Introduction

In the history of the decorative arts many materials have been used to create relief ornament. This paper is specifically concerned with one of these materials which is described as ‘composition’ or ‘compo’. Unfortunately, these terms have often been used generically or indiscriminately to describe materials which, while relevant to any comparative discussion, are not the primary concern of this paper. This can cause confusion in the interpretation of historical documents and in discussions of both a historical and technical nature. Today, composition and compo are most generally used to describe a particular material composed of four major ingredients (raw linseed oil, rosin, Scotch glue and whiting) and possibly several other minor components. This paper is specifically concerned with composition or compo so defined. ¹

The aim of this paper is to challenge the commonly held perception of compo as a largely imitative, mass produced, cheaper alternative to wood carving and therefore second-rate. The questions below seek to examine and identify the attitudes of the retailer and consumer to composition from its beginnings in the late 1700s to the point at which those attitudes changed.

Was compo ever presented as a truly innovative material?

What part did the physical qualities of the material play in forming attitudes to compo?

What do advertising methods communicate about the status of those at whom it was aimed?

What evidence is there for a wider, more architectural use and did that subsequently narrow to a more limited application on frames?

Evidence takes the form of trade cards and catalogues, together with excerpts from advertising based sources such as The Art Union. Effort has been made to show critical awareness of bias or simple miscalculation of the market, hence sources such as account books are essential in achieving a balanced picture. ² These are supplemented by physical evidence in the form of wooden moulds and the decoration/objects they produced. A full discussion of the wooden moulds is beyond the scope of this paper, however, a few examples are provided within the context of this paper where they are of particular relevance to the discussion or are linked to other key information presented here.

Analysis is concentrated on the earlier period up to around the middle of the nineteenth century. This is because the bulk of information exists for this early period for reasons clarified shortly. Other caches of chronological evidence help to delineate changes over time, in particular through the development of the London composition manufacturing firm of George Jackson & Sons.

The evidence

A consideration of prevailing attitudes to the subject of imitation in the late eighteenth century helps to place the following extracts in context: ‘In eighteenth-century France and England, as is clear from their literature on aesthetics and technology, imitation was as accepted as it was accomplished [1, p. 1].’ However, ‘Eighteenth-century theoreticians addressed imitation only as an intellectual problem, and only in the context of the fine and liberal arts [1, p. 1].’ It is not until relatively recently that the decorative arts were considered ‘worthy’ of such consideration and within this, composition’s place remains undefined.

It is clear that craftsmen often used imitative materials to enhance, elaborate on, or improve upon nature, for example, in the landscape architecture of ‘Capability’ Brown and it is quite evident in almost every area of the arts at this time. Faux coral is another example, which, through the use of artificial materials could be made into remarkable forms lacked by the genuine article but suggested by the latter. More importantly however, the impetus to do this did not come from the lack of coral at this time but was fuelled by taste. Imitation in the eighteenth century then was not content with ‘merely’ deceiving the observer but an often exhaustive search for a trickery which could amaze and delight beyond the bounds of nature itself. Novelty was everything and if that novelty came

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cheaply then so much the better. However, the use of imitative materials at this time had often nothing to do with economy, for example the use of ivory for door cases in Syon House when the shutters in the red drawing room are of gilded lead and the floor of the anteroom is of scagliola.

Trade cards are a major form of evidence for the way in which compo was retailed and consumed in the early years. They were one of the means by which semi-luxury goods of all kinds were advertised. Although very few trade catalogues or pattern books have survived, their use is indicated in some of these early cards.

The cards which are exclusively those of composition manufacturers or makers all post-date 1780. It is clear from the language used that these are some of the earliest cards describing compo when it was fairly new on the market. There is not so much a strong sense of the novelty value afforded by the new material, as assurances of its authenticity in descriptions such as ‘Real composition’, ‘Barker’s Original manufactory For Composition Ornaments’ (figure 1) and a shop bill of 1792 from the ‘Original Inventor of the Composition’ (figure 2).

