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A Touch of Refinement: Pioneer Graining

Doris R. Dant

Visitors to the Salt Lake Tabernacle are often stunned to learn that the pillars supporting the gallery are not marble but are pine painted to look like marble and that the “oak” benches and organ case are also pine with simulated oak graining. The Tabernacle woodwork and furniture are the most visible reminders of the practice of graining, a technique widely used in Utah Territory’s furniture to imitate the look of marble, hardwood, and even leather.¹

Before the coming of the railroad in 1869, Utah’s inhabitants were restricted to what could be freighted across the plains and what could be made locally. Because furniture was bulky and heavy, immigrants usually made or purchased furniture after their arrival, encouraged in this “home manufacture” by Brigham Young and the Apostles.² Although some furniture could be constructed from the hardwood packing boxes the pioneers used for carrying supplies in their wagons,³ local furniture production depended primarily on the trees indigenous to the area. The pine, cottonwood, willow, and other Utah woods were all unfashionable softwoods with plain grains. Designers solved this problem by substituting grained softwood for the more desirable hardwoods. Faux marble was created in the same way, since the alternatives were importing it or doing without.

This desire for fashion and beauty among a people displaced to undeveloped and isolated deserts had cultural, political, and religious roots. American culture valued the respectability deriving from refined manners and clothes and from homes improved by touches of gentility. “The realm of beauty and taste,” writes Richard Bushman, was promoted as having “no bounds. The farmer’s cottage could exhibit taste as surely as the rich man’s mansion.” Ideally, such refinement was to be “acquired at little expense by industry and rational planning.”⁴ Utah was not unaffected by these values. Marilyn Barker, an expert on Mormon furniture, points out that the populace wanted the newest fashion in furniture; “an attitude of simple refinement pervaded.”⁵ According to a contemporaneous observer, Utah’s notions of what was necessary changed from having “an old chest or empty barrel for a table” to a home decorated with “pretty patterns and tasteful colors.” In an ordinary Utah farmhouse, “the fundamental basis for all the tasteful objects . . . [was] the sense of beauty and artistic diligence.”⁶ Even utilitarian objects such as pie safes and meal bins were decorated (plates 2, 3).⁷

Refinement was practiced in Utah Territory for its political benefits as well. Because gentility was “a resource for impressing and influencing powerful people [and] frequently a prerequisite for inspiring trust,” it was an important tool for public relations.⁸ Taking their cue from the Prophet Joseph Smith’s vision of hospitality in Nauvoo, Utah’s Mormons wanted to impress visitors with their refinement. As Richard Bushman notes, “Besides [their desire for] respect from eastern cultural centers, control over their government hung in the balance.”⁹

If their religion had opposed beautification, many Latter-day Saints probably would have settled for plainly finished pine furniture as a moral obligation, but glorifying Zion with the workmanship of their hands was a religious imperative. And should the Saints succeed in adorning and beautifying their homes, they were implicitly promised, angels might visit them there.¹⁰ For C. C. A. Christensen, a pioneer artist and grainer, art—including home crafts developed “to the highest level of perfection”—draws individuals closer to the perfect sensibilities and abilities of the Creator, thus preparing them for their eternal work.¹¹

Graining flourished when European furniture makers immigrated to Utah. Trained in the aesthetic conventions of their countries of origin, they brought with them the tradition of imitating fashionable and exotic materials—for disguising unfashionable woods in this manner was the vogue even among the wealthy in Europe and the American East. In keeping with Brigham Young’s policy of creating self-sustaining colonies by relocating immigrants with needed skills, the European immigrants and other furniture makers were sent to almost all of the major communities.¹² In this manner, grained furniture—a touch of refinement—became available in much of the territory.

