The Decorator

Fall 2008 Vol. 62 No. 2

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The Historical Society of Early American Decoration, Inc.

The Decorator

Vol. 62 No. 2 Fall 2008

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Front cover: Painted chest with black freehand scrolls or "knots" on a cream background, c. 1800-1820. Courtesy of Old Sturbridge Village.

Back cover: Domed box with painted decoration, c. 1825. Courtesy of Old Sturbridge Village.

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

Shirley S. Baer

It is with mixed emotions that I retire after this issue as editor of *The Decorator.*

The job has been made easier by my predecessors, Peg and Mike Rodgers, who set high standards, were helpful and supportive, and encouraged me along the way.

Learning how to design and layout *The Decorator* was a challenge for me. Fortunately, I was introduced to fellow member Joseph Rice, who was and is a pro. Joe took this novice under his wing and taught me most of what I know about publishing. I simply could not have done it without him.

I could always count on contributors such as Martha Wilbur, Sandra Cohen, Astrid Donnellan and Yvonne Jones. My sincere thanks to them and to all the writers who have made my job such a joy.

A special thank-you to Janet Rhodes, who helped with editing during my early years, and to my daughter, Ann Fasano, who succeeded her.

Joe and Ann have both been selfless in their desire to make the journal and this editor look good. I shall always be grateful to them.

My 13 years in this position have been rewarding for me. I am proud of the fact that since becoming editor, "B's" and theorems are now being photographed and given a place of honor along with the "A's" in our journal. Yvonne Jones' "Birmingham Letter" was introduced in 1996 and has become a regular feature. In addition to her column, Yvonne has frequently written articles for us, and has honored us with her attendance and lectures at two of our annual meetings. She is a recognized authority on the japanning industry, and we are fortunate to count her among our friends.

Because of my roles as editor and meeting chair, I have had the pleasure of getting to know Esther Steven Brazer's two daughters, Diana Seamans and Connie Fraser. They have been kind and generous in helping me with writing about their mother and her work, and honored us with their first attendance at an HSEAD meeting in 1996. They attended again in 2006.

Finally, perhaps most rewarding has been the opportunity to research, to see and do new things, and to share those findings with you. Thank you for granting me this privilege for the past 13 years.

With the next issue of *The Decorator*, the editor's baton will pass to Lynne Richards. Lynne is very talented and we are delighted that she has agreed to take on the challenges of this position. I am sure that the HSEAD membership will support her enthusiastically in her new role.

Rural Fancy: Paint-Decorated Furnishings in the Old Sturbridge Village Collections

by

Nan Wolverton

This essay is derived from a paper delivered to HSEAD in Sturbridge, Massachusetts, in May of 2008 for the annual meeting entitled "New England Furniture: Plain & Fancy."

The collections at Old Sturbridge Village in Sturbridge, Massachusetts, house numerous outstanding examples of paint-decorated furnishings from rural 19th century New England. While these objects are admired and studied for their individual beauty or for their paint techniques, we can learn even more from them if we consider the context in which they were produced and used. As products of early New England culture, they can help us understand how middle-class rural New Englanders adorned their homes. When considered alongside the constellation of other objects and furnishings within room settings, especially parlors, we can begin to

Plate 1: Family portrait of Mr. and Mrs. Enoch Tuttle, Jr. and their two sons James and Darius W. Tuttle. Pencil, ink, and watercolor. Attributed to Joseph H. Davis, 1836. Courtesy of Old Sturbridge Village.

Plate 2: Grained stand, c. 1820-30. More whimsical than imitative, the graining creates a lively surface. Courtesy of Old Sturbridge Village.

appreciate the lively surroundings that some New Englanders achieved in their homes.

Wildly painted furnishings were often placed against intensely patterned carpets and wallpapers. Though he may have used some artistic license in creating the painted furniture pieces in his family portraits, itinerant painter Joseph H. Davis captured the unrestrained sense of decoration that many New Englanders enjoyed. Davis traveled the roads of rural New England where he found sitters for his portraits such as the 1836 family portrait of Mr. and Mrs. Enoch Tuttle and their two sons (Plate 1). The boldly ornamental interiors in Davis' work show an aesthetic that was not uncommon during this period.

