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*Front and back covers: A papier mâché pier table made in Birmingham by Henry Clay. Courtesy of Christie's, London.*

# Gilding the Lily

## Gold Leaf and Other Metal Effects Used by Japanners in the 18th and 19th Centuries

*Yvonne Jones*

*Part I of a paper delivered to the HSEAD on the occasion of its 60th Anniversary celebrations in Providence, Rhode Island, in April 2006*

The exuberant gold leaf decoration seen here on a cabinet made by McCallum & Hodson (Plate 1) which is now almost synonymous with Victorian papier mâché and tin-ware was, like other aspects of the japanning industry, rooted in the decorative traditions of eastern lacquer. But gold leaf is only one of several types of metal ornament found on papier mâché and tin-ware. As in the East, there were other kinds of metal leaf available and a colorful variety of metal powders to offer the gilder a rich palette and an even richer range of decorative possibilities. It is upon this variety of decorative techniques that this article will focus.

*Plate 1: McCallum & Hodson cabinet. Courtesy of Otto von Mitzlaff.*

Mindful that most HSEAD members are experienced gilders, the emphasis will be on the historical development of gilding in the Midlands japanning trade. In some instances, however, it will be necessary to describe the practical application of the ornament in order to distinguish one technique from another.

The earliest gilding in the English Midlands and, indeed, at Pontypool, and elsewhere in Europe, was predictably, mainly oriental in style, but as

japanners became more adept in their craft, so they felt less constrained by these influences using them instead as springboards from which to devise wholly new techniques and styles more in keeping with prevailing western taste. These stylistic changes are important in dating papier mâché and tin-ware, not least because regular revivals of some gilt patterns, and most particularly of traditional Eastern designs can be a source of much confusion for modern collectors. A comparison of early tea-boards made by Henry Clay, with trays similarly decorated in Indian style but made in the 1860s by Henry Loveridge, amply demonstrates this point.

To present a wholly chronological survey of gilding would necessitate darting from one type of gilding to another. This would serve only to confuse so, instead, each type will be taken in turn starting here, in Part I of this paper, with gold and other metal leaf.

Although japanners purchased some metal leaf from gold-beaters in Birmingham, their supplies came mainly from Germany. The color and quality varied according to the metal, or alloy of metals, from which it was made, but in skilled hands, this variety allowed for extraordinarily rich effects and color combinations.

Pure gold leaf was the most expensive. In fact it was so expensive that Samuel Loveridge of Henry Loveridge & Co. kept his factory supply locked in his office, and other factory owners probably did likewise. Understandably, therefore, a low carat second quality, at only one-twentieth of the price, was much more widely used. Even some alloys were too expensive for anything but the best work. For example, japanners in Birmingham favored a leaf made from the palest alloy by Robert Warner (fl. circa 1803 - circa 1835) a local japanner and, later, a bronze-powder manufacturer, but it cost two guineas an ounce (i.e. £ 2.10p per 28 grammes troy - a little less than twice the weekly wages of "first class men" in the 1840s). By contrast, so-called "Dutch" gold[1] was a much-used substitute for all types of gold leaf; it cost only two-shillings and sixpence per thousand leaves (i.e.12½p per 12 grammes troy, or just over half a young apprentice's weekly pay in the mid-19th century). Made from alloys of copper, brass and zinc, Dutch gold was available in several colors and shades but it quickly discolored unless varnished soon after application. And because pure silver-leaf also tarnished, alloys of tin or zinc were used in imitation.

Few tools were necessary for laying metal leaf: a leather pad on which to cut it, a palette knife, a plentiful supply of cotton wool, a burnisher, and a range of brushes: fine camel-hair ones with which to draw the intended design, a broad soft hogs-hair brush (known as a 'gilders' tip') for lifting the leaf, and a smaller hogs-hair brush or a cotton swab to remove

1 'Dutch' here, was a corruption of 'Deutsch', therefore the metal in question was German gold.

any excess leaf when the work was done. George Dickinson,[2] drawing upon his conversations with retired japanners, told how the brushes were made by only two or three specialist makers and how, before using a new brush, a gilder would hold it up to the light, spread its hairs between his finger and thumb, and remove any that were coarse and likely to scratch the work.

Applying metal leaf is a delicate operation. Readers will sympathize, therefore, with a novice but fictional amateur japanner who, in 1838, "had infinite trouble with the gold leaf. I think it is the most fidgetty thing I ever used in my life,"[3] and who was horrified by the amount of waste. For the commercial japanner, however, pure gold leaf was far too precious to waste, and any "sweepings" that adhered to his swabs or brushes, and all off-cuts, were carefully collected and sent to the refiners for recycling. In 1758, for example, John Cox, a "sweep washer," advertised in the Birmingham Gazette that he "Buys and sells gold and silver sweeps, and [that he] refines for silversmiths."[4] Swabs containing metal leaf other than gold were sold to bronze powder manufacturers who, like the gold refiners, burned them to extract the metal. A japanner could receive as much as six or seven pounds a year for recycling waste metal in this way.

The finished appearance of metal leaf depended upon the method by which it was attached, but essentially, oil-gilding produced a matt effect, and water-gilding, a burnished one. This was so for all types of metal leaf,

*Plate 2: Small papier mâché tray, circa 1810. Collection of Sara Tiffany.*

2 Dickinson, George, *English Papier Mâché*, London, 1925, p. 40.

3 Gandee, B. F., *The Artist or Young Ladies Instructor in Ornamental Painting, Drawing etc...*, London, 1838, p. 94.

4 Aris's *Birmingham Gazette*, 4 Sept, 1758.

*Plate 4. Papier mâché bread tray, stamped for Henry Clay. Private Collection.*

whether pure or alloyed, and so, for simplicity, and with few exceptions, the terms "gold leaf", or "leaf" will be used to describe them all.

