



TWO-TONED FINISHES

AMERICAN GRAIN-PAINTED FURNITURE, 1790–1880

CYNTHIA V.A. SCHAFFNER AND SUSAN KLEIN



Imitating the colors, grains, and figures of fancy hardwoods, wrote one nineteenth-century ornamental painter, required the facility, talent, and perceptive powers of a fine artist portraying a human face.¹ This same writer suggested that the imitator of fancy woods should select the best examples from nature for study and observation, then travel “the long road of patient study, close observation, and practice, practice, practice.”² Another period manual, *The Cabinet-Maker’s Guide* (1827), recommended that the “good mechanic” should “study truth and accuracy in the several parts, and beauty in the finishing strokes.”³

BLANKET CHEST
Artist unknown
Massachusetts
1825–1835
Painted wood
39¾ × 42¼ × 18¼"
Museum of American Folk Art,
gift of Jean Lipman in honor of
Cyril I. Nelson, 1995.5.1



WINDSOR BOW-BACK SETTEE
 Maker unknown
 Eastern Massachusetts
 1785–1800
 Ash or white oak, pine, and
 hickory with painted decoration
 38 × 79 × 21¾"
 Collection of Lauren and Keith
 Morgan

The painted decoration is an early nineteenth-century addition over an original green ground.

The Ornamental Painter

Despite the expertise needed to imitate polished wood graining, the application of layers of paint, color, shading, and varnish on furniture was distinguished from the “Art of Painting” as being “Economical Painting.”⁴ The nineteenth-century furniture ornamentor was a “Mechanick,” an artisan who earned a livelihood by manual skills and labor outside the class of artist usually studied by art historians. Many of America’s first fine artists began their careers as ornamental painters. Among them was William Sidney Mount, who apprenticed under his brother, Henry Smith Mount, a

sign and ornamental painter in New York City, from 1824 to 1827. Recalling this time, Mount relates the following story:

I took pleasure in my new vocation and discussed on the merits of a sign with as much zeal as a picture dealer would on the merits of an old master.... I remember at this period a young man of my acquaintance (sort of an upper crust) offended me by reflecting upon my profession—but I had my revenge by drawing him selling oysters at a stand. The likeness was so inveterate and ludicrous that he ever after eyed me at a distance.⁵

While Mount later achieved national recognition as a fine artist, most decorators of furniture remained artisans, supporting their families by painting signs, carriages, chairs, houses, ships, gilding, and glazing. City directories, newspaper advertisements, and surviving account books from the first half of the nineteenth century reveal the variety of ways furniture painters were employed. Many apprenticed from the age of fourteen, working as journeymen and masters in cabinetmakers shops, where specialization of furniture making prevailed. Others maintained separate shops and accepted a wide variety of painting commissions. In small communities, cabinetmakers finished their own furniture. And surviving grain-painted furniture reveals that rural farmers, in the jack-of-all-trades spirit of the nineteenth century, were self-taught grainers who constructed and ornamented furniture during the winter months.

As the need for ornamental painters grew, a new class of craftsmen with new needs arose and as the closed-guild system broke down, it was replaced by numerous practical guidebooks and increased specialization in the cabinetmaker trades. Moreover, in the new democratic republic, American craftsmen believed that they could learn the skills of cabinetmaking and finishing themselves. This demand for more painters wishing to practice the art of grain-painted decoration resulted in a new audience for

publications to disseminate information on formulas for paints and varnishes, and for the techniques and tools needed to produce enhanced and grain-painted furniture.

Furniture Finishers Manuals

Since the publication of the original guildbook of painters, stainers, and varnishers of York, England, in 1515, more than a hundred treaties, manuals, and handbooks on furniture finishing were published in England, France, and on the Continent. These publications slowly revealed the trade secrets of the guild, and by the second decade of the nineteenth century, Americans had also published numerous manuals for the cabinetmaker, varnisher, and furniture finisher. In an era before plagiarism was legally proscribed, new American editions drew heavily on earlier European publications in an outpouring of manuals numbering in the hundreds of thousands, several of which were reprinted in more than a dozen editions.

