



Figure 1. Deming and Bulkley pier table before treatment.



Figure 2. Detail of face of frieze, after wax removal but before saturation.

FINISH CONSERVATION ON A DEMING AND BULKLEY, CIRCA 1825 NEW YORK CLASSICAL PIER TABLE: AN EVOLUTION

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the conservation treatment of a 1825 Deming and Bulkley attributed New York City pier table with a decorative gilded surface. The nature of the gilded decoration on tables of this genre includes stamped and freehand oil gilded patterns sandwiched between resin layers. Therefore, the successful conservation treatment of the gilded decoration can only be achieved while often cleaning and concurrently visually saturating the resin layers.

The paper will discuss the evolution in approach in treating comparable furniture with similar surfaces. The author draws upon her experience in treating six related tables over the course of the past twenty five years using various methodologies. More recently, others have reported success in the use of acrylic resins in solution for the re-saturation of finish coatings. This treatment employs low molecular weight aliphatic resin.

INTRODUCTION

A very fine New York City pier table from about 1825 attributed to the firm of Deming and Bulkley was brought to the conservator's studio in 2000 in order to preserve the finish coating and original decorative gilding. One of the distinctive characteristics of this piece and of pieces of furniture from this region and period is the elaborate decorative gilding work used to ornament the surface. These layers of oil size and gold leaf using freehand and stamped gilding techniques are embedded within the surface coating, essentially sandwiched between layers. It is therefore imperative to preserve the coating in order to preserve the gilding. The surface of the pier table had been made to appear presentable for the auction market when it was purchased privately. The decoration was largely intact on the face of the frieze and plinth but the transparent coating was considerably deteriorated. The front feet were damaged and the pilaster bases missing. In the past the author tackled the problem of a deteriorated finish encapsulating decorative gilding with several different solutions with varying degrees of success. Drawing from her own body of work the author refers to several other treatments which informed her decision making, which are similar to this one, that she performed on tables in the past. She then describes this treatment for comparison.

DESCRIPTION OF THE MAKER

This New York City firm was located at 56 Beekman Street and was established by two cousins, Brazilia Deming (1781-1854) and Erastus Bulkley (1798-1872). They expanded and opened a retail business on King Street in affluent Charleston, South Carolina, introducing their designs by holding a raffle of a suite of drawing room furniture. They successfully supplied furniture to the high end market from 1820 to the 1840s, after trade embargoes earlier in the century had curtailed importation of luxury goods from Europe and the taste for furniture from Philadelphia and Providence had declined. Their pieces incorporated elaborate carving, exotic imported hardwood veneers and skillfully executed decorative gilding, often using bold gilded freehand and border patterns. Their merchandise compared favorably with the best imported European furniture which had previously set the tone for furnishing urban interiors for so-

phisticated Charlestonians. After taste for their designs waned, in 1852 Bulkley went on to become partners with the German émigré Gustav Herter. Here, the quality of craftsmanship only continued to excel.¹

DESCRIPTION OF THE PIER TABLE AND ITS CONDITION

The table is typical of the form: the frieze, plinth and mirror frame are comprised of a softwood substrate with veneer, incorporating rosewood with mahogany banding. The joinery is dovetailed and mortise and tenoned. The molding beneath the top and the pilaster capitals and bases are made of mahogany and oil gilded. The top, columns and pilasters are made of white and gold veined black Portor marble with imported French fire-gilded brass capitals and bases mounted on the columns in front. The frieze has an elaborate freehand gilded decoration in the center flanked by raised veneer blocks at the outer edges featuring bird-headed lyre form decoration. A black and gold stenciled border continues around three sides of the bottom edge on a raised mahogany veneer band. Gilt striping outlines the pilasters on the back. The plinth base is decorated on its face with a bold repeating gilded anthemion motif with a gilt and black stripe above and below. The table rests on turned and carved melon acanthus form feet in front and turned feet in back, both gessoed, gilded and painted black. The front feet are attached to the plinth by three dowels. (fig. 1)

