

PAINTED FURNITURE FROM MEDIEVAL TIMES UNTIL THE EARLY NINETEENTH CENTURY

How perverse we are today to spoil the natural beauty of solid timber with our clumsy human efforts to depict nature's beauty in synthetic paint. I find it amusing that words written over seventy-five years ago are equally valid today: whilst reading a 1914 publication, *The practical book of period furniture*, I encountered words which most definitely still hold true for today:

Even the most advanced modernists, while venturing many daring things in the field of colour combination, things that cause conservative-minded folk to stand aghast and gasp in sheer amazement, have essayed most of their flights and experiments with fabrics, mural decorations or furniture forms and have been extremely moderate, as a rule in applying coloured decoration to the carcasses or frames of cabinetwork or chairs.

The chapter from which this quote is extracted was written because of the increased interest in 'The sundry sorts of furniture painting formerly practised'. It also acknowledged that the 'Discriminating student of mobiliary art and history will more and more require a guide for this decorative phase.'

A brief look at painted furniture throughout history can provide examples of both the highest levels of refinement to the lowest depths of crudity. For instance, a little colour can emphasise the effect of carving or other ornamentation, or can be done with great and effective decorative intent. Good taste, arguably, is the ability to effectively consider colour and colour combination and, in the instance of furniture decoration, the element of colour and the manner of its application. Colour can be effectively and legitimately employed to brighten the furniture that surrounds us.

It is in the middle ages that we begin to hear of painted furniture in Europe. The furniture was often severely simple in form and line, and suggested the need of something to 'Relieve its austerity of aspect':

Such was the passion for gorgeous colour that even ornately carved chests or armoires were heavily overlaid with gilding and rich diaper work picked out in scarlet and blue, chocolate and green, or bright with heraldic devices blazoned in all their proper tinctures.

From the eleventh century until the Renaissance, a popular, vigorous sense of colour ensured the use of painted decoration on every available space both in architecture and on furniture. Evidence of this can be seen in many English cathedrals and parish churches when the whitewash or plaster is removed. Bright-hued diaper work can be seen on the stones of inner walls, while many of the painted roofs have never been touched. Ecclesiastical examples are cited because nearly all-enduring or important architecture was ecclesiastical in general character.

The tone of architecture set the tone of furniture in the early days: important furniture was always architectural in feeling. Architectural principles and lines of structure along with the motifs of decoration can also be seen in furniture. For this reason, it was natural to embellish furniture with colour in the same abundant manner as was seen in architecture.

The Renaissance developed a supreme regard for form and a taste for varied and vivid colour evolved amongst the fashion conscious. However, there were those that maintained their fondness for traditional furniture painting, including the Dutch and Bavarian peasantry. Even though both style and execution became extremely crude at times, there was still a spontaneity and originality of conception—which was enough to maintain respect, if not always admiration.

In England, some medieval traditions were carried through to Tudor times where we see old cupboards painted vivid vermilion and green. Chest panels were embellished with polychrome treatment and many ecclesiastical chests and coffers were adorned with paintings of scriptural subjects. Heraldic devices were particularly



resplendent once given such chromatic treatment.

In the Jacobean period the effect of carved ornament was frequently enhanced by the addition of colour. Some of the carved oak overmantels were given rich polychrome treatment and bed heads displayed heraldic ornamentation. Testers and panels of chests too were enlivened in the same manner. Human, animal or mythological figures were painted with distemper colours of vigorous hues and the adornment of gilding was often lavishly added. The same methods were applied when emblazoning heraldic devices. In all cases the colours were strong, simple and few in number.

Cromwellian times were distinguished by a severity of form and lack of colour, so painted decoration was not as popular. However, the Carolean period not only saw the restoration of the monarchy but also the revival of a cheerful interest in all the pleasant things of life and a resultant revival of interest in painted furniture. Again marquetry became popular and lacquers too were greatly admired and sought after. Gilding was used liberally alongside gorgeous fabrics.

The fondness for lacquer, marquetry and inlay, partially and wholly painted and gilded furniture increased during the William and Mary period and painted and gilt furniture, as well as brilliant coloured lacquers continued to be in fashion right through the reign of Queen Anne. Settees and chair frames of these times are wholly covered with agreeable dull blues, reds, greens and other colours, relieved by a goodly quantity of heavy gilding. Oil colours were used and have remained much fresher than the distemper colours of the Jacobean pieces. The popular lacquered furniture was extremely important and significantly exemplified a love of colour. Apple green, red, scarlet, blue, yellow, silver and brown were extensively used as grounds, as well as the standard black. During Queen Anne's reign, the woodwork of bedsteads was wholly covered with bright-hued fabrics, which were glued on, to emphasise the shape and line in panelling and moulding.

Paint, gilt and lacquer continued in use on furniture right through to the first half of the eighteenth century, but when the influence of Thomas Chippendale was felt, these modes of decoration were greatly abated. Before all else Chippendale was a carver, and relied wholly on carving for the embellishment of furniture. He did, however use gilding to embellish parts of his finer carved furniture, only using paint in commissions or in works for some other designer.