Foremost among American furniture literature is Hezekiah Reynolds’ *Directions for House and Ship Painting* (1812), which gives the exact proportions of pigments for mixing interior and exterior colors. This pamphlet served as the Rosetta stone for today’s paint conservators, who until the discovery of this treatise did not know the exact recipes for period paints’ colors. For example, for a Sea Green, Reynolds wrote: “To one pint of white Lead add one teaspoonful Rosin; one teaspoonful of Prussian blue; and one teaspoonful of Spruce Yellow, or in that proportion.”⁶ This mixture of yellow and blue pigments to produce green results in the unique coloration of nineteenth-century paints. While modern green paint reflects green light, early greens reflect both blue and yellow light because the pigments are not thoroughly combined.

The Cabinet-Maker’s Guide; or Rules and Instructions in the Art of Varnishing, Dying, Staining, Japaning, Polishing, Lacking and Beautifying Wood, printed by Jacob B. Moore in 1827, is thought to be the first American furniture finisher’s manual. This guide gives two recipes for imitating rosewood using red and black stains rather than pigmented

paints. The black stain is made by boiling one pound of logwood in four quarts of water, adding a double-handful of walnut peeling, and boiling again. When the mixture reaches a deep black color, the chips are removed and a pint of best vinegar is added. It was suggested that the black be applied boiling hot.⁷ The recipe for rosewood graining reads:

Take half a pound of logwood, boil it with three pints of water till it is of a very dark red, to which add about half an ounce of salt of tartar, and when boiling hot stain your wood with two or three coats, taking care that it is nearly dry between each; then with a stiff flat brush, such as is used by the painters for graining, form streaks with the black stain above named, which if carefully executed, will be very near the appearance of dark rose-wood.⁸

Rosewood's popularity during the second and third decades of the nineteenth century is evident in surviving New England furniture that reveals both red on top of black and black on top of red graining to imitate this popular wood.

The inventor, mural painter, and founder of the magazine *Scientific American*, Rufus Porter, printed his own manual, *A Select Collection of Valuable and Curious Arts*, in several editions beginning in 1825. This pamphlet combines scientific know-how and Yankee ingenuity, and reveals techniques for graining, making stencils, and tracing and copying pictures, among other things. Sixteen different editions of Henry Carey Baird's *The Painter, Gilder and Varnisher's Companion* were published in Philadelphia between 1850 and 1871, and while the early editions contain only brief references to techniques for imitating two varieties of rosewood, by the sixteenth edition there was a chapter titled "Directions for Graining and Imitation Woods and Marbles."

