Rocking Through The Ages

The quaint charm of the rocking horse was founded in pure functionality. Since Victorian times, well-to-do families required tuition for their children in horsemanship. The motor car was not yet invented, and the horse was the main means of transport.

The children learnt to ride keeping a straight back and a still head while rocking back and forth. They could vary the motion from a gentle to-and-fro to an exhilarating gallop.

In the 17th century, curved rockers had bases like those used in cradles of that era. They were made of solid blocks of semicircular-shaped wood pegged through to cross pieces with the seat in between. The simply curved heads were silhouetted in style, like that of a hobby horse.

Later, with the preference for more detailed and elaborate carving, the rockers themselves became long, thin, graceful arcs known as bow rockers. Curved and bow rockers gave children a feeling akin to riding a real horse. Some models had saddles up to five feet or 1.5 metres off the ground to accustom the children to height. In the mid 1870s the Americans developed a safety stand, upon which the horse was suspended on two metal hoops. Three years later, the back was not yet invented, and the horse was the main means of transport.

In 1859, in America, the ‘Shoo-fly’ version of rocking horse came on the market. It had a silhouette of a horse either in a seat or a seat suspended above the rockers. In the 17th century, curved rockers had bases like those used in cradles of that era. They were made of solid blocks of semicircular-shaped wood pegged through to cross pieces with the seat in between. The simply curved heads were silhouetted in style, like that of a hobby horse.

The difference in how the horse moved and how it reinforced, metal, plastic and fibreglass. The main Australian producer, Benson’s Trading, produced the Beetle type that is padded out to form the shape, and C) a moulded form designed for covering.

A peg 10 inches (25 cm) long was placed in each hole which the child used as ‘handle bars’. This meant that a child could handle a rocking horse twelve months earlier than with reins alone. Later as they gained confidence the pegs would be removed. If the novice was a girl, the left peg would be left in and she would ride side-saddle.

Horses made in the 20th century have been manufactured 2500 units. Each horse was manufactured by Roebuck prior to 1928.

Since rocking horses were sold as toys, colours were used to attract the buyer. Reds and yellows stand out, hence the most popular saddle-cloth colour was red. Prior to World War I the reds were more a maroon colour. Gold edging on the saddle-cloth was very popular because the military used it on their saddle-cloths.

When deciding how to restore a rocking horse, you need to consider whether original proof of the age is required. Also, you need to recall that older style horses were put together with animal glue. Application of stripper removes identification features and the animal glue. It can leave the owner with a pile of wood!

Stripper bulbs are worse as the chemicals keep leaking out in the years to come, giving major paint problems.

Most manes and tails are made from cottage hair because it is available in white, the most popular colour, and it is much finer than horsehair. Brushing hairdressers like to trim the mane and tail. This eventually results in a hole where the tail attaches. Children like putting small objects inside small holes. You never know what you will find! Externally, all sorts of wear and tear can be seen from scuffs to obvious attacks from all sorts of things, including swords, darts and airguns.

The largest and most widely known maker in England was Lanes. George and Joseph Lanes commenced manufacturing rocking horses in 1850 at Kings Cross, London. The trademark was the family crest, a Highland broadsword both surrounding a Scotch thistle. After a long history, including three generations with up to five factories operating at one stage, they produced the last horse in 1931.

Australian manufacturers included J.J. Bartlett, originally of Geelong, Flinders in Melbourne (1913-1973) who copied the English G & J Lines models. Some of these horses were known as ‘the first coin-operated rides in Victoria.

The most common horse found in Australia is that made by G.H. Roebuck & Sons of Leichhardt, New South Wales. The firm’s 250-year tradition in rocking horses started when John Roebuck opened a small factory in Foston Road, London in the 1720s. In their best year, 1935, they manufactured 2500 units. Each horse was dispatched from the factory in a hessian bag filled with wood shavings as padding. They sold their last horse in 1972.

Apart from painted, carved rocking horses, they can also be covered in either hide or skin. Such horses come in three basic forms: A) the conventional carved wooden style which is hide-covered instead of being painted. B) the skeletal frame type that is padded out to form the shape. C) a moulded form designed for covering. Very few exist in their original form as the hides shrink and harden.

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