Robert Dossie wrote in 1758[5] that oil-gilding was the only method used for gilding japan work, a fact which held true for the greater part of that century. Its matt or 'dead gold' finish, as seen on this tray (Plate 2), was entirely due to the oil-based gold-size with which the leaf was attached. The size was made from gum, asphaltum (i.e. tar or pitch dissolved in pure turpentine) umber, and linseed oil, and mixed with a little vermilion to ensure that it remained visible as it dried on the work in hand. It was thinned with oil of turpentine or, for a slightly brighter gold finish, with fat-oil that is, concentrated linseed oil and used very sparingly to paint the parts of the design which were to be gilded. Too much size would give the gold a pitted texture.

When the size was sticky but too dry to leave any trace on the finger, the leaf was picked up on the gilder's tip or with a ball of cotton wool, and laid on the work. To prevent the leaf from curling up on itself or wafting away on his merest breath, the gilder sometimes gave the tip or cotton wool greater adhesion by running it lightly through his hair or across a patch of oil he had smeared on his wrist - a method which is still used today. He pressed the leaf down and smoothed it with a pad of cotton wool wrapped in fine linen. When the work was dry, any excess leaf was gently removed with a swab or brush.

A pair of papier mâché pier tables sold recently in London[6] shows the quality of work that could be achieved by this method (Plate 3: front and back cover). They are from a set of six made in Birmingham by Henry Clay for the 4th Earl of Bristol. Traveller and collector Edward Daniel Clarke

5 Dossie, Robert, *Handmaid to the Arts*, 1764, vol I, section v, p. 501. (It also appeared in the 1758 edition).

6 Christie's, London. *Important English Furniture and Carpets*, 24 Nov., 2005, Lot no. 50. Although Clarke saw only two tables, it emerges that they were from a set of six which was split up when Lord Bristol's Irish home, Downhill, was sold in 1946.

saw two of the tables when he visited Clay's workshop in 1791, and noted that they were "painted after some designs brought purposely from Rome." He thought them "by far the most beautiful things of the kind [he] ever saw."[7]

All six tables have hinged tops which open to form circular tables with highly polished black japanned surfaces encircled by gold leaf borders. There are similar, but not identical, gilt motifs on their friezes and square tapering legs. According to Christie's catalogue, the friezes correspond to a pattern by Johann Tischbein, Director of the Royal Academy of Paintings in Naples who, from 1791, supervised the engravings of Sir William Hamilton's famous collection of Greek vases. Although Clay did not affix his name to the tables, Clarke's description, and comparison with a marked tray in the collection of Birmingham City Museum, which is painted with the same subject as one of the tables, leave no doubt about their maker.

An early 19th century bread basket and a king-gothic tray, both stamped for Henry Clay, show how the above process could be varied to produce different results. In the first example (Plate 4), the fine details of its border pattern were painted in size and the metal leaf attached according to the method described above. By contrast, although the leaf was attached to the second example (Plate 5) in the same way, it was laid in larger patches and the detail of its ornament was afterwards picked out or to coin the

*Plate 5: Detail from a papier mâché king-gothic tray; stamped for Henry Clay, circa 1812. Collection of Astrid Donnellan.*

7 Clarke, Edward Daniel, *A Tour through the South of England, Wales and part of Ireland...*, 1791, p. 377.

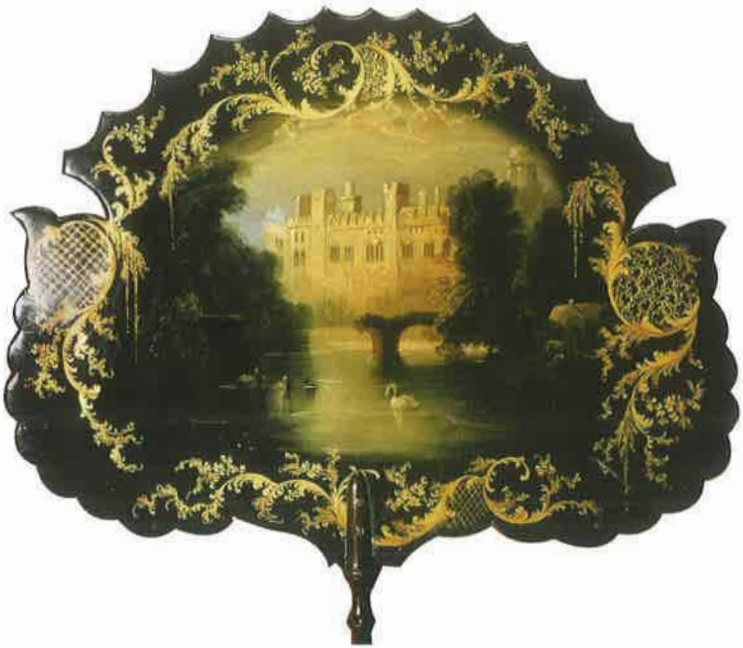

*Plate 6: Papier mâché hand-screen, painted with view of Warwick Castle, circa 1840. Private collection.*

workmen's terms 'etched' or 'pencilled' on the surface of the gold leaf with a camel-hair brush dipped in asphaltum varnish.

Some early papier mâché and tin-ware was decorated with 'metal powders', usually in combination with metal leaf. They were not really powders, but tiny flakes of metal leaf which were strewn over a sized surface and brushed or rubbed in to create a speckled or glittery effect similar to the makie or 'sprinkled pictures' of 12th century Japanese lacquer.

The gold leaf decoration seen here on a hand-screen (Plate 6) is an example of water gilding. This method of gilding was first used by japanners in the early 19th century. As may be seen, its burnished or bright finish, makes it very different from the relatively dull surface of oil-gilding. And yet, the metal leaf used for both effects was exactly the same. The reason for its brilliance was two-fold. First, and most importantly, the leaf was applied with isinglass, a water-based semi-transparent adhesive obtained from the viscera of fish. And second, improvements in the underlying japan varnish meant that the surface on which the gold leaf was laid was silkier and more receptive to gilding than hitherto. Bright gilding, as it was commonly called in the industry, was said to have "caused a revolution, not only in the manner of working, but also in the patterns and the artistic treatment of the japanned ware."[8] Articles gilded in this way, such as this papier mâché

8 Anonymous, *Rise and Fall of an Art Industry,* The Journal of Decorative Art, September, 1889, p. 139.

wine tray designed by Richard Redgrave and made by Jennens & Bettridge, certainly bear testimony to this (Plate 7).

