



Horse ready for gesso (plaster/glue mix) to fill in the imperfections

Rocking Through The Ages

THE quaint charm of the rocking horse was founded in pure functionality. Since Victorian times, well-to-do families required tuition for their children in horsemanship. The motor car was not yet invented, and the horse was the main means of transport.

The children learnt to ride keeping a straight back and a still head while rocking back and forth. They could vary the motion from a gentle to-and-fro to an exhilarating gallop.

In the 17th century, curved rockers had bases like those used in cradles of that era. They were made of solid blocks of semicircular-shaped wood pegged through to cross pieces with the seat in between. The simply carved heads were silhouetted in style, like that of a hobby horse.

Later, with the preference for more detailed and elaborate carving, the rockers themselves became long, thin, graceful arcs known as bow rockers. Curved and bow rockers gave children a feeling akin to riding a real horse. Some models had saddles up to five feet or 1.5 metres off the ground to accustom the children to height.

In 1859, in America, the 'Shoo-fly' version of rocking horse came on the market. It had a silhouette of a horse on either side of a seat suspended above the rockers.

In the mid 1870s the Americans developed a safety stand, upon which the horse was suspended on two metal hoops. Three years later, the English, seeing its merits, incorporated the feature into their designs. You can well imagine the large families of these times with all the children crowding around, jostling for their turn. The safety stand meant no more squashed toes under the bow rocker.

Another disadvantage of the bow rocker was that the child could slowly turn it around in a circle by leaning to one side whilst rocking. This

meant a lot of room was needed for these rocking horses, some of which were made up to 8 ½ feet or 2.6 metres long.

The safety stand rocking horses pivoted at such an angle that the action was quite similar to jumping a live horse over fences. This was quite different from the feeling of cantering which children experienced on the curved and bow horses.

Unfortunately on such large toys very young and small children had a tendency to fall off backwards or sideways. Keep in mind that children at the turn of the century were a lot smaller than today's children. In horses produced over the 1880-1912 period you will usually find two holes in the back about 3 inches (7.5 cm) from the neck. Most restorers have plugged them up over the years, not realising that they were another part of the training aid. A peg 10 inches (25 cm) long was placed in each hole which the child used as 'handle bars'. This meant that a child could handle a rocking horse twelve months earlier than with reins alone. Later as they gained confidence the pegs would be removed. If the novice was a girl, the left peg would be left in and she would ride side-saddle. In 1912, makers discontinued this practice as it was no longer considered unladylike to ride astride.

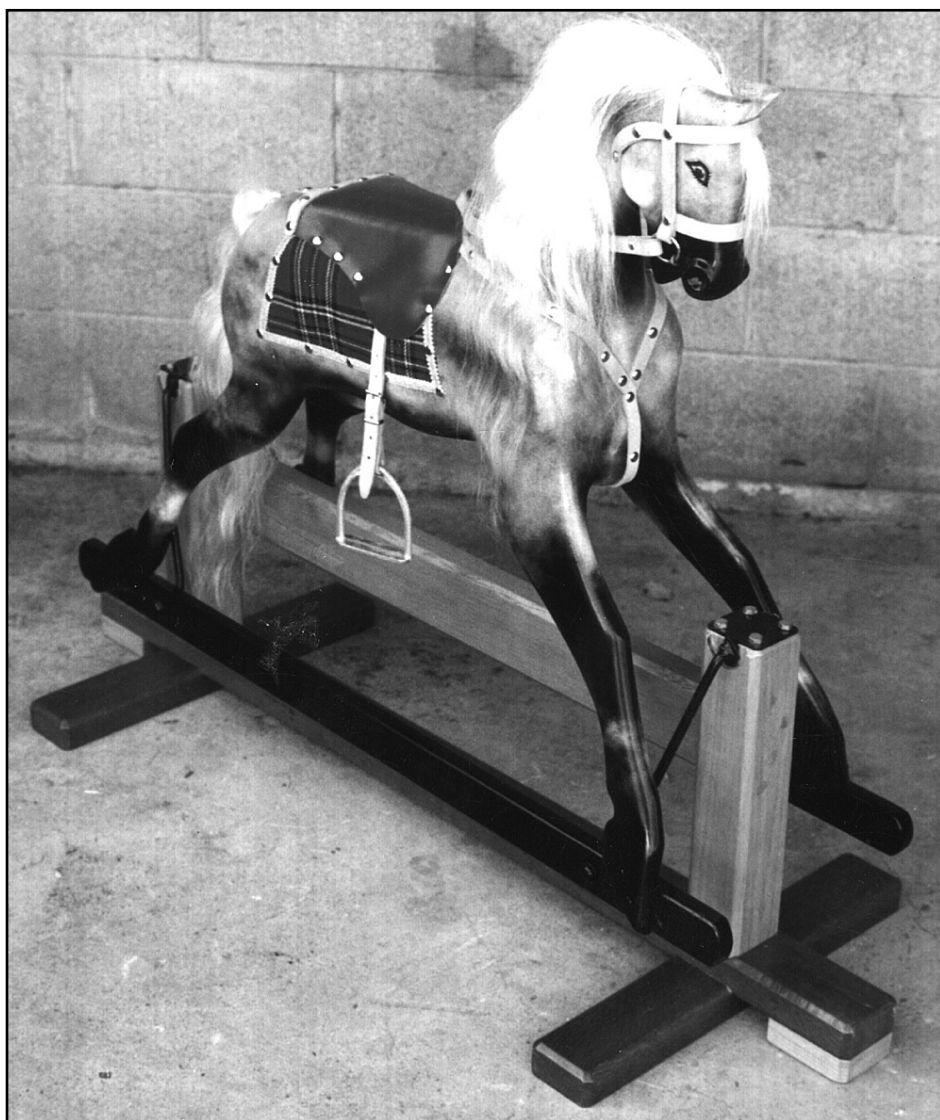
Horses made in the 20th century have been made from wood, papier mâché, composition (glue and sawdust), plaster of Paris with hessian reinforcing, metal, plastic and fibreglass. The difference in how the horse moved and how it looked came down to the preference of the maker.