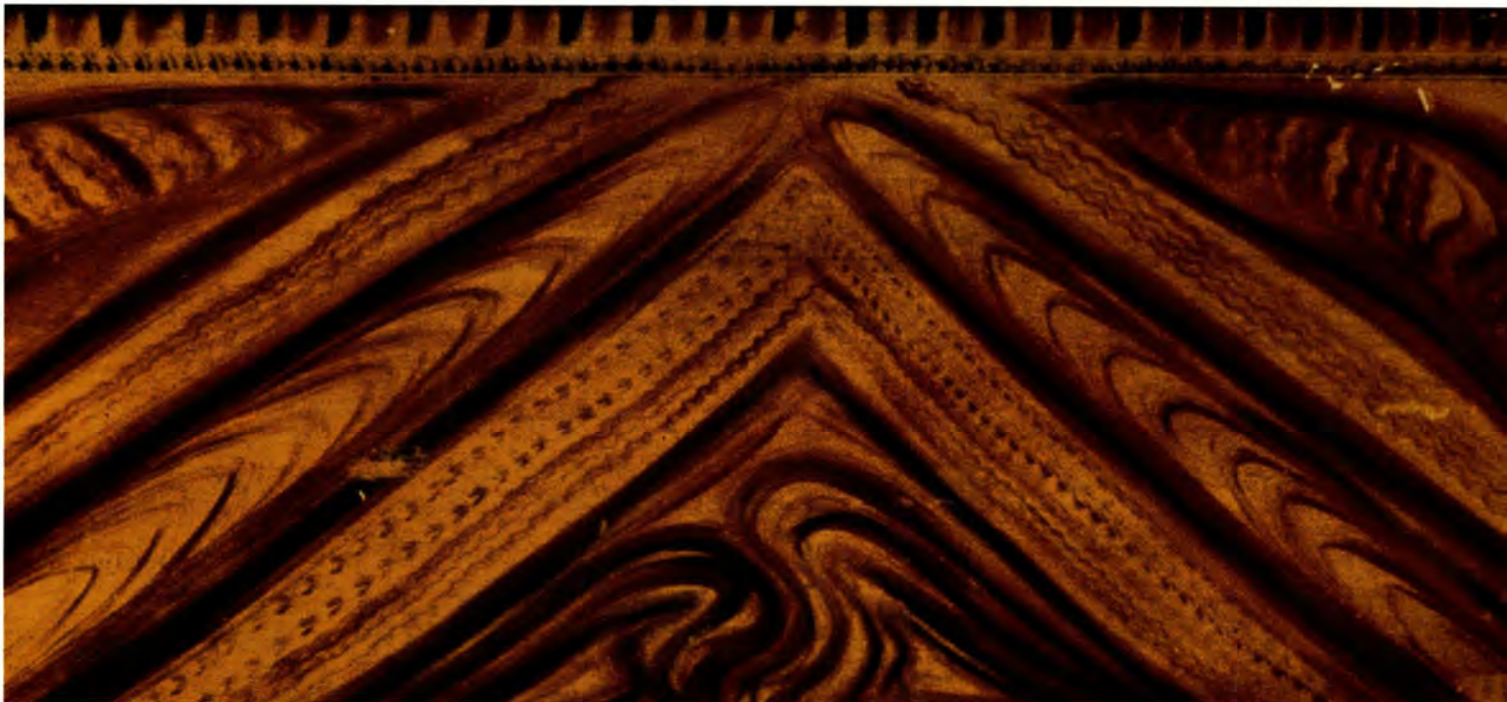
The arts of graining were revived after the Civil War with the production of ready-made paints. John W. Masury noted in *The American Grainer's Hand-Book* (1872) that "The disposition for grained work, which at one time declined materially, has of late years revived; and the fashion for this kind of painting is now more prevalent and general than ever before."⁹ In *The Practical Painter and Instructor* (1874), D.S. McDannell provided readers with a section called

"How to Charge for Graining." In this chart, the painter charged for each separate coat, per square yard. The seven stages of graining included priming, second priming, third priming, graining, and shading or glossing, at a per-coat cost of 12 1/2 cents per square yard and the two finishing coats of varnish at 15 cents each per square yard. Accordingly, the ornamental painter charged 92 1/2 cents per square yard for the complete seven stages of graining.¹⁰ This and other information imparted in these period journals provides invaluable information for understanding the art of graining. In the course of this research on nineteenth-century American painted



**SINGLE-DRAWER
BLANKET CHEST**
Probably Matteson
school
South Shaftsbury,
Vermont
c. 1824
Paint-decorated pine
36 × 40 × 18"
Private collection
Photograph courtesy of
Leigh Keno

This chest is not signed.





LIFT-TOP BLANKET CHEST
Maker unknown
Centre County, Pennsylvania
c. 1810
Grain-painted case
31 × 50½ × 22½"
Private collection
Photograph courtesy Olde
Hope Antiques, Inc.

furniture, sixty American finisher's journals have been identified, along with a better understanding of the tools and methods of nineteenth-century grain painting.

Paints, Tools, and Grain Painting

When examining nineteenth-century grain-painted furniture, one does well to remember that during this era paint

was made laboriously by hand using an assortment of ingredients, grinders, pots, and other equipment. It was not until the 1860s that factory-produced paint in ready-to-use cans was available in this country. One must also remember that graining required several layers of paint and varnish: priming coat and sequential layers of a ground color prepared daily from dry pigments, linseed oil, and natural resin varnishes. Some graining then received a glaze that was manipulated to produce the desired effect using a variety of tools and techniques adopted by each ornamental painter. Brush-graining requires a ground color, a second graining color, and often a third and fourth color for detailing. The final step in the graining process was the application of one or more finishing coats of varnish, which penetrated the colored layers beneath to heighten the

decorative effect and protect the graining materials from moisture, wear, dirt, and grime. The ornamental painter and his apprentices produced all of the paints, glazes, and varnishes for each of these layers.