The ranks of men skilled in graining included Brigham Young, who in Utah served as patron rather than practitioner. Many of his commissions were given to European master furniture makers, particularly to English immigrants William Bell and Ralph Ramsey. Bell was a supervisor in the Great Salt Lake Public Works from 1854 until 1869, when he was sent to Heber, Utah, on a furniture-making mission. In his own shop, he made furniture exclusively for the Young family. Bell’s washstand for Emmeline F. Young (plate 12) led to similar commissions for four other Young wives. During the eighteen years Ramsey spent in Salt Lake City, he ran his own cabinet-making shop, collaborated with Bell (plate 8), and made the Tabernacle organ case, assisted by Edmund Fuller Bird. He was then called on a mission to Richfield, Utah. Nathaniel Spens, a native of Scotland, did graining on the Tabernacle’s benches and pillars and the woodwork in the Salt Lake and Manti Temples as well as many Sanpete County houses. Other skilled

grainers—Andrew George, Christian Mathias Funk, John L. Anderson, and Moroni Faulkner—worked in the cooperative furniture factory of the Brigham City Mercantile and Manufacturing Company (plates 2, 4, 11).¹³

Master furniture makers were not the only people to do skillful graining. European artists were often trained in graining and other decorative painting skills as well as in easel painting. Three who employed their graining talents in Utah were John Tullidge, from England; Danquart A. Wegge-land, from Norway but trained at the Royal Academy in Denmark; and C. C. A. Christensen, from Denmark, also trained at the Royal Academy. Christensen would farm in Mt. Pleasant summer and fall and then in winter and early spring employ whatever artistic skills, graining included, that could find a market.¹⁴

The process of graining wood (plate 1) began with the application of a base coat of thin-bodied paint to seal the wood. Next came a ground coat for the lighter tones of the simulated grain. With the third coat, always a darker one, the pattern of the grain was created. For finishes such as oak (plate 7) and maple, this coat was applied to the entire surface. Then before it dried, some of it was removed with the fingertips, combs, dry brushes, feathers, or rollers. For finishes such as rosewood (plate 8), mahogany (plates 5, 10), and maple burl, the grain was directly painted on using the darker, third coat. For marble (plate 12), several coats of a pigmented thin wash were necessary to “create the illusion of depth.”¹⁵ Only then was veining added. For a walnut finish (plates 2, 4, 6, 9, 11), both the subtractive and additive techniques were necessary. Different parts of a grain required different tools; in the case of burl, a cloth roll was used as a stamp, and the grain between was painted with a dry brush. One of the ingenious nineteenth-century tools is a checker roller, made of notched washers on a shaft with smaller washers serving as spacers. With it, an artisan could craft the fine, dark grain lines of rosewood, mahogany, and walnut. To protect the finish and complete the color, a slightly pigmented varnish or shellac was added.¹⁶

In several instances, a leather effect was painted not on the wood itself but on canvas glued to the wood. The canvas variation required the base coat and several coats of varnish to be sanded to provide a smooth surface and the graining coat to be lightly sanded to simulate leather’s stippled look. Another graining variant was simulating intricate parquetry (plate 6). Although all graining was “slightly exaggerated or enhanced to be more convincing,”¹⁷ the usual desired effect was that of authenticity. Some pioneer pieces, however, were highly expressive (plates 5, 7).¹⁸ Whatever the specific approach used, graining reflected the Utah Saints’ desire to live in beauty while making do.

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1. All three graining variations are found in a four-sided clerical desk made in 1867. Richard G. Oman, "The Foundation of Latter-day Saint Art, 1835–1890," in *Images of Faith: Art of the Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1995), 16.

2. Richard G. Oman, "The Homemade Kingdom: Mormon Regional Furniture," in *Nearly Everything Imaginable: The Everyday Life of Utah's Mormon Pioneers*, eds. Ronald W. Walker and Doris R. Dant (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 1999), 157, 174 n. "Home manufacture" referred in pioneer times to producing goods locally either for sale or for private use.

3. Marilyn Conover Barker, *The Legacy of Mormon Furniture: The Mormon Material Culture, Undergirded by Faith, Commitment, and Craftsmanship* (Salt Lake City: Gibbs Smith, 1995), 51, 52.

