

“LOCK DOWN 2021”: THE PERFECT TIME FOR RESTORING A CAROUSEL HORSE

Never in my wildest dreams did I think I would own another carousel horse, much less another from the Friedrich Heyn factory.

My first I found in 1984, when it was advertised for sale in the daily newspaper. At that point it belonged to an antique dealer, who had apparently bought two from a German gentleman who was running the Constantia Nek Restaurant. He had imported two antique horses from Europe to decorate his dining room. There was a choice between the two horses and, as I couldn't afford them both, I picked the one with a prettier head. I later learnt that it had been made in the Friedrich Heyn factory in Neustadt an der Orla, in Germany about 1890. The other horse had been made by Josef Hübner, another local German carousel maker. I knew about carousels, having ridden on them as a child, but nothing about the horse makers, apart from some information in an American Country Homes magazine which alerted me to these wonderful, carved wooden animals. At that time, I was doing a lot of wood carving, in both hard and soft woods, and loved horses, so had no hesitation in driving off to Hout Bay with my two young sons to see what was on offer. We came home with a horse on board.



This was how the first one looked on arrival, and to the right, the result of my restoration. That is a story in itself. However, that work stood me in good stead and I learnt a lot from it. Research at that time was mainly from books, and I was able to find about five on both European and American carousels. Despite the fact that their restoration was popular at the time, none told me the original colours of my horse – photos would have been in black and white in the 1890s anyway. My first horse had so many different layers of paint and was so badly broken, and with nails and screws and metal braces hidden under bandages, that I could only strip off all paint, re-carve in places and repaint the best I could from rare references.

Apart from my two horses (and the Hübner I left behind), the only other one I ever saw mentioned was listed in the local newspaper as up for auction in Somerset West. We went through in torrential rain for the preview, but found the lot had been withdrawn. I am certain it was another Heyn. I never heard of it again.

But then, early in 2021, my daughter saw another carousel horse in an antique shop in Kalk Bay, and sent me a photo, not realizing the excitement it would regenerate. It was immediately recognizable as from the Friedrich Heyn factory; an 1890 Dresden Mirror Parade Horse– the *Rolls Royce* of his horse range. I went *hot foot* to Kalk Bay, and found this:



The antique shop owner had bought it early in 2020 from the daughter of a German hotelier who came from Dusseldorf to South Africa in the 1960s with his family, and his antique collection, to run the Tudor Hotel in Longmarket Street, Cape Town. His daughter had been given the horse for her 5th birthday, but as she now wished to return to Germany, she decided to part with it.



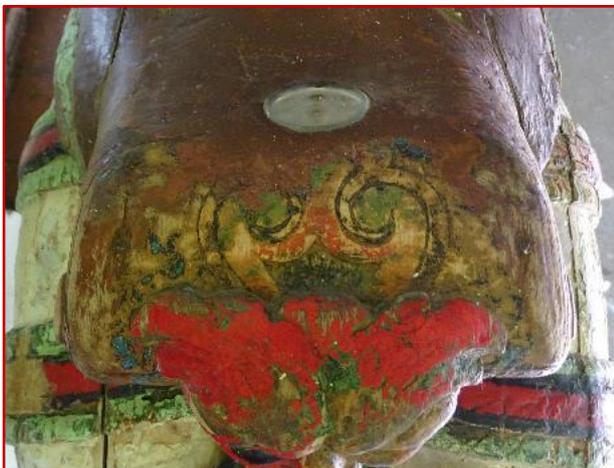
The horse was pricey, as those in Europe are, but after some successful negotiation, I secured it, hired a trailer, and we brought him home.

As it was still mid-summer, the horse was stationed in the backyard under a leafy pergola, and investigations began.



The next question was how to proceed. In some places the paint had gone, in others it was so thick that all the finer details were hidden. I knew I wanted to restore it so that the original colours and carving could be seen easily, but not to the extent that its story of wear, tear, and repair was hidden. As it was not going back to working on an outdoor carousel, the same thick gloss enamel finish was not needed.