The Adam brothers supplanted Chippendale's modes when, again, painted furniture came into high favour. They employed paint lavishly for embellishment of the furniture known by their name. England owes its most brilliant period of furniture painting to these men. The Adam brothers enjoyed great latitude in the painting of their furniture. When the piece was to be wholly coloured, they usually selected a neutral hue, say white, slate, grey or dull green, then they would pick out the less important features of the design in lines of colour. Finally they would garnish the

main portion of the design with such painted details as the decorator saw fit: classical medallions and plaques, wreaths, festoons and urns were generally employed for such embellishments. Often only portions of the furniture were painted, leaving some natural wood exposed. Satinwood, being beautiful in its own right, also provided an unusually delicate background for painted furniture. Angelica Kauffmann, Pergolesi and Cipriani lavished their most elaborate efforts in the painting of panels and arabesques on the beautiful pieces designed for the handsome drawing rooms of the latter part of the eighteenth century.

In England the habit of painting furniture lessened during the second quarter of the eighteenth century. However, France found painted furniture in vogue under the influence of Martin. A coach painter who was regularly employed to decorate coach doors with heraldic blazonings and flower borders, Martin used a fine transparent lac-polish leaving a beautiful surface. Works by Martin include tables, bookcases as well as smaller articles such as needle cases and snuff boxes. Often the only break in the excellent solid colour—characteristically a beautiful green—would be gilt mountings. His imitators and pupils continued to paint and enamel furniture of various kinds following his death.

Hepplewhite and Sheraton followed the lead of Adams in designing and advocating painted furniture, as well as producing out of mahogany and inlaid woods. Hepplewhite preferred painting over inlay, whilst Sheraton preferred inlay to painting. In addition to the finer work of Kauffmann, Cipriani, Pergolesi and others, attention should also be directed to the Japanned or painted furniture that was further adorned by gilding. The classical influence of the middle of the eighteenth century brought a preference for paler and more subdued colouring. Often the colour was concentrated in one or two places such as in the case where medallions and plaques were employed. Even so, a considerable quantity of furniture was still wholly painted till the end of the century and it is said that Sheraton sometimes sacrificed form and depended on paint to make up for the deficiencies in shape and proportion.

During the Empire period a good deal of furniture was painted in France, England and America using mostly dull tones for the body and then gilding and other colours were added. Chairs and tables were painted and then gilt ornament applied. Chairs and couches, especially of the cane variety, were the usual forms of painted furniture. The top rails and the cross rails of the back were often painted in colours and gilded on another ground colour with the designs of musical instruments or some pseudo-classical motif. The caned couches were painted in greys and greens and light browns and then lined in black or gold and adorned with classical designs in gold. In some cases the gold ornamentation was so lavishly applied that it is hard to distinguish the ground colour upon which it was applied.

The Biedermeier style of painted decoration followed the Empire period where chairs, sofas,

tables and other items were adorned with dainty devices in which floral wreaths, festoons and drops, oval medallions and above all, silhouette forms of birds, animals and flowers. Germany had the greatest following of the Biedermeier style. Painted decorations were seen on satinwood, maple or on wood that had been painted with a ground colour. In America, this style enjoyed considerable vogue, and devices were applied to chairs, settees or tables which had previously been painted black grey, green, blue, canary yellow or some other bright colour.

Dating from the seventeenth century, the first examples of American furniture painting are to be found in New England, where chests, hutches, and small boxes were often adorned with simple flower and leaf designs on a coloured background or, directly, on the natural wood. Sometimes they would merely have scrolls and waving lines. Typically, decoration of items such as the plain wooden chairs and settees of farmhouses involved lining the turnings of stretchers, spindles and legs with some contrasting colour to the ground work on the rest of the piece.

By the end of the eighteenth century and during the first part of the nineteenth century, the wide top rails and vertical slats of settee backs and chairs were frequently adorned with conventional designs or flowers in baskets. These were either stencil patterns or painted on, and sometimes done with a touch of gilding.

A most interesting and spontaneous style of painted furniture is that of the Pennsylvania Dutch. This decorative traditions was brought from the German principalities by immigrants who came and settled in Pennsylvania counties during the latter part of the seventeenth and first half of the eighteenth century. Though still peasant furniture, it clearly outranks the peasant furniture previously mentioned in this article with its highly decorative character and richness of charming naivety. Typical items included chests and small boxes given to the bride by the bridegroom. Pennsylvania Dutch chests are sometimes more subdued than those found in Germany. However there is a remarkable similarity in the decorative motifs employed: stiff, conventional flowers and fruits, birds and decorative bands. The favourite flower of the Pennsylvania Dutch was the tulip, and their favourite bird, the dove. Texts, dates and initials were also frequently applied. In the early nineteenth century a resurgence of popular appreciation occurred, favouring the traditional German colour schemes and designs, or modifications of them.

Fortunately today there are some excellent art conservators and restorers, as well as antique restorers, who together with gilders can restore or conserve painted furniture to maintain the original intent and integrity of the original mastercraftsmen ■

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