Composition is depicted as a desirable, innovative material in a very similar way to patent medicine. The physical qualities of the material are never directly alluded to, but its resultant advantages such as the cost of goods and the speed at which they could be supplied are usually very prominent: ‘Those who promoted novelties often had to face the active hostility of vested interests, such as the manufacturer of substitutes or near substitutes ... [2, pp. 124-169]’ The use of language suggests that compo, in common with patent medicine, was produced in a variety of formulae by different manufacturers, each trying to reassure consumers that theirs was in some way superior to the others. Patent medicine was usually heavily branded however, precisely because formulations were not necessarily so different from one another. As these cards do not advertise the benefits of the actual formulation, it is impossible to determine whether they refer to the four-ingredient material or something similar from this evidence alone. But in not mentioning the formulation, the notion of trade secrecy and therefore the idea that the formulation is desirable through its unique physical properties is promoted.

Physical advantages of compo over carving that would be quite apparent to the consumer included the range of stock mouldings of which a ‘Large...
Assortment is always ready for Inspection - Dimensions to Any Size or Pattern (figure 3, 1784-1790). This is strongly connected to the growth of retailing at this time, particularly the success of shops, from which many of these producers were selling their goods. Furthermore, the ornament they produced was being used to decorate them. In addition to this ready-made service, descriptions stress a far more individual service of the type customers would be used to when commissioning carved works. For example, the ‘sketch and pattern provided’ for designs, noted on Jaques’ card, verso, 1799. Other clear physical advantages, and in particular the flexible qualities of compo when newly cast, include the use of compo for ‘Circular work’ which required considerable skill, planning, and above all time when executed in carved wood (figure 4). Such work would be extremely costly. The advantages of compo for updating ‘New or Old Woodwork’ is a recurrent point in these early and later cards, also recalling object and archival evidence. For example, the frame surrounding The Linley Sisters, c. 1772, by Thomas Gainsborough (1722-1788), figure 5. This neoclassical frame with fluted frieze dates to between 1770 and 1800, after which time the cavetto or scoop profile became more popular. The sight and top edge are a beautifully carved ribbon and stick, though the back edge ornament is moulded and this may be true of the beading. Simple acanthus corners in compo placed over the mitres are visible beneath the later and much larger Regency additions applied to the top edge. The first leaves are probably original and indicate that compo had been used on frames before the Regency, but they do not suggest more than this.

Affirmations of ‘short notice’ and ‘Foreign & Country Orders particularly attended to & executed with Dispatch’ communicate the speed at which ornaments could be supplied. This also indicates the scale on which compo was produced and consumed and the level of demand for such goods from foreign customers shopping in London at a time of considerable economic trouble. In addition, it highlights the role of London as the eighteenth-century centre for the dissemination of new ideas and materials. As speed was one of compo’s distinct and obvious advantages, it would be a key difference worth promoting in relation to carving in the minds of the consumer whether a direct comparison was made or not.

Direct comparisons to carving point to a period of transition from carving to compo. For example, in the compo maker Jaques’ earliest card, his busi-
ness is described as: ‘Jaques & Son, Ornamental Wood Carvers’. The composition ornament maker Thomas Poyntell’s direct comparison: ‘as neat as any carving’ provides confirmation of a ‘transition’, in addition to reassuring the consumer by stressing the similarities of compo to carving (figure 6). The fact that compo (like Sheffield plate compared to silver) could be rendered visually indistinguishable from carved ornament through painting or gilding, enabled such a comparison to be made. This points to the motivation for the development of compo as both imitative and innovative. Crucially, this comparison serves to fix the idea of composition’s viability as an alternative to wood carving in the mind of the consumer. But at the same time it strongly suggests that compo was regarded as a direct imitation of carving and that consumers really valued wood as the genuine article. This type of marketing method endorses the theory that the consumer, skeptical and opposed to change, would only accept new materials and techniques if they were perceived to be as good as or indeed better than the original. This compromise or particular form of novelty is important because it indicates that consumers would only accept new ideas and goods if they were associated with comfortingly familiar elements. Therefore, if goods were presented as too radically different they faced rejection. The newness of the new product had to be reconciled with consumers’ pre-existing experience, knowledge and expectations. Innovation had to be domesticated in almost every sense of that word, from the national to the personal. Consumers had to be offered an idea of the new artefact’s potential (both practical and symbolic) which they could recognise. It is for this reason that so many of the new products came to incorporate references to precisely familiar objects. Product innovation demanded of the supplier not just persuasion and education, but compromise and sometimes concealment [2, pp. 124-169]. Furthermore, ‘eighteenth-century manufacturers relied heavily upon the archaic model in their efforts to overcome resistance to innovation [3, p. 12].’ This method of enhancing product difference by drawing attention to similarities with the tradition model was well understood by manufacturers/retailers by this time. Through these means they were able to provide assurances without directly alluding to the material. In this way, Josiah Wedgwood (1730-1795) reproduced the Portland Vase (1790), his new techniques and materials showcased far more effectively through compari-

