

Block Magic

The further development of this industry in America is bound to come, now that responsible textile interests are calling into their service artists of originality, and the demand for the best is quickened by the leading Interior Decorators

JOHN WALKER HARRINGTON



Courtesy of American Museum of Natural History.

Teakwood block from India, collected by Mr. Lockwood de Forest, with silk printed from it. The design is one of the most primitive types.

THE keynote of the recent exhibition of American Decorative Art at the American Museum of Natural History harked back to the culture of primitive peoples. It revealed their influence on our own textile art since the outbreak of the late war which caused designers in this country to seek inspiration from American sources, from the tombs of the Incas and the gay garments of the North American aborigines.

In all this foregathering of the artisans of the weaving world, the appeal to the decorative sense was the strongest in the examples of our re-born block printing industry. We have had printing from the wood for the adorning of linens and cottons, as the schools interpret it, for several decades, but here are the very beginnings of a craft which will one day rival that of England and of France. The

decorators who are called upon to set the mode for the beauty of American house interiors, as well as those who delight in furnishing their own homes with hangings which are individual as well as artistic should welcome this new industry. As the interest in the hand printed fabrics increases, as it is bound to do, there is no reason at all why we should not have in the United States printeries both large and small, devoted to the production of textiles direct from the mallet.

The well-conceived display at the American Museum was chiefly valuable in giving the settings and the historic backgrounds for nascent arts. It provided the horizons of culture, as Dr. Herbert J. Spinden delights to put it. Especially was this true with regard to the block printing.



An exquisite Jacobean design of well-balanced and distributed pattern, showing detail of embroidery motif, especially belonging to that period.



This interesting and elaborate design of block printing, reflects the influence of various periods, in a bolder, more aggressive, modern conception.

color is used, for here the art is revealed in its simplest form.

The East Indians however, as shown in the splendid specimen lent by Mr. M. C. D. Crawford, employed a variety of small blocks in the printing of large designs, laying on the various colors with a care and patience which amazes the American. Few such fabrics as these are available now, for the Hindoos have been long under the spell of quick production and aniline dyes. To them, as the name chintz indicates, the English owe their own block printing ideas.

Much the same interest and charm as that found in the hand printed fabrics from the land of Buddha appeared in specimens of Persian origin with their manifold scrolls. There were also seen blocks which the Japanese use at times to multiply the designs on their batiks.

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Courtesy of Marshall Field & Co. Bouquet Vista design adaptable to the various modern forms of decoration.

Draped over a case, was a huge sheet of tapa or mulberry bark cloth brought from the Fiji Islands and on it was imprinted a rude design. The savages had carved paddles deeply and had slapped on the coloring with them in an unconventional way. The imprints, however, were in the same general direction, and when the work was done, the curtain which was thus produced had a character and interest which captures our civilized attention.

From this simple paddling it is not a far cry to the more ornate printing done from the teakwood blocks which were lent to this exhibition from the collections of Mr. Lockwood deForest. The art was developed early in the Orient and the even-grained teak, so well adapted for carving, is an ideal material for the making of patterns. These blocks are fitted at their backs with huge handles on which the operator can get a strong grip. He can thus print off the close, fine designs in sections of six inches in width. The same



Watteau Jony Design is one of the black prints which responds to the present day trend of classical decoration.

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After one has duly orientated himself and swept these "horizons of culture," he is in a good position to sense all the feeling that there is in the block printed textiles which graced this epochal exhibit. One Chicago firm had a varied display of linens and cottons elaborately printed from the wood, and a New York house placed in the very front of its booth a silk, in Peruvian style, which had undergone the same process. The wooden slabs with which the patterns had been impressed by hand were shown in both instances. They were modeled on the same lines as the blocks from English sources.

It may be some time before our own block printing will rival that of Great Britain and France, but a good beginning has been made. The development of such an industry on this side of the water is bound to come, now that representative textile interests are calling into their service artists of originality and force, as well as skilled artisans.

There is a personality in the printing of fabrics with the wooden block which makes for their individual charm. The United States is a land of large production and small patience, but the time is coming soon when we shall have quality as well as quantity output. Block printing is an ideal industry for the new era. There are many persons of wealth and taste who are willing to pay good prices for fabrics which necessarily must be exclusive in design.

