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We Can Fix It But Should We? Take 2, Part Two – The Treatment of Mr. Chips

ABSTRACT—The studio of Fallon & Wilkinson, LLC was asked to consult on the treatment of a contemporary piece made by California-based studio furniture maker John Cederquist. The "kosode" form cabinet had sustained UV damage with significant fading of the surface design elements. As conservators, occasionally we are asked to undertake treatments that ultimately may have complex professional, ethical, and market valuation considerations. These issues become a large part of the equation when dealing with contemporary art. This paper will discuss the background, documentation, and rational for the treatment of Mr. Chips, and present the final outcome of this process.

1. INTRODUCTION

John Cederquist (born August 7, 1946) is an American studio furniture builder and sculptor in wood who resides in Southern California. Cederquist is best known for his decorative and trompe l'oeil wood assemblages, often in the form of furniture, that blur the distinctions between reality and illusion. He employs fixed-point perspectives, cartoon and imaginative imagery, and is greatly influenced by Japanese wood block prints. He is currently retired from his long-time art teaching position at Saddleback College in Mission Viejo, California, and is still producing work from his San Clemente, CA studio.

1.1 KOSODE

In 1992, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art held an exhibition *When Art Became Fashion: Kosode in Edo-Period Japan*. It was while viewing this exhibition that the artist developed an interest in the richly decorated kimono forms, and the inspiration for a new series of work was born.

The kosode, or "small-sleeved robe", was the predecessor of the modern kimono and the most important outer garment of all classes in Edo-period Japan, from the years 1615 to 1868. These garments were highly decorated and functioned as the designer clothing of the day, worn by the daimyo and high-ranking members of the samurai class, rich merchants, and artisans, along with actors and courtesans of the entertainment districts.

Kosode were decorated with a variety of techniques, including silk and metallic thread embroidery, tie-dying, ink painting, and applied gold and silver leaf. Colors ranged from the red of the safflower plant to purples, indigos, greens, and bright yellows.

1.2. MR. CHIPS

The first series of kosode produced by John Cederquist were exhibited at the artist's show at the Franklin Parrasch Gallery in New York in 2006.

The work titled "Mr. Chips" is a kosode or kimono form cabinet from this first series, ca. 2005. The materials of fabrication include primavera, mahogany, Pacific Northwest maple, California laurel, Baltic birch plywood, and various aniline dyes (fig. 1).

Fig. 1. Mr. Chips, before treatment.

The piece was purchased directly from the gallery, and from there it went on display in the owner's residence in a large living room that featured soaring two-story windows in three directions. Over the short course of a few years, the piece sustained substantial fading and UV damage (fig. 1).

2. EXAMINATION

During the initial examination, it was difficult to determine the original color scheme, which had faded significantly. Upon close inspection, there were protected areas of decoration left where the large façade of the cabinet overlapped the side panels. A large and complete area of intact and uncompromised original decoration remained in the interior of the cabinet, where there are three protected drawers that retain the vibrant color and shading that the front of the cabinet has lost (fig. 2).

2.1 THE DILEMMA

The client purchased the piece directly from the gallery show in 2006. The client's main request was to have the original appearance restored. When asked, the client's representative did not want to send the piece back to the artist, and specifically thought that the treatment should be handled by a conservator. The initial examination revealed the obvious need for a potentially intensive/invasive surface treatment, and this posed a number of questions.

1. What are the ethical considerations when dealing with the work of a living artist?
2. Can the available treatment options meet the ethical standards of the AIC?
3. Is it possible to develop a dialog with the artist, in addition to the visual/analytical means of examination?

After the initial consultation, the owner agreed that the piece would come into the author's conservation studio for a closer examination.

