

Bold Impressions: block printing 1910-1950

The following is an edited extract from the illustrated brochure produced to accompany a touring exhibition curated by Mary Schoeser for Central Saint Martins College of Art & Design, shown in the Lethaby Gallery, Southampton Row, from October 3rd to 31st, 1995, and at ten subsequent venues until June 1997.

preface

The Central School of Arts & Crafts, as it was called during the first half of this century, played an important role in both the revival of wood-block engraving and the development of a distinctly English style within this medium. Such artistic impulses soon found their way onto printed textiles, for which the Central also became known. It could be no more appropriate, then, that this exhibition should open in a gallery that is part of the original School building designed under the guidance of the then principal, W R Lethaby. The show, which is based on block printing, contextualizes the work of Joyce Clissold, a former Central School student.

Clissold was the moving spirit behind Footprints in its heyday and ultimately, its owner. Shortly after her death in 1982, a large archive of Footprints' material, and the copyrights vested therein, were given to the College by her executors. Therefore this exhibition not only provides the means to examine the Central's role in the creation of a new attitude towards block printing, but is the most appropriate way in which to acknowledge the generosity of Joyce Clissold's family and colleagues, both those who donated the collection and those who allowed their own material and recollections to be culled, greatly enriching the presentation. The exhibition also offers, for the first time, a unique opportunity to see together the work of individual studio printers and the industry's apprentice-trained block printers. Many exhibits are from private collections, being shown to the public for the first time. Their owners' largesse has greatly enhanced the story that the exhibition sets out to tell; so, too, has the support and enthusiasm of the College staff and the exhibition's sponsors, Cole and Son, Linotype-Hell, Kodak and Mulberry.

block printing 1910-1950

In 1910 block printing still made a small but significant contribution to British textile production, being the only established method of printing long repeats and overlapping areas of colour. Machine printing, in contrast, had the obvious advantage of speed and, as a result, much more economical production. Yet such economies depended on printing very large amounts – over 10,000 yards – and this, too, left a place for block printing, which, although six to ten times more costly, was well-suited to short print-runs.¹ Despite the fact that these factors were ideal for the production of avant garde designs, in 1910 block printed textiles were generally large, elaborately-coloured traditional patterns or complex specialist styles for the export markets. This was undoubtedly in part because of the massive number of old, useable blocks owned by the dozen-or-so surviving British block-printing firms, but it was also a reflection of the recent upsurge in conservative tastes. However, there were already indications of what was to come; by the 1920s and '30s, block printing was the vehicle for both a new style, and a change in the approach to designing itself. Unravelling this development not only high-lights the visually exciting designs, adventurous repeats and unpredictable colourways, produced in enough quantity to have a real impact on mass-produced fashions and modern interiors, but also reveals the links that were forged between industry, art, and the crafts between 1910 and 1950.

For the British textile industry as a whole, this period was disastrous. Sales, with eighty percent exported, were already declining in 1910. Over the next thirty years, a further three-quarters of the export trade was lost, almost all of it produced by machine-printing. Not surprisingly, much discussion focused on proposals to halt this decline and, in addition, to increase sales at home. Many found fault with the quality of designs, a criticism which was also voiced in relation to other British industries. One result of these concerns was the founding of the Design and Industries Association (DIA) in 1915, inspired by the Deutsche Werkbund (DW), a workshop founded in 1907 to improve the design of German machine-made products. However, for textile manufacturers the appropriate parallel was really an independent member of the DW, the Wiener Werkstätte, (WW), founded in 1903. It was already acknowledged as a source of artist- and architect-designed woven and printed fabric designs when its textile workshop was formally established in about 1910. Thereafter, block printed textiles dominated, with the majority produced in Germany.² The distinctive style associated with the early years of the WW was also available in England (in a shall range of Viennese-designed block printed linens launched by G P & J Baker in 1909), and through the WW company established in England in 1912. But the concept of artist-designed fabrics had an independent supporter in the form of William Foxton, a founder member of the DIA who had created his own furnishing textiles firm in 1903. His range, including designs by Claude Lovat Fraser, Minnie McLeish, F Gregory Brown and Gladys Barraclough, was also dominated by prints, as opposed to weaves, and the surviving evidence suggests that until the 1920s most were block printed. These were produced by outside manufacturers, such as Stead McAlpin & Co, who practised their craft in the traditional manner, using apprentice-trained printers and specialist block-cutters.

