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Plate 1. A late 17th century moulded front oak chest of drawers with original bun feet, polychrome decorated in bright oil based paints a considerable time after its manufacture but having a unique combination of decorative motifs (marbling, checker boarding, combing) and colours that make it a highly desirable piece of folk art. £24,200. Without its painted decoration it would have a value of £1,000-£1,500. (Christie's).

Early Painted Furniture

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It is easy to understand competitive bidding and exceptional prices for established market favourites like small canopied dressers, joint stools, tiny or very large gateleg tables, candlestands and little early bureaux with wells, especially when they are crawling with colour, bear polite scars as evidence of their age and largely retain their original metalwork or benefit from having been made out of yew or fruitwood. But when a big late 17th century oak chest of

simple geometrically moulded drawers suddenly jumps up and makes £24,200 because it is decorated with paint (plate 1), then all the accepted rules seem redundant. Early painted furniture, as a species, is unfortunately not documented and only recent research and interest has given rise to what knowledge we now share, both of materials and methods. We do know however that domestic and ecclesiastical British furniture has been

decorated with paint and coloured pigments since medieval times, and that after the flamboyant decorations of the Gothic period the painting of furniture and domestic wooden objects falls mainly into three categories: monochrome, polychrome (geometric or floral) and simulation. Monochrome decoration, the most common and variable type, was simply a coat or two of one coloured paint, applied generally as protection against



Figure 1. A mid-18th century comb backed Windsor type armchair in a mixture of woods; its character and appeal lies in the strong naïve sculpture form and its genuine old green painted surface. £2,500.

both weather (as in the case of early Windsor chairs and cricket tables which were often used outside) and the wear and tear of ordinary family life. It was usually applied to uncarved, softwood furniture and on to a prepared ground to protect against bleeding knots. The decorative merits of this type of furniture lie directly within the colour chosen and the effect that years of wear, patina and fading has had on its surface.

The 18th century comb back Windsor chair (figure 1) carries its two coats of green paint under a deep tobacco coloured patina which accentuates the wear and warmth of the timber showing through. The one piece Irish dresser (plate 2) shows the appealing touch of painting the back boards and shelves a different colour. This is not an uncommon feature on dressers, corner cupboards and delft racks, but adds considerably to their value. 17th century furniture with original paint is very scarce and the oak coffer (plate 3), with its primitive 'Celtic' carved panels, was presumably originally painted in the blue milk paint to disguise the blond ash panels enclosed in the oak carcass. The rarity of design and decoration makes it a very desirable item. It is interesting to note that the hard casein bonding in the old milk paint surface is unaffected by worm damage, but that the inside of the coffer has evidence of worming.

Geometric and floral design polychromed decoration is the most prized type on painted furniture since it

demands more fundamental artistic ability and epitomises the soul of 'folk art'. Invariably executed by the maker, be it a small love token or painted chest, the paint was applied to scratched or carved motifs to enhance the decorative qualities of a piece.

The 17th century Dorset coffer (plate 4) is a fine example of coloured pigments used to enhance design, as is the late 18th century child's money-box in the form of a house (plate 5) where the paint is used figuratively to accentuate architectural details. 17th century and early 18th century British free-hand painting, both floral and figurative, is extremely rare and highly prized on furniture, but a certain amount of 'leopard spotted', 'striped' or 'checker board' decorated early furniture comes on the market, often initialled and occasionally dated. Apart from their rarity, the colour designs and charm of these pieces always ensure a healthy price.

Finally, there is the simulated finish, where an item made out of ordinary oak or pine is painted to imitate a finer or more exotic timber, often walnut or an imaginary burrwood.

The William and Mary period oak single drawer side table (figure 2) is a wonderful example of period paintwork enhancing character and value. The wild graining is hardly a realistic imitation of walnut but carries its own particular decorative appeal. The mid-17th century oak joint stool in figure 3 is a rare



Figure 2. A fine William and Mary oak side table, with a good overhang to the thin moulded top and good bobbin turned legs. Joined by a shaped cross stretcher. Benefits considerably from its bold free painted graining and excellent signs of wear. £3,500. (Collection of Michael Wakelin and Helen Linfield).



Figure 3. An English oak joint stool with traces of a stippled imitation of walnut graining over a hard milk based (casein) ground. £2,000. A rare 17th century example.



Figure 4. A good example of the master grainer's art. Oak grained scumble on a pine carcass. Marvellous paint loss around the escutcheons helps 'the look'. £2,500. (Private Collection).



