



WHAT'S MY NAME?

Poonah, Indian, and Persian painting all refer to forms of theorem painting. Other names: formula painting, India tint work, Oriental tinting, and mezzo-tinting. Strictly speaking, "theorem" applies to the stencils and the method in which they were used, not to the resulting work. Velvet painting is also used, but not all paintings on velvet were done with theorems; some were painted free-hand.

FOREVER FAIR

Theorem paintings require the same care as other art works in the same medium: proper framing, protective glass, low light levels, pest prevention, and professional restoration, should restoration be needed. Many antique theorem paintings on velvet and other textiles were mounted on wood stretchers, like those used for paintings on canvas. Since wood is acidic, folk art expert Peggy McClard advises sliding a protective piece of archival acetate between the fabric and the stretcher.

WHODUNNIT?

Few antique theorems were signed or can be definitely attributed to a specific academy or instructor, so it's not known when and where they were made. Most, though, were likely produced in New England and the Mid-Atlantic states. Theorems were also done in England, but Peggy McClard believes that they were fewer in number and usually of simple flower subjects done on paper rather than velvet.

SOURCES & RESOURCES

One worthwhile read on the topic is The Art of Theorem Painting, a 2002 book by Lefko & Knickerbocker. It offers history, step-by-step instructions, profuse illustrations, and patterns for theorem painters and collectors.

The Internet, of course, has a healthy number of sources for collectors. A sampling:

- **AntiquesJournal.com:** Search this site's archives for a well-illustrated article titled "Theorems: When Decorative Art Becomes Enduring Folk Art."
- **hsead.org:** The Historical Society of Early American Decoration offers extensive online information about contemporary theorem paintings replicating traditional styles.
- **Meg-Andrews.com:** This site is run by an English dealer in textiles; search "theorems" for examples and a short essay.
- **OldeHope.com:** Here you'll find dealers specializing in American folk art, with numerous pieces for sale.
- **PeggyMcClard.com:** This site offers an informative essay on theorem paintings as well as fine examples for sale. —J.V.

PICTURE PERFECT

Women have always beautified their homes with their own handiwork. Starting around 1800, a new do-it-yourself craft called theorem painting brightened the scene.

By Jane Viator

In the early 19th century, America was prospering. The growing numbers of middle-class girls and women had time and money for self-improvement and formal education. A popular pastime and an elegant accomplishment for them: needlework scenes, which at the time began to include painted backgrounds, skies, and details.

Embroidered pictures, however, were time-consuming and expensive to make. The theorem technique of painting allowed even unskilled folks to quickly create professional-looking pictures to decorate their own homes or to give as gifts. Velvet painting, as it was first called, became a fashion and even a fad. As Antiques Roadshow appraiser J. Michael Flanigan comments, the original paint-by-the-numbers artwork was born.



This fine example of a theorem painting—a watercolor on paper—dates to c. 1840.

SOMETHING DIFFERENT

Linda Lefko, a leading contemporary theorem painter, author, and teacher, emphasizes that what distinguishes theorem paintings is the process used in creating them. The word "theorem," meaning formula or pattern, refers to the stencil itself. When theorems—always more than one, and as many as five or six separate stencils—are used to create a picture, the result is properly called a theorem painting.

In other types of stenciling, one color is used per stencil and usually there are spaces of plain background between the different colors in the finished work. For theorem painting, one stencil has elements of different parts of the subject—for example, a few petals of a single flower—rather than the whole shape, and several colors may



Dating to c. 1830, this watercolor theorem on velvet is signed "Polly Giles."

Jane Viator is a writer and decorative arts consultant based in Walnut Creek, Calif. Last month, she wrote about a day in the life of an Antiques Roadshow event.



Photos courtesy of Peggy McClard Americana & Folk Art



Appraiser Mitch Keno told an *Antiques Roadshow* guest in Mobile, Ala., in 2006 that the theorem painting pictured here is worth around \$24,000. Contributing greatly to the high value: the signature and date ("Painted by Miss Sally Hancock, Wrentham, Massachusetts, June 18 1826").

be used employing a single stencil.

Most important, the different elements in theorem stencils meet precisely. This process creates a finished painting that has hard edges to each shape but with careful shading can produce a realistic finished effect.

### KNOW-HOW

The earliest published instruction on theorem painting was printed in England in 1804. The craft quickly crossed the ocean and was taught in young ladies' finishing schools. For girls and women who were not students in an

academy, theorem painting was offered in short courses—what we would today call workshops, some of them taught by itinerants.

Instructors taught theorem painting as a craft or hobby anyone could learn.

- **Copying was encouraged.** Sources included prints, lithographs, and patterns provided by the teacher or printed in a book.

- **The goal was realism.** Stencils (the theorems) allowed the not-very-talented to turn out acceptable work on the first try.

