

Pâpier Maché Encyclopedia Article

Pâpier Maché

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Pâpier Maché

A mixture of paper pulp, glue, chalk, and sand, pâpier maché first became popular in Europe in the mid-eighteenth century for making ornamental items such as trays, boxes, and mirror frames; it was later used in architectural decoration. The pulp mixture was pressed by hand into oiled wood molds and then baked. Since architects could supervise the making of the mold, they had greater control over the finished product. Previously, decorative work was completed on-site by a plasterer, a process which made changes or repairs difficult and costly.

Henry Clay of Birmingham patented a new and stronger version of pâpier maché in 1772. Starting with a sheet of metal or wood, he applied the pâpier maché mixture to both sides so that the finished product would not warp or bend. When enough layers had been applied to obtain the strength desired, the sheet could be cut at the edges to obtain a smooth, straight surface. It was then oven-dried to remove excess moisture and hand-oiled or varnished. The finished product could be screwed or dovetailed much like wood.

In 1842 Benjamin Cook even patented a means of using pâpier maché for casting metal. The use of pâpier maché reached its zenith at the Great Exhibition of 1851, where, in addition to decorative items, chairs, couches, and tables made of pâpier maché were featured. Its use quickly declined, however, perhaps due to the advent of plywood, which was stronger. Pâpier maché is still used today to produce and decorate small items and for the amusement of children.