son than through a completely new design [4, p. 16]. His comparisons also served as publicity stunts as he understood the mass market very well: I know they are much cheaper at the price than marble, and every way better, but people will not compare things which they conceive to be made out of moulds, or perhaps stamped at a blow like the Birmingham articles, with carving in natural stones where they are certain no moulding, casting, or stamping can be done [5]. Artificial materials were successful precisely because they were a good imitation, or even an improvement on the original or traditional. The late eighteenth-century consumer’s attitude was therefore both skeptical and novelty driven.

The scale of businesses and the range of products Early cards reveal the broad range of uses to which compo was applied. The looking-glass frame and the chimneypiece feature widely, the latter still such an important part of late eighteenth-century decoration. There is one piece of advertising that may present evidence for the earliest batch production of compo. This is part of a catalogue, the main plate entitled ‘No. 303 Chimney-piece complete’: The numbers on the Chimney-piece, refer to the single Ornament, engraved full size: & are sold separate or compleat ______. Their Elegance, Duration, & Cheapness are recommended by a comparison with other Carvings ________ [6]. Although compo itself is not mentioned, it is clear that the subject of this piece of advertising is a substitute moulding material. There is nothing to immediately suggest that this was not metal, yet the comparison to the material and aesthetic qualities of carving, and low cost, suggest that the material used here was both perceived as imitative of carving and retailed as such. Each design element on the chimneypiece refers to another plate where they are featured ‘full size’ showing how a design could be made up of a variety of different elements of the purchaser’s choice. Two of the plates are dated 1776 and 1777 with the name J & O Westwood. It is almost certain that this is Obadiah Westwood, the Birmingham button manufacturer and patentee of a 1786 compo recipe; Westwood may have used his recipe some time before obtaining a patent. If this was the case, then compo was used before Jackson’s (unsubstantiated) 1780 claim to its origins. The scale of businesses is indicated by cards like that of Thomas Poyntell (1783-85), who produced work for ‘Architects, Builders and Artificers’ and
‘Funerals decently performed on the lowest terms’. Picture frames also feature frequently in these cards and in pre-compo examples indicating a level of demand that continued. Many of the cards of allied trades predating 1780 are those of carvers and gilders. However, after the emergence of compo in these cards there is no noticeable decrease in the numbers advertising in trade directories. The cards of carvers, on the other hand, advertised only a basic range of traditional goods and services, like the earlier of the two cards of William Wade (c. 1780, figure 7). However, Wade’s later card has the additional statement: ‘Composition Ornaments for Chimney Pieces’ (figure 8), indicating that those engaged in existing, traditional trades were keen to be part of new activity.

The advertising of other competing materials
Having established the emergence of the compo - sition manufacturer around 1780 via trade cards, there is a clear distinction between the way in which compo and allied and competing trades were promoted. The card of ‘Thomas Brown Plaisterer’ is more conventional than those of compo mak - ers because, although stressing the authenticity of its product: ‘All Sorts of Plaister of Paris, truly prepared for all Artists without any Adulteration’ it is devoid of all the other language suggestive of novelty (figure 9). Plaster of Paris was an old and familiar material and plastering a long established trade. It probably dates from the late eighteenth century and shows how older related and competing trades besides carving never went away.

