

In Depth:

Tacks vs. Leather Ornaments

Both furniture tacks and leather ornaments are small metal objects that were manufactured by foundries utilizing cast molding techniques, so they can often be similar in appearance. The function of these objects could overlap as well, so it can be a problem for archaeologists to choose appropriate terms when cataloging these finds. As a general rule, a circular flat or domed tack with a single tine is considered furniture-related, while decorative ornaments with multiple tines on the back are considered leather adornment. There are exceptions to this rule, however. Large molded decorative brass fittings with multiple tines on the back have been used to decorate high-end furniture (Figure 1), and single-tined metal tacks might be used on horse-related leather (Fennimore 1996).

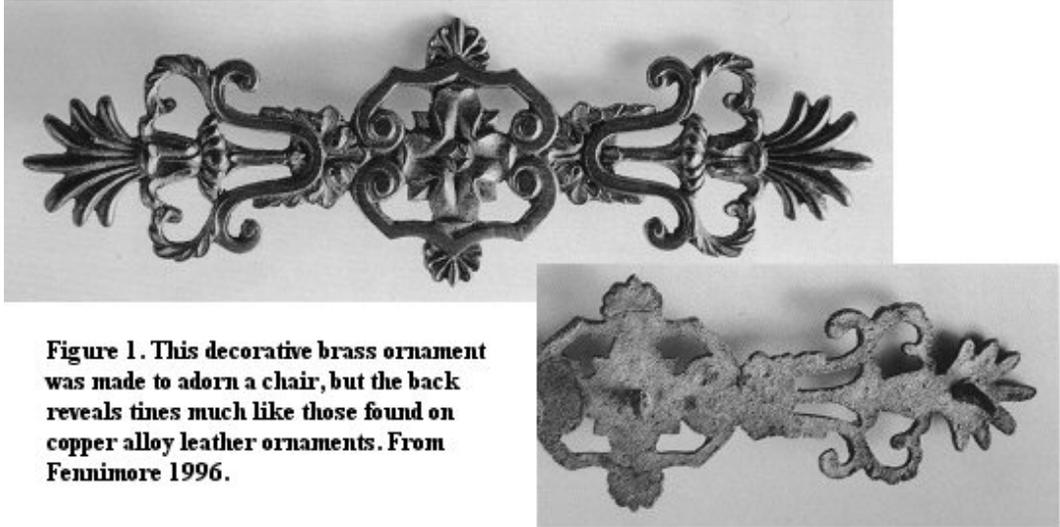


Figure 1. This decorative brass ornament was made to adorn a chair, but the back reveals tines much like those found on copper alloy leather ornaments. From Fennimore 1996.

Leather ornaments with multiple tines on the back have been known by various terms, such as leather escutcheon, mount, stud, boss, and spot (Figure 2). They are generally associated with horse furniture in Colonial America because