Graining and other painted surfaces on furniture contributed to these patterned and colorful interior spaces. The whimsical graining on the stand shown here (Plate 2) gives the piece delightful appeal. Yet if viewed in a typical 1830s rural New England room against a background of eye-popping wallpaper and brightly striped Venetian carpeting (as seen upstairs at the Fenno House at Old Sturbridge Village), the combination might seem overly decorated or even garish to the modern viewer. To understand why such furnishings sometimes appear to clash in their original settings, it is helpful to consider three factors: lighting, the explosion of available goods in the early 19th century, and the Fancy style.

The brilliance and clarity of modern lighting may make it difficult for us to appreciate how very different lighting was in early American homes. Furnishings in these interiors had to be bold to help make them visible in dimly lit surroundings. The colors and patterns on painted surfaces were subtly enhanced with light from candles and oil lamps just as polished and reflective surfaces in a room enhanced available light. Imagine how this paint-decorated chest (Plate 3) would come alive with the flicker of candlelight, setting the swirling painted decoration into gyrating motion. In some cases, the decorative designs and motifs on painted boxes or trunks mimicked the wall decoration in early New England homes. Nina Fletcher Little has noted that traveling artists occasionally embellished the furniture and accessories in clients' homes in addition to their walls.[1] The example

in Plate 4 was hand painted with a series of stylized thistle-like flowers and trailing vines that look much like the walls of an early 19th century home painted by an itinerant painter. While the overall effect of such a pattern on the wall surfaces as well as on the box may seem like overkill, we should try to imagine the intermittent play of candlelight on the three dimensional box as well as on a two-dimensional wall surface.

Though itinerant painters and small-time cabinetmakers worked throughout the countryside, mass production of goods for the home was well under way by the early 19th century. As factory production made a greater variety of goods affordable and helped define new tastes, consumerism took hold. In addition to an increase in imported goods such as transfer-printed ceramics from England, many small industries and manufacturing enterprises answered consumer demand. In rural New England, factory-made painted chairs were produced by the thousands. Yellow painted side chairs with stenciled decoration like those illustrated (Plate 5) were common in homes because they were available and cheap. By 1820, for instance, the village of Sterling in central Massachusetts produced more than seventy thousand chairs a year and these were shipped everywhere there was a market for them, including the West Indies and Africa.[2]

Furniture wasn't the only commodity that was produced in such quantities that the majority of rural families could now afford to amplify

[1]*Nina Fletcher Little,* Neat and Tidy: Boxes and Their Contents Used in Early American Households *(New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1980; reprint ed., Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities, 2001), p. 26.*

[2]*Donna Keith Baron, "Furniture Makers and Retailers in Worcester County, Massachusetts, Working to 1850," The Magazine Antiques, May 1993, p. 785.*

Plate 3: Low chest with graining in cut corner panels with bright blue surround. Attributed to Thomas Matteson, South Shaftsbury, Vermont, c. 1820-30. Courtesy of Old Sturbridge Village.

Plate 4: Domed box/trunk painted with stylized thistle and trailing vines, c. 1814. Courtesy of Old Sturbridge Village.

their household furnishings. Factory-produced wallpapers, floor coverings and printed fabrics from New England mills all contributed to the dramatic increase of vibrant and colorful material goods in homes. An unprecedented supply of these products was now accessible to New England families from

Plate 5: Common plank seat chairs, painted yellow with stenciling and free-hand designs. Levi Pratt, Fitchburg, Massachusetts, 1825-40. Courtesy of Old Sturbridge Village.

Plate 6: Domed box with stamped floral and leaf designs, c. 1830. Courtesy of Old Sturbridge Village.

local storekeepers. In rural settings store patrons bought whatever was available unless they could afford to travel to an urban center such as Boston where there was more selection. The ability to wallpaper a room such as a parlor, to place a carpet on its floor, and to add imported ceramics and painted furniture was an important step toward refinement for middle-class New Englanders, regardless of how the patterns and colors of these furnishings corresponded.

