

# The Decorator

Spring 2017



Journal of

The Historical Society of Early American Decoration, Inc.



# The Decorator

Spring 2017

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Front and back covers: Antique penwork face screen, c 1820. Courtesy of Joseph O'Kelly,  
co-author of *Antique Boxes, Tea Caddies and Society, 1700-1880*.

## **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: The Historical Society of Early American Decoration (HSEAD) perpetuates and expands the unique skills and knowledge of Early American Decoration.

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## Editor's Notes

Shirley S. Baer

Attendees at our April meeting will have the chance to meet many of our writers, including guest speaker Noël Riley, who is visiting from England.

In this issue, we have a review of her book *Penwork: A Decorative Phenomenon*, and a new article from her on penwork. She will give an after-dinner lecture Saturday and a gallery talk Sunday morning, and looks forward to conversations with our members.

Yvonne Jones, another of our treasures from England, comes through for us again with an intriguing article: In this issue, in addition to her regular *Letter from Birmingham*, she questions whether we ought to rename the category we now call “Pontypool.”

From our own members, we get a big-picture perspective on stenciling from prehistory to pop art by Linda Sheldon; and Astrid Donnellan gives a fascinating account of unveiling and restoring a 19<sup>th</sup>-century decorated clock face that had been covered over with spray paint.

Traditionally, the spring *Decorator* has been published shortly after HSEAD's annual meeting; in the interest of being more timely, we would like instead to begin publishing shortly before the meeting. Award winners will then be recognized in the fall issue.

My thanks to all our contributors for their research, writing, editing and graphics assistance. This has been a labor of love for all of us.

Finally, I want to express my great sorrow at the passing of former *Decorator* Editor Lynne Richards, who lost her battle with cancer just before the new year. Lynne wrote many articles for this magazine, served as editor for seven years, and was a tireless, dedicated worker for HSEAD and her community. She was a dear friend who will be very much missed.

Please contact me at [decorator@hsead.org](mailto:decorator@hsead.org) if you have ideas for articles or topics you would like us to address. Thank you for supporting *The Decorator*.

# The Nineteenth Century Art of Penwork

by Noël Riley



Fig. 1. Writing box of ebony with ivory-inlaid decoration, Vizagapatam, India, circa 1730.  
Private collection

Mention the word “penwork” to most people, and they will assume you are referring to an elaborate form of calligraphy. Certainly since the late years of the 19th century, the term has been more often associated with the art of handwriting than with any form of pictorial decoration. However, the art of painting in black (and occasionally colors) on a wood background in such a way as to show the designs in the negative, with the base surface forming an important part of the decoration or patterning, was a novel and extremely popular form of embellishment for many kinds of objects earlier in the 19th century. At the time, it was known as “voiding” or “imitation ivory inlaying” and was taken up with particular enthusiasm by amateur, usually female, artists. The term “imitation ivory inlaying,” alludes to the perceived origin of penwork as a method of reproducing the appearance of the inlaid and incised ivory furniture and small items that were exported to Europe from Vizagapatam in eastern India during the 18th century (Fig. 1).

Decoration in black and white had been used in a professional context in the early years of the 19th century, particularly by the makers of musical instruments such as harps, and by Tunbridge ware



Fig. 2. The top of a penwork sewing box illustrating the siege of Troy. Private collection.

manufacturers from about 1810. A few years later, it was being taken up by amateur artists, no doubt encouraged by the artistic entrepreneur Rudolph Ackermann. The December 1816 issue of his magazine, *The Repository of Arts*, reported that “among the many pleasing recreations of the fair sex, is that of painting and ornamenting Tunbridge and fancy ware...the figures are relieved in black...on the work-box, cabinet or screen; and when varnished has the appearance of ivory inlaid on



Fig. 3. The maker's name, S.W.Troy, and the date. 1816.

ebony ... ”

Coincidentally, the earliest recorded date on an item of penwork decorated by an amateur artist is 1816 – a work box featuring a classical battle scene surrounded by warrior figures within a Greek key border. Inside, each compartment has a finely painted polychrome lid (Figs. 2 and 3). The box is signed “S.W. Troy 1816.” The main scene, apparently depicting the siege of Troy, was evidently prompted by the maker’s name.

From this time, and for several years, Ackermann regularly included designs for penwork borders (many of them equally suitable for needlework), which suggests that penwork was now a significant artistic activity for leisured ladies. Large numbers of small items were produced in a range of styles, and showed greatly varying levels of talent. Some of these amateur artists were clearly confident in producing their own designs, while others relied on copied or even traced patterns from a range of sources (Fig. 4).

The objects they decorated included tea caddies, needlework and games boxes, panels for face screens, card and spectacle cases, miniature bellows (probably for blowing away excess hair powder), and sewing tools. More ambitious artists attempted chess table tops, miniature cabinets of drawers and, occasionally, larger items of furniture such as sofa tables and floor-standing cabinets. Very few are signed or dated, and styles in these amateur-produced pieces can only be a very rough guide to dating. It is noteworthy that most dated examples, rare as they are, come from the 1820s and 1830s (Fig. 5).

The designs adopted by the penwork artists fall roughly into three groups: neoclassical, chinoiserie (which also embraced Indian iconography) and floral. Sometimes a mixture of styles would appear



Fig. 4. A page of ‘Black and white borders’ from *Ackermann’s Repository*, February 1821.





Fig. 5. A penwork tea caddy in chinoiserie style, circa 1825.

on a piece, so a classical or chinoiserie theme would have floral borders, and a composition of naturalistically depicted flowers might be edged with formal patterns of florets or leaves. Some artists copied images from design books and other illustrated sources, but judging from the few identified, these were unusual and most apparently used their own ideas or adapted needlework patterns.