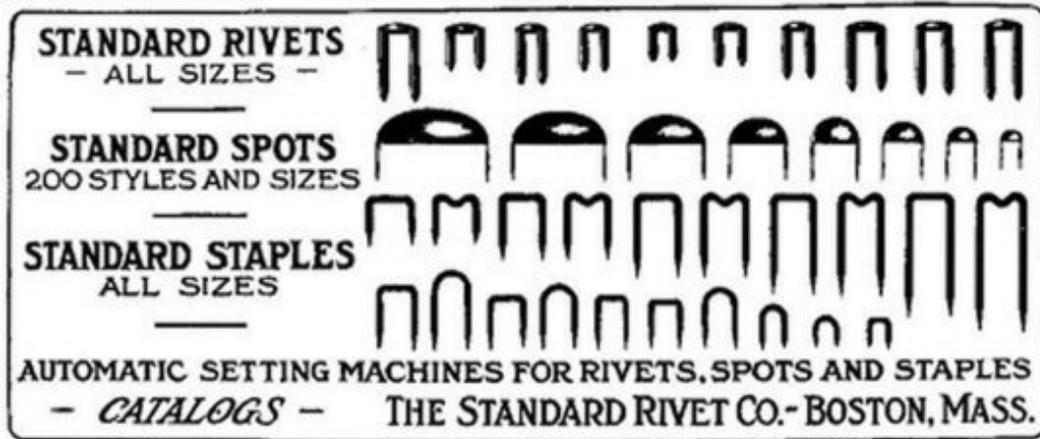


Figure 2. The September 1919 *Harness Gazette* featured this ad for The Standard Rivet Co. which offers "200 styles and sizes" of multi-tined "spots" that look much like many of the plain domed leather ornaments found on Maryland sites.

the use of such ornaments on clothing became unpopular by the early 16th century (Egan 2005). Some belts, spur straps, and other personal accessories continued to carry such decoration, however, and the use of metal ornaments on leather persists to the present day.



Figure 3. Single-tined decorative tack from Mattapaney-Sewall (18ST390). Courtesy Naval District Washington, Naval Air Station Patuxent River.

Copper alloy tacks, also known as brads, trunk nails, chair nails, or coffin nails, could be used to hold upholstery or leather coverings in place, or they could be added for purely decorative reasons after iron nails had already attached the upholstery. Plain domed tacks of various sizes were by far the most common type in the 17th and 18th centuries, but rare molded or decorative shapes exist, such as the star or flower-shaped motif from King's Reach (18CV83) and Mattapaney (18ST390) (Figure 3). Chairs, couches, trunks, bellows, and other household items with leather coverings might employ these tacks, or tacks could be used to add elaborate patterns such as hearts, dates, or initials to furniture or coffins. Single-tined tacks could also be horse-related, however, as they could be used on saddles to help attach leather coverings to wooden frames, and they might also appear as decorations on carriages.

pieces of furniture with similar assembly techniques. In 1836, Edward Hazen noted in *The Panorama of Professions and Trades* that:

The manufacture of trunks is equally simple with that of harness. In common cases, it consists chiefly in lining the inside of a box with paper, or some kind of cloth, and covering the outside with a skin, or with leather, which is fastened to the wood by means of tacks. Narrow strips of leather are fastened upon hair trunks with brass nails, by way of ornament, as well as to confine the work.... In the United States, this branch of business is very commonly united with that of the saddler and harness-maker. [Hazen 1837:74]

Carriage-makers might also be involved in harness and saddle repair and manufacture, as well as trunk-making. The truly fashionable (and wealthy) buyer might therefore call on a carriage-maker to manufacture a coach with matching harnesses and traveling trunks so that brass fittings on each piece shared a unified, stylish look from the nose of the horse to the cargo strapped to the back. For example, in 1777 the Reverend John Drake ordered a coach and accessories from John Wright and Co. of London, and the invoice includes:

"A new Coach neatly run with raised beads, painted dark green with Arms & Crests, the Leather japan'd and brass beads all round it..., a Leather Trunk, [and] a new pair of Wheel Harness and Bridles, brass sliders round the Housings, engrav'd brass Crests, screwings, watering hooks, polish'd Bitts, Reins' fronts bound and roses." [Nockolds 1977:70-71]



Figure 4: This 1696 coach exhibits beading that may represent brass tack heads. From Stratton 1878.

In this passage, "brass beads" probably refer to tacks on the coach, the "engraved brass crest" is an ornament for the harness, and "roses" probably refer to the bridle bosses (Figure 4).

Unfortunately, tacks and ornaments often found their way into the archaeological record one-by-one, while the horse furniture, upholstered chairs, trunks, and other objects of which they had been a part remained in use. The objects

therefore often lack associated artifacts such as bridle bits, harness buckles, or furniture hardware that might be indicative of their source. In such cases, it may not be possible to assign a specific function. Archaeological cataloguers should therefore rely on terms that are specific enough to imply form but vague enough to avoid major assumptions about function. The MAC Lab has adopted the term "tack" for single-tined metal attachments and "leather ornament" for multi-tined metal attachments.

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