Painters' manuals of the period describe a broad range of graining tools. Surviving nineteenth-century grainers' toolboxes confirm the use of a variety of brushes, combs and veining rollers, sponges, and feathers. Combs and veining rollers were dragged through glazes to selectively remove the outer layer of glaze and reveal the ground color, thus mimicking the veins of natural wood. Sets of metal graining combs were imported from England, as were wooden combs with both small and large teeth. Other combs were cut from leather, animal horn, or tortoise shell. For short-term use, combs of cork were used. One

manual suggested that some of the teeth of combs be broken out to better represent the variety of thickness of veins in natural woods.¹¹

Combs may have guided the surface decoration on the oak-grained *Sugar Chest* from Tennessee. In this masterfully grained chest, the ornamental painter imitated different cuttings of oak. For the surface of the front of the chest, a wide-tooth comb may have been drawn over the surface at a slant to produce the wavy veins emulating heartwood. The slanted parallel veins on the drawer front may have been produced using a stick or goose quill to simulate quartered oak, and the thin veins on the legs may have been drawn with a fine-tooth comb. The coloration of the ground coat and the veining color effectively mimic oak, and several manuals give recipes for both these colors: raw sienna, Van Dyke brown, and a drop of black and burnt umber for the graining color; a combination of white lead, yellow ochre, raw sienna, and burnt umber for the ground color.¹²

Graining could be accomplished not only by creating the undulating lines with combs but also by using natural sponges, washed leather, sticks, feathers, bristle, putty, chamois, and buckskin. These materials resulted in patterning that suggested rather than imitated wood graining. Period manuals refer to the imaginative graining produced using these items as vinegar painting, mottling, shelling, sponging, stippling, scumbling, feather painting, and finger painting. The well-preserved sample box that belonged to the New Hampshire ornamentor Moses Eaton and is in the collection of the Museum of American Folk Art contains ten sample panels, nine of which display finished graining techniques executed with different tools and natural materials.

Glaze Graining

Also in the collection of the Museum of American Folk Art is the two-drawer *Blanket Chest*, donated by Jean Lipman, that represents a school of decorative grain-painted furniture from Massachusetts. Several related blanket chests dating from 1825 to 1835 have recently come to light; these display construction similar to that of

the Museum's example and a highly creative decorative style that is at once imaginative and controlled. The carefully organized patterning is perhaps executed in a graining method referred to as "shelling" in McDannell's *The Practical Painter and Instructor*. This journal recommends using putty, which is rolled in the hands, then held stationary at one end and moved with the other hand in a stamping motion. Each press of the putty removes some of the glaze, "forming shells which are very beautiful."¹³ This method, also referred to as "seaweed," is today called vinegar graining because it is thought that the glaze contained vinegar and the putty contained oil so that as the glaze dried, the oil and vinegar separated, giving the finished shapes the appearance of seaweed.¹⁴ It is examples such as this that inspired Jean Lipman to write in 1974: "In the speed and freedom of their paint manipulation" nineteenth-century furniture decorators "were surprisingly akin to the abstract expressionists of the 1950s. Both groups of artists—a century apart in time—were 'action painters' in the literal sense of the term."¹⁵

Another example of the exuberant free use of a glaze is the *Ohio Blanket Chest* with its rhythmic, glistening imitative wood graining. These blanket chests reveal the importance of a well-produced glaze in the execution of imaginative graining. Darker glazes for graining over the ground color were made of carefully prepared pigments and varnishes. One period finisher's manual described the glaze as "not a fluid, but a compound of various ingredients mixed together, to the consistence of thick treacle" or what is called "meglip."¹⁶ Meglip, which appears in various spellings in period literature, is defined as "a vehicle made of oil of turpentine and pale drying oil in equal proportions."¹⁷ When mixed with oil colors, meglips took on a transparency and a buttery consistency, which made manipulation easy while still wet, resulting in the wonderful melding of ground and graining colors. Period manuals give different recipes for oil-based meglip mediums for graining, and as the century progressed, distemper or water-based colors were increasingly used. Ale,

beer, vinegar, or whiskey were recommended as the binder for distemper graining colors. Some painters felt that distemper graining had the advantage of being more easily corrected, but it dried more quickly than oil-based glazes, thus decreasing the amount of time that the surface was in a workable state.