Precise sources are only occasionally identified, and those known are usually in neoclassical style. Among them, images from Sir William Hamilton's famous collection of vases appear from time to time. The stories these vases illustrated were reproduced in several books. Hamilton's friend, Pierre Francois Hugues D'Hancarville, assembled the first of the compilations in 1766-1767, a magnificent production that was followed by William Tischbein's *Collection of Engravings from Ancient Vases* (1791) and more accessible volumes by Thomas Kirk (1804) and Henry Moses (1814 and 1817). Several scenes from these books have been identified among the neoclassical images on larger items of penwork. In addition, John Flaxman's illustrations of Homer's *Iliad and Odyssey* (1793), C.H. Tatham's *Etchings of Ancient Ornamental Architecture* (1799) and Thomas Hope's *Costume of the Ancients* (1809) provided inspiration



Fig. 6. A tea caddy in “Indian” style, with an elephant procession on the front, an image seen on a number of items of penwork. The flower borders are shown in both “positive” and “negative” form. Private collection.

for a number of the more ambitious penworkers.

The origins of Chinese/Indian designs are far more elusive. Oriental subject matter appears to have been the most popular genre for penworkers, and several images are repeated on various objects, which suggests that the painters used common sources, yet very few of these have been identified despite exhaustive searching in illustrated books by travelers to the orient over two centuries (Fig. 6). The late 17th century English publication, Stalker & Parker’s *Treatise of Japaning* [sic] and *Varnishing*, first published in 1688, is the only certain source for chinoiserie designs that I have discovered so far.

A number of penworks with the Chinese (style) taste appear to have common origins. For example, the flowingly clad figures of a Chinese lady in a bower with her arm outstretched, and a gentleman smoking a very long pipe, have appeared on a number of cabinets of varying sizes and proportions, some in polychrome and some monochrome, suggesting that the artist or artists who painted them were looking at the same source. This may have been an illustration in a book or periodical, or even a picture sheet provided by a supplier of artists’ materials, but it has remained tantalizingly elusive. A further possibility is that these cabinets were professionally produced in a workshop, which would account for the similarities both in the forms of the cabinets and the painting style (Fig. 7).

Flowers, both stylized and naturalistic, in borders or as main themes of decoration, are ubiquitous in penwork decoration, just as they are

Fig. 7. The door of a cabinet with polychrome decoration, showing a Chinese gentleman standing in a flowery bower, smoking a long-stemmed pipe. Private collection.



on Indian ivory-inlaid furniture. It seems the predominantly female experience of embroidery, in which flowers were so often the subject matter, strongly influenced penwork decoration, for there can be no doubt that most penwork was carried out by ladies. Patterns for embroidery, as well as printed designs specifically for penwork, were widely available for those who needed models to copy, but in some cases the floral compositions must have been original inventions. Occasionally, as with images in other styles, there are duplications, suggesting a common source (Fig. 8).

The search for the origins of designs used by 19th century penworkers ranges widely and, without doubt, the decorative painters of today can find inspiration in a similarly broad spectrum of sources. May the tradition continue to flourish!



Fig. 8. Penwork box with an oval chinoiserie scene surrounded by flowers, some naturalistically drawn and some stylized and reminiscent of embroidery. Private collection.

# An Uncommon Restoration Project

by Astrid Donnellan

Over the last 30 years, antique clock dial restoration has been a serious career for my husband and me. It has given us an education in artistic conservation and repair, as well as a historical education. We have received some of the most valuable American, English, Scottish and other European time pieces manufactured from early 1700 to early 1900. Not only have we had to remove previous restoration attempts, but to restore the piece correctly. HSEAD has been the backbone of this endeavor along with trial and error.

Many of the ornamental designs and artwork found on these dials are also found on English trays. In the late 18th century, the clock-making centers were in Birmingham about 1772, as well as Edinburgh, Glasgow, Aberdeen and Perth in Scotland. The japanning industry was just getting established at that time.

Each package that arrives here in the studio is eagerly opened, in the hope for something we haven't seen before. The dial that arrived this spring was a complete shock. I want to share this story as it was so unusual and an extreme challenge. I was so grateful to have HSEAD techniques to fall back on.

The dial arrived from a clock repairman in Fresno, California, after he saw our web site on the internet. The dial was accompanied by a photograph of the piece before it was sent to a local California restorer.

The dial I unwrapped was completely repainted .... WHITE! The original photograph told me the dial surface had been bronze powder in imitation of a brass surface. I was speechless. Needless to say, the repairman was shocked and in a quandary about what to do with the dial which now destroyed the value



Fig.1



of the clock. The restorer told him she couldn't match the background color, and so spray painted the entire dial white, and painted her re-interpretation of the design.

Bronze background dials are rare, and were popular in the 1840s and 1850s in Birmingham and this one fit the date as the floral decoration was late Victorian. So with all this information at hand, I photographed the dial as it was sent to me, (Fig. 1)

I made a clear acetate tracing for the placement of the numerals, and proceeded to apply paint stripper to the surface, a little at a time. To my surprise, the original floral decoration remained, and I was able to remove the spray paint right down to the original primer. I continued, and salvaged the arch design and all four spandrels. A few of the leaves were lost, but I had good photos and knew I could replace them.

My husband filled the areas of loss to create a smooth surface after which a good cleaning of the residue was needed. At this time I was able to match the background bronze color that was preserved from a



Fig. 2



Fig. 3



Fig. 4

remaining roman numeral (Fig. 2). I then brushed on a red sanding primer, being careful to paint up close to the original floral designs (Fig. 3).

