

2 The Evolution of Restoration Techniques

Carousels lived in amusement parks and traveled to county fairs, and they were given no more respect than other fairground equipment. They were functional, they entertained, but they were not thought of as art. They were part of the carnival environment and were treated as such. Most were routinely repainted as were all the other pieces of equipment at the amusement parks. The paint protected the wood and gave the equipment a fresh look.

The first repainting of the Dentzel carousel at Glen Echo Park was done by artists from the Dentzel factory, using the same decorative techniques they had applied to the original animals. However, as time went on, it became more difficult to find people who could do pin striping or could recreate blended spots and stripes. It made more sense to amusement park owners to paint the carousels the same way they painted their other rides, with household paint.

When amusement parks around America began closing in the 1960s and carousels were dismantled and their animals sold individually, people became nostalgic for the look of the original animals, and the restoration movement began. Animals were dipped in a chemical bath to remove all paint and expose the bare wood. The animals were then repainted creatively.

Sometimes entire carousels were restored that way. At Kings Dominion Park in Virginia and at Carowinds Park in Charlotte, North Carolina, the lovely Philadelphia Toboggan Company carousels there were stripped to their bare wood. The figures and the decorative panels were then repainted using automotive epoxies.

Two very important problems are introduced when this method is used. The first is that the stripping process dries out the wood, making it less stable. The second is that something of great historic value is lost forever – the original paint. How could this be allowed? It happened because the restorers of those carousels thought that the carving was the important part of the carousel figure, and they ignored the original color and design entirely.



The Herschell-Spillman menagerie carousel in Greenfield Village includes this well-dressed frog.

For the restoration of the Herschell-Spillman carousel at Greenfield Village in Dearborn, Michigan, the animals were spot checked for original color and repainted. However, the original colors were not systematically documented, and the original paint was removed.

In 1977 when restoration began on the Pullen Park Dentzel Menagerie carousel in Raleigh, North Carolina, the Pullen project became the first restoration of a carousel in which layers of park paint were entirely removed to expose and save the original paint. Twenty-eight of the animals had the original paint layer intact, and that layer was completely