Brush Graining

The use of a glaze for graining was referred to as "wet" graining. "Dry" graining was often accomplished with the use of brushes. The exuberantly painted *Single-Drawer Blanket Chest*, attributed to the Matteson school of grain-painted chests, may have been created using a series of brushes of different sizes. The graining in this chest captures the spirit of hardwood veneers, banding, and inlays in intense



reds, greens, and black on an ochre ground. Typical of the distinctive style of wood-graining found on a group of two-drawer chests and six-board blanket chests painted in the South Shaftsbury, Vermont, area, the surface decoration of this chest emulates the glistening figured veneers, spring banding, and checkered rope and quarter-fan inlays of its high style neo-classical counterparts.

A series of brushes were probably used to produce the simulated figured woods on these chests. In this case, rather than dragging an instrument through a liquid glaze, brushes were saturated in a color and drawn over the dried ground. Once dried, more colors and details were added until the total effect satisfied the painter. In his manual, *A Select Collection of Valuable and Curious Arts*, Rufus Porter described the brushes

OHIO BLANKET CHEST

Jacob Werrey
German Township
Fulton County, Ohio
1872

Painted and grained poplar
with stenciled decoration
28 x 48 x 23"

Collection of Gale Frederick
and Daniel Overmeyer

This chest is signed on the
bottom in blue paint,
"German Township, Fulton
co./February [sic] 11,
1880/Made by Jacob
Werrey."





needed to produce mahogany graining: a “short stiff brush” for the graining, “a small flat brush” for applying dark shades to the graining, and a “pencil” (a very thin brush) to imitate the shading of the wood.¹⁸ These were the brushes probably used on the Vermont chest.

Nathaniel Whittock gives instructions for using brushes in the imitation of mahogany:

Take a large tool [brush] and well filling it with colour, but not too wet, draw it over the panel you intend to grain firm so not in a straight line, but in a slanting and in some cases a wavy direction, letting the hand press heavily upon the brush so that the hairs may spread . . . giving the appearance of various grains . . . As soon as the colour is by this means spread over the panel, take a large dusting brush, lightly beat the work with the points of the hairs . . . against the grain; this must be done very quickly with a light hand, and at the same time using proper judgment to vary the beating.¹⁹

Throughout his much longer description of mahogany graining, Whittock touches on the artistry of the process as he writes of the movements of the hand, which should be quick, light, spirited, and practiced. The vigorous sweep of the lines in the application of wood graining, the extra care taken to finish each stroke, and the subtle understanding of the natural colors of wood combined to produce wood graining at its best.

Taking full advantage of the fluidity of paints and glazes sometimes resulted in patterning and free-flowing designs that have more to do with a love of pattern than an attempt to mimic the natural veins and lines of wood graining. The *Windsor Bow-back Settee* with rows of wavy black lines, separated by rows of yellow dots, on a red ground is more reminiscent of redware pottery with slip decoration than any wood grain. Another ingenious surface decoration enlivens the *Foxtail-Decorated Blanket Chest* from Tuscarawas or Wayne County, Ohio. It exhibits a unique foxtail or feather decoration on its front and sides. With flowing edges, a pair of foxtails in mirror image enliven the front of this six-board blanket chest,



Image Source, Inc.

FOXTAIL-DECORATED BLANKET CHEST
 Maker unknown
 Tuscarawas or Wayne County, Ohio
 1850–1860
 Sponge-painted and decorated poplar
 23 × 37 × 18½"
 Collection of Daniel Overmeyer

The top of the chest is sponged across the middle in a darker brown.

and single foxtails run diagonally across each side. This spontaneous, graceful motif on a light-wood sponged ground was executed by an unknown ornamentor between 1850 and 1860.