I prepared the varnish and bronze powder into a paint and applied this mixture to the sanded surface, and waited for tack, then I dusted the surface with dry powder (Fig. 4).

Next day, I washed off the surface of loose powder and sealed it with a coat of gloss varnish. After a light sanding, I transferred the tracing of the graphics, and then painted them on (Fig. 5). After replacing missing leaves, tendrils and lemon gold leaf, the job was complete. Another dial saved, and a happy client (Fig. 6).



Fig. 5



Right, Fig. 6

There are times when an artist finds herself in her comfort zone and carries on with no growth or added knowledge. By tackling a new project, it allows one to reach and expand knowledge and expertise.

# From Cave Walls to Cathedrals, Wallpaper to Graffiti: Perspective on the Art of Stenciling

by Linda Sheldon

As members of HSEAD, we focus on specific decorative arts of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. It's often instructive as well as affirming to examine what we do in a larger context. This is particularly true of stenciling, which enjoys a long and storied history.

Until recently, we had to speculate on the origins of this form of decorating. It's clear now, however, that stenciling as an art form existed in the Paleolithic and Upper Neolithic era, up to 40,000 years ago.<sup>1</sup> "Negative" hand stencils have been discovered in European caves such as the Caves of Lascaux, and, more recently, in Borneo.<sup>2</sup> Anthropologists believe the artist, while placing a hand on the cave wall, blew finely crushed red ochre pigment onto the stone surface, leaving an outline. Careful analysis of the anatomical structure of these images suggests that at least some of the hands belonged to women.<sup>3</sup> Whether they were the artist's models or created the impressions themselves is unknown.

Given these discoveries, it's likely that stenciling traveled to different parts of the world as part of the great population migrations, and that isolated groups simultaneously developed their own traditions. For example, Eskimos on Baffin Island were making prints out of sealskin stencils before they had any contact with Western civilization.<sup>4</sup> The Egyptians used stencils to outline images on their walls and tombs, which were then carved in low relief, filled with stucco which held color well, then painted. Murals in the Roman world incorporated stenciled designs (Right).<sup>5</sup> In the 5th Century AD, the emperors Justinian and Charlemagne used stenciled letters to initial official documents.

Around the same time, the Chinese were developing a





Santa Cruz “negative” hands.

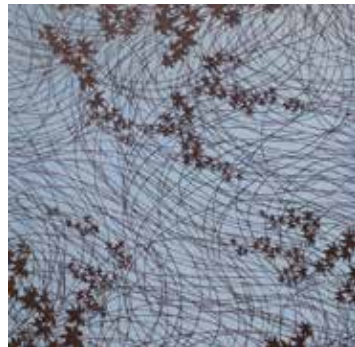
process called “Derma”: The artist created a design on paper with acidic ink, which ate through to leave a perfect stencil. While in China, the art of stenciling was confined to religious subjects, in Japan,

where it appeared a little later, it became very refined and a form of high art. The stencil paper was made of pressed mulberry fiber waterproofed with persimmon juice. To make the stencil more durable, the artist cut two identical copies, which were sandwiched together with shibu, an adhesive or varnish reinforced with human hair or fine silk webbing in a quarter inch grid. Once dried and hardened, the stencil was reusable indefinitely. It was this technique that allowed the Japanese artist to create and execute incredibly intricate stencil designs with almost imperceptible bridges.<sup>6</sup> The concept formed the basis for what we now call “screen printing,” and it solved the vexing problem of interior stencils falling out.

Stenciling then traveled to the Middle East via the Silk Road, and was dispersed to the rest of Europe with the Crusades. Whether there was an indigenous stenciling tradition in Medieval Europe prior to its introduction from the Orient is unclear. It’s quite possible that there was, but that it was considered a naïve art. It gained stature, as so many things do, when it was costly and came from afar, and gained still more when adopted by the Church for ecclesiastical decoration. Stenciled items then became a status symbol for the wealthy. Stencils created locally, however, even those inspired by the imported designs, remained fairly crude until the late 15th century.

Anything can be controversial to someone, and stenciling was no exception. Guilds in the 15th century were fiercely protective of their membership’s earning prospects. As stenciling crossed over from the Church into the secular realm, it began to pose a threat to the Painters’ and

Japanese stencil for fabric.





Stationers' Company of London, a powerful guild that mustered its substantial resources to mount a smear campaign against the art form. They viewed it as a form of charlatanry, "a false and deceitful work and destructive to the art of painting," and went on to accuse its practitioners of being too lazy and unimaginative to paint something.<sup>7</sup>



Despite pockets of resistance, European stenciling continued to gain ground. It reached its peak of popularity between the late 17<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, appearing on furniture, walls, wallpaper, and textiles throughout the continent. Following closely on the heels of its immense popularity in Europe, stencil art came to North America and gave rise to the stenciled walls, floor cloths, trays, and furniture (e.g. Hitchcock) with which we are familiar.

The popularity of stenciled objects declined in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century as less expensive, mass-produced items became available. Wallpaper, for example, once the province of the elite in the U.S., became accessible to a rising middle class as prices came down with industrialization. However, there remained a niche of interest among the upper classes in ornate stenciling well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Well-heeled customers were willing to pay for fine one-of-a-kind wall décor and accessories. Hence, we have artists like William Morris (1834-1896) a scion of the Arts and Crafts Movement who was famous for his elaborate and expensive wallpapers.<sup>8</sup> Louis Comfort Tiffany (1848-1933), best known for his Art Nouveau stained glass, used stenciling as part of his interior design work.