The style of cards to promote their product
Instead of using the text, it is the images that were used in the majority of cards to promote the style or design of the ornament. Indeed, they went beyond this and delivered a message about the social status that the goods might bestow on those who pur - chased them. This is very much in line with trade
cards at this time, which relied as much on the image as the text. 7

The distinct formats to the cards changed with time and are closely linked to the point of sale. A common device is used in the card of the compo maker Barker, following a classical theme with figures, sculptural elements and a stone tablet on which the information is written (figure 1). This type of card may have been old fashioned by the 1780s and not commonly used for compo, however, its purpose was to sell the classical ideal through the use of ‘identifiable icons, whose presence transcends any particular material’ [4, p. 197].

Another simple form popular in earlier cards and trade sheets from around the 1760s is the fine-patterned border that mimics needlework (the framing of which is frequently advertised). A good example is the earlier card of William Wade c. 1780 (figure 7), which does not really communicate with the consumer, however, Wade’s card changes to reflect the style of ornaments that were being retailed as he makes the transition to compo (figure 8). 8 A number of other compo makers make good use of ornament and the chimneypiece in particular. 9 Trade cards were also an expensive form of advertising and this may have been a factor for those using older designs.

A further design among the cards of Jaques (figure 10), dating from between 1784 and 1801, features a royal crest. Claims of royal and aristocratic patronage were common in the eighteenth century. Their intention was to foster an image of high quality goods for an elite clientele of high social status but without using the goods themselves, and they are similar in this way to examples that make use of classical imagery. This is important because it has been argued that compo goods were what might be termed semi-luxury commodities because they were not custom-made on commission at the highest level [7, p. 187]. However, compo designs could be bespoke just like carved objects. New, unique moulds could be commissioned for specific tasks and to the taste of particular individuals to create an exclusive and totally hand-crafted object. The fact that a maker may subsequently have re-used the mould does not detract from this fact. For example, Jackson’s were able to secure the restoration of frames at Windsor Castle precisely because they recognised an unusual design for which they had the original mould (figure 11).

Instances where a cast from a wooden mould (or
vice versa) can be located remain rare however. Another example is the pair of Regency cabinets in figure 12, each mounted with a pair of compo crocodiles identical to those from the ‘A’ and ‘B’ moulds in figure 13 bearing the initials ‘SJ’. The weight of evidence for crocodiles as a design feature in the early nineteenth century, and the fact that they are entirely in accordance with the date of the cabinets, argues against their being added at a later date. The cabinets can be dated to at least as early as 1825, but the crocodiles represent Nelson’s victories at the Battle of the Nile (1798) and Trafalgar (1805). They are very similar to ormolu mounts on the Nelson Vase (figure 14) supplied by William Collins to John Fish around 1810, but they are smaller and certainly not identical. The moulds may therefore have been carved shortly after such examples, either using them as a model or perhaps using a printed source.

Trade cards of the 1820s and 1830s provide evidence of further developments, often using the picture frame as a pictorial device. Figure 15 shows a highly decorative sweep sided frame that was fashionable but by no means new at this time. Such evidence supports that from the earliest Jackson account book (1805-1818) that the demand for frames was strong. Although popular in the eighteenth century, cards sometimes used a shop front or interior (figure 16, c. 1827) to remind the consumer of the particular goods purchased there and the retail experience in general. The card of George Sully is slightly later and aimed at the trade (figure 17, c. 1840). Despite the range of trades supplied with ornament (including for example the manufacture of letters) the design of this card again suggests that at this date, frame-makers were among the primary customers. George Sully may be linked to moulds bearing the initials ‘GS’ (figure 18) hand-carved into one of the faces of a mould carved on both sides and thought to date from the early 1820s. The gothic revival ornament is consistent with this date and could have been used to decorate the early ‘Upright Gothic Piano Forte’ from 1826 (figure 19). Why Sully (or the individual responsible) carved as opposed to stamped his initials (as is sometimes the case) remains unclear. His ownership, as distinct from authorship, is not indicated by the extra time taken to carve the initials but does reveal the level of care and pride with which these objects were created. Sully, like Jackson’s also had the expertise to produce compo ornament and to carve the moulds.

Figure 12 A pair of Regency mahogany and she-oak cabinets, (Lot no. 184, Sotheby’s sale catalogue, ‘Fine English Furniture’, London, 22 March 2002).

Figure 13 ‘A’ and ‘B’ crocodile moulds bearing the initials ‘SJ’ Crocodile moulds.