In some cases, the painted decoration on furnishings point to the efficiency with which objects were ornamented to keep up with demand and competition. The domed household storage box illustrated in Plate 6 has a quickly stamped sunflower-like design on its surfaces. Stamping a design was more efficient than hand painting, but the stamping on this box is uneven and crowded indicating that the decorator created the design quickly and without careful planning. Time was money, and the faster products were made, the faster they could turn a profit. The consumer who purchased this box may have been more interested in acquiring an inexpensive, colorful box than worrying about the precision with which it was decorated.

The availability of goods and the ability to purchase them helped foster an affinity for color and pattern that has been identified as a Fancy aesthetic. As Sumpter Priddy has demonstrated in *American Fancy,* between 1790 and 1840 Americans embraced a cultural phenomenon known as Fancy.[3] It was a celebration of virtually every form of creativity rooted in imagination. Colorful and boldly patterned objects triggered delight, surprise and laughter. Dynamic combinations of images connected the imagination to the larger world and helped evoke an emotional response. Thus a painted box like the one in Plate 7 invites the eye to travel across its surface following dynamic colors and patterns. Even without much color the whimsical

[3] *See Sumpter Priddy,* American Fancy: Exuberance in the Arts 1790-1840 *(Milwaukee: The Chipstone Foundation, 2004).*

Plate 7: Domed box with painted decoration, c. 1825. Courtesy of Old Sturbridge Village.

scrolls and "knots" on the lidded chest in Plate 8 please the eye and tickle the imagination with their playful designs.

The need to make the most of low light levels, the new abundance of goods, and the excitement of color and pattern that often accompanied these goods all help explain the role of painted furnishings in rural New England. If we consider them within the physical and cultural contexts in which they were produced and used, we can gain new appreciation for their role as household objects. They help us more fully understand what choices and tastes early New Englanders had for ornamentation, and also that their lives may not have been as dull and drab as we may sometimes think.

Editor's note: The author is an independent scholar and museum consultant.

Plate 8: Lidded chest painted with black freehand scrolls or "knots" on a cream background, c. 1800-1820. Courtesy of Old Sturbridge Village.

Laura Bullitt

Country Painting

Dorothea Colligan

Country Painting

Carol Buonato

Clock Dials

Alice Smith

Theorem

Nancy Corcoran

Stenciling on Wood

Mary Harbey

Theorem

Ursula Erb

Clock Dials

Helen Meitzler

Glass with Border

"A" Awards by Roberta Edrington

Freehand Bronze

Special Class

Special Class

Glass with Border

Gold Leaf Panel

Glass with Border

Lois Tucker

Country Painting

Mary Avery

Theorem

Lois Tucker

Freehand Bronze

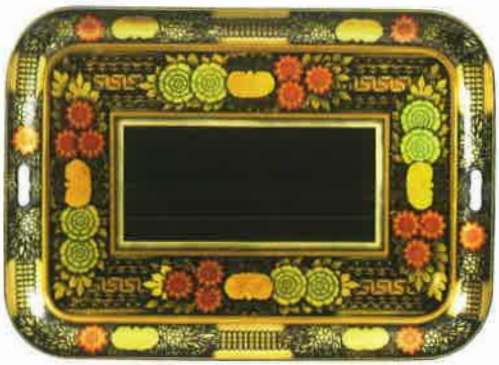
"A" Awards by Betty Taylor

Stenciling on Tin

Country Painting

(Taylor received a second "A" for a duplicate of this tray)

Country Painting



Stenciling on Tin

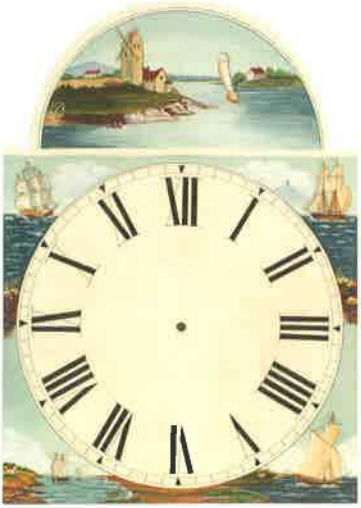
Victorian Flower Painting

Special Class

(left and below)

