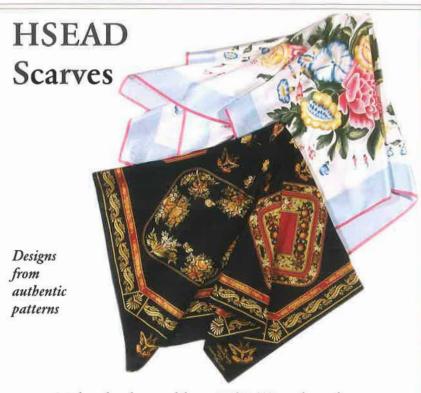
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