The client had purchased the pier table at auction. It was delivered to the conservator's studio in the following condition: where the mirror frame joins the frieze and plinth the carcass had been disassembled and reassembled using PVA glue, prohibiting dismantling. The marble columns had old repairs, misaligned at old breaks with extensive adhesive flow-out and the marble pilasters and their bases were missing. There were minor veneer losses to the rosewood on the plinth. The finish had severely degraded and was no longer saturated, seemingly detached from the wood. It had distinct light spots overall and appeared yellowed and crazed. (fig. 2) There was UV light damage and bleaching on the

table's proper right hand vertical sides of the frieze and plinth and extending in about four inches on the top surface on the plinth. The decoration was in very good condition in that there were few losses, mostly where severe light damage had taken place. Improperly reattached and oriented, the proper left front foot had severely degraded gesso in the front only which, when turned around and properly oriented, would result in being located in the back. The surface appeared to be covered with a great deal of brown dirt, which was particularly evident in the gesso losses. Upon examination and solvent testing this material turned out to be reddish brown wax, perhaps applied both to integrate the appearance of the gesso losses and to slightly saturate the appearance of the finish surface. It served to hide the true condition of the piece, perhaps even making it more salable in the auction market where this piece had been purchased.

CASE STUDIES 1979–1992

The author has treated other New York City pier tables and card tables in the past which are possibly even attributable to this maker and which resemble this table in form as well as in the techniques used in construction, surface finishes and decoration. Due to the degradation of the coating and the resultant loss of optimum optical properties they all had to have their finish surfaces treated. Drawing on the experience provided by these case histories from her own archives as well as on the advice in consultation with colleagues helped the author to decide on very different courses of treatment for all of these tables.

The following are six brief examples the author undertook which range in character from the radical intervention of a twenty six year old to the conservative restraint of someone fast approaching mid-century. In description they include complete removal of the finish coating and refabrication of the decoration, removal of the finish coating adjacent to the original decoration, mechanical removal of the finish coating on top of the decoration, cleaning and reforming the original coating and finally cleaning and re-saturating the original coating.



Figure 3. Roper House New York pier table, after treatment.

The first example dates from a treatment undertaken in 1979.² It is a New York City pier table from about 1825 attributed perhaps to Joseph Meeks's workshop. (fig. 3) The finish was severely degraded and at the time the author felt that a complete restoration was the only course of action. After documenting the decorative bronze powder

stencil pattern, both photographing and tracing it in order to copy it, the surface coating was removed from the frieze and the plinth and rebuilt using a shellac-type French polish, leaving only the decorative freehand gilding and border pattern on the frieze. The bronze powder stencil decoration was reapplied on this newly-polished surface and sealed with polish on a pad. The end result is a mahogany veneered surface from which the finish has been completely removed and newly-applied adjacent to the original freehand gilded lyres and border decorations. This technique results in an abrupt step in the surface thickness at the edge of the sections of original decoration that were saved.³

The next treatment took place in 1983, coincidentally the year the author first attended an AIC meeting and started cultivating greater awareness (and guilt) about restoration. This New York pier table from the same period illustrates the result of having had the finish removed around the elaborate freehand-gilded decoration and being French polished. (fig. 4) This approach saves the original decoration and reveals the figured veneer but loses the original coating. Like the



Figure 4. Roper House pier table, after treatment.



Figure 5. Edgewater New York pier table after treatment.

previous treatment, it, too, has a stepped appearance.⁴

Another approach involves a New York City pier table circa 1825 delivered to the conservator's studio in 1985 which had a darkened, degraded finish coating which had already been treated. It had been roughly cleaned off in some areas on the frieze and a coat of fresh shellac had been applied over it. The losses in the gilt decoration had been inpainted with bronze powder paint. The author removed the new shellac from the degraded finish from the freehand gilded decoration using thinned shellac, rolling it off with a saturated swab and mechanically removed the bronze powder paint. The author then removed the finish adjacent to the decoration with a commercially available paint remover. The losses were ingilded using oil size on a French-polished shellac surface and etched in the shading lines with a sharp tool. The author then toned the new gilding and French polished the surface overall. The end result is mixed. (fig. 5) The wood and decorative gilding are clearly visible but upon close examination one sees a stepped effect

where new finish transitions to original decoration which is embedded within thicker old finish.⁵

The next example is a treatment completed in 1987. This New York pier table closely relates to the two previous tables. Its decorative gilding work is related to the work found on both Meeks and Deming and Bulkley attributed tables but has an ebonized mahogany veneered surface. It, too, has a central bronze powder stenciled pattern with flanking freehand gilded lyres and stenciled border on the frieze. A gilt border pattern frames the mirror and striping frames the stone pilasters. The plinth has an inner locking ring pattern on its face. In this case the untreated finish was very dark and poorly adhered. (fig. 6) After no success with the results from solvent testing, the author gently sanded through the powdery, dark finish to the point where the decorative gilding appeared bright and then saturated the ebonized surface with ethanol. She lightly sanded the surface smooth and French polished with shellac as a final coat. When she saw the table several months later, disappointingly, the ebonized surface had slightly blanched.⁶



Figure 6. Ebonized New York pier table before treatment.