Susan Laime

Theorem



Alexandra Perrot

Clock Dials

Nancy Toombs

Country Painting

Anne Dimock

Gold Leaf Panel

Roberta Edrington

Freehand Bronze

Joan Austin

Stenciling on Wood

Roberta Edrington

Freehand Bronze

Country Painting "B" Awards by Linda Mason

Members' "B" Awards

Betty Nans
Glass with Border

Jean McLaughlin
Country Painting

Helen Metzler
Clock Dials

Helga Johnson
Gold Leaf Panel

Members' "B" Awards

Joan Austin

Metal Leaf

Joan Dobert
Country Painting

Joan Dobert

Country Painting

Alexandra *Perrot*

Gold Leaf Panel

Members' "B" Awards

Laura Bullitt

Pontypool

Anne Dimock

Stenciling on Wood

Lois Tucker

Stenciling on Tin

Mae Fisher

Glass with Border

Members' "B" Awards

Betty Nans

Gold Leaf Panel

Theorems

Lois Tucker

Charlene bird

Mary Avery

Members' "B" Awards: Theorems

Sonja Bridges

Sonja Bridges

Joan Dobert

Dolores Furnari

Amy Finley

Marilyn Hall

Applicants Accepted as Guild Members
Sturbridge, MA

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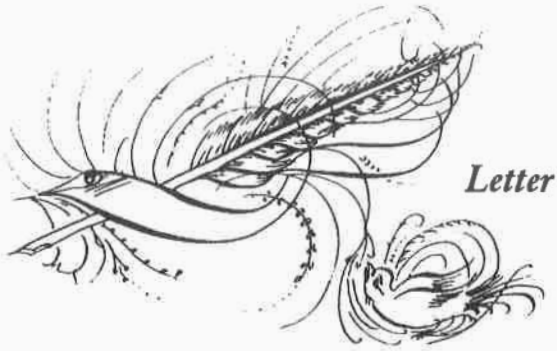
Naisi Lebaron
Jill Miller
Mary Ellen Piester
Diane Tanerillo
Christina Hirsch
Deborah Leister
Elaine Peeters
Francis Smith
Rosalyn Smith



Letter from Birmingham

by Yvonne Jones

Late Papier Mâché Tables: Their Makers and Their Prices

A rare edition of the *Birmingham & Wolverhampton Illustrated Hardware Price List*, of 1878, has recently come to light and within its 803 pages, there is much to interest the collector of japanned goods. The book was issued as a joint catalogue for hardware manufacturers in the two towns who had all agreed a fixed list of prices and a representative range of examples to illustrate their goods. The page devoted to papier mâché tables, (opposite page), is particularly useful since it shows a type which has survived in large numbers but about which little has hitherto been known.