The *Lift-Top Blanket Chest* from Centre County, Pennsylvania, is grained in patterning that echoes figurative hand-painted blanket chests by Pennsylvania German fraktur and ornamental painters. Scribed geometric patterns painted in red and dark cobalt blue within three divided panels is characteristic of compasslike devices seen on manuscript frakturs and the stars that decorated Pennsyl-

vania German barns, butter molds, and tombstones. In this case there is no attempt to create graining in imitation of natural wood, rather the surface treatment creates an allusion by its diversity of pattern, resulting in a pleasing depth and texture within a familiar design context. It tricks the eye in another way.

Indeed, the surface treatments of numerous surviving nineteenth-century grain-painted blanket chests, tall-case clocks, worktables, bedsteads, and desks reveal both masterful skills and artistic sensitivities. ★

Cynthia Van Allen Schaffner is the author of Discovering American Folk Art (Harry N. Abrams, 1991), and, with Susan Klein, of American Painted Furniture, 1790–

1880 (Clarkson Potter, 1997), and Folk Hearts: A Celebration of the Heart Motif in American Folk Art (Knopf, 1984). Schaffner has written for The Magazine Antiques, House & Garden, House Beautiful, and Country Living. She was a trustee of the Museum of American Folk Art from 1983 to 1996.

Susan Klein has lectured on American folk art throughout the country and has written articles for The Magazine Antiques, Art & Auction, and Country Living. Klein served as a trustee of the Museum of American Folk Art from 1977 to 1997, and since 1990 has been a trustee of the Children's Hearing Institute.

NOTES

1 John W. Masury, *The American Grainer's Hand-Book* (New York: self-published, 1872), p. 11.

2 Ibid.

3 Robert D. Mussey Jr., ed., *The First American Furniture Finisher's Manual; a Reprint of "The Cabinet-Maker's Guide" of 1827* (New York: Dover Publications 1987), p. iv.

4 See Abraham Rees, *The Cyclopaedia or Universal Dictionary of Arts, Sciences and Literature* (Philadelphia: Samuel F. Bradford and Murray, Fairman & Co., c. 1810–1824).

5 Quoted in Avis B. Heatherington, "The Ornamental Painter: Neglected But Not Forgotten, 1639–1860," *The Decorator*,

Vol. XXXVI, No. 1 (Fall 1981), p. 13.

6 H[ezekiah] Reynolds, *Directions for House and Ship Painting* (New Haven, Conn.: Eli Hudson, 1812), p. 6.

7 Mussey, op. cit., p. 24.

8 Ibid., p. 25.

9 Masury, op. cit., p. 11.

10 D.S. McDannell, *The Practical Painter and Instructor* (Chicago: Lakeside Publishing & Printing Company, 1874), p. 189.

11 Nathaniel Whittock, *The Decorative Painters' and Glaziers' Guide* (London: Issac Taylor Hinton, 1827), p. 22.

12 William E. Wall, *Graining: Ancient and Modern*, 1905 (Dobbs Ferry, N.Y.: Sheridan House, reprint 1988), p. 54.

13 McDannell, op. cit., p. 71.

14 Edwin A. Churchill, *Simple Forms and Vivid Colors* (Portland, Maine: Maine State Museum, 1983), p. 26.

15 Jean Lipman and Alice Winchester, *The Flowering of American Folk Art* (New York: Viking Press in cooperation with The Whitney Museum of American Art, 1974), p. 232.

16 Whittock, op. cit., p. 22.

17 *The Century Dictionary*, 1890, as quoted in Patricia J. Keller, "Decorative Graining in Oil and Distemper: Instructions to the Trade," *The Decorator*, Vol. XLVI, No. 1 (Fall/Winter, 1991–1992), p. 14.

18 Rufus Porter, *A Select Collection of Valuable and Curious Arts* (Concord, N.H.: self-published, 1825), p. 31.

19 Whittock, op. cit., p. 28.

SUGAR CHEST

Maker unknown
Maury County, Tennessee
1820–1830
With paint, 1850–1860
Cherry and tulip poplar
37½ × 30½ × 29¼"
Collection of the Tennessee
State Museum, Nashville

The graining on this chest
resembles oak.