Where do we see its influence today? Roy Lichtenstein, the Pop Artist (1923-1997) used Ben Day dots to create some of his art work. This technique was a four-color printing process that used strategically placed dots (some close, some farther apart, and some overlapping) to achieve different shades, tones, and values as well as secondary colors. It was used extensively in the printing of comic books in the 50's and 60's. The Ben Day dots seen in Lichtenstein's work were created through a stencil.<sup>9</sup> Andy Warhol and Robert Rauschenberg used screen printing to create their iconic works. And today, the British graffiti artist, Banksy,



Drowning girl by Roy Lichtenstein.

creates his playful and subversive art with stencils and spray paint.<sup>10</sup>

The tools have evolved. Few stencil artists use hides or leaves these days, and they can opt for a spray can instead of blowing red ochre from their mouths. One thing is clear, though: The drive to create is timeless, and as long as the

drive to create exists, stenciling will be a part of it.



Artwork by Banksy

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3. <http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2009/06>. Statement by Dean Snow, Pennsylvania State University archaeologist.
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7. LeGrice, Lyn. The Art of Stenciling. Clarkson N. Potter, Publishers. New York, 1986, page 12.
8. File:Brooklyn Museum - Wallpaper Sample Book 1 - William Morris and Company - page 066.jpg. From Wikimedia Commons, the free media repository.
9. Drowning girl. Roy Lichtenstein. Date: 1963. Style: Pop Art. Genre: genre painting. Media: oil, canvas. Dimensions: 172.7 x 172.7 cm. Location: Museum of Contemporary Art, New York, USA. Fair use.
10. By Szater (Own work) [Public domain], via Wikimedia Commons. Sweep\_at\_Hoxton.



*In the last Decorator, credit for the theorems of Diane Tanerillo and Lauren Harhen was reversed. The theorems with the correct identifications are below. Our apologies for this mistake.*



Left: Lauren Harhen

Right: Diane Tanerillo



# THE ALLGOODS OF PONTYPOOL

Thomas Allgood

c.1640-1716 (b. Northamptonshire)

John

(b. pre-1681)

Edward I

1681 – 1763

Thomas III

1727 – 1779

Thomas II

c.1707 – 1770

Edward II

1712 – 1801

Henry

(to Birmingham,  
c.1780 )

William

d.1810/11  
(Billy the Bagman)

USK

c.1763

William

(d. USA)

# The Pontypool Question

## Early Welsh and English Japanned Metalware

by Yvonne Jones



Fig. 3. English or Welsh tray, c. 1770. 14.75 x 18.5" Courtesy of Sara Tiffany.

With few contemporary records to serve as a guide, any attempt to distinguish between early Welsh and English japanned tinware is largely based on popular tradition and hearsay. But recent research into the history of the japanning industry in Birmingham shows that by the mid-18th century, the differences were sometimes barely discernible. The research is in its early stages, but as will be seen from the evidence set out below, it is time to think more carefully about how we use the term “Pontypool.” Some years ago, HSEAD felt it necessary to rename one of its painting categories, changing “Chippendale” to the more appropriate designation “Victorian Flower Painting.” In light of what follows, the category named “Pontypool” may also be due for revision. The idea of decorating black iron with colored pigments was not new when John Hanbury (1664-1734) and the Allgoods began their experiments with japan varnish in Pontypool, in South Wales, in the early 18th century. A small iron plate painted in the style of Kraak porcelain in the Museum für Lackkunst in Münster, for example, is attributed to

the workshop of Willem Kick of Amsterdam and dated 1620-1625.<sup>1</sup> A tea canister painted and signed by the London-based artist Marmaduke Cradock in about 1700, is on view in the Victoria & Albert Museum, in London.<sup>2</sup> They are rare survivors for both pieces were “cold-painted”—that is, their decoration was not baked or stoved as it was on Pontypool and later japanned wares. As a consequence, there was a tendency for cold-painted decoration to peel and flake from the metal surface.

The search for a satisfactory varnish for use on black iron had begun in the second half of the 17th century, and engaged some of the leading minds of the day. But there was no significant development until John Hanbury, proprietor of the Pontypool Iron Works, found that passing iron through a heavy rolling-mill instead of being hammered flat not only produced sheets of uniform thickness, but it produced them at a much faster rate. These improvements made it possible for Hanbury to manufacture domestic household goods from thin iron sheet, though he soon found that their unprotected surfaces were prone to rust.

His manager at the iron works, Thomas Allgood (c.1640-1716) began work on finding a solution to the problem, but it was his son Edward Allgood (1681-1763) who, between 1720 and 1728, having succeeded his father as manager, finally found a satisfactory method of plating iron-sheets with a thin layer of molten tin. It so effectively guarded against rust that by 1750-1760, small quantities of so-called tinplate were exported to Europe and America.

Prompted by this success, Hanbury encouraged Allgood to seek an even more durable finish for tinplate-ware. He looked to the shellac-based varnish then used by western cabinet-makers to imitate and compete with imported lacquered furniture, but it proved little better in terms of its adhesion to metal than the cold-painted technique of the previous century. After much experiment and various modifications, Allgood satisfactorily adapted it for use on tinplated metal. The distinctive ingredients of his improved varnish were asphaltum and linseed oil which, when heated with other ingredients, yielded a sticky tar-like substance. But, this new japan varnish threw up another problem. The asphaltum would harden only if it was slowly baked or stoved at between 250° and 280° F for at least 24 hours. It was this stoving that gave Pontypool japan ware not only its characteristic lustre, but a hard dense surface that called out for decoration. Moreover, it was this need for stoving that distinguishes what would become an industrial form of

japanning from the type undertaken by cabinet-makers.