Some carvers became so adept at carving a particular breed of horse that the heads all looked identical. Copy lathes can mechanically produce huge numbers of identical heads. However they usually lack detail, especially in the ears and the flare of the nostril.

Following widespread use of cars, demand for the rocking horse still increased during the 20th century. However, now it was sought as a toy. The copy lathe was required to mass-produce rocking horses, with each copy identical to the master.

Not all makers identified themselves or the date of production. From the 1940s onwards Roebuck placed a sheet of old newspaper under the saddle, giving approximate dates only. Since 1909, the dappling has become stylised and each pattern gives a clue to the age.

All of this makes it difficult to estimate when a horse was made. An expert needs to look at small changes in design, dappling (coloured spotting in the painted coat of the horse) and harness. No records were kept by the makers about such minor changes. Verification from owners can help establish the age of production.



Fully restored rocking horse manufactured by Roebuck prior to 1928

Since rocking horses were sold as toys, colours were used to attract the buyer. Reds and yellows stand out, hence the most popular saddle-cloth colour was red. Prior to World War I the reds were more a maroon colour. Gold edging on the saddle-cloth was very popular because the military used it on their saddle-cloths.

When deciding how to restore a rocking horse, you need to consider whether original proof of the age is required. Also, you need to recall that older style horses were put together with animal glue. Application of stripper removes identification features and the animal glue. It can leave the owner with a pile of wood! Stripper baths are worse as the chemicals keep leaching out in the years to come, giving major paint problems.

Most manes and tails are made from cattle hair because it is available in white, the most popular colour, and it is much finer than horsehair. Budding hairdressers like to trim the mane and tail. This eventually results in a hole where the tail attaches. Children like putting small objects inside small holes. You never know what you will find! Externally, all sorts of wear and tear can be seen from scuffs to obvious attacks from all sorts of things, including swords, darts and airguns.

The largest and most widely known maker in England was Lines. George and Joseph Lines commenced manufacturing rocking horses in 1850 at Kings Cross, London. The trademark was the family crest, a Highland broadsword belt surrounding a Scotch thistle. After a long history, including three generations with up to five factories operating at one stage, they produced the last horse in 1931.

Australian manufacturers included R.J. Bartlett, originally of Gore St, Fitzroy in Melbourne (1913-1973) who copied the English G & J Lines models. Some of their horses were used to make the first coin-operated rides in Victoria.

The most common horse found in Australia is that made by F.J. Roebuck & Sons of Leichhardt, New South Wales. The firm's 250-year tradition in rocking horses started when John Roebuck opened a small factory in Euston Road, London in the 1720s. In their best year, 1935, they manufactured 2500 units. Each horse was

despatched from the factory in a hessian bag filled with wood shavings as padding. They sold their last horse in 1972.

Apart from painted, carved rocking horses, they can also be covered in either hide or skin. Such horses come in three basic forms: A) the conventional carved wooden style which is hide-covered instead of being painted; B) the skeletal frame type that is padded out to form the shape; and C) a moulded form designed for covering. Very few exist in their original form as the hides shrink and harden. The main Australian producer, Benson's Trading, produced the B type from 1948 till the mid-1960s.

There is an enormous amount of information available on rocking horses. This article simply scratches the surface. We would particularly like to highlight the research of enthusiast Len Elliot, The Rocking Horse Man. His assistance and advice has been invaluable for the restoration work we have done over the years. For those wanting more information, please don't hesitate to call.

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Laura Jane Martin (3½ years old) on a Roebuck rocking horse

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