3. CONTACTING THE ARTIST: DEVELOPING A DIALOG

Once Mr. Chips was in the conservation studio for assessment, and after consulting with colleagues in both the wooden artifacts and contemporary art fields, it became clear that attempting to

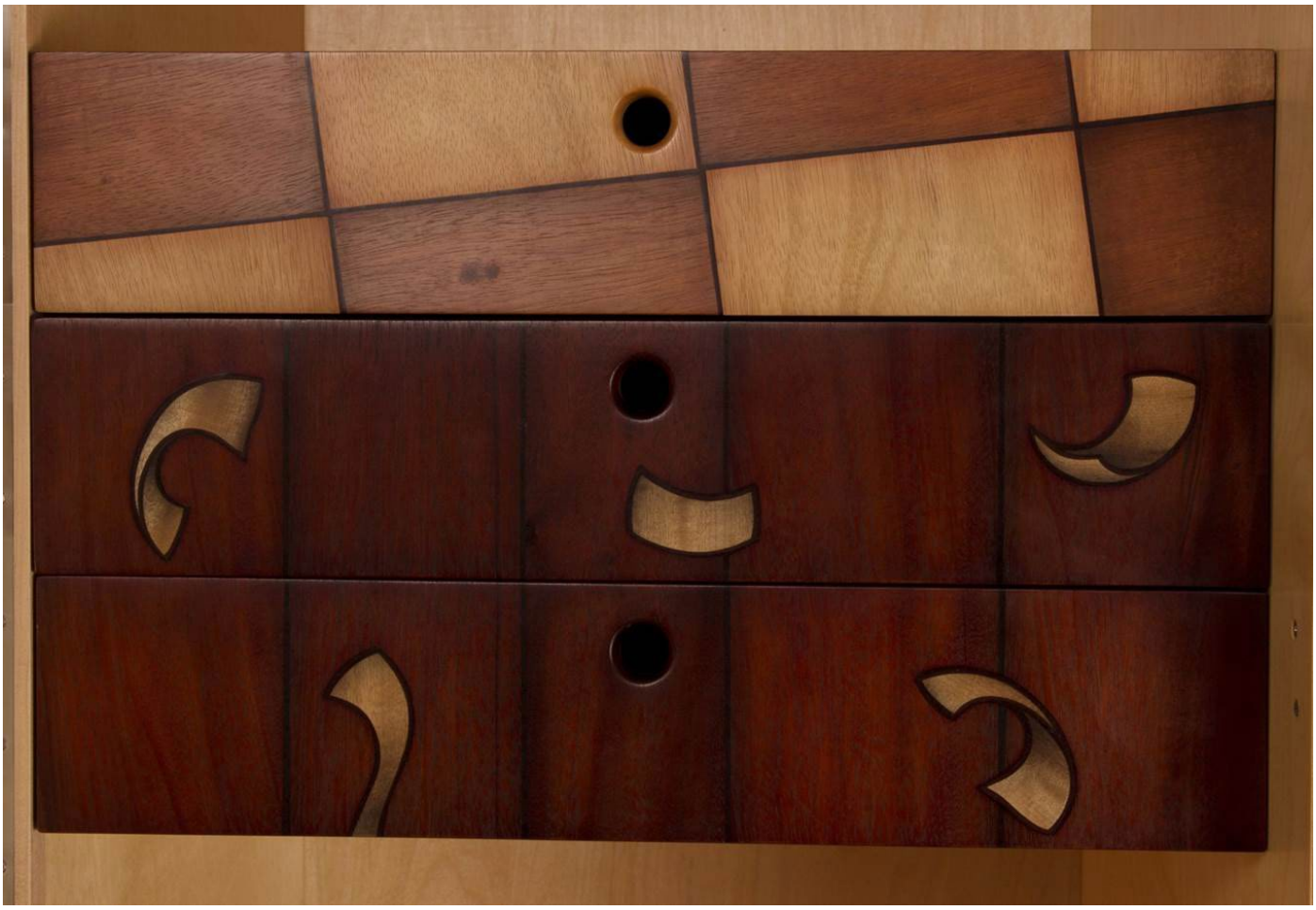

Fig. 2. Detail of protected interior drawers of Mr. Chips.

contact the artist directly would be an important first step before considering any type of intervention.