In 1758, Robert Dossie, in his well-known book *The Handmaid to the Arts* gave the first published account of how to make “common black japan grounds on iron or copper, produced by means of heat.” His information was almost certainly based on the practices followed in Pontypool. To make these common grounds, he directed that it was first necessary to coat the metal with a drying oil, such as oil of turpentine, leave it until almost dry, and then place it in “a stove of such degree of heat as will change the oil black, without burning it so as to weaken its tenacity.”<sup>3</sup> A tricky procedure, given that ovens at the time had no temperature controls.

By all accounts, Allgood had undertaken his varnish experiments in his own home and in his own time, using blank tinplate articles made by his elder brother, John (b. pre-1681). The trials were so fruitful that by around 1730, Edward and John established their own factory, The Pontypool Japan Works. An early indication of its success is found in a letter sent by one of Hanbury’s sons, Sir Charles Hanbury-Williams, to his wife in 1734. Sir Charles, a man of fashion, enthused that “Tom Allgood has found a new way of japanning which I think so beautiful that I’ll send you a couple of pieces of it.” The Tom mentioned here was probably Edward Allgood’s son. It will be seen from this rudimentary family tree (Fig. 1), that there were many Allgoods involved in japanning, and, to add to the confusion, several of them shared the same name.

Pontypool, then, has the distinction of being the first place in the world where sheet metal was successfully tinplated and japanned. Accordingly, it is engraved on Edward Allgood’s gravestone that it was he who “Invented ye Pontypool Japan and also ye Art of Tinning Iron Sheets,” for it was he who perfected both processes and ensured their success. These developments laid the foundations for the japanning industry—a wholly new branch of decorative arts manufacture which by the late 1730s had spread to the English Midlands.

A few contemporary records hint at differences between Welsh and English products, but these are now under question. A further complication in terms of attribution arises from a disagreement among the third generation of Allgoods which led Thomas and Edward Allgood to set up a rival factory in nearby Usk in 1763, where they continued to produce articles identical to those they had made in Pontypool.

But let us look now at some of the products of this new industry. Trays were and would remain the mainstay in each of the





Fig. 2. Welsh or English Tray, c. 1770. Courtesy of Deborah Lambeth.

manufacturing centres: Pontypool, Usk, and the Midland towns of Birmingham, Wolverhampton and Bilston, (Fig.2). Candlesticks were also among early products at Pontypool, and, in addition to those they made themselves, the Allgoods japanned candlesticks brought in by their customers—which explains the existence of brass candlesticks decorated in early so-called “Pontypool-style.” These and articles such as tobacco boxes and small copper boxes were generally japanned in black or deep crimson, and from the late 1740s, they might have been decorated with imitation tortoiseshell grounds. Coffee pots, either pear-shaped or with inwardly sloping straight sides, were also among their early output. For some reason, teapots were rarely, if ever made.

The earliest known description of japanned manufactures at Pontypool is found in the travel diary of Reinhold Rücker Angerstein (1718-1760), a member of a family of Swedish iron-masters. As an agent of the Swedish government, Angerstein had toured Britain’s iron industry during the years 1753-1755, with a view to better understanding its success. It was a clear case of industrial espionage. Following his visit to the Pontypool Japan Works in 1754, he noted having seen “bread baskets, tea trays, snuffboxes, and various kinds of sheet-metal work that is cut and embossed in rings, and then scoured, dried, varnished and painted,” and went on to describe a snuffbox “with a golden flower painted on it”<sup>4</sup> Angerstein’s reference to “golden” decoration accords with the observation of the Rev. Richard Pococke would make two



years later, to the effect that Pontypool tinware was decorated “with Chinese landscapes and figures in gold only, and not with colouring as at Birmingham.”<sup>5</sup>

On this evidence, a rectangular tray in the National Museum of Wales, with its restrained gilt ornament, was typical of early Pontypool wares. The attribution is lent credence by its decoration which shows a view of Kelmarsh Hall, the Northamptonshire home of the Hanbury family.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, the tray’s pierced edge shows a version of the “cut and embossed rings” to which Angerstein referred, and which are so much a feature of early Pontypool trays. The tray was very simply constructed: the edges of a rectangular sheet of tinplate were pierced prior to their being turned upwards to form a vertical “gallery”; the corners were neatly folded, and the resulting overlap was riveted and hammered flat. Rectangular trays such as this were available in only three sizes, but the more popular round trays and waiters ranged in size from 6-24 inches in diameter. Mostly they were edged with decorative pierced rims of about ½ to 1½ inches deep. However, as we shall see, the presence of a pierced edge can no longer be used as evidence of Pontypool manufacture (Fig. 3: page 21).

First, consider Pococke’s comments concerning gilt and colored decoration, for if the same evidence is applied to this fine punch bowl (Fig.4), we run into problems. Emblazoned with the arms of Sir John Bridgeman (1667-1747), 3<sup>rd</sup> Baronet of Weston Park, Shropshire, it combines both gilt and colored decoration. Nevertheless, several factors point to it having been made in Pontypool. First, the dates of Sir John and his wife, Lady Ursula (1671-1719), suggest an early date for its manufacture. Second, Pontypool is known to have accepted commissions for pieces decorated with clients armorial bearings or with views of their country seats. And finally, both the execution of the bowl’s tortoiseshell ground and gilt decoration are consistent with what is known of early Pontypool wares.

