

THE ROMANTIC PERIOD OF COTTON PRINTING IN FRANCE

TO THE uninitiated a reference to the “romantic period” of an industry may seem an affectation and be met with a questioning attitude of polite tolerance such as one is inclined to assume toward an enthusiastic collector whose pet hobby differs from one’s own. Of course to an unbeliever, precious tattered bits of “romantic” *toile de Jouy* will *always* be *rags* until the scoffer falls—as many a one has—to the fascinations of the chase and has experienced a realizing sense of the subtle joy that comes with the discovery of some missing scrap long sought for to complete the fragmentary motive of a “document.”

The eighteenth century was an age of romance and as such was bound to leave its imprint on the art of the period. This is especially true of the decorative printed cottons produced in France during the latter part of the century; fabrics inspired by the beautiful palampores that were sifting into the country from the Far East—Indian prints that were the inspiration of the picturesque *mezzaros* that served as combined head-dresses and shawls of the women of northern Italy—and that found a ready market in Portugal, England and Holland at the same time that they were being carried westward by the American skippers to their homes in the Colonies.

These “Indiennes,” sometimes referred to as “toiles peintes,” and French cotton prints of the second half of the eighteenth century, have always delighted European collectors; but only in recent years have Americans shown much interest in this fascinating subject, a subject that is as full of romance as a nut is of meat.

In the first place, early in the seventeenth century these East Indian prints had become far too popular to please those interested in home

industries, so the edicts of kings—that remained in force for a century or more—prohibited their importation; in France the edict applied as well to “counterfeits made in the Kingdom.”

In spite of this “embargo,” which was finally withdrawn in 1759, *Indiennes* and French prints continued in favor; and when, in the days of Louis XV, *Dame Fashion* who had long ignored the royal decree, demanded flowered chintzes, the market provided them. The wives of those charged with the enforcement of the law mingled with the boulevard crowds wearing daintily patterned gowns of flowered toiles, while Mme. de Pompadour furnished the Chateau Bellevue with the finest *Indiennes* available.

All of this time, business had been carried on in a number of centres in spite of legal restrictions; this was especially true in privileged districts, such as Avignon which was then a Papal State and Italian territory beyond the jurisdiction of the court, and certain Church properties in Paris. The great era, however, dates from the establishment of the Oberkampf factory at Jouy-en-Josas in 1760. It has been well said that the history of *Toile de Jouy* may be summed up in one name, that of Oberkampf whose genius and untiring energy elevated textile printing to a fine art and made it a leading industry in the land of his adoption.

Christophe Philippe Oberkampf, born in 1738, was of Bavarian parentage but spent the greater part of his life in France. The young fellow, whose forbears had been enthusiasts in textile printing, grew up in his father's work-shop in Wisenbach where he became skilled in experimental dye-work and learned the valuable secret of obtaining fast colors by the use of mordants. At the age of eighteen Oberkampf went to Paris where he entered the employ of a printer named Cottin whose place was in the Arsenal of the Clos-Payen which, like the enclosures of Saint Benoît and Saint Jean-de-Latran, was a privileged quarter. During his stay in the Cottin factory, Oberkampf introduced his process of fast dyeing, the “*bon teint*” that established his reputation and eventually placed him at the head of his profession. When therefore the Controller General of Finances at Versailles, a Swiss named Guerne de Tavannes, learned that the law prohibiting the printing of “*Indiennes*” in France was about to be revoked, he offered Oberkampf the directorship of a new business venture. This the young Bavarian accepted upon one condition and that



FIG. I. "LE BALLON DE GONESSE"
TOILE DE JOUY ATTRIBUTED TO J. B. HUET, 1784

was that the factory should be located at a site selected by himself. This granted he chose Jouy-en-Josas near Versailles where the grassy meadows for bleaching the cloth sloped down to the shores of the River Bièvre. Here a small work-shop was established and on May 1st, 1760 the first piece, designed, engraved, printed and dyed by Oberkampf was taken from the press. As neither of the partners had large resources, the output of these early difficult years was limited; but when in 1763 a new partnership was established, the "Sarrazin-Demaraise Oberkampf Company," with sound financial backing, the prosperity of the house was assured. Oberkampf, the skilled technician took entire charge of the works, while the new partner, Demaraise, devoted himself to the Paris end of the business which was located on the rue des Mauvaises-Paroles and later in 1767, at the hotel Jabach on the rue Neuve-Saint-Mery. Business prospered. Cloth for printing was requisitioned from various quarters; first a cotton cloth was used that was made in Normandy and Beaujolais, a fabric known as *Siamese*; later, with increasing trade, cargoes of Indian muslins and cambrics were purchased in London and in the East, while at the same time a cloth of special dimensions was woven for the Jouy works at St. Gall, Switzerland.

In 1783 the crown conferred upon the establishment the title of a Royal Factory, and in 1786 Louis XVI bestowed upon Oberkampf letters of nobility.

It was during this period, in 1783, that the artist, J. B. Huet—one of the foremost animal painters of his day—became associated with the firm, his services having been retained to design a pattern commemorative of the inauguration of the works as a Royal Factory. The subject chosen for this print was the works itself showing the different processes employed in the manufacture of toiles de Jouy. A few scraps of this famous print still exist, one strip is owned by the Oberkampf family, another is in the collection at the Victoria and Albert Museum, a piece that once served as a chair covering.

