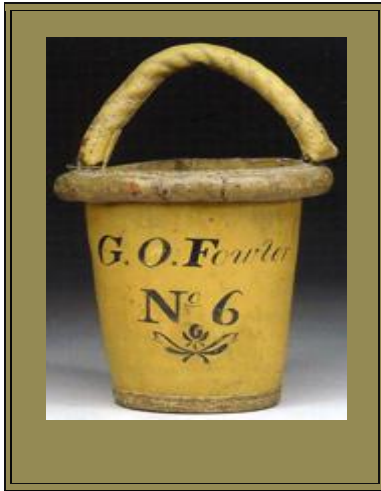


Gold Leaf and the Tradition of Artwork on Fire Trucks

Fire buckets in colonial towns had the owners names painted on them. Laws often required residents to purchase them and keep them in repair. In the 1680s, in New York, the number of buckets a home or business needed was determined by the risk of fire. A baker must have three buckets and a brewer had to have six buckets on hand in case of fire. The buckets held about three gallons of water.



“Bucket Brigades” were used commonly which consisted of 2 lines of people stretching from the town well to the fire. Lines of sturdy, male volunteers passed the bucket from hand to hand. When emptied they were returned by another line of boys and women, to be refilled.

Prior to the invention of useful hose in 1807, water to supply the engines had to be conveyed by buckets. All residents were required by law to keep available in their houses, buckets for use at fires. To easily identify their bucket, owners usually marked them with their name, initials or street number. Many were emblazoned in oil paints with coats-of-arms, portraits or other insignia. Each neighbor tried to outdo the other, making each bucket more ornate.

By the mid-eighteenth century hand pumpers were in use, but the tradition of the artwork lived on. The invention of the steam engine and hose reel in the mid 19th century saw the end of the bucket brigades. However, this early equipment was also painted and decorated.

The yearly fire fighters parade was an important occasion in cities and towns around the country in the late 19th century. The special items worn and used at the events are important collectibles. The costumes worn by the different fire companies were colorful and special decorations were painted on engine panels. Famous artists, such as Thomas Sully and Joseph Johnson, were commissioned to paint panel motifs. These included scenes from mythology or historical American battle scenes and heroes. They were finished off with silver plate, burnished brass and gold leaf trim.



Even working helmets were adorned with metal trim called “fronts”. Some were even topped with a metal ornament of a horse or eagle.

Engine lamps, with etched glass designs and company numbers, as well as fire department lanterns were popular.



Today’s truck artwork consists of “gold leaf” replicated on vinyl, thereby greatly reducing costs to local volunteer fire companies.

For more fire history visit: <http://firehistory.weebly.com/tidbits.html>