Figure 14 The Nelson Vase by William Collins (c. 1810) centerpiece from the ‘Fish Suite’, on loan to the Royal Pavilion, Brighton.
Although composition making was not a craft necessarily demanding great specialisation, it did rely on the moulds, and thus if a frame-making workshop were to produce compo ornament on their own premises, they would need a reasonable stock of these. The acquisition of a stock of moulds would require a substantial expansion of the business in terms of space and cost. Furthermore, continued outlay would be necessary to replenish the existing stock with the latest designs. As compo designs would keep for several weeks if carefully wrapped, the obvious course would be to buy these designs ready-made from the specialist manufacturer. Compo making required relatively simple ingredients, the majority of which could be found within the frame-maker’s workshop, but it did require a degree of skill developed over time. Many frame-makers, too busy with other processes, could choose not to invest when the pressings could be purchased ‘ready-made’. The applied decoration of early nineteenth-century musical instruments indicates that designs were bought in from compo makers as such a trade was obviously highly specialised (figure 20). Therefore, carved moulds were specially commissioned for certain tasks.

The durability of the material
Millar’s historical (late nineteenth-century) text extolling the virtues of compo on shop fronts corroborates information from the earliest trade cards:
It [compo] was largely used in Edinburgh, Glasgow, Dublin, and other towns for the decoration of wood mouldings on shop fronts, many of which are still in existence, and the composition seems harder and in a better state of preservation than the wood work on which it was fixed. This gives ample evidence of its durability, [my italics] even when exposed to all weathers [8, p. 297].

Although no surviving examples have been located, an early catalogue (c. 1830s) is entirely devoted to these façades made in papier mâché. It is possible that these or similar designs were also made up in compo, perhaps at a slightly earlier date, strengthening Millar’s reference. The fine detail achieved with compo was surplus to requirements in this instance, and bulky designs would be extremely heavy. The durability of compo may have been a problem, despite the fact that Millar indicates the quality of examples that survived at least to the end of the nineteenth century. Durability is also noted quite frequently in relation to papier mâché, thus the physical quality and durability of a material were usually critical to its acceptance.\(^6\)

Part II of Jackson’s 1839 catalogue still survives.
where they describe themselves as ‘Composition ornament and improved papier mâché and carton pierre manufacturers, modellers, carvers, and workers in ornamental Roman Cement and Plaster of Paris’ [9]. Composition is still afforded a relatively prominent position. Their promotional assertions at the beginning of this catalogue provide insight into both the aims and practices of a major manufacturer of compo at this time and some clues as to the demands of their customers. The language shows that novelty now lies almost purely in ‘design and increased feeling and beauty of execution’ and no longer in the material itself. Design and ‘higher matters of taste’, which had been important to the late eighteenth-century consumer, had become far more important than the type of casting material used. Nevertheless, references to carton pierre and improved papier mâché, which feature heavily in the catalogue for the first time, seek to reassure consumers that material deficiencies such as the stability of the material over time have been resolved. Clearly concerns about the durability of materials, which had always been an issue, had not disappeared.

The 1840 catalogue of the Queen’s decorators H.W. & A. Arrowsmith is partly aimed at the trade and indicates that a broader range of materials, old and new, were now available to the consumer for various elaborate architectural schemes:

The ornaments shown in our design are to be in relief; and may be made of composition, plaster of Paris, or any substance which can be run in moulds, or formed by a tool. Some persons prefer the introduction of carvings in wood; but the expense is greatly increased, and but little advantage is gained either in appearance or strength [10, p. 20].

Even though the most eminent decorators of the day advocated the use of moulding materials, it is clear that their customers sometimes preferred carved wood. Similarly, an extract from The Art Union expresses a contemporary (1842) view of papier mâché. The purpose of the journal was to report on novelty and innovation as a marketing resource for firms. All the uses towards which papier mâché is directed here include those associated with compo, but its advantages over compo are much promoted. However, the comparison to wood carving is still there, implying that carving was still considered the benchmark of quality by which cast materials were measured:

... picture frames which, bid fair to rival the best carving in wood ever applied to the same purpose, .... The frames of Mr. Bielefeld present the best
characteristics of fine carving, the course of the chisel, though subdued, is everywhere apparent, and the liberal resort to undercutting, and occasionally nearly alto relief, realise the peculiar finesse and spirit of the best manipulatists amongst the old carvers in wood; substituting, for the dull, prim, and mechanical mediocrity of works in putty composition, an easy, liberal and artistic dexterity in the execution, ... they are liable to no injury from chipping, as the common frames are; we have seen the effect of a picture entirely ruined in consequence of the frame being shattered during transit. An essential advantage also is, that these frames weigh no more than half the weight of the usual frames of the same sizes [11, p. 61]. Weight and durability could be a significant problem for compo no matter how satisfactory the recipe. The journal devotes much energy to the aesthetic superiority of papier mâché, its ‘rare artistic qualities, which are lost at the height of a room or the summit of a column’, precisely because it produced ornament that lacked the crisp detail of composition. In an effort to convince readers that problems with ‘durability in any atmosphere’ had now ‘ceased to be a matter of doubt’, this extract reveals that the durability of papier mâché was still an issue. Through direct comparisons, it is clear that despite composition’s failings it still retained a place in the market of 1842. Nevertheless, the production of frames in papier mâché may have presented some competition [11, p. 257].

The continued use of old and ‘new’ casting materials

Within the same journal, an advertisement of C.J. Eckford from 1841 indicates that picture frames were still using compo (figure 21). The primary emphasis here is on low cost but reinforced by the range and quality of available goods and services. A slightly later advertisement (1844) from the same firm cites a ‘splendid and extensive stock of picture frames...in imitative oak, from 20s. upwards’ showing that there is no attempt to disguise the use of emulative materials and suggesting that they were now regarded as important in their own right’ [12, p. 274].

One entry within the earliest surviving customer account book of Jackson’s (1805-1818) provides a fascinating record of Eckford’s operations during the early years of trading. It shows above all that his frames were made by Jackson’s [1, pp. 91-92]. Jackson’s completed all the work except the gilding. For example, ‘ornamentg’ [sic] refers to the application of composition ornament; ‘sweeping’,
the cutting of the curves for a sweep sided frame; ‘witing’ [sic], the gesso; ‘cutting through’ refers to the piercing of the ornament in frames such as those surrounding the Turners’ from 1831 (figure 22), and finally ‘chequing’ refers to the cross-hatch pattern in the gesso (still created by hand with a carving flute or similar tool at this time). At the time of the ledger Eckford’s involvement seems largely to have been retail - buying frames wholesale from Jackson’s and providing the desired finish, and there is no reason to believe that Eckford’s business operations had much changed by the 1840s. There are some important differences however. Comparing the retail prices of frames in the 1840s trade sheet to the trade prices in the Jackson ledger, prices in fact came down over a period of twenty-five years [1, pp. 112-120]. The ledger indicates that the styles were very similar to those of the later trade sheet. However, the early examples from the ledger had numerous pierced areas of decoration whereas by 1841 Eckford was no longer providing this considerable extra refinement. This had to be done by hand and thus frames could be more competitively priced by reducing refinements. Examples matching these patterns show that quality could be reasonable and still produced with traditional moulds, although ultimately quality was compromised (figure 23). These frame types were purchased in large quantities by collectors such as John Sheepshanks (1787-1863) and Richard Ellison (1788-1860) to frame their contemporary collections of oils and watercolours and were widely used at this time. Demand ensured competition which kept prices down, although these prices were still only within the reach of the upper-middle classes at this stage. Despite the lack of refinements, each object was still individually produced. Another excerpt from The Art Union gives a view of composition in 1846, through the firm of George Jackson on whom the commentary is based. It is not many years since ‘composition’ was almost the only material employed to imitate carving, and in its early application little other use was made of it than the decorating of doors, shutters, chimney-
pieces, etc. The style of architecture in vogue, at the time this invention was first introduced, was peculiarly suited to the mode of production best calculated for this material; and many houses in the metropolis, particularly those erected by the Messrs. Adam, the architects of the Adelphi, are profusely decorated with composition ornaments. Improved taste soon required that the material, or some other, should be rendered capable of more extensive development, and that works in high relief should be produced; to this may be traced the origin of many of those attempts that are constantly made to bring in to use other materials, and several compositions have been devised possessing different degrees of value according to the purposes to which they are to be applied [13, p. 53].