It is difficult to be precise about when japanners first used bright gold. A small tray lent by the japanner John Jones for exhibition in Wolverhampton in 1884 was described in the accompanying catalogue as "One of the first japan trays on which burnished gilding was introduced."[9] If, as claimed, it was painted by Edward Bird at the Old Hall, then its date of manufacture, and thus the introduction of this type of gilding, were necessarily in the late 1780s or early 1790s, when Bird was employed at that factory. However, Mr. Hobson, a journeyman at Jennens & Bettridge, was credited with its introduction in the 1820s and all surviving evidence in the form of decorated objects supports this as the more likely date, if not of its introduction, then certainly of its widespread use. Save for minor idiosyncrasies, Hobson's gilding method was widely adopted for the decoration of the better class of tin and papier mâché goods; it was seen in use at McCallum & Hodson's factory some thirty years later, and there is no evidence elsewhere of any marked divergence from this method then or later.

*Plate 7: Papier mâché wine tray impressed Jennens & Bettridge and printed with the name "Redgrave" for its designer, Richard Redgrave. Private collection.*

To create a bright gold pattern around the edge of a tray, for instance, Hobson washed "The whole or nearly the whole"[10] border with a weak solution of isinglass and water, or if the gilder preferred, wetted it with his tongue. This trick, which some believed gave better adhesion, had to be exercised with great caution since any acid in the saliva after meals or during illness was likely to discolor the leaf. Sheets of gold leaf were laid on

9 *Wolverhampton Exhibition - Official Catalogue*, 1884, p. 54, Cat. No. 5.

10 Anonymous, *Rise and Fall of an Art Industry*, op.cit., p. 139.

*Plate 8: King-gothic tray, circa 1835. Private collection.*

until the edge of the tray was entirely or nearly covered. When the water had evaporated, the border pattern was painted on to the gold with asphaltum varnish to protect or "stop out" those parts of the pattern to be saved. The asphaltum showed up as a dull yellow, enabling an experienced gilder to work by eye, adding "perhaps a leafy wreath, or an arabesque or scroll ornament"[11] as the work dictated. Once the asphaltum had dried, the exposed gold was rubbed off with damp cotton wool and the protective varnish removed with turpentine to reveal the bright gold border pattern beneath.

Subtle and complex patterns were achieved by using several different shades of metal together, but such extravagance was generally reserved for only the best quality goods.

As in the earlier period, thin washes of colored varnish were sometimes applied over gold leaf to heighten the effect of a flower, or to give iridescence to the feathers of an exotic bird (Plate 8). This gave a "peculiar gorgeousness of tint" wrote an anonymous admirer of the technique in 1850, "which can be obtained by no other method."[12] As in the earlier period,

11 Anonymous, *Birmingham and her Manufactures,* The Leisure Hour, No.62, 3 March, 1853, p. 155.

12 Anonymous, *The Book of Papier Mâché and Japanning,* Ladies Library, London, 1850, p. 19.

*Plate 9: Papier mâché notebook, circa 1840. Private collection.*

details such as leaf veins were sometimes etched or pencilled in asphaltum onto the shiny gold surface (Plate 9).

By slightly modifying the method for applying bright gold, it was possible to achieve other effects. For a dead-gold finish, for example, the design was painted in gold size, - as in the early period, but instead of leaving it until it was sticky, it was left until thoroughly dry, and brushed with a solution of isinglass prior to the leaf being laid. The size had the effect of dulling or "deadening" the gold while the isinglass, it must be presumed, provided a smoother, more receptive surface. It was a method which C. J. Woodward (son of Josiah Woodward of the Birmingham japanning firm of Woodward & Midgeley) said, in a paper he gave to the Birmingham Society of Artists in 1926, allowed for very fine lacy work.

In addition, extravagant patterns were made possible by combining the effects of bright and dead gold, especially if several colors of gold were used together. To achieve this variation, the parts of the first layer of gold, which were to be shiny, were stopped-out with asphaltum, and those which were to appear dead were painted with size. A second layer of gold leaf was then applied over all. This, again, added considerably to overall cost, and particularly so if areas of contrasting gold abutted, since this necessitated the whole border and in some cases, the entire surface of the object, being covered with further layers of gold leaf. Once the excess gold had been rubbed away and the stopping-out fluid removed with spirit, the contrasts of bright and dead gold took on the appearance of rich damask or brocade.

Another technique credited to Hobson was *embossing*. It was a variant of the combination effect described above. First a "plain dead ground of bronze"[13] powder was laid on a japanned and sized surface and the

13 Anonymous, *Papier Mâché Manufacture,* The Stationer and Fancy Trades Register, 5 May, 1869, p. 269.

*Plate 10: Detail from a king-gothic tray showing spangled decoration. Private collection.*

intended design was drawn on in oil. The oil caused the size beneath the bronze powder to soften, making it possible, after a while, for the oil and the underlying bronze to be rubbed, off leaving the design in black within a bronze ground. This was then brushed with isinglass and water and covered entirely with gold leaf. Where the leaf touched the exposed black outline, it shone brightly, and where it touched the sized bronze parts, it appeared dead, creating a glistening design against a field of dead gold. The technique appears to have been rarely used.

Hobson was also said to have introduced the decoration known as *spangles.* It can be seen here in a detail from a gothic-shaped papier mâché tray (plate 10). This involved gilding a glass surface, such as a bottle, varnishing it, and when the varnish was dry, scraping off the gold onto a tacky japanned surface. The result was similar to that achieved by using metal powders (see above).

With the exception of *raised work*, there remains one other method by which japanners applied gold leaf: namely transfer-printing.