Sir John, of course, may have purchased the bowl from a London or provincial retailer, but it is nevertheless interesting that he chose a Pontypool piece in favour of one from the newly established japan factories in Wolverhampton or Birmingham, towns much closer to Weston Park, than Pontypool. The most likely reasons were that manufacture in the Midlands was still in its infancy, and japanners there were not yet producing objects such as bowls—certainly there is no evidence to suggest they were; and loyalty to Wales may have played a part, for the



Fig.4. Punch bowl, probably Pontypool, c1745. Note colored decoration.

Private Collection

family home of Sir John's wife was on the Welsh borders.

The tortoiseshell effect was achieved by attaching irregularly shaped pieces of silver leaf to a japanned surface and coating the entire surface with up to three layers of clear varnish, each of which required stoving. Once stoved, the varnish imparted a brownish color to the underlying metal leaf, and so created the variegated appearance of tortoiseshell. By contrast, Midlands' japanners favored the use of patchily applied vermilion pigment in place of silver-leaf, to create a redder tortoiseshell effect—a less costly method that was later adopted at Pontypool. And contrary to appearances, Pontypool's gilt ornament was also achieved with the use of silver leaf. The idesign was first drawn onto the japanned surface with a fine brush dipped in size, left to dry until just sticky to the touch, then overlaid with silver leaf. Once firmly attached to the sized motifs, any excess leaf was wiped away, and the details of the design were painted with a fine brush or “pencil” dipped in asphaltum varnish.



Detail of gilt decoration on punch-bowl.



Fig. 6. Jappaned iron table-top on a wooden column and tripod stand.  
Courtesy of Carlton Hobbs, New York

The motifs were then coated with a clear golden varnish to create the desired effect—a process which clarifies Pococke’s assertion that he saw at Pontypool a snuffbox painted with a golden flower.

To return to the significance of pierced borders as a means of establishing the origins of early jappaned ware, the comments of Thomas Hull and John Mulford when they visited the workshop of John Baskerville (1706-1775) in Birmingham in 1765 are especially interesting. There they noticed some waiters with lace-like open borders, which they described as made of “Iron japan’d, pierced & . . . beautifully painted”<sup>7</sup>—a description which could be applied to a tray of comparable date displayed in the National Museum of Wales, where it sits

comfortably alongside other similarly decorated and apparently Welsh pieces.<sup>8</sup>

But turn this tray over, and unusually for the period, it will be seen that it is stamped with the maker's name and location, "BEDFORD B'HAM," for Stephen Bedford of Birmingham. Here, together with Hull and Mulford's notes, is proof that pierced edges and this style of painted decorations (flowers and nesting birds) were, indeed, found on articles made in the Midlands as well as in Wales. Moreover, the presence of wooden fixings on its underside show that it is not a tray but rather the top of a tilt-top table, similar to the example seen here (Fig. 6)—hence the strange 'portrait' arrangement of Bedford's painted decoration, which would be correctly aligned when the table was placed in the corner of a room with its top tipped.

We know that Baskerville made similar tables. In 1742, only three or four years after having commenced as a japanner, Baskerville was granted the first patent ever in respect of japanning. It was for rolling metal mouldings which could be japanned to ornament furniture or made into picture frames or boxes. He did not explain how he proposed that moulded metal be used to decorate the "fronts of furniture" but it is unlikely, save perhaps for picture- and mirror-frames that he intended any item to be wholly veneered with japanned tinplate. His listing in the Birmingham directory of 1767 as a "japanner of Tea Tables, Waiters, Trays & c.", confirms that he did, indeed, make tables, but is otherwise short on detail. However, more usefully, a letter<sup>9</sup> written in 1772 by the influential Birmingham industrialist, Matthew Boulton (1728-1809), included a thumbnail sketch of a round table that he wished to order from Baskerville. Save for the fact that Boulton required its pierced edge to hang down, rather than stand up, it otherwise shows a table similar to Bedford's.

In a letter to the Earl of Corke in 1767, Samuel Derrick said that "Baskerville is a great cherisher of genius, which, wherever he finds it, he loses no opportunity of cultivating. One of his workman has manifested fine talents for fruit-painting, in several pieces he shewed me."<sup>10</sup> The artist in question was probably Amos Green (Fig. 7), an artist who is known to have worked for Baskerville, and who at the time was "esteemed inferior to no one in England for fruit," and was thought to paint "flowers, insects and dead game very well"<sup>11</sup>—subjects which, with

Fig. 6. Japanned iron table-top on a wooden column and tripod stand. H: 26", Width of top: 27.5". Courtesy of Carlton Hobbs, New York



the possible exception of dead game, frequently found on japanned ware.

With the exception of Baskerville's apprentices whom he regarded as "gentleman painters,"<sup>12</sup> (in spite of their being, by his own account, a motley group of young men), there are no details of other artists in his employ. Nevertheless, given his reputation for "being able to select just those men who were best fitted for their particular occupation,"<sup>13</sup> it is likely there were others. The ceramic painter, John Giles, who lived and worked close by, has been said to have worked for Baskerville, but as yet there is no evidence that he did. Intriguingly, alongside the name of one of his boys in the "Apprentices Register," Baskerville is identified as a "flower painter."<sup>14</sup> Might this suggest that Baskerville drew upon his own acknowledged artistic talent to undertake some of the painting himself?