Some views of the horse's condition, and the repair work needed, follow below:





Merrylegs, the first horse I restored in 1984 was smaller, less decorative, and made totally of lime wood. At that time, I could buy a powder paint stripper that was mixed with water, plastered thickly onto an area of the horse, and covered with a sort of Vilene cloth. After eight hours the cloth could be peeled off gently and almost all the layers of paint came with it. I cannot remember the name of that product, and it is not available anymore anyway. It did however dissolve much of the natural glue as well as the paint, and the joints in the horse became looser. I also had to re-carve the right front foreleg from the knee down and both back legs from thigh down. Much of the horse, apart from the body box and the head, was eventually in pieces. The original colours were too difficult to track and the repainting had to be guesswork from scarce references. The horse's eye on the outer "parade" side was badly cracked, and I got a new one from the National Museum's taxidermy department in Cape Town. To ensure the eye fitted perfectly, I carried the horse's head through the city streets to where the department was based near the Good Hope Centre at that time. Old taxidermy eyes were flat-backed in olden days, and not the more rounded ones you get now.

Stripping

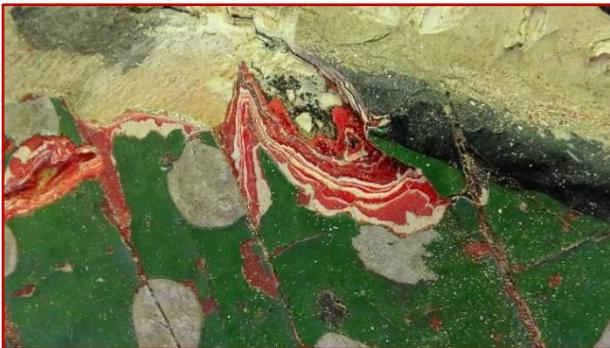
With the second horse, later named **Artax**, I immediately decided that no standard liquid paint stripper could be used, and I definitely could not send it to be harshly stripped industrially. Having done a fair amount of carving before, I reckoned that a small, rather blunt 5 mm chisel and wooden mallet might be the answer to removing the paint carefully. The second horse is not all lime (linden) wood. Much of it is something like Oregon pine. The new horse's lower legs are definitely this wood, as a stronger wood than lime was generally used for larger animals' legs in the carousel factories in eastern Germany.

On Artax, I steadily chipped off the paint until most of the many layers were gone, and I could then use a razor scraper to work down to the underlying original colours and also find any decorative paintwork done by hand.

Paint layers

It appeared that the original first coat on his body and mane had been a thick white primer. Then a shiny off-white top coat was applied. Most Heyn horses left the factory with dapples on their lower body. Each design of harness was given its own specific colours. But from then on numerous layers and other colours of paint followed over the years, as the horse was repaired and maintained for use on its carousel, and the finer details become covered.

A Heyn Boden-Karussell fitted with Dresden Mirror-horses, a large rocking chariot and a daintily ornamented motor car. The revolving centre is hung with richly decorated draperies. The ceiling is painted with cherubs, while rather crude neo-classical and genre paintings fill the simple wooden rounding boards. From Heyn's 1911 catalogue. (Staples & Charles Ltd., Washington D.C.)



This was the headpiece of the bridle – actually originally green with a black trim – showing at least ten different layers of paint.

< Field of view about 2 cm.



The horse when stripped down to original colours.

In some areas, particularly on the plain white main body, a rhythmic tapping with a small-headed metal hammer made the thick paint just fall off, leaving only the original layers. A very small chisel was needed to clean the finely carved areas of the harness. Knowing the direction of wood grain and how to wield a chisel was definitely an advantage. With the chisel being so small, I could sense the hardness or softness of the wood beneath it and change the strength of my taps accordingly to avoid chipping off any underlying wood. As I worked, I found hidden decoration details, particularly at the back of the saddle where an outline had been cut into the wood but subsequently covered with paint. Painted gold lines and flowers on the saddle flaps were discovered as well.