In fine arts conservation, the integrity of the object is generally linked to both the "artist's intent" and the original appearance of the work. Conservation research often focuses on artistic intentions and the materials and methods used to achieve them, but in the wooden artifacts field the intention and original materials have usually been altered or obscured by time, and need to be re-interpreted. This was a unique case because we were dealing with contemporary art and a living artist, and the potential to get primary information was theoretically in the realm of possibility.

The author composed an initial e-mail of inquiry to John Cederquist, outlining the issues at hand and indicating a request for guidance as to how to proceed. Fortunately, the e-mail was returned with a phone call the next day, and a lengthy and informative phone call ensued, ending with an invitation for the author to visit the artist at his studio in San Clemente, California.

During the day-long studio visit, the author interviewed the artist about his thoughts on the conservation of his pieces, his fabrication techniques, formulas, and specific aspects of Mr. Chip's decoration. The artist was interested in the topic of conservation, and was extremely generous and willing to provide permission and advice on the intervention (fig. 3).

3.1 STUDIO ASSISTANT

In addition, the artist's studio assistant and former student, Chris Labonte, was on hand for a portion of the interview. Chris was hired in 1989 to help with the fabrication of pieces designed by the artist. Chris also does a great deal of the surface decoration airbrush work under guidance from the artist.

From the start of this project, the author had been seeking an original image of Mr. Chips, at first from the collector and then the gallery, with no success. Finally, Chris Labonte located some images that were taken in the studio just after completion in 2005. The images proved to be very helpful later, during the treatment process.

Fig. 3. John Cederquist at the bench, San Clemente, CA 2013.

4. DOCUMENTATION: THE CEDERQUIST'S CREATIVE AND FABRICATION PROCESSES

By visiting the artist's studio and seeing the work being fabricated, it was possible to develop a much greater appreciation and understanding of the creative process, fabrication methods, and assembly sequences employed by the artist.

John Cederquist tends to get an idea and then rapidly develop prototypes in both wood and paper, often sketching directly on the plywood substrate. In the front of the studio building, there is a graphic printing shop, and they provide the artist with fast, large paper enlargements. The author observed a mock-up for a chair back, in which a textured cloth was draped over a wooden support and secured with c-clamps. This mock-up was then photographed and printed in black and white on a large life-sized sheet of paper, which was used for a template and design reference. The artist explained that initially the c-clamps were meant to be temporary, but then they were deemed appealing so he incorporated them into the final design.

A variety of techniques are used by the artist to create the illusionistic surface decoration. The illusion of three dimensions and fixed-point perspective are often achieved by gluing ¼-in.-thick wooden shapes, carefully chosen for grain direction and character, to a plywood substrate. The pieces of wood are cut on a scroll saw, and sanded smooth using a hand-held belt sander. The sanding and cutting produces a slight bevel to the edge of the wooden pieces. The pieces are assembled and glued onto furniture grade plywood like a jigsaw puzzle. The technique shares more with a mosaic technique than with marquetry or intarsia. The slight bevel allows a fairly tight registration on the bottom of the cutout wooden pieces, and on the top surface it allows for a filling in of the open join line with pigmented and bulked west system epoxy resin, which is troweled into the gap, directly on the wood, forming thin, opaque perimeter lines around the shapes (fig. 4).

There are also often areas where a burn-in-type tool is used to create more detailed and shallow lines on the wooden pieces, which are filled with the same epoxy resin. In all cases, the epoxy is sanded down flush with the wooden surface with a belt or orbital sander. It is notable that on the original pieces examined by the author, it was difficult to find any remaining sanding marks; they are very well surfaced. The wooden "puzzle pieces" are a robust ¼ in. thick, allowing for this overall and fairly aggressive surfacing.

Occasionally, there are small bubble "holidays" observed in the pigmented west system epoxy line; these are gone back over and filled with pigmented five-minute epoxy to match.

The prepared and sanded top surface is then often selectively bleached before being airbrushed with various aniline dyes and inks and coated with a clear wiped-on finish.