The process of decorating cloth by means of patterns cut in wooden blocks originated with the ancients and is a method still employed. In this the patterned block receives the color,¹ usually applied by a small

¹In *toile peinte* the block prints only the outline of the pattern and the solid colors are filled in with the brush.

boy apprentice—apprentices of this type still exist in England—who passes it to the printer; he in turn places the block on its proper spot in the pattern, strikes it with a wooden mallet, and passes on to the next repeat of the pattern where the same block fits, and this process continues until the series of blocks necessary to complete the pattern have all been used in turn. The colors thus applied are made “fast” by the use of mordants—a chemical applied to the cloth before printing.

While the block method was desirable for small flowered chintzes, it proved impracticable for the elaborate patterns designed for house furnishings; so Huet availed himself of large metal plates such as were used for engravings and from these his finest patterns were printed. Toward the end of the century printing from wooden rollers was introduced which in turn were supplanted by metal and this in its elaborated form is what is employed in the power presses of to-day.

With Huet as head designer the popularity of the Jouy fabrics received an added impetus. In close proximity to the Court at Versailles, the Royal Factory fabrics became the vogue and the series of plates designed by its master-draughtsman during this era of prosperity have never been surpassed in the field of textile design.

Some of the most interesting, produced in the year 1784, were those designed to commemorate the first balloon ascensions, notably that made by Charles and Robert on the 27th of August 1783 when the balloon descended at Gonesse—Charles, a professor of physics, being the first to apply hydrogen gas to balloon inflation. This plate was entitled “Le Ballon de Gonesse” and its original cartoon is among those preserved in the library of the Musée des Arts Décoratifs in the collection of documents presented to the Louvre in 1896 by Monsieur Barbet, a member of the Oberkampf family.

How quick the French were to discover the trend of the market and to embody in their patterns *le dernier cri* is evidenced not only in this early plate, but in many later works. For instance, the very charming fragment illustrated in figure II, probably among the first designed by Huet, is an early print from the plate that in its altered form was entitled “L’Aérostat dans le Parc du Château.” When Paris became delirious over balloon ascensions, this plate¹ with its central dog motive was quickly

¹Les Nouvelles Collections du Musée de L’Union Centrale des Arts Décoratifs—Publié par la Librairie d’Art Décoratif—(Louvre) 9^e série—Les Peintures décoratives de Huet.



FIG. II. DETAIL OF PRINT FROM THE HUET PLATE
"L'AÉROSTAT DANS LE PARC DU CHÂTEAU," c. 1784.



FIG. III. HUET CARTOON
SHOWING THE BALLOON THAT REPLACED THE FIGURE OF THE DOG FOUND IN EARLIER PRINT FROM
THE SAME PLATE. (CF. FIG. II.)

changed to meet the popular mood and to record some special event. The presence of figures resembling those of the King and Queen would suggest that possibly it might refer to the ascent of Pilatre de Rozier and the Marquis d'Arlandes from the Parc de la Muette. That figure II is a print from an original plate that was afterwards altered is borne out by the fact that the design here shown is identical with the original cartoon in the Louvre, shown in figure III, except that in this there is no balloon, and furthermore that Plate 101¹ in the volume of Huet designs published by the Louvre shows the fragment cut from the original plate—the dog motive that was replaced by the later balloon motive.

A similar instance in which the printed fabric varies from the original cartoon is recorded in the Toile de Jouy curtains that furnish one of the Haverhill rooms in the new American Wing of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. In this print, which has a beautiful design of figures and animals combined with arabesques, the small medallions frame the two sides of the Franklin Peace medal (1782); in the original cartoon of this pattern preserved in the Louvre, these same medallions in every instance frame cupid motives which were probably replaced by the Franklin Peace Medal either in recognition of the popularity of this American statesman in Paris or possibly as a business venture to attract American trade.

The flourishing industry at Jouy, like every other business, suffered from the devastating ravages of the Revolution but nevertheless found time to record the thrilling events of the day on the prints run from its presses. One of these is illustrated in the very rare and much pieced fragment shown in figure IV entitled "La Fête de la Fédération," printed after 1793 which depicts various scenes of those troublous times. Here the figure of Liberty offers Louis XVI the "bonnet rouge," the emblem of the new régime, as the Queen and the little Dauphin with other members of the royal household look on from below. At the left (a fragmentary piece) the rejoicing populace is seen dancing on the Ruins of the Bastille; above at the right the horrible Noyades (1793) or as Carlyle terms it "drownages" that were enacted at Nantes on the River Loire are recorded, also the tumbril with its victims en route to the guillotine, while

¹Les Nouvelles Collections—9^e série—Les Œuvres de Huet et son école.



FIG. IV. "LA FÊTE DE LA FÉDÉRATION"
PRINTED AFTER 1793

below at the right may be discerned the figure of Lafayette mounted on his white charger.

The spirit of the French seems never daunted; just as the men of the eighteenth century were able in spite of revolutionary horrors to pursue their daily tasks within a stone's throw of riotous up-risings, just so those entrapped in the horrors of the World War rose above the stress of disordered days to record in their *toiles de guerre* of 1914-15 events that are now international history.

Surviving the Revolution, the fabrics produced by the works during the years of the Directorate and the Empire show a marked change in the type of design. Neo-classic ornament was the order of the day and Huet devoted his attention to classical subjects, but never failed to introduce in some part of the pattern his delectable rabbits, ram's heads and other animal motives that were so characteristic of his style. But the passing of the old man Oberkampf and his master draughtsman, sounded the knell of the great period of French cotton prints; for while the delightful series designed by Hippolyte Lebas and Penelli reflected some of the Huet spirit, those produced after 1818 are dispiriting by contrast and lack the inspiration that placed the prints of the preceding century in the front ranks of the decorative arts of the period.

To-day few of these finer specimens remain outside of the documents preserved in the library of the Musée des Arts Décoratifs, the Bibliothèque Forney, Paris, in the New York Museums and in private collections.