The Hunt for Patriotic Banding

Three cheers for the red, white, and blue—in intarsia and bandings.

Since 1977, I’ve specialized in repairing and conserving antique and period furniture. Part of my conservation work involves restoring veneers, inlays, and bandings. I started collecting samples of early veneering work in the mid-1980s, and documented every example I could. I carefully made notes and sketches of each of the various pictorial inlays and bandings that passed through my shop. During this time, I noticed a lot of color in inlay work, including greens, oranges, creams, browns, and blacks. Greens seemed to be a normal part of period pictorials inlays, but I did not see them used in period bandings until a recent discovery. Also, I knew that I rarely saw reds and blues except in centennial bandings from the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

When green is blue

The first blue veneer I uncovered was on a partial paterae (a fan-shaped inlay decoration) from the front leg of a 1820s English sideboard as shown at right. The front of the inlay was faded green and cream, and darkened with hot-sand shading. When I removed the inlay and turned it over, the back of it revealed a robin blue that was dyed through.

I found a second blue on a Chippendale-period looking glass, circa 1800, that was in pieces and had many missing parts. Inlaid in the center bottom was a flower-shape paterae that featured faded green, cream, and hot-sand shading.
When I removed the inlay, paper was still glued to the back. When I used some warm water to remove the paper, a spotty blue color came through (photos below left).

I found the third item at an estate sale, a small door that perhaps had belonged to a clock or small cabinet. Inlaid in the center was another pictorial flower-shape paterae that featured faded green, cream, and hot-sand shading. I removed the inlay and flipped it over. I removed the rest of the hide glue with warm water and a sponge. This blue veneer was an entirely different shade, and the dye appeared to be hand-applied (photos below right).

All this led me to a new question about the antique veneer colors: Had the faded green on some other antiques originally been blue, too?

The research I’ve done has revealed that the dyes of the era were not colorfast, so sunlight and time took its toll on colors. Was faded green really blue? I’ve put years of thought into this mystery and have begun discussing it with colleagues. They are always just as intrigued as I am, but the question has never been fully answered.

I made another discovery while on a visit to the Concord Museum with Freddy Roman, a friend and fellow restorer. The museum was preparing for a new show, part of the “Four Centuries of Massachusetts Furniture” exhibit in Concord. During our visit, curator David Wood invited us to examine a Daniel Munroe timepiece (circa 1800–1801), at the museum. To help educate people about this wonderful early American clockmaker, David asked Freddy to construct a casework model, and I was asked to make a large-scale model of the clock case’s banding. Upon close examination with a magnifying glass, I saw faded orange, cream and green (photo opposite), which indicated to me that the banding colors may have originally been red, white, and blue. Wow, I couldn’t believe that, as I said it out loud to David and Freddy. We took a lot of pictures, measurements, and notes.

New interest in dyed paterae
This latest discovery at the museum rekindled my interest into the whole subject of dyed paterae and bandings. It brought back to my mind a dressing stand that I considered buying several years earlier in 2007. The piece, made in Fort Independence (Castle Island, Boston), was signed by its makers.

At the time, I passed on buying the piece because too many of its parts did not seem original, or were not from matching periods. The mirror supports had been replaced, as well as

Looking-glass paterae

Door paterae
the frame and glass, and someone had made poor attempts at repairing the missing and chipped bandings. With permission, I took pictures and detailed measurements for my banding research and filed them away.

Later on, when reviewing my pictures and notes, I realized this banding could have been red, white, and blue—just like Munroe’s banding. There wasn’t just one sample inlaid on this piece, there were as many as three or more! I also had a strong suspicion that this banding had been made in Boston. Luckily the original seller still owned the piece, so with a different interest now, I purchased it.

**Boston’s role**

Many early American cabinetmakers kept good account books, so their trips to Boston to purchase supplies are well documented. I’ve also worked on many documented pieces of furniture and clocks that were known to have been made in and around Boston. Also, it makes sense that as both a major commerce and early political center, Boston would have had inlay makers constructing red, white, and blue paterae and bandings in celebration of our new republic and the arrival of the 19th century.

With more focused questions now and my interest building, I am taking new steps to research what I have begun calling “patriotic banding.” Since so many compelling examples of red, white, and blue bandings and inlays have reinforced this idea, I have given myself a new commission to set out and finally answer the questions I’ve thought about for years: Was red, white, and blue banding only made in Boston? Or, was it made in other cities too?

I want to prove that these were in fact intended as symbols to celebrate the founding of a new American nation. With more research and time—and help from friends who have joined me along the way—I believe all these questions will be answered.