Fig. 4. Detail of epoxy work in progress, Cederquist studio 2013.

4.1 ORIGINAL FINISHING MATERIALS AND TECHNIQUES

One of the most important parts of dealing with any potential treatment of Mr. Chips was documenting and understanding the colorants and coating used, and having the artist explain original intent and specific formulas was indeed a huge part of the success of this documentation process. Tracings of all the design elements had been rendered prior to the visit, and in conjunction with printed photographic images of the object, a map of the finishing details was created. The artist's studio assistant was there to point out many tips and details of the process as well.

4.2 FABRICATION OF SAMPLE BOARDS

For further clarification, a series of sample boards were created at the author's studio using what was learned during the artist's studio visit, utilizing the original construction and finishing materials along with specific fabrication techniques. The sample boards included a replication of part of the primavera "checkerboard" upper section of Mr. Chips, as well as a portion of the lower mahogany panel. These sample boards were then airbrushed using the artist-specified color formulas and top coated with the original coating formula. The results were very promising, with a very close match to the original color when judged against the intact interior drawers of the object (figs. 5, 6).

5. TREATMENT CHOICES

The culmination of the research to date indicated two possible treatment scenarios.

The first was an additive, reversible type of ideal conservation treatment, where the original surface would be left intact, a barrier coat applied, and a system of colorants and coatings would be applied on top to replicate the original surface, all designed to be reversible and emphasizing retention of the original surface.

Fig. 5. Detail of sample board, replicating upper primavera section of case.

Fig. 6. Detail of sample board, replicating lower mahogany section of case.

This theoretical treatment posed several issues that proved difficult to overcome in practical application. The first was that the artist's approach of airbrushing dye directly into the wood was visually difficult to achieve once a barrier coat and different refractive index resins were introduced. The second and more insurmountable issue was the fact that the Pacific Northwest maple Mickey Mouse hand and Stanley plane body on the upper section of the case were originally bleached to an almost silvery white color, and this visual effect was not possible with alternate methods that were experimented with. Additionally, the lower portion of mahogany originally had been treated with a true logwood stain as a base step, and this also proved to be a difficult visual effect to achieve with alternate materials.

The second consideration was also potentially the most controversial. This could be called the "guided studio assistant" approach. It would require working closely with the artist and the studio assistant, and would mean a fairly complete resurfacing of the piece. This would be irreversible by conservation standards. It would utilize the artist-approved original processes, techniques, colorants, and coatings. It would be intrusive, yes, but would be more optically true, and would still allow for the remaining original document windows of the interior drawers and the recessed areas of case overlap to remain intact.

6. TREATMENT RATIONAL

Once the viable treatment options were debated, the client was presented with the pros and cons of each approach.

In addition to the treatment options, there were other factors to consider. The piece underwent what could be described as a sudden and acute failure; this is not patina. The piece no longer represents the original intent of the artist. This is confirmed by the artist in person. We have the complete documentation: original color scheme, color formulas, craft and fabrication techniques, and remaining unaffected documents on the object as a backup reference that can be preserved for future study. The artist and studio assistant will be available to provide direct advice for the treatment. The sample boards indicate that it will be technically possible to obtain a very close match to the original surface intent.

At the end of the discovery process, after careful consideration of all of the factors involved, it was decided to take the "guided studio assistant approach" and to resurface the piece, using the artist's traditional materials and techniques.

7. TREATMENT OVERVIEW

The basic treatment overview was formulated and contained the following main areas of emphasis.

1. Photograph the piece extensively pre-treatment.
2. Wash back the remaining degraded coating using solvents.
3. Testing shows after washing back the surface that "witness color and shading" was retained.
4. Apply traditional Cederquist formulas and finishing techniques to re-color the wood.
5. Apply tannic acid and logwood dye to specified areas.
6. Undertake re-bleaching of specified areas.
7. Airbrush Solar-Lux dyes in the specified sequence.
8. Finish the piece with Emmet's Good Stuff and Renaissance microcrystalline wax.