Although Baskerville is better known today as a printer of fine books than as a japanner, it was on account of both trades that many distinguished visitors were attracted to his workshops. In fact, in the absence of any surviving examples of Baskerville's japanned ware, it is the journals and notebooks of these visitors that provide much of what is known about his products. The earliest known record was left by Angerstein, who visited Baskerville in 1754, shortly before going on to view the Pontypool Japan Works. In Baskerville's japan shop, Angerstein saw "tea trays and other household goods made from thin iron sheet," which were "painted with birds of all kinds, some [painted with] pictures and flower arrangements."<sup>15</sup> Similar trays are found listed some twenty years later in this bill for japanned goods, which Baskerville

sent to his long-standing friend Matthew Boulton just before closing his japan workshop in 1773:

No. 1 & 2	2 trays oval fruit	6. 6. —
No. 3	A 32 Inch fine tray fruit ( <sup>16</sup> oval)	5. 5. —
No. 4	An oval Flower piece 30 Inch	2. 12. 6
No. 5	A pastoral 34 Inch oval	3. 3. 0
No. 6	A fine Fruit piece	£5. 5. —
No. 7	Agamemnon sacrificing his Daughter Iphegenia who is carried away in a Cloud by Minerva & a Hind left upon The Altar	£6. 6. —

It appears that from the 1760s, many trays made in Pontypool and the Midlands were almost indistinguishable from each other. And to add to the confusion, there is a further complication.

In a lease of 1747,<sup>17</sup> Baskerville was described as a “boxmaker” rather than a “japanner,” which raises the possibility that japanned tea chests with pierced foot rims and moulded sides—a type generally associated with Pontypool—could have been made by Baskerville in accordance with his patent (Fig.8). But since his patent would have expired by the time such chests were made in the 1760s, the range of possible Midlands makers increases. For example, Stephen Bedford was also known to have made fine boxes.

All good examples of English and other japanned tinware, regardless of date, continue to be popularly attributed to Pontypool. Indeed, in the 1760s, Midlands japanners themselves used the term “Fine Pontypool work” when advertising their best japanned metal ware, if only to distinguish japanned tinware from the newly introduced japanned papier mâché products. Such terminology continued until the close of the industry in the early 20th century. But this alone is not the cause of the confusion between English and Welsh wares; the fact remains that the distinction between the two is far less clear than hitherto believed.

It is time to review the early history of japanning in Pontypool and the important part the Allgoods played in its development. As we have seen, it can be as difficult to disentangle the various members of the Allgood family as it is to distinguish their products from those made in England, so it may be some time before we can properly address the Pontypool question. Until such time,

japanned tinware post-dating 1740 with pierced edges, tortoiseshell grounds, and finely painted birds, fruit and flowers, should, like the splendid cutlery caddies at Colonial Williamsburg,<sup>18</sup> be described as “Welsh or English.”

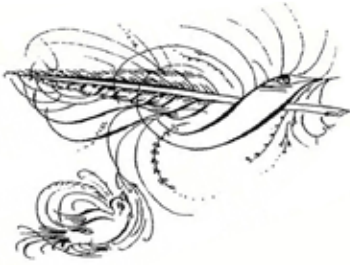


Fig. 8. Tea chest, Welsh or English, c.1765. Courtesy of Keith Pinn.

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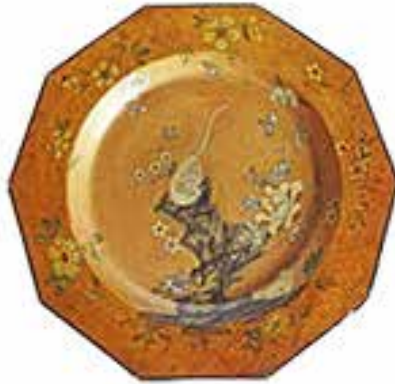




## Letter from Birmingham

by Yvonne Jones

### An Intriguing Curiosity



Papier mâché plate with aventurine-style decoration. Impressed: "CLAY." Late 18th or early 19th century. Private collection.

This small papier mâché plate is a puzzle. At first glance, its glittering gold ground is easily confused with the golden skies that are typical of so-called late-bronzing. But, in place of finely ground metal powders, the background on this plate is made up of a dense scattering of tiny but nevertheless readily distinguishable flakes of shredded gold-leaf.

Traces of stray gold particles on the tree-trunk and on some of the flowers and leaves, show that, contrary to appearances, the gold was applied after, rather than before, the painted motifs, while the awkward rendering of the tree shows it was outlined with transparent size in readiness to receive the gold flakes. And unusually for English papier mâché, the decoration appears to have been applied over a white ground which shows up as white spots breaking through the bronzed surface of some leaves and, in places, around the plate-rim.

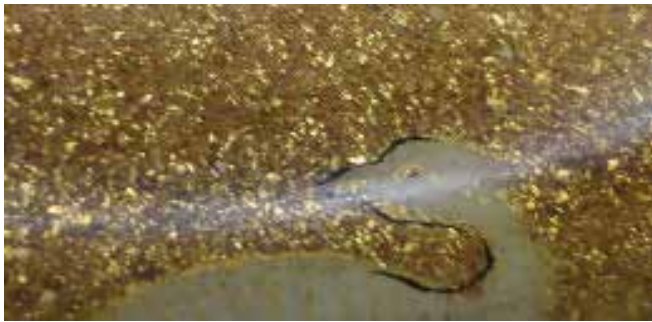
Although decorated in a style not hitherto associated with English papier mâché, the plate is stamped 'CLAY' for the best-known of the





early Birmingham japanners, Henry Clay. It is unlikely that this plate was a “one-off” but since no other examples of this decoration are as yet known, the implication is that the style was not extensively used. However, this would be surprising since, by their own admission, Birmingham’s early japanners saw themselves in “fierce rivalry” with their counterparts in France where this “aventurine”<sup>\*</sup> technique had been introduced by the Martin Brothers, in Paris, in about 1745, for the decoration of costly articles such as lacquered carriages.