- **The emphasis was on mastering methods, tools, and materials, not on origi-**

**nality.** Consequently, there are many versions of theorem paintings from the same pattern, with variations in color and skill of execution.

The most common subject matter was a still-life of fruit or a flower arrangement, sometimes with birds or butterflies. These were usually taken from professionally done prints or drawings.

Landscapes, biblical scenes, and mourning pictures were more ambitious subjects. These often incorporated much more freehand painting, and today are especially desirable to collectors for their liveliness and individuality.

## INSIDE INFO

### TOOLS OF THE TRADE

Collector, dealer, and artist Peggy McClard painted the work here in 1986. "It's tea-dyed and framed in a period frame," she notes. "It shows the importance of knowing what one is buying and from whom, because tea-dying velvet gives it the look of a period theorem."

The design comes from a period "theorem painted bedcover," McClard explains. "The three large stencils on the table are the ones from which it was painted. Unlike most stencil painting, the stencils of a theorem are very complicated because the theorem is full of different colors. It would take too long and be too hard to match up a single stencil for each color. So one stencil may hold the design for eight or more colors and the artist must be careful not to mix her colors into areas where that color is not wanted.

"The acetate 'comma' is used to cover areas where the artist is not painting in an open stencil," McClard continues. "Although watercolor was used in the period, we can't get the thick watercolor from the 19th century so we tend to use oil paints in tubes.

"The squares of wool shown on the stencils are wrapped around the artist's finger, dipped into the paint, rubbed so that very little paint remains on the wool, then painted in a circular motion from the edge of the stencil towards the center of that opening," she adds. "The brushes are used at the end of the process to paint such details as stems, vine tendrils, leaf veins, and signatures."



Photo courtesy of Peggy McClard Americana & Folk Art

## THEOREMS: PRETTY AND PRACTICAL

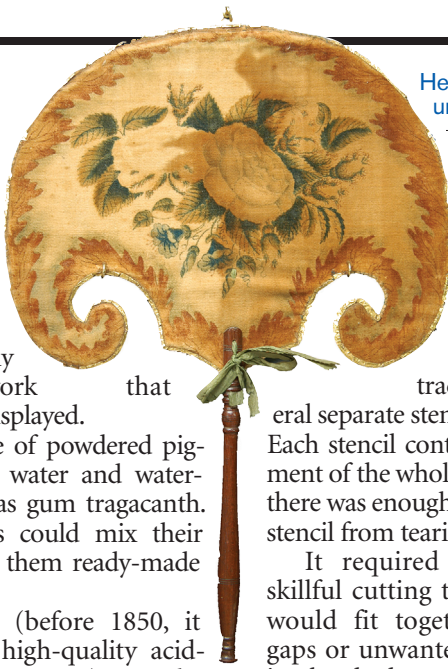
Theorem painting required minimal tools and materials, making it a reasonably inexpensive way to quickly create finished work that could be proudly displayed.

- **Paints** were made of powdered pigments mixed with water and water-soluble gum such as gum tragacanth. Ambitious painters could mix their own paints or buy them ready-made in saucers.

- **Velvet or paper** (before 1850, it would have been high-quality acid-free, 100 percent rag paper) were the usual supports. Silk and cotton were also sometimes employed.

- **Brushes** for theorem painting were short, stiff, and flat-ended, with a separate brush for each color. A soft longer-haired brush was used for adding fine freehand detail.

The theorems themselves were made of paper coated with wax, McClard says,



Here's a rarity: a theorem painted on a hand-held fire screen or fan. This unusual watercolor on velvet dates to c. 1810.

to create a strong material called **horn paper**: "The wax helped the stencil last longer and it also gave a little translucency to the stencil paper." The pattern was

traced and cut, with several separate stencils for a single painting. Each stencil contained parts of each element of the whole drawing, placed so that there was enough uncut paper to keep the stencil from tearing or falling apart.

It required careful drawing and skillful cutting to produce stencils that would fit together perfectly without gaps or unwanted overlaps. The resulting hard edges and rigid outlines create the characteristic appearance of theorem paintings and help to distinguish them from freehand paintings of the same subjects.

Most theorem paintings were done on velvet; some were executed on paper or cardstock. Today, antique examples range from a few hundred dollars to

several thousand. Larger, more elaborate pieces bring higher prices, as do those with especially good workmanship, bright original color, or unusual subject matter, and their original frames.

While most theorem paintings were intended purely as decoration to hang on the wall, the technique was also used to produce useful items such as bed coverings, tablecloths, bell pulls, purses, and other articles of clothing.

Such documents as valentines and family records also were embellished with theorem painting. Linda Lefko notes that before color lithography, theorem paintings were even occasionally used commercially to illustrate seed and nursery catalogs.

By 1840, academic subjects began to dominate the school curriculum. The first flowering of theorem painting faded. But the best and brightest surviving examples of this once widely practiced schoolgirl craft continue to enhance collectors' homes as they did in the 19th century. ❁