Although this extract gives a nineteenth-century view of the eighteenth-century use of the material, the relative merits of the various materials within the class at this period were well understood. It was the taste in the 1830s and 1840s for ornament in high relief with undercuts that provided the impetus for the constant attempts at developing different materials.

By 1846, producers were finding new ways to use old and ‘new’ casting materials. Such methods of production were considered innovative and composition was recognised as adding value, not taking it away ‘as much greater elegance may be gained than by adhering too rigidly to the monotonous repetition of castings, to which they [architects] now resort [13, p. 53]. Those objects ‘where part of the design required a greater delicacy of finish ... have been mounted with composition’ [13, p. 53]. The staircase (figure 24) is an example of the combined use of materials to produce an object whose design is influenced by the use of these materials. The basic shapes were made of hardwood and the foliate enrichments ‘coated on’ in composition: ‘By this means a very elegant effect is produced, and a large amount of expense saved [13, p. 53]’. Again, it is the way in which the material is used here and not the material itself that is said to be new or different.

By 1874, the catalogue of the furniture company James Shoolbred illustrates, through entire room schemes in specific styles in addition to individual pieces, the change in the way objects were now displayed and consumed [14]. Many examples undoubtedly relied upon composition for their decoration (figure 25). At this point, compo was no longer considered a novelty and is rarely mentioned. This catalogue is aimed at the now far wider, middle-class retail market that demanded decorating ideas. Naturally, large manufacturers like Jackson’s would have relied on the trade. Manufacturers then, as today, were fulfilling a dual role and catering to the retail sector through a shop, often with the factory or workshops behind. This would provide a visible presence, always a primary form of advertising.

By the 1870s, compo had long since ceased to be retailed as an important material in its own right. It is not mentioned in Jackson’s 1882 catalogue of ‘Cornices’ at their ‘Carton Pierre, Papier Mâché and Patent Fibrous Plaster Works’ [15]. Their 1885 catalogue of ‘Architectural Ornaments & c’ is concerned with patent fibrous plaster and carton pierre only [16], and their 1889 catalogue of the same name mentions a wide range of materials, but again, compo is excluded: ‘Papier mâché, carton pierre, plaster and cement manufacturers patentees of the canvas plaster; wood carvers & c.’ It is felt to be significant that this 1889 catalogue is the first in which Jackson’s state that they were established in 1780. Competition from specialist machine manufacturers and the constant development of materials may have driven Jackson’s to foster an association with Adam as a marketing tool, particularly at a time when neoclassicism was enjoying renewed popularity.

Summary

Compo was retailed as a novelty but was compared to familiar, traditional woodcarving to render it acceptable to the innately skeptical eighteenth-century consumer. By the middle of the nineteenth century, evidence indicates that compo added value and was marketed as a desirable material in its own right, although it was the design made possible by the material and not the material itself that was important to consumers at this point.

Early comparisons to carving indicate that compo was a very recent introduction in the 1780s in England. As compo was retailed in a similar way to patent medicine, the formula was deliberately kept secret to create the idea that it was desirable through its unique physical properties and to keep it out of the hands of potential competitors. This implies that there was actually not a great deal of difference between one formula and the next in terms of its handling qualities. Although the formula is concealed, it is clear that the material to which the cards refer had the same physical characteristics as the compo with which this paper is concerned. For example, its use for ‘Circular work’. The appearance of compo recipes
within trade manuals by the 1820s marks the end of a period of novelty and thus a relaxation in trade secrecy surrounding early developments. Early cards further confirm diversity within the structure of the trade and support the evidence of surviving ledgers for the carving, gilding and frame-making trades. The material would need to have the physical properties of compo to sustain these operations. It is also clear that producers supplied both the wholesale and retail market, some firms, catering more to one than the other. The earliest cards confirm the broad range of applications, which subsequently narrowed to use predominantly but not only on picture frames in the early nineteenth century. By contrast, larger producers such as Jackson’s seem to have reverted to a mainly architectural output by the 1830s and it is the carvers, gilders and frame-makers who continue frame production in compo for the most part, though there are exceptions.