4. Richard L[yman] Bushman, *The Refinement of America: Persons, Houses, Cities* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993), 269, 274.

5. Barker, *The Legacy*, 37, 54.

6. C. C. A. Christensen, "The Fine Arts," translated with an introduction by Richard L. Jensen, *BYU Studies* 23, no. 4 (1983): 404–5.

7. Oman, "The Homemade Kingdom," 171.

8. Bushman, *The Refinement of America*, xix; Richard Lyman Bushman, "Was Joseph Smith a Gentleman? The Standard for Refinement in Utah," in *Nearly Everything Imaginable*, 40–41.

9. Bushman, "Was Joseph Smith a Gentleman?" 29, 40–42.

10. Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses*, 26 vols. (Liverpool: F. D. Richards, 1855–86), 9:283–84, February 23, 1862; 17:53, May 3, 1874; John Taylor, in *The Gospel Kingdom*, comp. G. Homer Durham (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1943), 283–84.

11. Christensen, "The Fine Arts," 405–7.

12. Barker, *The Legacy*, 70, 121, 122; Oman, "The Foundation," 18.

13. Barker, *The Legacy*, 50, 53, 83, 134; Oman, "The Foundation," 18; Oman, "The Homemade Kingdom," 173; Richard G. Oman, labeling for the exhibit *The Homemade Kingdom: Mormon Pioneer Regional Furniture*, Museum of Church History and Art, March 6, 1998, to January 18, 1999.

14. Oman, "The Foundation," 23, 33; Richard L. Jensen and Richard G. Oman, *C. C. A. Christensen, 1831–1912: Mormon Immigrant Artist* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1984), 2, 3, 12–15; on page 51, Jensen and Oman have a photograph of a mantel marbled by Christensen.

15. Stephen Shepherd, "Faux Painting and Graining Techniques," in *The Legacy*, 142.

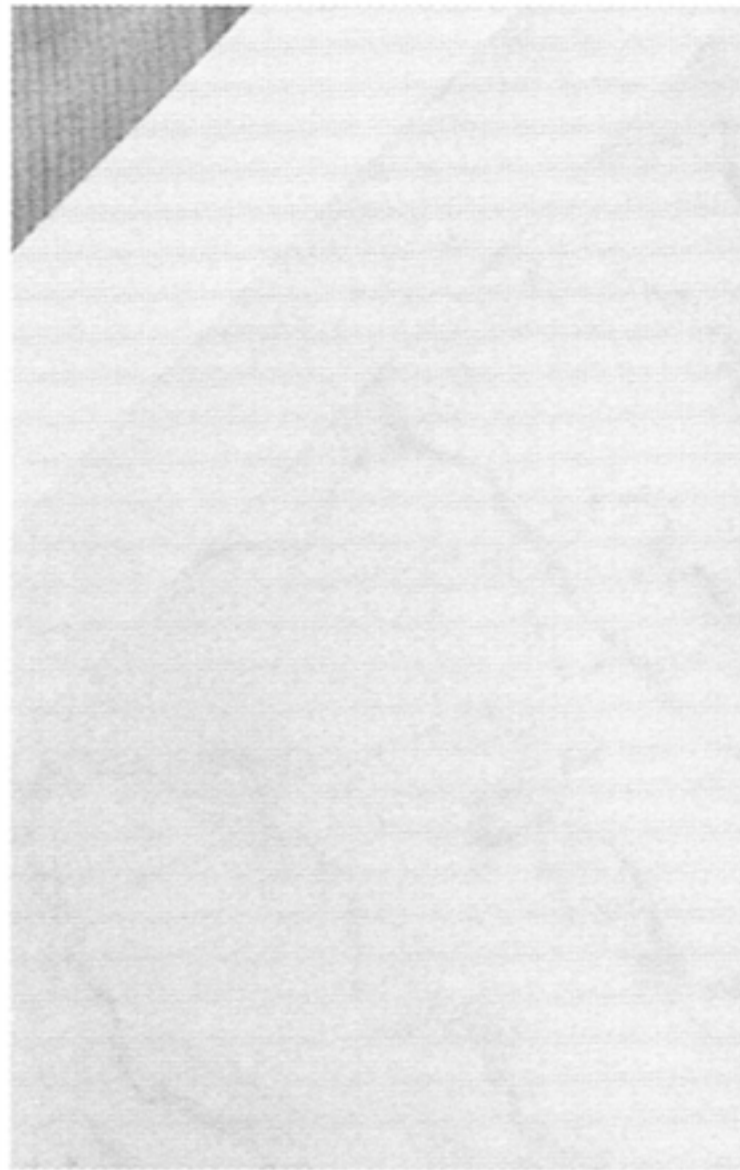
16. Oman, "The Homemade Kingdom," 165; Shepherd, "Faux Painting," 138–42.

