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Art Review | 'Surface Attraction'

Flights of Painterly Fancy From a Desire to Upgrade

By [ROBERTA SMITH](#)

In the late 1950's, the art critic Clement Greenberg coined the term "homeless representation" to dismiss the recognizable images in the largely abstract work of Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns. You wonder what he would have called the various painted motifs and patterns that flutter across the tables, chairs, cabinets and blanket chests in "Surface Attraction" at the American Folk Art Museum. Nomadic abstraction? Philandering formalism? This delectable convention-stretching exhibition of more than 30 pieces of painted furniture from the museum's collection reminds us that painting can be very footloose.

Greenberg wanted things nailed and narrowed down: his gospel of Modernist determinism had all art mediums being reduced to their physical essences, which for painting meant paint on canvas - no images, no spatial illusion, period. But even if essences were possible, the idea that paintings would be mere paint on canvas seems laughably blinkered. People have been adding marks and images to too many different things - walls, textiles and ceramics, as well as furniture - for far too long for such a limited notion to fly.

The Folk Art Museum show suggests that in the American colonies, starting in the late 1600's and well into the 19th century, quite a bit of painting talent and ambition found an outlet in the decoration of everyday wood objects. It was a cheap and easy way to satisfy the human need for civilized beauty in a place where the wilderness was overwhelming and anything man-made was usually highly prized and heavily used. Adding the artistic to the functional was one way to make the most of things.

Contrary to many assumptions, including my own, furniture painting was not usually a self-taught art but a widespread, often itinerant profession, like painting portraits or murals. It was also considered a suitable pastime for young women who might learn its rudiments as they would embroidery; a case in point is a maple center table whose round top is wreathed in drawn and sometimes painted flowers that Sarah D. Kellogg, of Amherst, Mass., never got around to finishing.

The show, organized by Stacy C. Hollander, the museum's senior curator, includes not only tools, recipes and books but also a compact sample box that once belonged to Moses Eaton Jr., of Dublin, N.H. Its exterior and the nine painted panels it contains form a portable tour de force of theme and variation; they enumerate a range of patterns - incipiently floral, tortoise or woodlike - executed with sponges, combs or brushes on an identical ocher ground (as indicated by an unpatterned 10th panel).

Decoration often began as a desire for disguise, painting being an inexpensive way to upgrade coarser grains, like pine, to more princely ones, like mahogany or cherry. But the desire for improvement often outstripped the skill of imitation, or was overcome by flights of painterly fancy, with unpredictably wonderful results.

On the top of a Federal sideboard table from early-19th-century New England, rows of umber and turquoise boomerang brushstrokes suggest abstract aircraft flying in formation. Meanwhile, in the effort to mimic mahogany, a drop-leaf table from Maine (1830-40) is painted red-brown and then loosely striped, thick and thin, in black. This was a standard combination, but here it yields a pattern that is less lustrous wood than brash woolen suit (you could imagine it on a Red Grooms gangster).

Nearby, on the front of a low blanket chest, the painter expands outward from what appears to be a black knot with such light sweeping brushstrokes that the final effect is of a large grisaille peacock feather rather than of wood grain. And next to the pinstriped table, on a blanket chest atop a chest of drawers, another painter has vaguely alluded to wood grain with a series of widespread quavering, curving lines that radiate between clusters of smoky spheres. The whole thing has a cataclysmic wobble that resembles Arthur Dove's visionary abstractions and, more surprisingly, Michelangelo's "Creation of Adam."

In this sphere, professionalism did not necessarily rule out amateurishness. A rather clumsy attempt to evoke tortoiseshell or lacquerware on a mid-18th-century secretary bookcase resulted in a gorgeously murky surface of free-floating dots and spots in fading red, yellow and black on a dark brown surface. A yellow grandfather clock from Ohio is covered with spare, three-point dapplings; they might have begun as a feint at a burl or bird's-eye maple pattern, but at some point they evolved into leopard spots or, as the design came to be called, the cat-paw print.

Because a large central staircase pointlessly devours a great deal of gallery area, the strongest part of the show is relegated to a relatively narrow space, but this creates an unusually intense face-off between abstraction and representation. Several chairs and one table, along one wall, have homey landscapes painted across backrests and back edges or more sophisticated stencils of neo-Classical motifs that were taken up as factories began to produce inexpensive furniture. Image - a view of Ithaca Falls - and stencil come together in a lively disharmony in an armchair from Ithaca, N.Y.

Abstraction prevails along the opposite wall in three chest-over-drawers and one low blanket chest, all hung, like much of the show, at painting height. Their patterns are marvels of ingenuity. Translucent fan shapes in green and red on yellow cover one chest with forms that suggest seaweed, feathery shells or richly patterned endpapers; they were achieved by rolling a short length of putty, held down at one end, over the wet paint.

Nearby, a grisaille pattern reveals the benefits of unfettered putty-rolling: a series of rippling swaths suggest luscious mud or iron filings being pulled across a magnetic field and threaten to burst the traditional striping that reiterates the outer edges of the chest. The third chest is patterned with a similarly translucent gray paint in parallel batches and pinwheels of lines so closely spaced that they suggest a kind of basketry.

And the front of a cream-colored blanket chest is decorated with a series of arcs that seem to be made of overlapping puffs of smoke, which they are. They were achieved by holding a lighted candle near the wet surface. Where there is a need, there is usually a way.

"Surface Attraction: Painted Furniture From the Collection" remains through March 26 at the American Folk Art Museum, 45 West 53rd Street, Manhattan; (212) 265-1040.