The use of card designs to equate goods with the idea of exclusivity and discriminating taste, in line with the advertising of other goods at this time, was a means of overcoming skepticism surrounding moulding materials, and of offering reassurance. It was not necessarily an indication that the goods were made in an inferior way to carved goods, at least before the introduction of machinery, as is frequently the interpretation. The visual imagery of retailing literature suggests that although compo production was essentially a batch production, producers were still targeting the higher end of the market. Although the beauty of compo was that repeat patterns could be produced at speed, compo designs, for the most part, were a direct product of the intaglio carving skills, and good casts directly reflect these skills. Work could be custom made at the highest end of the market. Many objects decorated with composition have no less rich a provenance than their carved counterparts, although they are considerably more complex. The fact that compo was used to modernise outmoded designs both during neoclassicism and the Regency runs counter to the argument that compo was used in a purely imitative way.

Durability clearly was, and still is a key issue for all products. The fact that so many compo objects to have survived are in very poor condition points toward damage and deterioration as a major factor in forming compo’s reputation as a poor quality mass-produced material. However, it is important to remember how these objects would have appeared when first made.

Victoria Coibion, frames conservator
Brussels, Belgium
victoria.coibion@icloud.com

Notes
1 For a more complete discussion of composition the material, see [1].
2 It is fortunate that one ledger of customer accounts from the major compo producer, George Jackson & Sons, dated 1804 but containing information from the years 1805-1818, has survived the destruction of much of their archive material. See also Chapter Three [1].
3 Jaques’ card of 1790.
4 Date unknown but thought to be in the 1790s.
5 Perceval Collection, Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge. Jaques seems only to have been known as Jaques & Son for a short time in the early 1790s, according to the trade directories, used to assist the dating of these cards. See Appendix I [1].
6 For further information on this subject see Chapter Three in [1], pp. 81-83.
8 Wade is noted in trade directories at 86 Leadenhall Street, removed from the earlier address at no. 42.
9 The same chimneypieces continue to feature in Jaques’ cards. That of 1799, shows an alternative design, although still of neoclassical inspiration.
10 The provenance traces these cabinets to Embley Park, Hampshire, home of Florence Nightingale and her family from 1825. They may have formed part of the contents of their previous home, Lea Hurst in Derbyshire. See lot no.184 in Sotheby’s, ‘Fine English Furniture’, London, 22 March, 2002.
11 Very similar crocodiles can be seen forming the hilts of swords at the same date.
12 See: Gleeson, Janet, ‘John Fish and the Dolphin furniture at Brighton Pavilion’, Apollo (September 1997) [pp. 9-13]. This article notes that William Collins had a glass manufactory at 277 Strand and that he was ‘a celebrated maker of pier and chimney glasses and lamps’. It is therefore most likely that he was well acquainted with the work of compo manufactories in London, although the precise nature of his operations requires further investigation.
13 As listed in London trade directories under both ‘carvers and gilders’ and ‘compo ornament makers’.
There is clear evidence that composition ornament was used to decorate pianos at this time and other musical instruments such as harps. See [1, p. 90].

Although undated, this date was assigned because Jackson’s were at 50 and 49 Rathbone Place at this time (from their catalogue). The styles also suggest the late 1830s, in addition to the fact that two other catalogues are known to have been produced in this decade.

Another late seventeenth-century example of consumer resistance to the quality of new goods was the failure of the East India company to sell imported cotton shifts over those made of the traditional linen because they were not as durable and the quality of the sewing may also have been a factor [2, pp. 124-169].

A note in the text refers to this second part of the collection as ‘Various Articles of Taste and Furniture’.

See also Chapter Two, [1].

References

• 27 plates from a catalogue of designs, Department of Prints and Drawings, Victoria and Albert Museum, M.64g / E.1467-1493-1907.
• Jackson, George & Sons, Part II of the Collection of G. Jackson & Sons, manufacturers of Composition and Improved papier mâché, London, Jackson (1839).
• The Art Union (1842).
• The Art Union (1844).
• The Art Union (1846).
• Jackson, George & Sons, Cornices, London, Jackson (1882).
• Jackson, George & Sons, Architectural Ornaments &c., London, Jackson (1885).