In 1809, Charles Valentine, a japanner of Clerkenwell, in London, was granted a patent for *A New Mode of Ornamenting and Painting all Kinds of Japanned and Varnished Wares of Metal, Paper, or any other Compositions.*[14] It included a method for transfer-printing in gold, a development which

14 Patent No. 3219.

appears to have been a topical concern among decorators. For instance, a similar patent, in respect of porcelain, was granted the following year to Peter Warburton of Staffordshire. Even so, the process was not new having been used in the mid-1750s on enamel plaques and boxes made at Battersea in London, and on Staffordshire salt-glazed stoneware in the 1760s. It is possible, therefore, that there had been earlier attempts to print in gold onto japanned surfaces, but if Valentine's method was typical, it is equally as possible that the time involved outweighed any saving of skilled labor. It was thus not until many years later that this form of gold decoration was widely adopted by japanners.

According to Valentine's patent, the whole of the surface to be decorated was gilded twice (why twice, he did not say), coated with copal varnish, and left to dry. An engraved copper plate was inked with a mixture of printing ink and fresh beeswax, and an impression, taken on gummed tissue paper, was transferred to the gilded surface. After what was described as *a few days* he coated the work with the intended ground color mixed with a little copal varnish. When this had dried, the object was warmed in order to soften the waxy ink beneath the ground color, making it easy to rub off to reveal the gold-printed image. The result, Valentine said, was "the same as if the gold size had been applied by the pencil."

It is possible that the finely worked gold leaf pattern which forms the background on each of a pair of extraordinarily large and handsome vases made by Jennens & Bettridge was done in this way. They were commissioned in the early 1830s by Lady Hertford for the Blue Drawing Room at Temple Newsam House just outside Leeds in Yorkshire, which she was furnishing in a mixture of chinoiserie and French regency taste, and to where they have recently been returned. Influenced in shape and style by Chinese porcelain vases, they are decorated with birds, animals, butterflies and landscapes in reserve panels edged with mother-of-pearl. Their decoration so closely resembles descriptions of the work of Joseph Booth, who became "justly celebrated for his exquisite imitations of Chinese and Japanese ornament,"[15] that they may indeed be his work. As an acknowledged expert in these styles, it is unlikely that Jennens & Bettridge would have given so important an order to any other artist. As a sidelight, when the vases were sold in London in 2003, their fine metal mounts were attributed to Edward Holmes Baldock of London, but the possibility of a Birmingham mount-maker should not be discounted. There was, for example, Matthew Boulton's Soho Works, which after Boulton's death, was maintained by his son who continued to make high quality silver-plate and ormolu until 1846.

15 Aitken, W C, *Papier Mâché Manufacture*, Birmingham and the Midland Hardware District, (ed. Timmins, S), 1866, reprinted London, 1967, p. 569.

*Plate 11: A small papier mache stationery box, impressed "Jennens & Bettridge." Collection of Shirley S. Baer.*

The combination of papier mâché and gilt metal features on several of Jennens & Bettridge's best pieces.

However, some thirty-five years after Valentine's patent, Thomas Farmer, a japanner, observed that painting, as distinct from printing, designs directly on to gold leaf was still the norm. On this evidence, it would seem that transfer-printing in gold was not commonly used. In all probability this was not through any lack of interest, but for want of efficient means. Farmer, himself, pursued the problem in a patent of 1844 (#10,224), but as it made only slight changes to Valentine's method, and was concerned mainly with the preparation of copper plates for printing, it is of little relevance here.

Of greater interest in the context of japanning was the *negative process* of gold-printing. This is understood to have been patented by George Haselar of Wolverhampton in 1852, although no specification appears to exist. It is necessary therefore to rely upon the description given by R. B. Prosser in 1881 in his book *Birmingham Inventors and Inventions.* There, we are told, an inked impression of those parts of the design not to be gilded was transferred to the object, and the whole surface was brushed with a weak solution of isinglass and water. Gold leaf was applied all over and rubbed with spirits of turpentine to remove, in one operation, both the unwanted gold and the underlying negative impression. Areas not touched by the transfer were left sharply defined in bright gold. It is difficult to see how this improved upon existing processes, but Prosser asserted that it "was

worked satisfactorily for some years by one of the leading houses in Wolverhampton",[16] by which he must surely have meant either the Old Hall or Loveridge's Merridale Works. Nevertheless, it is impossible today to identify goods which may have been decorated in this way.

Two patents, issued in 1853 (#361) and 1854 (#1714) to Charles Breese, a japanner at Breese and Hayward in Birmingham, were almost identical to each other, and described yet another method for transfer-printed gold decoration. By printing the design onto gold leaf with a stopping-out fluid instead of painting it on, Breese's idea was an obvious development from Hobson's free-hand methods. It quickened and standardized the decorating process and Samuel Timmins welcomed it in 1866 for having brought in its wake "Plain black centres, and simple gold or metal borders", like the one on the Jennens & Bettridge stationery box, c. 1855, shown here (Plate 11), which "almost entirely banished the tasteless and loaded ornamentation formerly in vogue ... Patterns designed by skilful artists can, by this method, be multiplied to an extent that enables the manufacturer to put on the cheapest articles a style of ornament only used a few years ago upon the most expensive."[17]

Thus, besides speed, gilding with transfer prints brought other savings and benefits. Instead of requiring experienced hands, articles could be gilded by apprentices. What was needed of the transfer-printer was not aesthetic judgement, but care, a good eye for accuracy, and above all, practice. The downside, was that these 'chaste' styles which critics had encouraged, brought with them unemployment for many skilled gilders and other decorators.

By 1856, according to George Wallis, though there *appeared* to be greater restraint by designers generally, he saw little evidence of it among Birmingham's japanners. He believed that progress would come only as "the result of improvements in other departments of ornamental industry being taken up from time to time, and adapted to the wants of the japanner and his employer."[18] To some extent, events proved him right. A number of border patterns introduced in the 1860s largely facilitated by Breese's introduction of transferred gilt borders shared many characteristics with those favored by the electro-platers, whose success was beginning seriously to threaten the japanning trade.

