

Bold and fanciful designs flourish in country craftsman's graining kit

# FANCIFUL GRAINING:

Tools of the Trade



MOSES EATON JR.



*Photos: Terry McGinness*



## Sandra Tarbox

Graining artists were split into two distinct groups: trained craftsmen whose clients were of the upper-class with sophisticated taste, and rural craftsmen who were self-taught and often developed their own designs and techniques. Skilled professional craftsmen continued to follow the rules of the established art form while country craftsmen and itinerant artists developed more fanciful and imaginative graining techniques. It is not always easy to distinguish between the two groups, however, as many craftsmen crossed the line if a customer was more or less critical and demanding of their work.

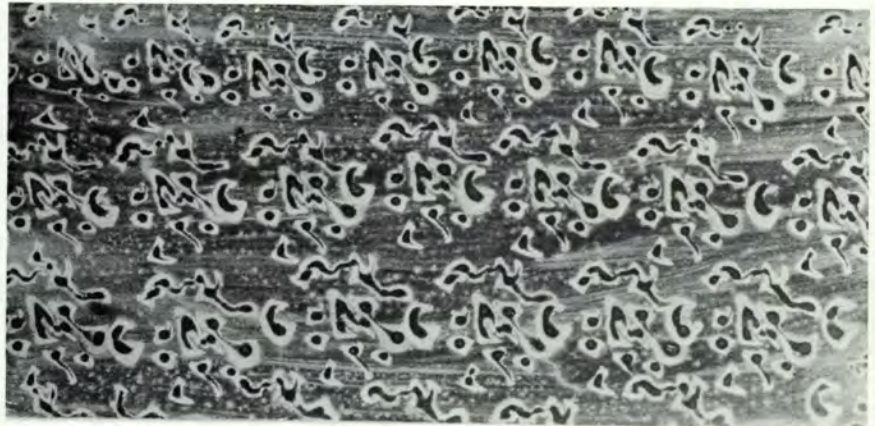
In the hands of the country craftsman, false graining found new freedom of expression. Graining was applied not only to walls and doors but to other wooden objects as well, including chairs, boxes, chests, bellows, mirror posts and frames. What began as an imitation of actual wood became

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*Found on the old Moses Eaton farmstead in Dublin, New Hampshire, this false graining kit sample box was made circa 1820 of painted pine and brass. The box measures 8 $\frac{3}{4}$  x 15 $\frac{1}{16}$  x 2 $\frac{5}{8}$ " deep; panels measure 6 $\frac{7}{8}$  x 14 $\frac{1}{16}$ ". It may have belonged to the prolific itinerant artist, Moses Eaton, who worked during that period. (Anonymous gift and gift of the Richard Coyle Lilly Foundation.) Museum of American Folk Art.*

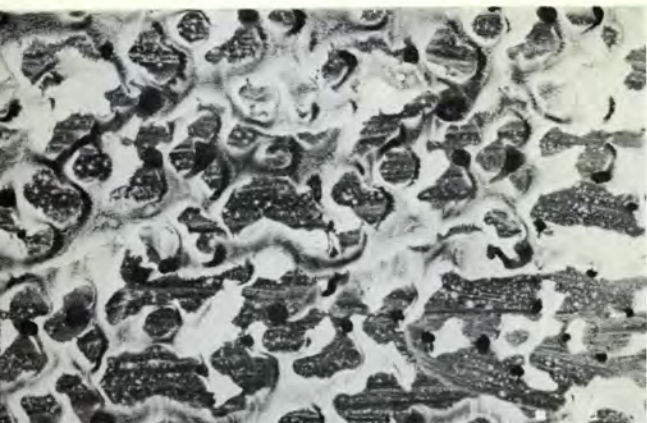


unconsciously abstract, acquiring an appeal all its own. Many designs flourished which were free and bold with strong colors.

Different objects were used to create the variety of patterns. Furniture makers often used graining brushes and combs made of steel or leather. These left a stiff and controlled design. Country craftsmen used simpler tools: feathers, sponges, corn-cobs, newspapers, potatoes, soft cloths, fingers and putty, and even burning candles which, when run under wet paint, left a smoky effect that was soft and quite pleasing to the eye. These objects produced some of the more unusual characteristics of this decorative art.

The technique of graining was not complicated. First each article was sealed and given a coat of paint, usually in a light color, and left to dry. The second coat—a combination of various paints, turpentines, vinegar or beer depending on the desired effects—imparted a darker glaze. While the glaze was still wet, the craftsman, using one or more tools, made his pattern as simple or ornate as he desired.

The Museum's newly-acquired graining kit falls into the realm of the fanciful. The box itself is grained on all sides on a yellow background using green, burnt umber and raw umber as the glaze coat. A solid red band encircles the middle and top



lid. Inside are ten panels. Each one was given a coat of yellow ocher—one being left as a sample of the base color. Five of the panels were patterned with the use of putty, the glaze color being red, a red-brown, green and two in raw umber. One of the raw umber panels has dots. These were made by touching the wet surface with a finger tip dipped in a bluish-green paint. A cork, a piece of wood or a potato fashioned into the shape of a stylized leaf gives a contemporary look to a second green panel. The three panels of burnt umber glaze are worked in putty or possibly the little finger and palm of the craftsman's hand. The shape of a fan and two abstract designs seem to flow in a unique

harmony all their own. The amusing and bright patterns found in the graining kit might have been effectively used on any country-style article.

Brought to America by European craftsmen prior to the revolution, false graining was a natural part of any itinerant artist's repertoire in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Many examples of early graining can still be found enhancing the walls, doors and furniture of older New England houses. Whether or not the sample box was used, we do not know, but the many cherished early examples of fanciful graining that are still found today throughout New England shows that it was an art greatly admired.