Figure 5. A late 17th century English chest of drawers with the cushion moulding painted in simulation of tortoiseshell. £3,500. (Collection of Michael Wakelin and Helen Linfield).

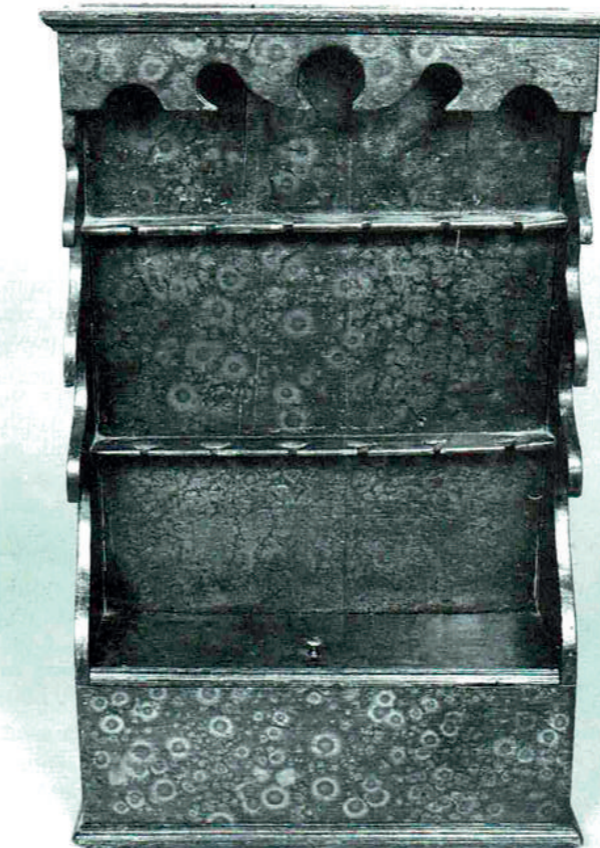


Figure 6. A George III period spoon rack decorated with a dark glaze of pigment, vinegar and sugar over a lighter oil based ground. This poor man's graining technique is now more sought after for its vigorous style and bold patterns. £1,200. (Collection of Michael Wakelin and Helen Linfield).

example of imitation walnut; originally a much closer match, it is now very worn with the ground colour predominating. This scumble type decoration, achieved by drawing a comb, hard brush or feather through a wet dark glaze laid over a lighter coloured ground, became popular during the 18th century and common during the 19th century. In late

items it is not commercial, but a good 18th century example such as the clerk's desk (figure 4), which is imitating oak grain on a pine carcass, would certainly attract a premium.

Simulation is not limited strictly to imitating wood. Marble and tortoiseshell, as seen on the cushion mouldings of the 17th century moulded front chest of

drawers (figure 5), are both known types and towards the end of the 18th century various new techniques became popular, creating fantasy finishes with techniques such as vinegar painting as seen in the charming George III period spoon rack in figure 6 which is created by applying vinegar and sugar based colours over oil or milk based grounds.

Since these painted country objects are now enjoying such popularity and their values have risen so dramatically over the past couple of years it is important to understand a few basic principles, mainly concerned with their discovery, authenticity and restoration.

Primarily, it is important to understand that later generations have failed to see the merit or charm in their ancestors' painted furniture, with its cracks, chips, and unfashionable decoration and colouring; pieces have therefore been redecorated to suit their 'modern' or contemporary taste. This obviously has protected the original paint from further damage, but requires skilful restoration to return to the original.

To remove the later layers of paint in order to reveal the original surface satisfactorily, the restorer has to scrape it off carefully with a scalpel or chisel. This inch by inch method is known as dry scraping. Except in very exceptional circumstances no chemical paint removers, solvents or hot air machines should be used as they seriously damage the original surface.

The dry scraping technique leaves a powdery, slightly rough finish and returns the item close to its condition prior to re-painting, complete with blemishes and chips. The handsome blue painted press cupboard in plate 6 is a fine example, as is the wooden rush light



Plate 2. Early 19th century Irish pine dresser, retaining the old paint surface and having an attractive colour combination. Lifts what might have become another stripped pine dresser into the £1,500 bracket. (Private Collection).