Finally, in this survey of gilding with metal leaf, we come to what was misleadingly called *stencilled* gold decoration. The patterns were not stenciled as that term is understood today, but applied with corks[19] in a

16 Prosser, R B, *Birmingham Inventors and Inventions*, (1881), re-printed 1970, p. 44.

17 Timmins, S. (ed.) *The Miscellaneous Trades*, Birmingham and the Midland Hardware District, 1866, p. 640.

18 Wallis, George, *Recent Progress in Design as Applied to Manufactures*, Society of Arts Journal, vol. IV, 14 March, 1856, p. 297.

manner similar to "potato-cut printing" (Plate 12). It was introduced as a fast and inexpensive means of applying gilt borders to goods made for the lower end of the market, and it was especially popular among japanners in Bilston. Like transfer printing, it required of the decorator both accuracy and practice. The gilder dipped the cork in gold size and, using the little finger as a spacing tool, printed a repeat pattern round the edge of the tray. A little lemon-yellow mixed with the size ensured that the motif remained visible. When the size was sticky to the touch, Dutch gold or a similarly inexpensive alternative was laid on, and the excess wiped away.

Other types of gilding – bronze decoration, so-called "inlaying of aluminium", and what the japanners called "raising"– will all be discussed in Part II, which will be published in the next edition of *The Decorator.*

*Plate 12: Small Bilston tray with border decorated using a "cork", mid 1800s. Collection of Shirley S. Baer.*

18 Wallis, George, *Recent Progress in Design as Applied to Manufactures,* Society of Arts Journal, vol. IV, 14 March, 1856, p. 297.

19 "Cork-cutting" was listed as a separate trade in local directories and most japanners would have ordered stencils from these specialist suppliers rather than cut their own. Each pattern was given a name or number so that as corks became worn with use, new sets could easily be ordered.

*NB. Sadly, it is not possible here, to include all illustrations from the lecture. They will, of course, be included in my forthcoming book. YJ*

# "When This You See Remember Me"

## Tokens of Remembrance and Love

*Linda Carter Lefko*

How many of us have clipped our babies' curls and tucked them in a baby book as a memento of their infancy? How many of us remember writing in the autograph album of a friend in our youth? We save handwritten letters and cards from people who have touched our lives, and cherish the favorite handwritten recipe cards of our mothers. Mementos like these are becoming more precious as we pass through this digital world with email and instant messaging and online recipe files. Seemingly, the personal touch of the handwritten thought is becoming a thing of the past, and has made these tokens of remembrance priceless.

It is easy to become absorbed in studying the various ephemera that are mementos of the past several generations. Their existence reflects the interests, past times and accepted beliefs of the 19th century romantic. Sentimentality was not necessarily the provenance of women only. Many of the tokens are small stitched, embroidered or painted pieces with handwritten dedications and testimonials to fondness and love. They were appreciated because of the affection with which they were created, not necessarily by their inherent value.

Keepsake albums were popular in the first part of the 19th century. They were leather bound, often with ornamented and embossed covers and marbled endpapers, filled with blank pages. Similar books were used for diaries, recipes and household records. The entries were often verbal remembrances, sometimes by the album owner, and often from friends and family. Occasionally, the handwritten verse was combined with watercolor and/or theorem painted embellishment. The rose and scroll painting shown here exhibits the theorem (painting through successive layers of

*Freehand watercolor and theorem painting, circa* 1835, 6" x 8" (sight size). *Collection of Linda Lefko.*

*Left: Necklace with portrait of young man, watercolor on ivory. Below: Back of portrait necklace. Courtesy of Susan Dean, Antiques and Uncommon Treasure.*

stencils) technique used to base-in the roses and leaves as well as the hand-watercolor embellishment used to define the leaf separation and veining, scroll, and all the tiny buds and leaves. Flowers were often the subject of the painted ornamentation, and it was believed that they had symbolic meaning. For example, the moss rosebud was symbolic of confession; the blue violet we see so often in early floral paintings, symbolic of faithfulness; the pansy, tender thoughts.

Popular "language of flowers" books such as *Flora's Dictionary* by Mrs. E.W. Wirt, 1829, helped convey the idea that the flowers were vested with symbolic meaning. The recipient could read it and get a particular meaning because of the various flowers used in the memento. Some of these books even had poems that would accompany the floral token, along with a poetic response for the receiver to send back. One of the major features of the 19th century New England newspaper was the poetry column. The verses were often copied into the keepsake albums of the period.

Sentimental customs of the 18th and 19th centuries include the preservation of a loved one's hair, from a simple lock woven and tied in a friendship album to a formal piece made by a professional jeweler. During the 18th century, hair was woven in-to brooches shaped like lyres and bows, necklaces, bracelets and rings, as both love tokens and memorial jewelry. The exquisite watercolor on ivory of a dashing young man (shown above) may have been given as a pledge of love and fidelity. The delicate hair monogram under glass on the back of this piece is beautifully executed by a professional hair artist. The hair

monogram is not necessarily the hair of the young gentleman. Artists frequently had samples of hair ready for use in different pattern motifs upon completion of the portrait, so it was not necessarily the hair of the loved one. It was fashionable to wear portrait medallions as pendants on long chains or mounted as pins. These professionally water colored love tokens date to the end of the 1700s and into the early 1800s.

*Small heart and hand. Collection of Linda Lefko.*

By the 1830s, hairwork had also evolved into an amateur pastime, and can be found in family scrapbooks and friendship albums, the forerunners of autograph books. Collecting hair from the living was a common practice. In fact, *hair receivers* often adorned the dressing tables in the boudoir. The miniature hairwork tokens of love and friendship were often adorned with fragments of ribbons or tiny watercolors – friendship gifts that would last forever and cost little. There is evidence that these tokens were made in the early 1800s by young boarding school girls who often employed time-honored designs that had been handed down through the generations. Sometimes the hair tokens in the albums record an entire family's existence and the love between family and friends. Other times they are meant to be a presentation piece such as a valentine. Hair does not decompose, so it is a lasting memento of the owner's existence.