Fig. 7. Detail of lower section of Mr. Chips case, during treatment.

Fig. 8. Detail of Mr. Chips Mickey Mouse hand and wood plane, during treatment.

8. TREATMENT DETAILS

After washing back the degraded remaining coating with solvents, the wood of the lower mahogany section of the façade was coated with a solution of tannic acid, allowed to dry, and followed by three thin coats of logwood dye. This gave a rich color back to the faded surface. The chips and other areas not meant to be dyed were masked off with clear airbrush frisket material. The brush-dyed wood was then first airbrushed with "nutmeg brown" Solar-Lux dye, allowed to dry, and then airbrushed with "cordovan brown" Solar-Lux dye. Lastly, the black pigmented epoxy line was masked off first on one side and then the other, each time "fuzzed out" with the airbrush using a mix of one part wheat to three parts black Solar-Lux dyes (fig. 7).

On the upper section of the case, the treatment began with a light sanding of the Pacific Northwest maple of the Mickey and the Stanley wood plane. These areas were then isolated with masking frisket and bleached using a commercial two-part type of wood bleach. These areas were allowed to dry and neutralized with a mix of two parts water to one part vinegar. The Mickey Mouse hand was then lightly airbrushed with black Solar-Lux dye to create volume and shadowing. The Stanley wood plane was also airbrushed with black Solar-Lux dye to create shadow and tone. The bottom of the wood plane has a drop shadow under the body, and there are some ripples added to the side of the body of the wood plane to mimic reflectance (fig. 8). Chris Labonte provided the author with additional examples of this decoration that had been done on other Cederquist pieces for a backup reference. Additional coloring on the Stanley wood plane included airbrushing the cherry plane handles with cherry Solar-Lux dye, followed by light airbrushed volume toning with the "gray mix" of one part wheat to three parts black Solar-Lux dye. The brass adjustment wheel and the brass screw on the top of the front handle were airbrushed with lemon yellow Solar-Lux dye to mimic brass.

The California laurel board being shaved by the Stanley plane and the falling curled "chips" were all lightly toned with "gray mix" to achieve a three-dimensional feel. The board was sprayed along the top edge of the face of the board with a quick gradation to nothing to help separate the face from the top. Then the bottom edge was sprayed, going from lighter to darker from the front of the board to the back, increasing the width and height of the gradation from front to back.

On the upper section of the case that comprised the "checkerboard" pattern of primavera, the lighter rectangles were lightly sanded and bleached with one application of the commercial two-part wood bleach, followed by neutralization. The lighter rectangles were then sprayed with a light and thinned coat of golden fruitwood Solar-Lux dye, and then the perimeters were sprayed with a light dusting of nutmeg brown. The darker rectangles were first sprayed with nutmeg brown Solar-Lux dye, followed by a light perimeter dusting of "gray mix" (fig. 9).

On the upper section of the case, there are three Japanese date-mon. Date-mon are ornamental designs or symbols placed on traditional kosode garments in areas generally reserved for family crests, and were often made up of eclectic designs. The Cederquist-designed date-mon on this piece consists of a circle "doughnut" in which there are overlapped wooden boards forming a square pattern. The "doughnut" was airbrushed with golden fruitwood, followed by nutmeg brown, and was meant to have a rounded overdimensional feel achieved with the toning. The center was lemon yellow, and the overlapped boards were