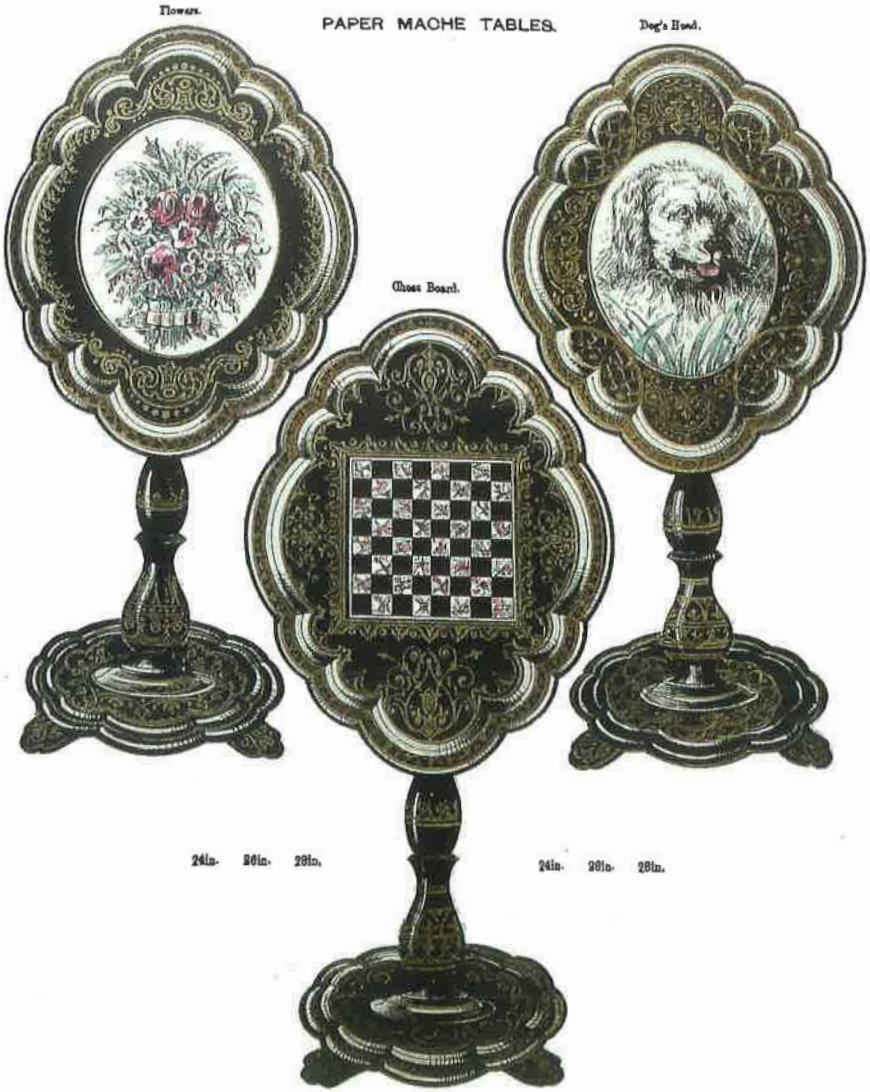
It appears they were available in two qualities and three sizes:

	24	26	28 inch
Middle Quality	9/-	9/6	10/- each
Best Quality	12/-	13/6	15/- each*

Both qualities were "Made in a variety of Patterns in Landscape Views, Flowers, and Dog's Heads" and also, as shown here, as chess boards, all at the same prices.

On the evidence of surviving examples, most such tables were made from moulded pulp – a brittle material which readily chipped and fractured. They were less expensive than earlier tables made from pasteboard and this was reflected in the inferior surface of their japan-varnish and in their decoration which was sometimes perfunctory, clumsily pearled, and seldom incorporated pure gold leaf. At best these tables were painted with a simple and redeeming charm, at worst they were cheaply printed and of little artistic merit. However, they are typical of papier mâché goods made in the closing years of the industry and it is good to be able, at last, to associate them with known makers. The page devoted to tables refers readers to a list of

** 9/-, for example, was short-hand for nine shillings, and 9/6 for nine shillings and sixpence.*



Birmingham manufacturers printed on an earlier page relating to japanned iron trays; since some of these firms were concerned solely with japanning iron goods, I name only those which were known also to have made papier mâché. They were: Thomas Knight & Co., McCallum & Hodson, J & G Pears, Perman & Stamps, and Isherwood Sutcliffe.

Ebeneezer Sheldon, one of the better-known of the late Birmingham japanners who made similar tables, is noticeably absent from the catalogue on account of not having commenced in business until 1881.

Editor's Note: An illustration of a papier mâché table with a dog's head was used for the Fall 2002 cover of "The Decorator."

The Bookshelf

American Painted Floors Before 1840

by

Ann Eckert-Brown

135 pages, over 100 color pictures and some B/W illustrations.
20 Spring Green Books, RI, 2008, Quality Soft Cover

Reviewed by Sandra Cohen

Ann Eckert-Brown's book, *American Painted Floors Before 1840,* is the perfect companion and sequel to her first book, *American Wall Stenciling 1790-1840* (Fall 2003 for full review). The inspiration and motivation for this book comes from her love of early American decoration. Her attraction to historic houses and their decorative painted interiors stirred her curiosity and ignited her passion to learn more about the origin of the designs, techniques and authors of these early architectural canvases.

In *American Painted Floors Before 1840,* Brown continues to examine and celebrate painted interiors. The anecdotal accounts of these buildings and homes and their inhabitants are a part of America's story. Her quest covers several dwellings in New England, extends as far north as Canada and west to Tennessee. Many of the locations are in Massachusetts and her home state of Rhode Island. She carefully selected these homes, probed into their backgrounds and then photographed their original floor designs, defining and exhibiting them handsomely in one publication.