Figure 7. New York pier table, one of a pair, after treatment.



Figure 8. Deming and Bulkley card table before treatment.

The following illustration draws from a pair of New York pier tables the author treated for a private collector in 1991. Both of them have an indented arched frieze with a central floral ormolu mount and a delicate stenciled border pattern with an oil-gilded double reed molding below. The plinth shelf has an extraordinary freehand gilded decoration on the top which reflects in the mirror in back. They both had an extremely degraded finish but evidence of the original, clear, highly glossy varnish could be found under the mirror frame when the table was disassembled. In consultation with Christine Thomson the author cleaned the clear coating using an acetone gel cleared with mineral spirits. She then reformed the finish with a commercial product called Qualarenu, a mixture of ethanol, isobutyl isobutyrate, propylene glycol monoethyl ether, naphtha, methanol and toluol which according to the MSDS sheet may cause dizziness, loss of balance and coordination, unconsciousness, respiratory failure and even death. It seemed to saturate the finish, however. Application of this product left a somewhat swelled, irregular surface after it evaporated which was then lightly sanded and finally French polished with shellac. The end result is a reformed original finish which is saturated and through which the appearance of the decorative gilding and mahogany veneer is enhanced. (fig. 7)

The final comparative illustration is from a treatment the author undertook in 1992 on a Deming and Bulkley attributed card table in a private collection in the Miles Brewton House in Charleston, SC which boasts some of the most accomplished carving, choice of exotic woods and decorative gilding work ever to be incorporated in one piece. The top is veneered in rosewood and has a satinwood cross-banded perimeter within which is a freehand gilded grapevine pattern. There are gilded motifs on the center front and on the chamfered sides of the frieze. Spiral-turned support columns are in back with alternating oil gilded and verte antique twisted reeds. The front is supported by carved dolphins with oil gilded and verte antique surfaces. The lower plinth shelf has a central motif on the top and a laurel pattern on its face, both executed in freehand gilding. It rests on four carved dolphin feet again coated in gilt and verte antique. It retains its tooled velvet playing surface and chip pocket lining. Its entire surface coating was very dark when the author first examined it for treatment in 1992. (fig. 8) Most of the surface cleaned beautifully with acetone gel cleared with mineral spirits except for the top of the plinth. For this area, on the advice of Joe Godla the author used a xylene, water and Triton X-100 mixture cleared (theoretically) with xylene. The border pattern on top was cleaned by abrasion. To the top and



Figure 9. Detail of face of frieze, after resaturation.

the top of the plinth surface the author applied Qualarenu to reform the finish. She applied a dilute Soluvar gloss barrier coat overall and then lightly French polished the surface with shellac. As they were found to be too time consuming and cost prohibitive to clean, the carved elements were barrier coated or overpainted with reversible or chemically exclusive materials to visually recreate the original oil gilded and verte antique surfaces.⁷

TREATMENT

When approaching the Deming and Bulkley pier table treatment which took place from 2000 to 2001 the author, by chance, discussed this finish conservation problem with Arlen Heginbotham. He had successfully treated degraded surface coatings with Acryloid B72 in Cyclosol 53, a very slow evaporating, 100% aromatic solvent manufactured by Shell. Using the slow drying properties of the solvent it allows the resin to penetrate deep within the surface. The author became very optimistic about this new option. Arlen's WAG presentation in 2001 covering the optical properties of a varnish coating and methods of achieving a resaturated appearance with this method can be reviewed in the 2001 WAG Postprints.⁸

The first phase of the treatment was to clean the reddish brown wax from the surface using Shell-sol 340 ht and Stoddard's in succession; both have very low aromatic content. Three applications,

washed on with large cotton swabs until clear in color removed the visible wax but may have also driven some wax further within the very degraded and cracked finish. Tests with a 15% B-72 solution dissolved in Cyclosol 53 resulted in no change of appearance after evaporation. Instead, drawing upon the property of a low molecular weight synthetic resin, and one which the author felt would be more compatible with any wax residue left after cleaning, she tried a fully-saturated alicyclic hydrocarbon resin soluble in petroleum distillates: 15% Arkon P90 in Stoddard's solvent. It had been studied by René de la Rie and introduced to the author through the Getty paintings conservation lab and suggested and used by Joe Godla on several furniture treatments in the early 1990s.⁹ It successfully saturated the coating. (fig. 9) After securing loose veneer and repairing veneer losses the author brushed on approximately seven successive coats of the resin formula and wiped off any excess which did not penetrate, allowing each application to dry, sometimes over night, to observe the effect. The final coats were padded on. Afterward it felt dry to the touch. Aware of the fact that this resin has a fairly low glass transition point and remains soft and when exposed can even be pulled off with the application of wax, the author made two to three passes over the surface with a shellac pad to seal it. Studies by Hans Piena on Regalrez, a synthetic resin closely related to Arkon P90, published in *JAIC* in 2001, distinguishing between types of



Figure 10. Deming and Bulkley pier table after treatment.