17. Shepherd, "Faux Painting," 141.

18. Oman, "The Homemade Kingdom," 166.

PLATE 1. How graining was done
Painted by Ron Wheat, 1998

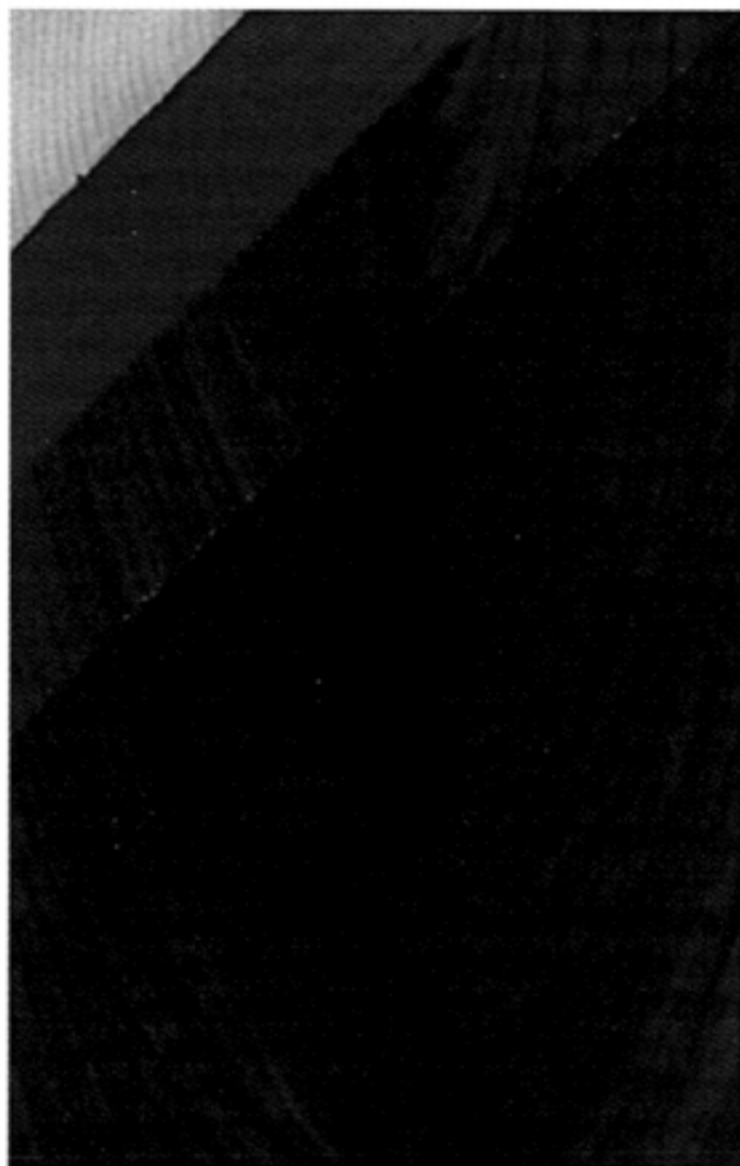
carrera
marble



Julian jade
marble



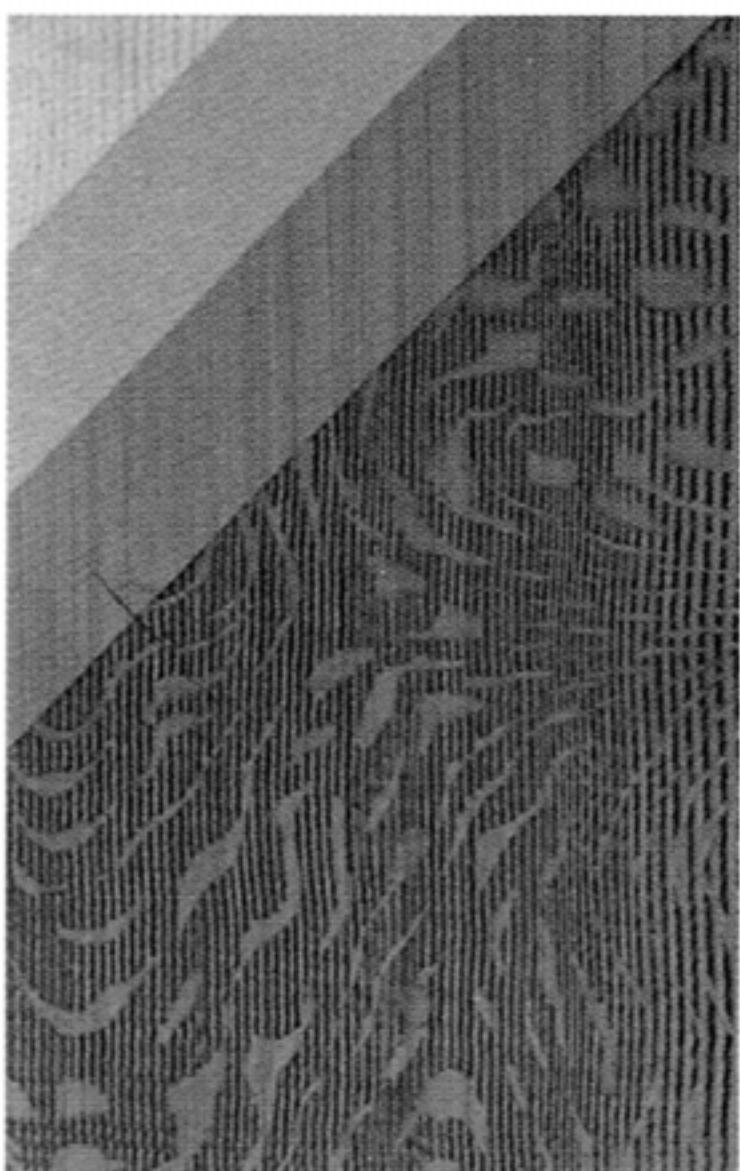
crotch
mahogany



walnut



quartersawn
oak



bird's-eye
maple

