

## VISIT TO THE TEXTILE DEPARTMENT AT THE VICTORIA AND ALBERT MUSEUM 17th April 1997

The visit was conducted by Paul Harrison of the Textile Department, and Mary Schoeser author of *'English and American Textiles; 1790 to the present day'*, published by Thames and Hudson, and a subsequent book on French Textiles from 1760.

Items were shown on a cotton sheet; both a practical way of displaying delicate fabrics and to make the point that it is this very basic domestic item which often fails to survive. Leading on from this we were shown an 18th century twill bed sheet of 'dimity' design. Dimity, in this instance, refers to a small pattern made by a herringbone weave between the lines of twill which gave the fabric greater strength. The warps were of linen, being stronger than cotton.

Textiles reflected wealth and status with similar fabrics used for both clothing and furnishing. This is, of course, particularly apparent when reading inventories and wills when textiles usually take precedence over other goods in terms of value. Apart from status, by the seventeenth century, fabrics were certainly providing a notable increase in comfort in many a household as demonstrated by the soft colourful pile of a Turkey-work seat cover made in England in the mid-seventeenth century. Norwich was apparently a centre for this work, although they were also produced in homes, and imitated carpets imported from Turkey, using a knotted technique applied to the wefts. Floors were also made cosier by the use of carpets, although the term 'carpet' can also be applied to a covering of any kind such as a table carpet. We were shown a Scotch carpet dating from the mid 18th century which had a complex double weave for extra insulation, and the design itself is still used on Welsh woven blankets. This type of floor covering would probably only have been used in a sitting room whilst more humble rooms perhaps made use of oil cloths, which often imitated rush matting. We saw two small examples of oil cloth with printed designs on a jute base, dating from the 19th century. It was an industry which had affinities with sail making on account of the materials used and had initially developed in the Liverpool area.

Tapestry is often equated with wealth and splendour, and certainly the 18th century Soho firescreen panel we saw was very much a prestige item, finely woven with wool and silk similar to a Dutch still life. However, tapestry was woven for a wider market as seen in another firescreen of a much coarser weave produced at Moorfield. Painted cloths imitating tapestries were a popular alternative and were usually more economical. We examined a fragment of painted cloth dating from the mid-seventeenth century which Mary Schoeser thought was probably partly printed and possibly came from the Frankfurt area which was the market centre for such work.

The technique of weaving was discussed further when looking at silks and brocades. We were shown a very fine piece of brocaded silk woven on a draw loom to form a central design for use on the ends of a bolster, using a phenomenal 1000 threads per inch. Such silk pieces in the eighteenth century were often woven 'à disposition', ready for the customers to apply to their own needs. The weavers engaged in this particularly skilled labour had great prestige, whilst the less experienced wove the vast quantities of damask or less complicated work. Damask was woven to display the satin surface of the

design which was silhouetted against a duller ground and was of one colour. Sometimes the repeats were enormous as they were used to hang on walls as can be seen at Ham House. As a reflective wall covering, damask created a very dramatic effect within the candle-lit interiors of many a Palladian mansion. The palmette design with scrolling foliage was often used in this context although it could be adapted to a smaller scale for upholstery. We saw a similar design on stamped velvet and woven in wool. It was very interesting to discover that loose covers were used before the third quarter of the 18th century for special occasions and were thus more elaborate. We saw some wonderfully complex examples of seat covers: in silk and damask with appliqué work and silk embroidery. One which seemed to be everyone's favourite was in a brown striped dress silk with appliqué work in chintz red flowers and bordered by a very full white bobby fringe, a totally original composition. Seat covers were made on the chair which ensured a snug fit and the seams were hidden by a narrow braid, a forerunner of piping.

We also learnt a little about the dyes used in the textile industry. Reds, which derived from the cochineal beetle, were traditionally expensive, both from the early days of tapestry weaving to the nineteenth century red damask and silks. Napoleon apparently kept red for his own Imperial use when it became difficult to import the dye owing to the wars and it was thus equated with luxury. A pure green dye was not available until 1807: previously this was formed by mixing blue and yellow, and, as yellow fades relatively rapidly, many of the greens in early textiles are now blue. Mary Schoeser's book covers dyeing and block printing extensively, and she elaborated on block printing and the significant lead India had in this method. One can usually relate block printing to the pin marks left on the fabric where the block was fixed.

It is, however, often the more mundane item which is particularly fascinating to those interested in social history. The sort of woollen fabrics or cloths mentioned so often in inventories relate to fine worsted, which is combed before spinning, and moreen which has the appearance of silk moiré, the texture of which is formed by putting the dampened cloth through heavy rollers. Paul Harrison showed us some 'ginghams' a term which applies to woven stripes as well as checks and referred to the weight of the cloth. The examples shown dated from the 18th century and were used in lining, towelling and other everyday uses, resulting in a low survival rate. Perhaps now is the time to start hoarding some real twentieth century domestic clichés such as the nylon overall or at least the odd bedsheet.

Looking through such a diverse and rich selection of textiles, one could see more clearly that furniture cannot be studied in isolation and that textiles are very much an integral part of furniture history.

Both Mary Schoeser and Paul Harrison deserve special double thanks for conducting both morning and afternoon visits and giving so much fascinating information on the subject.

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