As tends to happen when unusual objects appear, the discovery of this highly unusual plate may trigger the emergence of other similarly decorated examples; such discoveries would, surely, enable a better understanding of the aventurine technique.<sup>\*\*</sup> How much there is still to learn about this intriguing industry!



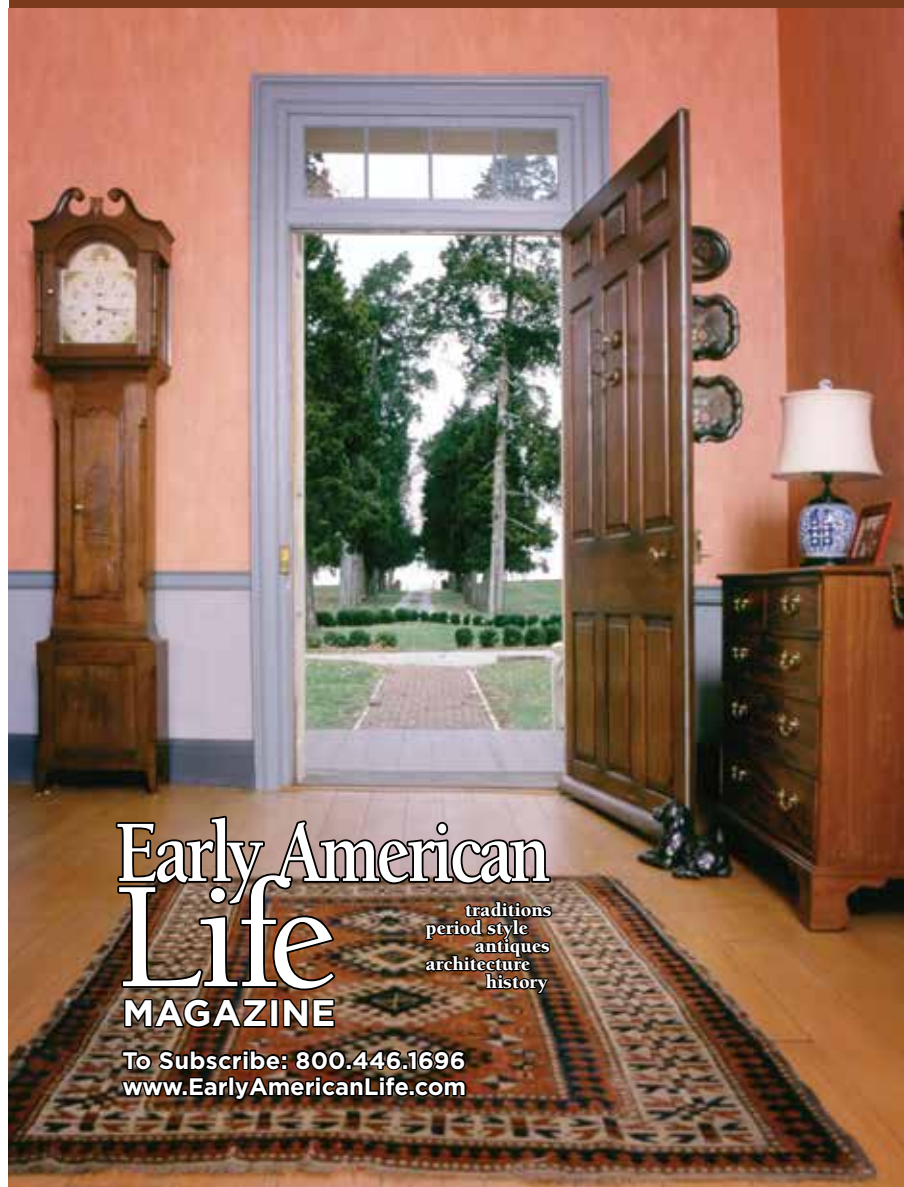
<sup>\*</sup>The style owes its origins to a spangled quartz known as “aventurine,” the effects of which inspired the nashiji technique of Japanese lacquer and later, in the 15th century, the development of aventurine glass in Venice.

<sup>\*\*</sup>Already since submitting the above, a large tray with a wide “aventurine” border has appeared; there will surely be others.



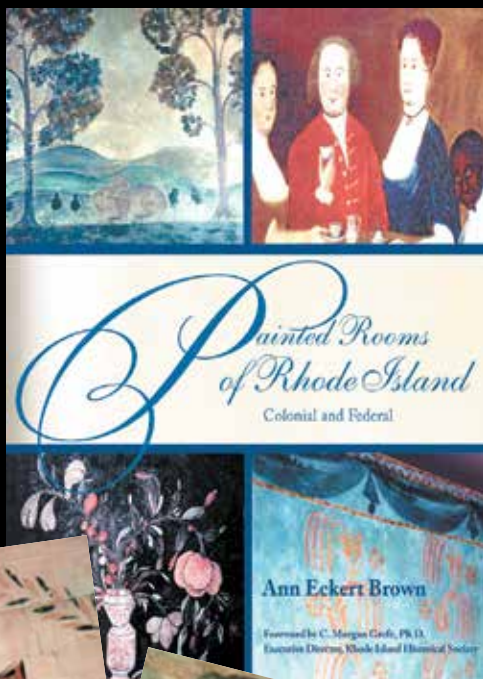
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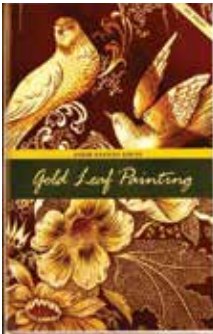


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