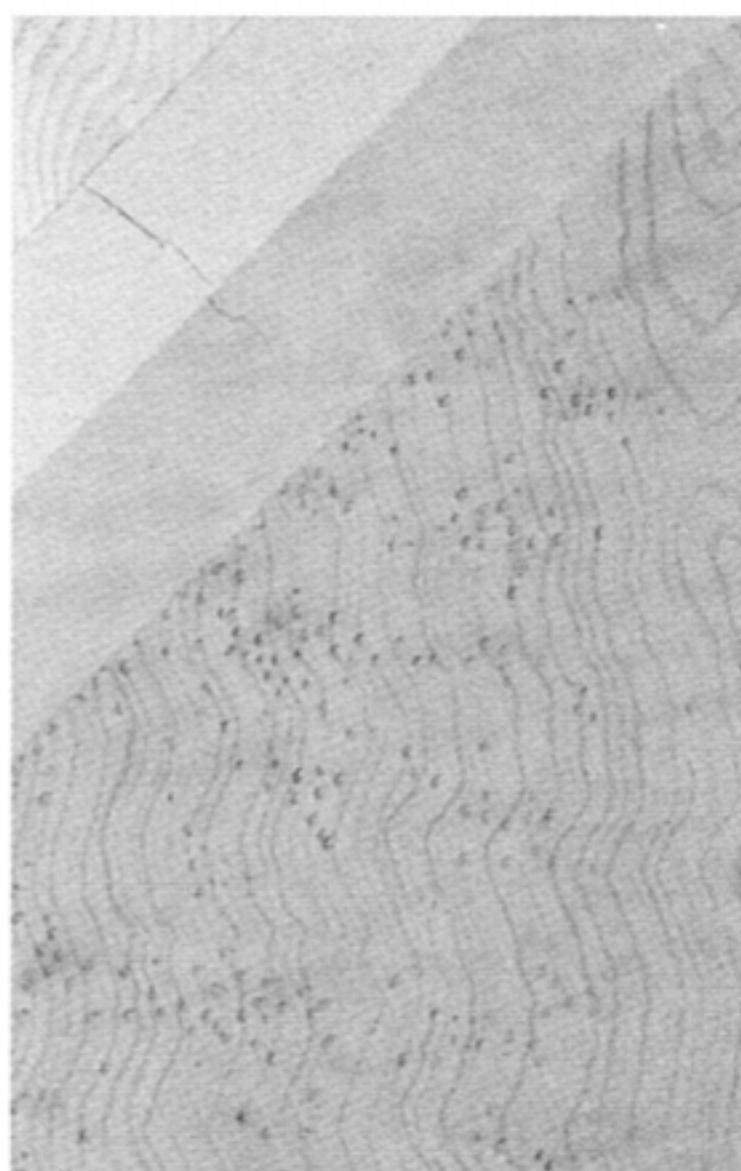


PLATE 2. Pie safe, Brigham City Cooperative Furniture Factory, Brigham City, Utah, about 1875, pine, which has been hand grained to look like walnut, and tinned sheet metal. Museum of Church History and Art, loaned by Lorenzo and Elma Hansen.



PLATE 3. Meal bin, maker unknown, location unknown, 1865–1885, wood, which has been hand grained to simulate bird’s-eye maple; metal; and porcelain. Museum of Church History and Art.



PLATE 4. China cupboard, probably made by the Brigham City Cooperative Furniture Factory, Brigham City, Utah, about 1875, pine hand grained to look like walnut and burl. Museum of Church History and Art, gift of Paul Jensen.