From whence do these hand block prints derive the character which makes them so deservedly desirable? Here again we get back to the aboriginal, for the very irregularity which we see in the figures on the potteries and the textiles of primitive peoples, appears in this modern craft. There is a lure of refreshment and interest everywhere. The skilled workmen who print the wood are in theory doing their very best to have an exact meeting of all parts of the designs which are laid on with the blocks each spread with different hues. The long strips of the cloth are stretched on tables which rest on solid foundations, and the artisans pass along with the slabs laying them on with care and often pounding them smartly when an especial depth of color is desired. Sometimes, however, so fallible and therefore interesting is man, the designs of the different blocks do not precisely register and there is a merging of two shades at the edges of the pattern which adds softness to the outline. Even the slight variations in the tones and shades due to this hand process add the charm of surprise to the final result.

Excellent as are the results which are obtained from the ma-

chine printed textiles, the block gives a certain solidity and richness of hue which is difficult to imitate. The pigment seems to sink in deeper and to give a certain quality which is inherent. One is conscious of an effect which suggests dark velvety depths and an air of mystery.

The value of the block comes out the most, however, in the sense of perspective which it imparts. Compare a hand printed fabric, for instance, with a calico or some such cloth, and note how in the first there is an impression of distance, while in the second the design rests flat and snug upon the compacted filaments. In the best patterns from the American blocks, three different planes can be plainly felt and discerned. Here are all the accessories of a real painting—foreground, middle distance and background. The birds and the flowers seem veritably to stand forth from their environment. They live, for there is atmosphere about them, and they bask in the light of the sun. The block can thus give depth of atmosphere to the curtain which hangs in a doorway.

The accumulative hand printing transmits richness to fabrics which defies analysis. Starting, for instance, with a large bouquet design, such as was exhibited at the American Museum by a noted Western house, the progress of the coloring is like a triumphal procession. First, the gray hound laid on with block one, then the dark blue, after that a third block with plum color details, then a grayed medium-blue; fifth, gold color, and next, dark plum, then the clear rose; a lighter brown follows, and last, a darker and more golden tone of brown. Here is a poem in hues by which the operator with the blocks, whether he wills it or not, is soon inspired by a love of his work and comes under its magic spell.

There is a fabric of grape design, recently shown, printed on a specially woven, fifty-inch cotton. The whole pattern conventionalizes the source of forbidden wine with the graceful leaves and purple fruit. It is twenty-five by nineteen inches and is applied four times in thirty-eight running inches of the cloth. Each of the eighteen colors is printed in eighteen blocks to print one repeat. For every thirty-eight inches of the material, therefore, there must be one hundred and forty-four block applications. Before the block can be used it must go to the color pads, so if, like Efficiency Edgar, we count motions, two hundred and seventy-two handlings or block applications are necessarily required of goods. It is small wonder then that the costs of such material run up as compared with the prices of

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fabrics which go swiftly through the mills.

One should, however, bear in mind that in these days some exquisite work is turned out by the use of the etched copper rollers, and it looks very like the block printed variety. Even a semblance of the irregular charm of the wood can be given by skilful manipulation. The process of printing from the cylinders is an elaborate and intricate one, although simple enough in principle. The design is distributed into its various colors and on each burnished surface is engraved that part of it which is dedicated to a special pigment. The printing is not rapid, every effort being used to dry the fabric evenly and to smooth it out properly before it is calendared. The technique of this kind of work has developed marvelously in the last few months and the output of the machine products is increasing. It finds a wide range in hangings and in all forms of decoration.

When the American block printer comes into his own, however, and the efforts of the art

schools to produce a distinctive style along these lines are concentrated, we may look for a development of an industry which will give greater charm and variety to the American home. In Colonial days we had a start in this direction, and there is no doubt that, with the return to the ways of peace, there is a bright future for an art which derives its inspiration from ancient sources.

As there is a large demand for block printed fabrics which may be used for bags and small articles the individual worker may turn out pieces which have a special appeal. Even the amateur who has a knack for handling tools and a good eye for color may make his own wooden blocks and print them. A sloyd knife or a few chisels and a gouge would well equip him. He may never rival the wonderful printings which are to be seen in the large establishments, but there is abundant opportunity to exercise his gift. Thus can be gained a keener appreciation of the taste and skill which are required for success in a useful and a noble art.