Queen Victoria ascended to the throne in 1837 and was alleged to be responsible for making "events" of holidays, birthdays, weddings and anniversaries-Hallmark's raison d'etre!

Ladies often drew and hand-painted their own valentines in the 1830s and 40s, and embellished commercial lace-edged and embossed designs with verse.

*Theorem valentine circa 1820. Collection of Linda Lefko.*

For those who were unimaginative or inarticulate, either the poetry column from the newspaper or the passionate verses printed in tiny booklets such as *The Ladies' and Gentlemen's New and Original Valentine Writer* by J. M. Fletcher, gave them plenty of sentimental material. These ornate verses found their way onto handmade tokens of all types – friendship albums, puzzle purses, rebuses (when the message contains pictures that represent words) and acrostics (where certain letters in each line form a word or name). The theorem painted valentine illustrated reads:

*Forget me not - I only ask*
*this simple boon of thee;*
*And let it be an easy task,*
*Sometimes to think of me.*

The verse is typical of those found in the pocket verse books of the day. The design of the theorem roses and buds is skillfully shaped to form an empty heart that encompasses the verse. The shading on the blossom, buds and leaves is primitive and almost nonexistent. Several of these survive today in collections, and have been executed with various degrees of ability. This may indicate that the theorem pattern was available at a school setting and was probably designed by an artist/teacher and then offered to the students for painting. It is obvious from the deterioration that the valentine was folded and tucked away for safe keeping over the years - a nameless treasure almost 200 years old!

Heart motifs were not necessarily related to love. Some were given to school children as rewards of merit, some were used as fasteners for childhood locks of hair in Victorian memory books, and still others were used as a design theme on fractur birth registers and marriage certificates.

The symbolic hand is often found on watercolored love tokens and calling or friendship cards that were popular during the last half of the nineteenth century.

The invention of chromolithography in 1837 flooded the American market with tiny printed scraps that were used to create and decorate all manner of cards and love tokens as well as albums, workboxes and even furniture. This was a precursor to what we know as decoupage. These calling or friendship cards often had a hand and flower chromolithograph that covered a secret message or name. The lithograph was secured at one edge, and could be easily lifted to reveal the message.

The handwriting that embellishes letters and friendship tokens covers a wide range of ability. Beautiful Spencerian penmanship exercises provided another method of personalizing messages of friendship and love. They were often combined with hair and tiny painted motifs and put into albums and diaries. Hours of dedicated practice would result in beautiful pages often

*"Hand with rose" calling card. Collection of Linda Lefko.*

embellished with penwork flourishes that defy the imagination. Instruction books were available, and practice, practice, practice could result in a friendship album page like Rowena's. This does not diminish the handwritten messages of affection that are barely legible tokens.

Eighteenth and 19th century women were the primary creators and keepers of mementos and keepsakes, much the same as they would be now were they not caught up in the fast-paced whirl of the 21st century. They were the creators of the friendship quilts, family registers and sentimental gatherings that made a house a home. Domestic handiwork and creative leisure time are almost a thing of the past. It behooves us as artists to pass on this love for commemoration of special events, friends and family through our handwork – our painting, our creative genius and our love of friendship.

*Hand embossed chromolithograph calling card, circa 1870. Collection of Linda Lefko.*

These friendship and love tokens can take many forms, and document the dignity of expression of our generation. Hopefully, our creative endeavors will be the mementos and love tokens for our future generations.

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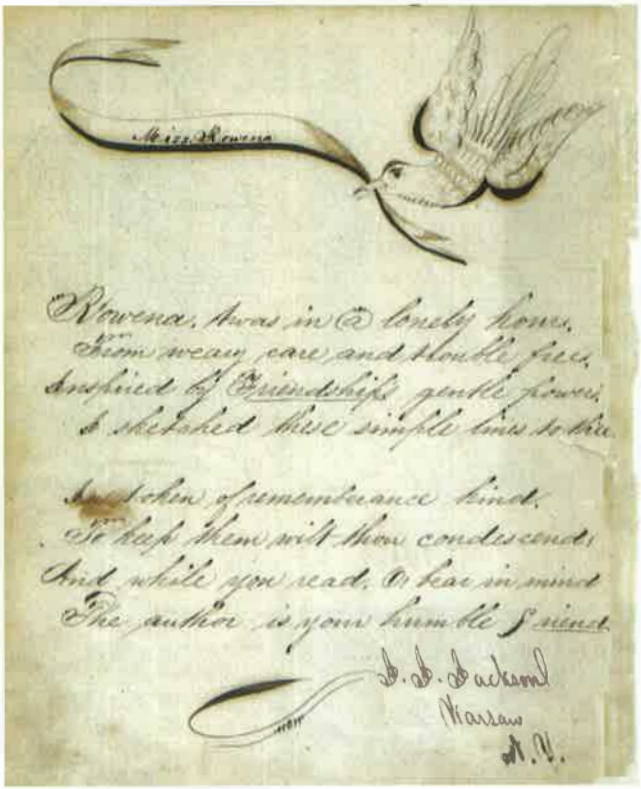


*Page from* Friendship Album *by Rowena, circa 1875. Collection of Linda Lefko.*

*Editor's note: The Spring 2007 (Rochester, N.Y.) Historical Society of Early American Decoration meeting's theme will be* Mementos, Memorials and Mourning.

