

## MINOR PAPERS

Dear John Waterer (Pt II) *This is the second half of a commentary by Franklin Pereira on John Waterer's books on the Iberian leatherworking tradition. The first half was printed in the Summer issue of the Newsletter.*

On page 17 you describe again the "four distinct types of guadameci", similar to the ones I remarked before. I haven't come across gilt pieces dating from before the 15th century, therefore phase one is silvered sheepskins with painted patterns and hand-tooled; it is followed by the use of wooden stamps that, with ink, mark the repetitive designs in whole or part of the surface; it may include other paintings and hand-tooling. Both phases mean a flat guadameci.

*"There was another kind of decorative leather which should be mentioned at this point, although it does not belong to the main course of development which chiefly concerns us here. Many are familiar with what may be described as the typical Iberian seventeenth and early eighteenth-century chair with seat and back each consisting of a strip of fairly thick tanned hide stretched from frame to frame and secured with large brass nails. These pieces of hide usually have elaborate ornamentation in bas-relief done either with a metal plate in a press, or by hand-tooling, which employed several techniques including incising, punching and modelling, some of the work apparently being done with heated tools. The chair panels were sometimes gilded and occasionally painted as well, but many show no sign of gilt or colour". (S L, p18)*

You are referring to the Portuguese chair, upholstered in thick cowhide, carved and tooled. Happily very few pieces were decorated by means of a metal plate, as all the work is hand made. The guadameci development has to be understood together with the Islamic fashions of interior decoration: tapestries on the walls, silks, carpets and cushions to sit on. Such fashions expanded to the whole Peninsula due to the attraction of the wealth and culture coming from the Muslim south. The lack of documents of Islamic origin makes one to research amidst the Christian ones: parchment paintings, kings' rules, imports, fashions, ... Only later on did the chair become fashionable, and leather moved from wall-hangings and cushions to upholstery; no more thin and gay-coloured, but thick and dark brown, carved with chisels to last and to be seen.

*"Many variations of the tawing process are possible but as no early examples have survived, it is not known just how the original guadameci was made nor precisely what were its properties. Ancient accounts indicate that it was supple, durable and polished on the surface, which seems to indicate some kind of subsidiary dressing. As the manufacture of equivalent leathers spread over Europe there must have been variations both in the type of skin used and in the method of dressing employed". (p25)* Besides having no pieces dating before the 15th century, the accounts stating it was supple are probably referring cordoban. The way gilt pieces are made destroys all the softness of the tanning.

*"What was it that distinguished the Hispano-Moresque guadamecis from anything that preceded them – tannage, colour, type of pelt, or gilding? (...)*

*It has been suggested that the fine bright red of the Cordoban leather was obtained by the addition of tin salts to the alum, both capable of acting as a mordant for kermes, one of the earliest dye-stuffs, known to have been used in ancient Egypt. But about A.D. 1000 Eraclius described the use of madder: 'To dye Cordovan leather. Take the undyed leather, pure and white. Wash the hair side with alum. Take madder. Place it with urine in a copper vessel and heat, but no more than the hand endures. Submerge the leather in the vessel. Draw forth to see if it be red enough. When dyed sufficiently, let dry by stretching on a level board. Rub smooth with a boxwood staff. Then take grease, rub it all over and let dry'. It is known that madder was still used in later times for dyeing guadameci: a Cordoban ordinance of 1543 strictly forbade the use of any other dye. Madder, as opposed to kermes, was not used in Egypt to produce a red dye until the Graeco-Roman period: it was probably introduced there from Greece where the madder plant is indigenous. The evidence is conclusive. Either kermes or madder, or both, might have been introduced into Spain by the Moors, but could also have been familiar before their arrival".* I wonder why you describe the cordoban, as formerly you said that this type of leather is *"not the one with which this treatise ["Spanish Leather"] is concerned*". Being washed and silvered, it sounds obviously useless to have the sheepskin dyed beforehand.

In chapter four you say: *"no surviving specimen [of guadameci] appears to pre-date the mid-fifteenth century" (p28)*. I totally agree with you.

