

Excavated in Egypt and revived in Northern Europe: Continuity of human taste in printed textiles

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I want to introduce you to textile trade from the “good old days”, want to speak about his genuine roots and will then speak about some surprising new findings.

Chapter 1: Blueprinting as a trade

I think that everyone in this room will know the trade and how it works. Just in case, a short introduction:

Resist printing and Indigo dyeing

The patterns are printed onto the white fabric by means of so-called printing blocks or stamps repeating the pattern. The applied paste forms a coating layer, which consists of gum Arabic, china clay, fats or oils and metallic salts and protects the fabric in the following dyeing process. The oldest recipes known to me date back to the early 18th century.

Following the printing, the cloth (linen, cotton, hemp or silk) is dyed blue in an indigo vat. In my workshop, I use an vitriol vat, which means that the reduction of indigo is carried out with the aid of calcium carbonate and iron sulphate, a recipe from the year 1760.

In a third step, the dyed textile is cleaned in sulphuric acid to wash away the coating layer, and a white décor appears where the paste had been applied, while the rest of the fabric remains blue.

Up until the 19th century, it was fashionable to give the finished textile a silky, shiny effect by rubbing its surface.

Here are some blocks for printing patterns that will give the same shiny effect for imitating silks.

I want to draw your attention to the treasure of every blue printer’s shop: its stock of printing blocks. It consists of masterpieces of craftsmanship from the 17th, 18th and 19th century, made from matured pearwood. The pattern is created through a combination of excellent decorative carving and additional use of metal pins; some of the printing blocks contain between four- to five thousand of those brass pins with a width of .4 mm. The blockmaker was a highly specialised and hard to find tradesman.

About 100 years ago, the victory of machines and of synthetic chemical dyes led to the defeat of these printing forms everywhere. By everywhere, I mean Europe: these blue printer’s workshops existed in every town from Russia to Spain.

It’s a shame that this fact is omitted in favour of romantic dispositions by historians in museums and archives in Germany who praise their archives of historic blue print patterns as “typically regional”, with typical decors and typical recipes, which of course were kept “terribly secret”.

The academic chemist shakes his head in disbelief, when it comes to “typically regional” recipes.

How do museums explain the fact that the printing patterns were identical or similar everywhere? Well, once upon a time, in the good old days, they would say, journeymen carried some printing blocks in their rucksacks on their journeys to pass them on from one workshop to the next and receive other printing blocks to pass on in return. In this fairy tale, a vivid exchange of precious printing blocks and decors was mysteriously created in all of Europe.

Chapter 2: Printing in the Indian fashion

The roots of this textile craft go back to India. In Europe, we had no idea of a way to print by using mordant and red dye, or reserve techniques using indigo. Our poor positive prints were limited to the application of glues, oil or resin, on which colour pigments were then sprinkled. Such textiles were practically unusable and unwashable – which explains our enthusiasm for the brilliance and washability of Indian textiles!

After 50 to 60 years of the East Indian Companies buying ready-made textiles in India and simultaneous technological espionage (thanks for the researches of Giorgio Riello and Barbara Lemire) we Europeans opened the first indigo and printing workshops: One was opened by Jacob ter Gouw in Amersfoort near Amsterdam in 1672, another by James Taylor in London. In 1681, we witness the first textile printer in Augsburg, Germany. His name was Jeremias Neuhöfer.

Recent findings by Olivier Reveux, CNRS Marseille, show that as early as 1644, a printing and dyeing workshop “in Indian fashion” was opened in Marseille on the basis of old contacts to the Levant / Syrien and Libanon. By the way: Christian Armenians were involved in the foundation of almost every one of those workshops.

Taste and Decors came with the exotic cotton to the people of Europe; patters included: pomegranate, carnations, carnellia, peonies, the so-called “paisley”...

These new and exotic patterns became popular and the “state of the art” in all of Europe.

A look back to the “good old days”: When watching an historic film of the trade from the 1930s, it is striking that traditional costumes of Northern German girls from the Luneburg Heath feature patterns containing pomegranate and tropical leaf motives from the 18th century.

Daniel Defoe, the famous author of „Robinson Crusoe“, described in the early 18th century the situation in London: /Quote/ “It crept in our houses, our closets and bed-chambers, curtains, cushions, chairs and at last the beds themselves were nothing but calicoes or Indian stuffs“ /Quote/

Chapter 3: Surprises

You never stop learning.

Only two years ago, I learned about your association „Textiles of the Nile valley” and asked

Mrs Fluck if there was any evidence of indigo dyeing etc. in this field. She referred me to excavations in Quseir-al-Quadim in 1990, where Ms. Vogelsang-Eastwood excavated many printed textiles. Having studied the reports of the excavation, I went to Leiden, where Ms. Vogelsang-Eastwood was so kind as to allow me to see the original resist prints, and Ms. Fluck guided my attention to the collection of Ruth Barnes of the Kelsey Museum. Spontaneously, I recognised several patterns consistent with printing blocks from my workshop; obviously, they had been produced for the Egyptian market in India more than 1000 years ago and travelled to Southern Europe from there most likely...

My printing block comes from the workshop of Josef Stengel, South Hungary, crafted ca. 1930

This printing block, made in 1820, was found in a museum archive in Northern Germany.

This border with a peacock feather motive was manufactured in the 18th century in the region of Glarus, Switzerland, by the Blumer manufactory. The second border was found in a 19th century pattern book from Northern Germany. They all show a special kind of ornamental border, which looks like the battlements of a castle. The design isn't bad, but slightly strange nevertheless.

An explanation for this was given by Dr Ulrich Türk in his 2001 study on the battlement kilim: The origins of these saw-tooth-like contours lie in the special technique of weaving kilims, in the slot technique of so-called "tapestry weaving" (wirken). If differently coloured areas are aligned next to each other, slots are created in the warp, for example between the inner field and the border of the kilim carpet. These slots could be avoided by the interchanging of differently coloured filling yarns, thus creating the battlement-like structure.

As Europeans, how much must we have treasured these middle-East textile decors even before the times of the East Indian Companies. And today?

Well, 25 years ago, when I had the privilege to pick from the archives of a museum 2 of the more than 200 printing blocks for reconstruction, I instinctively – and perhaps naively - picked exactly those two patterns. Was it accident, or did I react – exactly like the Egyptians and our European ancestors and my customers of today - to the good taste from India?

I am quite certain that there are much more connections of taste and textile design between my European craft of the last 400 years and your archives of textiles – more than 1000 years ago - from the Nile Valley!