



## History of “Compo”

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If you query the term “compo” in Wikipedia ([view article here](#)) you will find a rather uninspiring definition of compo: “Compo is also the shorthand term for composition ornaments, a general term for molded and cast mixtures composed variously from linseed oil, pitch, whiting, hide glue, and various binders and aggregates such as horsehair, hemp or dried clay. Decorative elements are cast from this material and applied to walls, ceilings, doors, and mantels for an overwhelming decorative effect.”

In fact, compo is a fascinating product with an impressive pedigree. While the Decorators Supply Corp in Chicago has been producing compo (composition ornaments) for well over 100 years, early forms of compo can be traced back to the Egyptians. Mark Reinberger gives a very nice introduction to the history of compo in his book entitled: “Utility and Beauty – Robert Wellford and Composition Ornaments in America” published by University Delaware Press in 2003. Reinberger credits British architect Robert Adam with propelling composition ornaments “into prominence as a widespread substitute for wood carvings”. Robert Adam, for whom the “Adam Style,” was named, is credited as being the leader of the first phase of the classical revival in England and Scotland from around 1760 until his death. While Adam apparently utilized compo in varied applications, it became a product of choice in the manufacture of the traditional English chimneypiece (fireplace surround), which was a center of hospitality and comfort in the cold and damp climate of England and the British Isles.

According to Reinberger, composition ornament (“compo”) was first recorded in America in 1788 and “rapidly became an important, even vital, part of Federal period architecture....”. Among makers and suppliers of composition ornaments, Robert Wellford was the best known in his day and in the present. His works, utilizing composition ornaments, appear in the collections of major museums, including the Winterthur, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Philadelphia Museum of Art and the Museum of Early Southern Decorative Arts. For those interested not only in composition ornaments but early Colonial American decorative arts, Utility and Beauty – Robert Wellford and Composition Ornaments in America is a good resource and interesting read. This book is complemented with 130 images or illustrations of composition ornamentation and its uses. It is of note that one of these 130 images is a catalog page from Decorators Supply’s current “compo” ornaments book – Catalog #124 – Ornaments for Woodwork/Furniture. Catalog #124 has been unchanged since the 1920’s.

For those readers seeking additional information on compo or more information on the restoration and/or care of composition ornaments, you might consider reading: Preservation Brief 34 – “Applied Decoration of Historic Interiors Preserving Composition Ornaments” as presented by the National Parks Service – U.S. Department of the Interior: <http://www.nps.gov/hps/tps/briefs/brief34.htm>. This Brief is much more technically based, reviewing compo ingredients, the process of manufacturing composition ornaments and preservation/restoration techniques for composition ornaments. The authors describe compo as one of the first “thermoplastics” – natural or man-made materials that can be made soft or “plastic” by the application of heat. They further state that “generally adhered to wood, historic composition ornament is most often found decorating flat surfaces such as interior cornice and chair rail mouldings, door and window surrounds, mantelpieces, wainscot paneling, and staircases – indeed, anywhere that building designers and owners wanted to delight and impress the visitor, but stay within a budget. While composition was cheaper than carved wood, it was still meticulously hand made and applied; thus it was more often used in “high style” interiors.” Decorators Supply provided resource material for this brief and once again one of the pages from our composition catalog – Catalog #124 – Ornaments for Woodwork/Furniture is illustrated in this brief.

Finally, we would like to illustrate the basic process of making and manufacturing composition ornaments at our factory in the historic Chicago neighborhood of Bridgeport. Decorators Supply traces its earliest roots to 1883 – established to manufacture “artistic decorative accessories”. During the early years of the 20th Century we employed dozens of artisans who hand carved the 13,000 wood master carvings that comprise our historic library of ornaments. It is from these masters that we make moulds for the casting of our composition ornaments. The following images will give you an idea as to the process and authenticity of our work.

Below are four (4) images illustrating the following:

1. Compo patties after mixing up a 400 lb batch
2. Compo patties being re-steamed in the morning to soften it for casting
3. Compo patties awaiting casting while composition ornaments sit, curing on dry racks
4. Composition ornaments being cut from their backers by hand and eventually trimmed