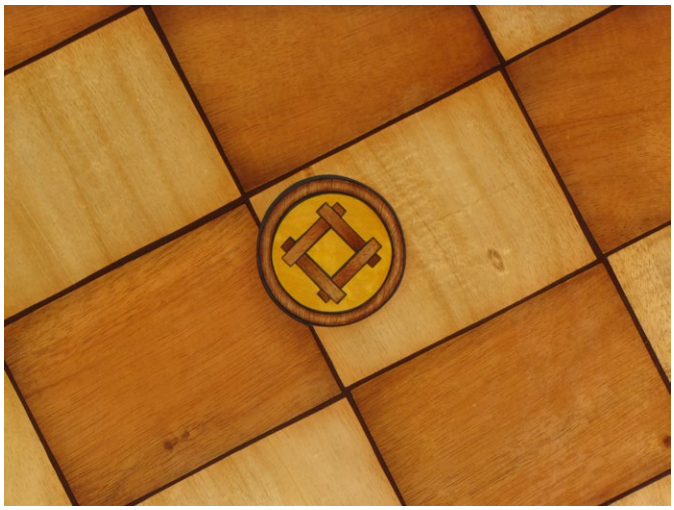

Fig. 9. Detail of Mr. Chips upper primavera section of case, including the date-mon, during treatment.

sprayed with nutmeg brown and "gray mix" to achieve a three-dimensional stacking effect.

The last coloring step was the treatment of the sleeve ends and bottom edge of the kosode form. In the traditional kosode garment, these areas were often weighted silk tubes that gave some drape and form to the edges. Here the artist used the Pacific Northwest maple again. The wood was lightly bleached with the commercial two-part wood bleach, neutralized, and then sprayed with a light lemon yellow. The "tubes" were then colored with a wiped-on wash of pyrrol red litho ink, thinned with turpentine. The center was wiped off lightly to create a highlight, and was then lightly undertoned with nutmeg brown and "gray mix" to achieve a three-dimensional volume.

The original protected section of interior drawers was retained intact and was not treated. There are also "windows" of original surface retained under the proper right outer "wing" of the façade.

After the piece dried, the entire outer surface was coated with three thin coats of Emmet's "Good Stuff," a fast drying, clear, synthetic oil gel. This final finish was then waxed and buffed with Renaissance Wax microcrystalline wax polish (fig. 10).

9. CONCLUSIONS

In closing, this treatment provided a rare opportunity to document a living artist's materials and techniques in a unique way and provided great insight into the Cederquist creative process. It is my hope that through this documentation, any future treatment decisions by conservators on Cederquists body of work will be better informed, and I would like to think of this project as a starting point, and not as a conclusion.

Fig. 10. Mr. Chips, after treatment.

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Gluckman, C. G., and S. S. Takeda. 1992. *When art became fashion: kosode in Edo-period Japan*. Los Angeles, California: Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

SOURCES OF MATERIALS

Airbrush Supplies
Chicago Airbrush Supply
2417 N. Western Ave
Chicago, IL 60647
(772) 292-2992
www.chicagoairbrushsupply.com

Behlen Solar Lux aniline dyes
Woodcraft Supply
249 Spencer Street
Manchester, CT 06040
(860) 647-0303
www.woodcraft.com

Emmett's Good Stuff wood finish
Bally Block Company
30 S. Seventh Street
P.O. Box 168
Bally, Pennsylvania, 19503
www.Butcherblock.com

Litho Ink
Pyrrol Red
Daniel Smith
4150 First Avenue South
Seattle, Washington 98134
(206) 223-9599
www.danielsmith.com

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TAD D. FALLON grew up around art and antiques, working within the family business, Copake Auctions Inc., prior to college. In 1991, after beginning college as a studio art major, he entered the Fashion Institute of Technology's Restoration program in New York City and studied decorative arts restoration. After graduation, he worked at Sotheby's Restoration as a supervisor in the Finishing Department. In 1996, he was accepted to the Smithsonian Institution's graduate Furniture Conservation Training Program, and from 1999 to 2000, Tad served a graduate internship at the Metropolitan Museum of Art's Sherman Fairchild Center for Objects Conservation. He holds a certificate of completion from the Smithsonian Institution and an MA in Conservation from Antioch University, in Yellow Springs, Ohio. In 2000, he formed a business partnership with fellow Smithsonian classmate and renowned furniture maker Randy Wilkinson to open the private conservation practice Fallon & Wilkinson, LLC, where he specializes in the treatment and research of both historic and modern surfaces, colorants, and coatings.