Amasa Allen house, 1792, Walpole, NH

Firsthand access to early American houses is limited; many antique homes are privately owned. However, many owners are eager to share their passion

Robert Hooper house, 1754, Danvers, MA

in Americana by allowing authors to view and study these rare pieces of America's colonial heritage. Finding painted floors before 1840 that still retain their fine, near-original state is a challenge. Books by Jean Lipman, Janet Waring, Robert Bishop and other researchers and authors provide references and black and white pictures of painted floors. Brown thoughtfully credits those who came before her, and, aided by their contributions, she continues her own research. Her book is a buffet of twenty-five historical buildings and their decorated floors and interiors, most of which she has observed first hand.

Illustrations of the antique painted floors in Brown's book mirror elements from designs and patterns on imported floor coverings. "Venetian carpets" and other textiles and wallpapers were successfully adapted and painted on floors. The grapevine pattern on the second floor of the Robert Hooper House, 1784, is reminiscent of its earlier roots in ancient Greece. A very similar motif graces a border mosaic from the 6th century in Antioch. The chamber floor in the Allen House features three-dimensional cubes in black and red on a base coat of yellow ochre. The author connects this design to the 1739 Carwithan book that contained designs for stone floors and floor cloths. One can also find this three-dimensional pattern on a black and white floor mosaic in the House of Faun in Pompeii that dates to the 2nd century BCE! Brown describes the artist of the Allen floor as being well traveled, sophisticated and well read.

The author proceeds like an archeologist and views her painted floors in their context and natural surroundings. Brown begins from their beginning. She gives the floors a context, a home in a time and place, a family or a number of families, a builder and a decorative painter. The original owners are America's early families. Their tales are chapters in other areas of American history. However, these tangents give this book a larger and more interesting scope. My attention was held by every nuance of these dwellings.

Smith/Appleby House (now a museum), 1696, Smithfield,RI

Like a sleuth, Brown's eyes travel through the painted interiors, searching and detecting clues. Her years of experience endow her with a comfortable familiarity with design and technique. Sometimes subtle similarities between floors and the geographical proximity of the buildings lead to educated assumptions about the identity of the itinerant artist; sometimes she tentatively attributes the painting in several homes to the same hand.

Brown's research is meticulous, and she brings to our attention a generous bibliography that includes important sources that are not mainstream. Her analysis and descriptions of each floor are so detailed that her words draw pictures in addition to her photographs and illustrations. Her speculations are supported, but as a professional researcher, she avoids making assertions. She understands the nature of the different painted surfaces, and she explains the effect that time, light and aging finishes would have on the original colors. After examining the Smith-Appleby House, she excerpts an original recipe for simulating marble by John Stalker and George Parker, mid-17th century English designers and artists. She also adapts her own formula using products available for today's decorative painter. Like her predecessors, Rufus Porter, Waring, Brazer and others, she experiments with recipes to achieve the original colors and techniques. This is especially valuable to conservationists and decorative painters whose goal is to authentically reproduce the painted floors.

With each residence, Brown relates a chronological history, punctuated with historical data that inform and engage you. The Howe's Tavern is one story. In 1707 David Howe built his two-room home in Sudbury, Massachusetts, where he lived with his wife Hebzibah and their five children. Nine years later he added two more rooms, converting it to a "Hous of Entertainment." Situated on heavily trafficked Boston Post Road, it evolved into a fourteen-room inn. Passed from father to son, it served travelers

until 1919. In 1862 Henry Wadsworth Longfellow visited the Wayside Inn and wrote his *Tales of the Wayside Inn*, an American version of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. Visitors to the Inn inspired Longfellow to write a litany of tales including the "Student's Tale," "The Musician's Tale" and "Paul Revere's Ride." Ultimately, Henry Ford purchased the property. A purist, Ford resisted restoration, but thanks to Esther Stevens Brazer, the original decorative floor paintings from 1790 were copied and preserved. Brown features Brazer's reproductions and gives us ample information about the Inn's originals.