Regalrez, cite this low glass transition problem and recommend Regalrez 1126 with its higher molecular weight and higher glass transition point for use on objects in the public sector.¹⁰

During the course of treatment the author realized that during a previous restoration the front feet had been rotated when reattached, with their back sides toward the front. The actual fronts had been protected and were in much better condition than the rear. Carving losses were built up on the two front feet with Araldite carvable epoxy and were completed incorporating traditional gesso fills and water gilding on the feet. Pilaster bases were replaced and were fabricated out of mahogany using a pattern from another pier table whose molding profile conformed to the shadow left by the originals. They are oil gilded and patinated. The marble columns were cleaned of excess glue and the stone surface waxed and buffed. (fig. 10)

CONCLUSIONS

In retrospect and upon reflection the author can say that she might have done things differently. This succession of treatments parallels her awareness of the potential and pitfalls of saving an original finish on furniture of this type. A coating on classical furniture should function and appear as it was originally intended and should be transparent in order to enhance an exotic wood or reveal gilt decoration. With these synthetic resins as tools at our disposal we can utilize their properties and come closer to achieving this goal as required by the dictates of the piece or client. These approaches to treatment even at their best still bring to mind the philosophical discourse regarding reversibility in light of the debate between reforming and saturation of a finish coating. As long as our field continues, the choices of the conservator will always remain open to question.

Melissa Carr and the author are currently collaborating on a project and Melissa has been achieving some remarkable results using solvents to reform severely degraded coatings. Let us all hope that her presentation is forthcoming and that the dialog will continue.

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NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. See McInnis, Maurie D. and Leath, Robert A. "Beautiful Specimens, Elegant Patterns: New York Furniture for the Charleston Market, 1810–1840" in *American Furniture*, edited by Luke Beckerdite, Hanover, NH: University Press of New England for the Chipstone Foundation, 1996, pp. 137-174, for a description of the firm, its furniture products and the market and taste in Charleston that supported it.

2. This table is in the collection of Richard H. Jenrette and is located in the William Roper House in Charleston, SC.

3. See Moyer, Cynthia "Conservation Treatments for Border and Freehand Gilding and Bronze-Powder Stenciling and Freehand Bronze" in *Gilded Wood: Conservation and History*, edited by Deborah Bigelow, Madison, CT: Soundview Press. 1991, pp. 335-336 for a complete description of the technique used to reproduce the stencil pattern.

4. This table is in the collection of Richard H. Jenrette and is located in the William Roper House in Charleston, SC.

5. Ibid., pp. 337-338 for a complete description of the technique used to clean and polish the surface and ingild the freehand gilded pattern. This table is in the collection of Richard H. Jenrette and is located in Edgewater in Barrytown, NY.

6. Ibid., pp. 336-337 for a complete description of the surface treatment. This table was owned by

a New York City antiques dealer, Anthony Ingrao, Inc. and later purchased by Carswell Rush Berlin, Inc.

7. This table, which descended in the Alston Pringle family, is illustrated in the McInnis/Leath article cited above, fig. 1, p.137 and fig. 22, p.160. My husband, Joe Godla, has since discouraged me from using Qualarenu which is more in keeping with my low toxicity/low tech approach to conservation I have tried to develop.

8. See Heginbotham, Arlen "What's Old is New: B-72 and the Treatment of Degraded Furniture Finishes." in *2001 Wooden Artifacts Group Postprints* of the American Institute for Conservation, pp. 41-56.

9. See Rie, E. René de la and McGlinchey, Christopher W. 1990 "New Synthetic Resins for Picture Varnishes" in *Cleaning, Retouching and and Coatings*, ed. J.S. Mills and P. Smith. London: International Institute for Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works, pp. 168-173.

10. See Piena, Hans 2001 "Regalrez in Furniture Conservation" in *Journal of the American Institute for Conservation* 40: pp. 59-68.