*"It is clear from an Ordinance which regulated the guadamecileros of Córdoba, first promulgated in 1528, that both the basic silvering of the*



leather and the painting of designs thereon were well established at that date, although panels were not invariably silvered all over as they usually were at a later period. The same Ordinance also lays down that, for dyeing leather red, madder must be used and not Brasil-wood (which produced a duller red and was probably cheaper) and also fixes the permitted size of panels as approximately 0.63x0.53m. (24x21in). It prescribes death as the penalty for passing off tin foil as silver!" (p30).

As I said, Córdoba was Christian since 1236. I also became puzzled when the Ordinance stated that, for dyeing, madder must be used and not brasil-wood ("sean teñidas con rubia y no con brasil"). I went to Córdoba with that document; in fact, one must know an Iberian language to fully understand the documents. The thing is, the "secret" golden varnish is made of aloes-powder, pinetree ... and madder – and that's why it's referred in the document; the verb "dye" is wrongly used.

On page 31 you go back to the cordoban, once again forgetting that your book is not concerned with that type of leather. *"Probably the principal stimulus behind all the developments resulting in leather hangings of good repute, in the making of which all kinds of both new and established skills were employed, was the manner in which these increasingly luxurious decorations fitted into the pattern of exotic magnificence that marked the great days of the Khalifs. Whilst the appellation 'Spanish' was still employed in respect of shoe and gloving leathers as late as the seventeenth century, it is on the fame of the decorative hangings that the legendary reputation of Spain in connection with leather chiefly rested until our time. The ornamental uses to which guadameci was put in the country of its origin must often have been spectacular. Rooms and halls of palaces and great houses glowed with 'gold' leather, which in later times were embellished with elaborate forms including arches and pilasters as well as dados and friezes. Sometimes leather hangings were used above a dado of Moorish tiles, for example in the Alhambra (built between 1248 and 1354) where the tiles may still be seen although the leather that once surmounted them has long since disappeared, leaving shallow recesses of plain plaster where it once hung. In the Sala des Reynes (Court of the Queens) are two oval cupolas lined with white leather on which are paintings believed to have been executed by Italian artists in about 1500, one dilapidated, the other in amazing condition considering that for 450 years it has been exposed to natural atmosphere."* (p48) We don't know if the Caliphs used gilt leather; nor is there clear evidence about its use in the Alhambra Palace. But it's sure that the Court of the King's cupolas are not



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guadamecis. The leather is covered with a thin surface of plaster, which was then painted. The painters were not Italians, but Spanish mudéjar ones, in late 14th century.

On page 68 you write a short paragraph about Portugal: *"We noted that Portuguese gilt leather was being sold in Berlin in 1715. There is also evidence that a certain amount of gilt leather was brought into the port of Antwerp from Lisbon in 1644 for sale at Amsterdam. We have also suggested that the simple geometrical pattern on the walls of the Dining Room at Ham House, dating from about 1675, may be Portuguese because such patterns are typically Iberian and there were strong commercial links between England and Portugal in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. While this is merely a suggestion, the evidence given in the first two sentences of this paragraph prove that some sort of an industry existed in Portugal during the second half of the seventeenth and first half of the eighteenth century. Indeed, it may have stepped in to supply panels decorated in a simple manner while the Spanish industry was in decline, as it was at that stage. It is unlikely that Portugal would have been able to compete with the Dutch and Flemish industries in producing elaborate panels, on the other hand. If it had, we would surely have found a great deal more references to the Portuguese industry."*

You had to come over here, get to learn the language and do some research. The material deserves a book, with fewer illustrations, as examples are very few. From early 12th century up to late 17th, documents do exist, whether taxes and rules, the Ordinance of Lisbon, palaces' uses, exports to Brasil and Japan (yes, guadameci is the forefather of wallpaper!), and the like. The Ordinance of Lisbon, dated 1572, sheds some light in the how-to of the technique.

There's a lot to research in the leather field, whether utilitarian or decorative. The work asks for a team (fully paid to be professional), that likes to travel and isn't afraid of facing less *"westerner comforts"*. Historians, cameramen, computer-men, craftsmen and the like, are welcome in the leather research teams. We all need exhibitions, books, catalogues and CD-ROMS, to move out of forgetfulness and misunderstanding. We need workshops to deal with antique techniques and to make artefacts for today's thirst and emotions.

Yours truly,  
Franklin Pereira, January 2003