Repairing

I decided to leave the evidence of all nails, screws, bolts, metal work and major repair work in situ, and only fill the cracks. The tip of one ear was repaired with a wood epoxy, as well as a large 5 mm crack in the body on the parade side. The remaining cracks were filled with standard wood filler. Two of the Bavarian glass discs were loose and easily removed. These were cleaned carefully and resprayed on their backs with a mirror spray and re-set into the harness. The loose piece of wood around the mirrors was also glued into place, and then filled with wood epoxy as it was part of the large crack. The gaps around the rest of the mirrors were filled with standard wood filler for easy sanding. A colour nearest to "old gold" (yellow ochre and raw umber) was mixed to stand in for gold initially, and later highlighted with an artist's acrylic gold paint.

Repainting

After researching a variety of paints, including chalk paint and other craft acrylics, I decided to use a good quality commercial acrylic primer, as it would cover minor flaws the best. Particular attention was taken to the filling and sanding on the body, but the original paint layers were left on the under belly for evidence of the condition that the horse had arrived in. The two places where the original dapples were still visible were left untouched. No top coat was applied on the primer at that time, for fear of making the paint coat too thick. A few months later, I found just the right product to tone down the brilliant white paint and give the horse a slight gloss finish – Nugget Light Brown shoe polish!

For the harness decorations (*caparaisons*), I used good quality artists' acrylics. These were applied directly on top of the cleaned-off areas where the original colours were still evident and made as thin as possible to show up the carving underneath. Some light sanding was necessary after the first application of this paint, as it raised the grain in the wood, but it toned down the freshness of the new paint nicely. The intention was not to replace the full carousel park paint, rather to display the original colours and show up the carver's art. Colours were mixed exactly to match those found on the original layer. These were sealed with an artist's acrylic matte glaze.

Decorations

Thick Bavarian glass discs were set in several places on the parade side of the horse. These had originally all had a mirror coating on the back, but in a few cases it had either partly or totally fallen off. One circular mirror was missing from the rump, as well as an ornate brass ornament at the edge of the bridle's brow band. On the less ornate side of the horse, the pressed brass ornaments were all in place but only one had its original glass cabochon gem. Two had remains of broken glass. In a local bead shop I found some plain glass domes or cabochons which fitted perfectly into the centre of the pressed brass ornaments. Their backs were sprayed with mirror spray paint before insertion. Hand-painted gold flower designs were discovered on the saddle flaps. They were traced for repainting later. The missing glass ornament on the rump was replaced by the base of a cut-glass sherry glass, which fitted the gap perfectly. The base was cut off the stem with a trim saw, ground down, and re-polished

on a faceting machine. Again, the back of the ornament was sprayed with mirror paint before mounting.



The headpiece medallion appears from old photographs to have been a brass decorative fitting of some kind but not necessarily with a gem in it. I found a modern round mock-brass drawer-pull in a local hardware shop and it fitted the inset in the wood perfectly. The original paint of the *grotesque* face on the back of the saddle cantle was seemingly all black with green detailing. He was finely carved with an open mouth with teeth, detailed eyes and eyebrows, and lines in his beard.

Both horse ears had been loose in their sockets and were put back into place after repair. Only the skin and minimal hair was left of the tail, but the peg to hold it in place was there. Big problem: a new, real horsehair tail was needed. But about six months later, this had been resolved. I got a fresh tail from the local knacker. It was salted, and soaked in alum to tan. See the final photograph for the magnificent result.

Below is the very white horse before applying the Nugget shoe polish to tone it down. I used grey artist's oil paint for shading certain areas and marking the dapples on the barrel as it doesn't dry too fast and can be altered if needed.



And below is the final result



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