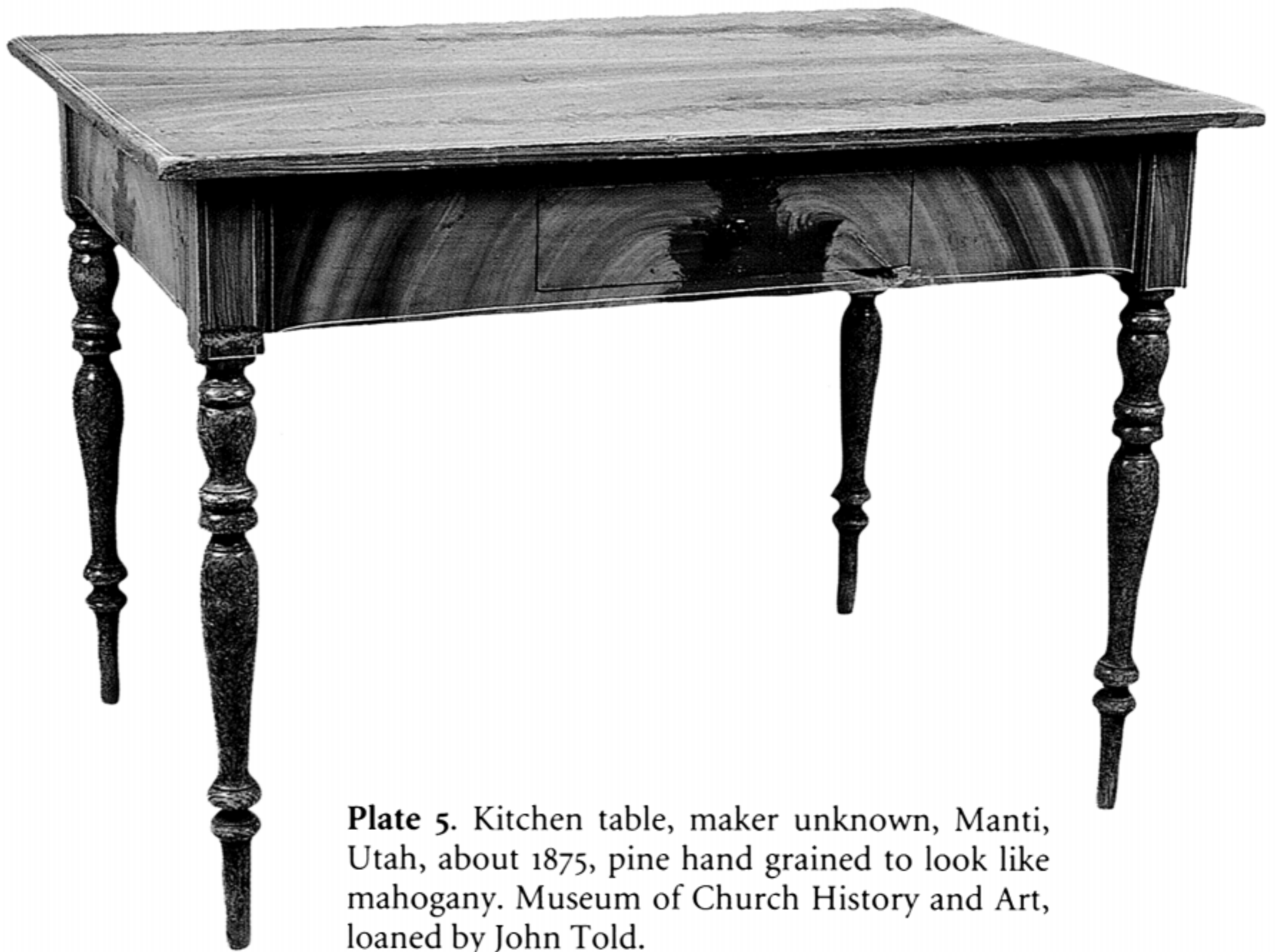


Plate 5. Kitchen table, maker unknown, Manti, Utah, about 1875, pine hand grained to look like mahogany. Museum of Church History and Art, loaned by John Told.



PLATE 6. Table and detail of its top, maker unknown, Mt. Pleasant, Utah, about 1875, pine hand grained to look like walnut parquetry. Museum of Church History and Art.



PLATE 7. Wardrobe, unknown maker, Sanpete County, Utah, probably about 1885, pine hand grained to look like frame-grain oak. Museum of Church History and Art, gift of Scott Evans.

PLATE 8. Regency couch, attributed to William Bell (1816–1886) and Ralph Ramsay (1824–1905), Salt Lake City, 1856, pine, which has been hand grained to look like rosewood, and fabric. Museum of Church History and Art.





PLATE 9 (*opposite page*). Mormon couch, Ole Swensen (no dates), Manti, Utah, after 1870, wood hand grained to look like walnut. Museum of Church History and Art.

PLATE 10 (*opposite page*). Chest of drawers, A. Swensen (1834–?), Mt. Pleasant, Utah, January 30, 1873, pine hand grained to look like mahogany. Museum of Church History and Art.

PLATE 11. Bedstead, Brigham City Cooperative Furniture Factory, Brigham City, Utah, about 1875, pine hand grained to look like walnut and burl. Museum of Church History and Art, loaned by the Brigham City Museum Gallery.





PLATE 12. Washstand, William Bell (1816–1886), Salt Lake City, about 1860, pine hand grained to look like mahogany and marble. Museum of Church History and Art, loaned by the Beehive House.