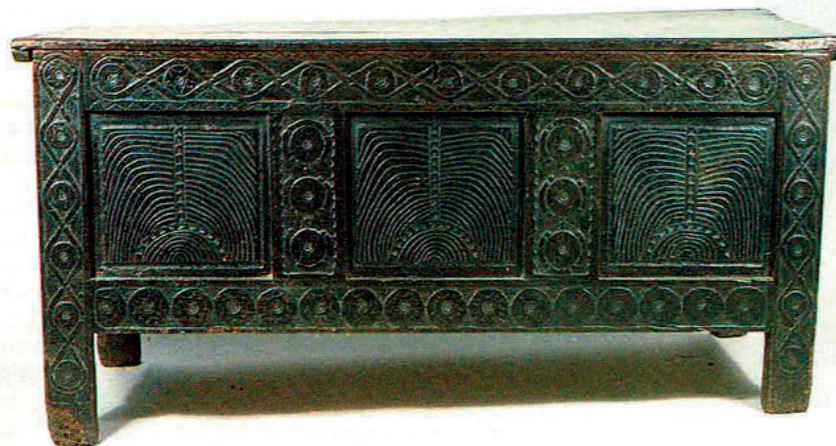


Plate 3. Above left. A mid-17th century English ash and oak panelled coffer with interesting scratch carved panels and geometric carved stiles retaining much original milk based blue paint. £2,000.



Plate 4. A handsome example of the type of regional polychrome decoration known as 'Dorset'. A simple technique of rubbing coloured pigments, probably with a light oil base, into the shapes formed by shallow scratch carving. £2,500. (Collection of Michael Wakelin and Helen Linfield).

nip (plate 7) of the chalky and genuine finish achieved only by dry scraping.

Since it is the most 'honest', dry scraped furniture is the most desirable and easily identifiable. Dealers or restorers who claim to have 'washed off' the later paint often mean that they have 'washed on' much or all of the original 'old' paint, and the story about having things 'touched-up' is one to beware of. To avoid these pitfalls follow a few guidelines when examining an 'antique' or 'original' paint surface. Beware of any 'original' paint found in worm holes, or worm tracking, in chips and bruises, in gaps or cracks caused by shrinkage, on or towards the bottom of feet, on repairs or patches, and on replaced hinges, and beware of a paint surface without a ground. Cracking should be in line with shrinkage, i.e. long lines with the grain. A bubbled surface is easily achieved with an electric blow lamp and brush strokes should not be visible after 100 years or more. A black or coloured wax finish is often also a sign that there is something to hide.

The cherished and sought-after pieces, in either 'as found' original condition, or dry scraped, proudly display all the evidence of their age. Faded sun-bleached colours, particularly blues, salmon pinks and turquoise greens; paint worn through to the wood on tops of chests and seats of chairs, built up patina around old handles and bleached out areas around polished brass, are points of value and merit. Wear around feet, water damage, stains (not unsightly), natural blistering and paint loss from prominent and often handled areas are all good signs — but the faker knows that too!

As a general rule a good piece of painted country furniture is now worth more than its equivalent in oak and, as an item, all the same basic rules as to quality, rarity, size and condition still apply. However, the great discrepancy occurs over the question of originality. Many pieces of painted country furniture were already 50 or 100 years old when first painted, in fact one of the highest known prices for a piece of American painted furniture (\$250,000)



Plate 5. A charming example of 'folk art', simple child's money box, c.1790, made and painted to imitate a Georgian house. Its strong simplicity and colour give it 'the look'. £500.



Plate 7. An early hand carved wooden rush light nip, decorated in original bright blue milk paint. Protected for years under a deep oak grained scumble. £450.

was paid for a bun footed blanket chest that was decorated some 100 years after it was made in about 1700.

The chest of drawers in plate 1 falls into this category, the decoration having apparently been executed in the early 19th century on an original but otherwise ordinary late 17th century oak chest. The painted furniture market it seems has now established its own rules in this respect. If the paint is antique, although not necessarily contemporary with the item, and if it has not been 'touched-up' or otherwise enhanced, beyond the bounds of legitimate restoration, it may be considered acceptable.

Later paint is not comparable to later veneering; the paint was not applied to deceive or copy, simply in the view of the owner or painter to decorate and brighten up the home. Therefore the furniture itself becomes only a vehicle for the paint, the colours and decorations employed had no precedent and by their nature became original to the piece. This is our British folk art, and was produced by ordinary unskilled people. But to be considered desirable and valuable, it needs to have character, colour, originality of design and the 'look'. It is this indefinable 'look factor' that ultimately lifts an otherwise ordinary piece of painted country furniture into the heady world of art and high finance.

All illustrations courtesy of Robert Young Antiques except where otherwise stated.

Plate 6. A late 18th century pine press cupboard with the sought-after dry scraped look of its powdery blue paint. (Note paint surface on replaced cornice and waist moulding does not carry the softness and complexity of colour.) £3,500. (Private Collection).

