

Eighteenth-Century Powder Horns and the Conservation of Historic Americana

by Julia Silverman

Each academic year, a second-year student at the Williams College/Clark Art Institute Graduate Program in the History of Art is awarded the Judith M. Lenett Memorial Fellowship in Art Conservation by the Williamstown Art Conservation Center. The two-semester fellowship provides the student with the opportunity to research and conserve an American art object. This year's Lenett Fellow, Julia Silverman, worked on a trio of eighteenth-century powder horns from the collection of Historic Deerfield in Deerfield, Massachusetts. She was supervised by WACC chief objects conservator H el ene Gillette-Woodard. The project culminated in a public lecture at the Clark, from which the article below is adapted.

In the Federal Militia Act of 1792, the United States Congress outlined the weapons and supplies every able-bodied man should carry to defend his country. These included a “good musket or firelock, a sufficient bayonette or belt, two spare flints and a knapsack.” Most were also expected to carry a cartridge box, only recently affordable in America, loaded with twenty-four paper cartridges that allowed for the rapid and convenient loading of firearms. For anyone slightly behind the times who did not possess a cartridge box, the Act allowed them to accompany their “good rifle” with a “powder-horn, twenty balls suited to the bore of his rifle, and a quarter pound of powder.”

By the end of the eighteenth century, powder horns—ox and steer horns treated to hold gunpowder—were quickly being replaced by the new technology of pre-loaded cartridges. Fifty years earlier, during the French and Indian War (1756-1763), the horns had been ubiquitous. In pre-revolutionary America, settlers carried flintlock muskets and rifles for hunting and fighting, and horns—cheap, durable, and naturally ergonomic—made excellent vessels for protecting and transporting gunpowder. Since horn has a relatively soft outer layer, making it easily engraved and decorated, their owners often customized their powder horns by engraving them with

names and images. Not everyone decorated his horn himself, and there rose in the colonies a small industry of professional designers-engravers, each with his own distinctive style.

Three examples of French and Indian War-era horns came to the Williamstown Art Conservation Center from Historic Deerfield and formed the basis of my academic year as Lenett Fellow. Each horn was engraved with the name and rank of its owner, along with figural designs and calligraphic elements. More pertinently, each horn came with damage of varying types and degrees, including flaking, cracking, and pest damage, which I was tasked to treat.

The first horn bore the name Josiah Walker and was decorated with a floral border and small, winged cherubs arranged around ranks of opposing soldiers about to engage in battle. A large British coat of arms completed the design. Walker was from Stratford, Connecticut and served in the French and Indian War in 1758 and 1759. (He also fought in the American Revolution, but one presumes that by then he had retired the horn emblazoned with an icon of British loyalty.) This horn had only minor damage, a large flake missing on the throat and a bit of corrosion on a small metal loop used to attach the horn's shoulder strap, which my Lenett supervisor H el ene Gillette-Woodard, WACC head objects conservator,

and I thought would make a fine introduction to conservation work.

The second horn belonged to a Lieutenant Levi Whitney and was by far the most eccentric of the

Detail of the Levi Whitney horn, before treatment and after repair with paper fills.



three powder horns. It was likely decorated by an amateur artist, who included such images as a “Brazon Serpent”—likely a reference to the healing bronze serpent of Moses—an octopus-like “Divel”—perhaps a misspelling of devil—and various fish, plants, and little suns. This horn showed significant worm damage, which resulted in large holes and losses along its mouth.

The third horn was the property of Aaron Page. Its immaculate copperplate calligraphy and deep amber color (likely from immersion in yellow dye) indicated that the engraving and

decoration were the work of a professional artist. Etched on one side was a tableau of opposing troops adapted from eighteenth-century military manuals, accompanied by a rhyme common to the period: “I powder with my brother ball / a herow like do conquer all.” The horn was also inscribed with a date and location: “Lake Gorg July the 8 ano 1758.” This horn had the most significant structural damage of the three: its entire throat was shattered and the shards were stiff and immobile.

Although the practice of treating and decorating powder horns varied by maker in the eighteenth century, the construction of all three Deerfield horns reflected techniques typical of French and Indian War-era makers. A horn was



The Historic Deerfield powder horns, after treatment. From top, identified by original owner, the Josiah Walker, the Aaron Page, and the Levi Whitney.

collected, sawed to the desired size, and boiled in water with potash to hollow the inside. A wooden plug was then fitted into the mouth of the horn while still wet, allowing a seal to form as the horn shrank during the drying process. The plug was secured with wooden or metal pegs (our examples contained both) and treated with hemp, tallow, or wax for waterproofing. Once treated, the horn was polished with pumice and coated with plant oil before engraving. All three of the horns displayed the signs of this process: examination under ultraviolet

light revealed a greenish-yellow autofluorescence indicating the plant oil treatment. The Josiah Walker horn fluoresced a much paler green than the others, which likely indicated a previous restoration in which the original coating was removed and replaced. X-rays revealed holes and cracks in the horns that were invisible to the naked eye.

While each horn unquestionably commemorates events in American history, their place in the history of collecting American antiquities is also worth pausing over. Understanding the criteria by which these horns were valued had important implications for their conservation treatment. All three of the horns had been donated to Deerfield as part of a gift of

seventy-five horns from William H. Guthman (1924-2005), a prolific dealer and collector of historic Americana. An expert in military paraphernalia, including historic guns, uniforms, and drums, Guthman had begun collecting Americana as a hobby in the 1950s. By 1966, he'd become a full-time antiques dealer, ultimately growing his company to one of the largest dealers of military Americana in the country.