## Members' "A" Awards

**Anne Dimock**
*Glass with Border*

**Roberta Edrington**
*Special Class*

**Karen Graves**
*Theorem*

**Elaine Dalzell**
*Glass with Border*

**Judy Thornton**
*Glass with Border*

**Robert Flachbarth**
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**Astrid Donnellan**
*Special Class*


**Anne Dimock**
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**Martha Kinney**
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**Laura Bullitt**
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*Theorem*


# The Bookshelf

## Group Dynamics, Family Portraits & Scenes of Everyday Life at the New York Historical Society

*by Richard Brilliant with Amy Weinstein*

*Published by the New York Historical Society in association with the New Press, 217 pages.*

*Reviewed by Sandra Cohen*

Preserving one's likeness in art dates back to ancient times. Five thousand years ago, colorful funerary art became a realistic landmark for a wandering spirit in the afterlife as well as a sympathetic reminder for posterity.

Portraiture still serves as that touchstone. More immediately, it mirrors the lives of family and friends, and on a more scholarly level, it documents the lives of historical figures and the times in which they lived. Pictures can be worth a thousand words, but their truth is not always so easy to discern, and it is not always the obvious or literal interpretation. *Group Dynamics* is a stunning exhibition of some of the best family portraits from

James and Sarah Tuttle. *Gouache, watercolor, graphite and black ink with selective glazing on paper.*

the late 18th and 19th century America, and the authors of its catalogue lead us through the literal and figurative messages.

The late 18th and 19th centuries were a time of change and diversity on every front. Manifest Destiny gave birth to a truly American school of painting, the Hudson River School. This time is also about the Civil War, the Emancipation Proclamation, railroads, and economic prosperity. It's about America's growing pains and progress. The subjects in these paintings and every detail portray individuals who lived during some of the nation's worst and best years. Many of the subjects represent high society, and their demeanor, dress and domestic accessories attest to their success, time and place in society.

The teeming hustle and bustle viewed in photos of Manhattan's Lower West Side and the Lower East Side is palpable. Members of a growing entrepreneurial class create a market for a wealth of goods and services. Those who can afford it desire to own works of art such as genre scenes, landscapes, still life and, of course, the portrait to stake one place for posterity. Nathaniel Hawthorne reminds us that "Nothing in the whole circle of human vanities takes stronger hold of the imagination than this affair of having a portrait painted... It is the idea of duration – of earthly immortality – that gives such a mysterious interest to our own portraits." Success is sweet, and sharing it with the world is even sweeter.

*Group Dynamics* focuses on some of their framed residents who played a pivotal or peripheral role in the nineteenth century. The originals are stunning from miniatures to life size, and they command our interest and admiration. The catalogue is the next best way to look at the faces and review them in their moment in time.

The curator categorized the collection according to 1) Image and Narrative, 2) Social Landscape, 3) Family Ties: Defining the Self, 4) Society, Gender and Class, 5) Fictions of the Pose, 6) Life Out-of-Doors. These themes create contextual frames for this representative selection of portraits, enriching our exploration of the faces, costumes, furnishings and other various aspects that provide clues to the subjects' personal stories. The introduction offers a scholarly

Mrs. Daniel Truman and Child, *oil on canvas, attributed to Reuben Moulthrop.*

The Farnum Children *by Joseph Whiting Stock, oil on canvas.*

and literary reference to the paintings, and each portrait is accompanied by text that provides a background of the art and the artist.

The earliest photographic images are remarkably captivating. At times the subjects are posed, and there may be some degree of manipulation of the backgrounds and tinting to enhance the realism, but the unbiased lens and subtle variations of filtered light convey its subjects with such simple honesty. A generous sampling of photographs includes a daguerreotype of Mr. And Mrs. Hinken. This is a naïve rendition of a couple. Her cap is an accessory of rural women; her not so rural accessory of a book indicates that she's literate. Mr. Hinken's arm around his wife belies a formal, serious demeanor.

Francis Carpenter's oil painting of *The Lincoln Family,* 1865, painted after Lincoln's assassination and after the death of his son, Willie, was composed from a variety of the family's photographs, and demonstrates the dramatic quality of black and white (although here the artist's intent was to use the painting to develop an engraving.) The mood is solemn and reminiscent of a president's legacy and the tragedy of a family's and a nation's loss.

Next, the eye feasts upon the color oil paintings that convey the blushing textures of skin, scenery, flowers and fabrics. Eastman Johnson draws us into a backyard of a southern white neighborhood. *Negro Life at the South* lulls us with the soft sounds of the banjo player, the soft whispers of a young couple, and the animated dancing of a mother and her child, but the ramshackle dwelling and adjacent stately mansion echoes a time of white supremacy and slavery.

Other genre paintings such as *Visiting Grandma* and *The Peddler* are such familiar and endearing scenes. One's eyes travel through these settings engaged by their sentimentality and historic information and captivated by the handsomely rendered period furnishings.

Folk art is amply represented. The *Miller Family Mourning Picture*, a watercolor and ink on silk, was painted by Sally Miller and is a popular work of early schoolgirl art. Another naïve painting is *James and Sarah (Clark) Tuttle* by Joseph Davis. The couple is seated on painted scroll-back chairs, facing each other across a faux finished table on a brightly painted floor cloth. An oil painting on the wall featuring their sawmill, a book in her hand, and his finger pointing to a verse in the Bible make the necessary statements about their New England work ethic and character. The rest of the furnishings include a sumptuous platter of fruit referencing their own fruitfulness (thirteen children) and a contented cat.

A tender mother-and-child portrait, *Mrs. Daniel Truman and Child* by Reuben Moulthrop, comes with a bonus miniature landscape viewed through an open door in the upper right corner. Our perspective leads us down a garden path to the water front harbor where Daniel Truman, a ship's Captain, is looking out to the sea beyond. However, it is the nurturing scene in the foreground that holds one's attention. Mrs. Truman's soft features and her benevolent smile and the slightly tilted child's head resting on her mother's breast celebrate maternal love. The texture of Mrs. Truman's delicate diaphanous lace cap and collar and the abundant folds of the little girl's white smock reinforce their innocence and femininity. Hand in hand they hold roses that emphasize shared virtues of a mother and daughter. On the other hand, the fathers and sons featured in this gallery are recognized for their intellectual acumen and achievements.