Each house on Brown's itinerary has a story, and her voluminous context whets our appetites to explore many different aspects of early American decoration on our own. All the details surrounding early, painted floor décor before 1840 are rich and fascinating, and they undoubtedly contribute to the interest they hold for us. Just as members of a family bring the stillness of a room to life, the performance of line, color and form infuses the floors and walls with a rhythmic, natural energy and beauty. Ornamentation continues to seamlessly blend form and function on floors and walls, transforming these spaces and endowing them with a lasting legacy of early American decorative art.

This new publication is a refreshing and more focused approach to decorated floors and a valuable single source for the style of decorated floors before 1840.

Photos courtesy of Ann Eckert-Brown

Samuel Smith house, before 1840, Smithfield, Nova Scotia.

Future Meetings

Fall 2008	Killington, VT	September 18-21 (TFSS)
Spring 2009	Burlington, VT	May 1-3 (FSS)
Fall 2009	Killington, VT	September 23-27 (TFSS)
Fall 2010	Killington, VT	September 22-26 (TFSS)

Authentic Theorem Pattern Collection

The Historical Society of Early American Decoration

"A" Award by Mary Avery

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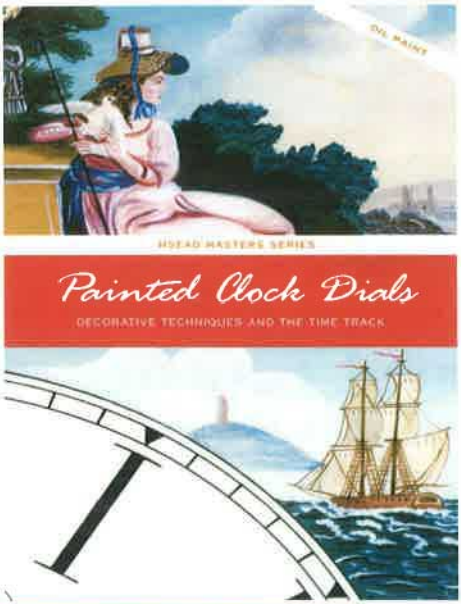

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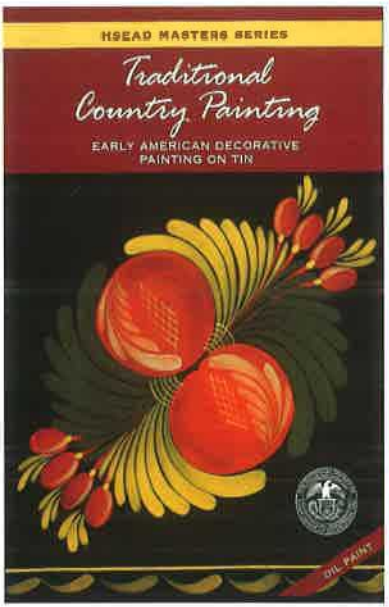

American Painted Tinware

A Guide to Its Identification

Volume Four

by Gina Martin & Lois Tucker

Volume Four covers Edward Francis, William Eno, Williams, Zeitz and signed pieces. Miscellaneous designs attributed to Connecticut and New York, as well as unknown shops, are covered.

With 330 color photos and more than 550 line drawings, the authors trace the development of American painted tinware.

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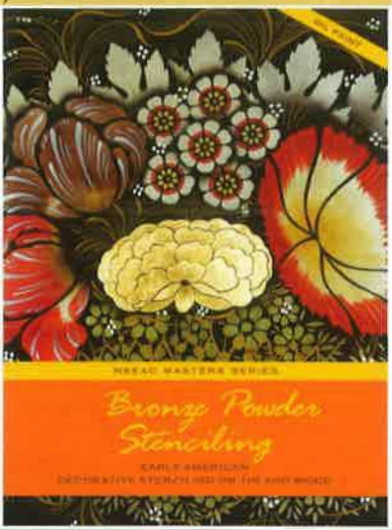

Techniques in Reverse Glass Painting

by Margaret J. Emery

Third edition, revised and expanded (includes 2006 updated listing of supplies and suppliers). HSEAD member price: $32.95 (Postage and handling included; NY State residents, add sales tax).

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