Guthman had a particular fondness for powder horns and focused much of his scholarly work upon them. Deeply critical

but merely second in quality or interest among American military horns for the sole reason that the fad of the moment has raised the map horn to first place." By this definition, a culch horn was, "really a second-grade horn from the standpoint of art."

This was precisely the viewpoint against which Guthman reacted. Some of his criticisms were pragmatic from the standpoint of a collector: the emphasis on an inscription, for example, made high-value horns easy to forge, especially when a forger carved directly onto an antique horn.

Thus, Guthman encouraged collectors to pay close attention to the stylistic attributes of the horn's carving, rather than simply its content. Looking to diaries, letters, and calligraphy books contemporary with powder horns, Guthman urged close comparisons between flourishes and script types to confirm a horn's authenticity. More importantly, Guthman's focus on these stylistic attributes marked the first attempt to study powder horns not just as historical artifacts, but as a type of "a folk art indigenous to the colonists of North America."

From the perspective of today's art-historical scholarship, Guthman's project warrants some skepticism. In many ways, it relied on what now seem to be antiquated practices of connoisseurship. In the catalog for an exhibition he organized with the Connecticut Historical Society, Guthman stated explicitly that his aim was to "establish critical standards of quality and appreciation"

for powder horns. Guthman was not an art historian, but rather a collector and appraiser, and while his focus on style did effectively reframe a conversation about horns as art, it also shifted the way they were collected in a way that increased the value of his personal collection. Like the rival collectors he criticized, Guthman collected powder horns with the names of well-known people—another Guthman horn in the Deerfield collection bears the name Israel Putnam, the general who reportedly issued the famous directive, "Don't fire until you can see the whites of their eyes." Guthman's emphasis on style allowed him to depart from the established criteria of value—the inscription—and mold a new standard based on his personal



Lenett Fellow Julia Silverman at work on the Aaron Page horn.

of the tendency among collectors to value horns based on the content of their textual inscriptions (taking such inscriptions unproblematically as evidence of the horns' owner or place of origin), Guthman used his scholarly work to redefine the criteria by which powder horns could be evaluated. A 1929 article from *The Magazine Antiques* illustrates the relatively narrow criteria by which horns had been judged by collectors prior to Guthman; in it, the author asserts that there are two types of powder horns: "map horns," which contained images of maps, then the most highly prized category of powder horn, and "culch horns," that is, everything else. The author explained, "Culch, in this application, doesn't mean rubbish,

interest: the quality of the inscribed pictures. He created new connoisseurial standards that later became the norm.

Guthman divided American powder horns into three distinct periods. The first, from the time of King George's War (1744-1748), he said, reflected designs from European decorative arts. The second, produced from 1754, were associated with the French and Indian War and hailed as the first "fully American" type. These culled inspiration from a diverse set of sources, including popular newspapers, calligraphy books, and copperplate type. The third period comprised horns from the Revolutionary War era, which contained their own distinct iconographic forms.

Within the French and Indian War period, Guthman further classified the horns into distinct schools. The three horns I treated are specimens of the "Lake George Style" due to their inscriptions, copperplate lettering, and ornamental borders and images of soldiers, plants, animals, mermaids, etc. Guthman also attempted to parse the styles of individual creators. He pounced on those few horns signed by their makers, mobilizing these creators as valuable brands. One was John Bush, the son of a free black farmer in Shrewsbury who, despite having only signed a single horn, was credited as the founder of the "Lake George School." When Guthman didn't have creators' names, he identified anonymous masters. The Aaron Page horn, for example, is attributed to the "Selkrig-Page carver," who carved another horn in Deerfield's collection bearing the name Nathaniel Selkrig. Guthman linked the two horns by their composition and other stylistic attributes.

Identifying horns by their makers, emulating the centuries-long practice of linking artworks to the hand of exceptional individuals, was one way in which Guthman attempted to raise them to the status of "art." More particularly, however, by focusing on the stylistic components of the imagery and deemphasizing the importance of the physical horn itself, including its patina, Guthman performed an intellectual detachment of design from material, the aesthetic from the historical. It was an art historical move with serious implications.

The intellectual separation of decoration and ground, of the executed design and the gritty, patina-ed surface of the horn, has roots in an older art-historical distinction between "historical value" and "artistic value" made by Austrian scholar Alois Riegl in his 1903 essay "The Modern Cult of Monuments." While we don't know if Guthman encountered

Riegl's text directly, its ideas became ingrained in practices of connoisseurship during much of the twentieth century. One can think of Guthman's project as an attempt to invert historical and artistic value. While older collectors had esteemed powder horns for their historical value—the way they marked an important person or event in the formation of the American nation—Guthman redefined them as aesthetic objects of contemplation.

Yet Guthman implicitly argued that powder horns had what Riegl called an "art historical" value too. This, I think, was the crux of his project. In mapping different schools of decoration and tracing the development from a "European style" through a "mature American style," Guthman focused collectors' eyes on decoration rather than documentation. Instead of valuing only horns that could be linked

to an important event in American history, Guthman's "art historical value" made space for every horn in his collection to be a specimen in the development of a distinct, authentic, American folk style. By emphasizing a shared visual heritage, Guthman democratized "value." He carved out space in the marketplace for specimens that would previously have been deemed second-rate. He became the first person to engage with a significant category of American material culture, and while most decorative arts scholarship of his time attempted to link objects with aristocratic owners, Guthman's "artistic genius," John Bush, was an otherwise anonymous black farmer.

The move to esteem powder horns for their artistic genius
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X-ray images of the Whitney and Walker horns.