Miller Family Mourning Picture *by Sally Miller. Silk with watercolor and ink.*

The Peale Family *by Charles Wilson Peale, oil on canvas.*

Charles Wilson Peale was an American Renaissance man. The son of an embezzler, Peale was self-educated, studied for a while with Benjamin West, fought at Valley Forge, was commissioned by Princeton to paint a portrait of George Washington, and became one of the leading portrait painters in America. His interests ranged from art to nature, science and technology. He also headed a family dynasty of artists, including four of his promisingly named children: Rembrandt, Rubens, Titian and Raphaelle. His brother, nephew, four nieces and three children became artists. Appropriately, *The Peale Family* by Peale highlights the "Social Landscape" category. The scene depicts Charles behind his younger brothers, St. George and James, discussing a sketch. Included are his first wife, their daughters (who did not survive childhood), his sisters, his mother, and their longtime housekeeper. The family dog, Argus, and busts of Benjamin West, his patron Edmund Jennings and himself also made the cut. All gather around a table, suggesting the close relationship and meaningful dialogue that steered this family to greatness. Their dress, furnishings and an easel suggest their refinement and talents, and the fresh bowl of fruit with an apple peel cleverly echoes the artist's name. Peale's palette and naturally genteel expressions endear us to many of his subjects.

Five early American portraits of the Beekman family by Kilburn and Durand exude all the embellishments of the elite in colonial America. Silk taffeta and lace dressing gowns, velvet jackets, ledgers, books and roses are some of the props that address their rank and privilege. Even their expressions, gestures and posture reflect the self-assurance that often accompanies education and wealth.

Silhouettes by Augustin Edouart are fine examples of dramatic black paper cuttings on his characteristic sepia backgrounds. Edouart assumed this profession by way of a wager to cut a better "shadow" impression. He also introduced the technique of drawing fine white lines to further define the hair and clothing. Edouart's use of penciled lines in the silhouette of *Mr. And Mrs. Henry Rutgers Remsen,* set against a lithographed garden, personalizes the figures with delicate details that soften the blackness. Edouart created approximately 100,000 of these hollow-cuts and an estimated 4000 in America. His decision to cut them in duplicate, preserving a copy for his records, resulted in an ample historical treasury of his work. While black paper and scissors helped to create these stark, dramatic negatives, oil on ivory dissolves the borders of realistic detail, revealing a colorful dreamy illusion.

Ann Hall, an American miniature artist, departs from the typical oval shape and develops a rich portrait of her sister, nephew and herself on a four-inch square palette of ivory. The artist, center, flanked on one side by a simple glass of flowers and on the other by her sister, engages the viewer with a confident gaze while her sister, in profile, admires the floral arrangement. The colorful spectrum of this bouquet is echoed in her sister's soft shawl. The nephew, depicted in three-quarter profile in the lower foreground, intently sketches the floral still life. The size, shape and complexity of this painterly composition allow for a more interesting setting and for a group of related subjects that invite the eye to wander, wonder and simply enjoy this apparition of beauty.

The essence of portraiture explains its allure. Most of us share a fascination of people and their lives. Are we seeing a mask for public consumption, or an honest mirror of the soul? The characters in these paintings are long gone, yet their eyes and expressions engage us and speak to us through the vernacular of art. The portraits in Group Dynamics range from the simpler stalwart figures in the daguerreotypes to others like Fassett's painting of Mrs. Charles A. Lamb that

Jane Beekman, *oil on canvas by John Durand.*

Ann Hall, Mrs. Henry Ward and Henry Hall Ward, *watercolor on ivory by Ann Hall.*

captures a Victorian parlor in which Mrs. Lamb herself becomes a prop in a room filled with exquisite memorabilia.

However, all spark the imagination, prompt queries and delight the eye. *Group Dynamics* invites you not only to look, but to respond. These paintings vividly and vivaciously communicate the lives and times of a vital cast of characters in America from the expansive times of Manifest Destiny through the Civil War and its aftermath of progress and prosperity known as the Gilded Age.

All photos from the book: *Group Dynamics, Family Portraits & Scenes of Everyday Life at the New York Historical Society.*

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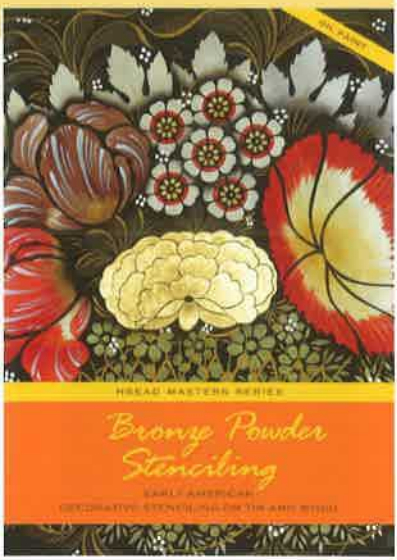

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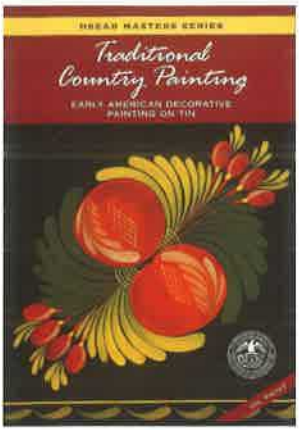


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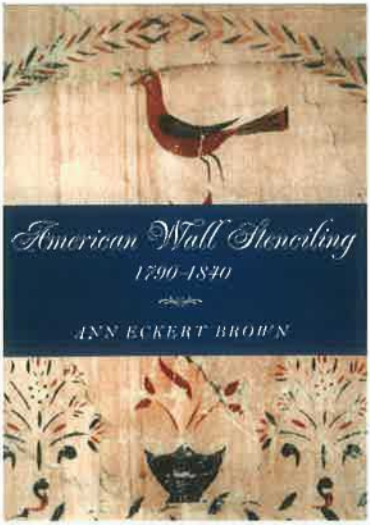


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