Foxton's lead had slight impact on machine-produced textiles, at least initially, but it demonstrated the fruits of a marriage between craft-scale industry and British artists (as opposed to architects, who, since Pugin, had been influential designers of printed textiles). After about 1910 a handful of retail and wholesale firms began experimenting with new styles, many of which were purchased from the Continent or, as in the case of the British artist-designed prints sold by Omega, printed there.³ The dominant theme was strong, bright colour, often on a dark ground, rather than one particular type of pattern. Because of the varied sources of designs, a distinctly indigenous school of textile design – so evident in the years between 1870 and 1905 – was still not apparent in the British displays at the International Exhibition held in Paris in 1925. This, and the continued decline in exports, was a source of embarrassment about which the printed textile industry could do little. The vast majority, whether machine or block printers, produced on commission; among block printers only a handful – such as Baker's and Turnbull & Stockdale – sold fabrics under their own name and therefore made their own design choices.

Also acting against the possibility of a new British style was the traditional separation of the design and block-cutting stages. In 1906 it was noted that young designers were no longer interested in cotton prints or wallpapers. 'The capture of the schools by what we may call the Arts and Crafts theory of design...has this year reached a stage which leaves no room for doubt. With very few exceptions the cleverest students have devoted themselves to designing for something which they can themselves carry out rather than for some process of manufacture, a trend that has diverted the attention of the students from the great manufactures of the country, and has led them to devote their energies to designing for embroidery, stencilling, enamel, jewellery, and so forth.'⁴ Thus, what was lacking was a direct link between making a design for printing and its application in mass-production.

A new approach to wood-engraving itself was to develop, not in the field of textiles, but within the realm of book production. The oldest reliable form of creating multiple prints, at the beginning of the twentieth century wood engraving was a process that was used largely for its ability to reproduce imagery with clarity; there was also, as in textile printing, a clear divide between artists or designers and those who cut their blocks. It was from the Central school of Arts & Crafts (now Central Saint Martins College of Art & Design) that the approach taken by Noel Rooke in fostering autographic wood engraving was to have widespread impact.⁵ Starting to teach at the conclusion of his period as an evening-class student at the Central School from 1900-5, Rooke was inspired both by W R Lethaby's belief that 'design comes by designing'⁶ and Edward Johnston's classes, which encouraged him to use the graver like a brush or pen, resulting in a renewed exploration of the "white line" style. By 1912 he was teaching wood engraving (heading the book production department from 1930-46). Acceptance of wood engraving as an independent art form came slowly, but in 1920 the Society of Wood Engravers was founded, followed a year later by the establishment of Leon Underwood's Brook Green School, which also fostered an innovative approach to wood engraving.

A third incident that was to contribute to a distinct approach to block printing was the acquisition by Phyllis Barron, while in Normandy in 1905, of some old blocks. Between then and 1914 she established that they were for textiles rather than paper and pursued information about dyes while also training in fine art at the Slade. She did not cut her first block until 1915. Her interest was in the craft itself; her discovery of Ethel Mairet's book on vegetable dyeing,⁷ and subsequent time spent with its author – a leading hand spinner, dyer and weaver – determined Barron's commitment to the control of all stages of her textile printing.

Although she worked for a short time after World War I with Frances Wollard (completing her largest commission, for the Duke of Westminster), it was after 1923, when she worked solely with Dorothy Larcher, that these two began to be widely known. In 1925 they were assisted for a year by Enid Marx, who established her own workshop two years later. They became the epitome of the application of Arts & Crafts principles in textile printing.⁸ These, then were the elements that shaped a new approach to textile design in the interwar years: the desire to integrate art into industry, the development of a new approach to wood engraving, and the passion for the process of textile printing. The development of each depended on the existence of the others: Barron, for example, relied on skills acquired in part from the industry. It was at Baker's print-works that she had learned the principles of steaming, and from a visit in the early 1920s to Turnbull & Stockdale – famous for their use of indigo discharge – that her control of this difficult process derived.⁹ In addition, although both she and Larcher had trained as painters (Larcher at Hornsey College of Art), and Barron at first designed on paper, they developed an approach akin to the new school of wood-engravers, working directly onto their blocks (often using lino) and generally using only one colour, until after their move to Painswick in 1930.

Impetus was also provided by art college graduates, even when the college did not teach wood engraving, as was the case at the Slade until 1921 and the Royal College of Art (RCA) until 1924-5, when Paul Nash taught there.¹⁰ Nash had been a fellow student with Barron at the Slade, where Underwood had also studied, but had previously studied at Central School evening classes from 1908-10 and evolved his own wood-engraving technique. He inspired his student Eric Ravillious, who in turn inspired Marx, a fellow student at the RCA from 1922-5 (and also a student at the Underwood school). Marx had previously attended the Central, where she studied calligraphy with Johnston, textile design with Lindsay Butterfield and design with Bernard Adeney.¹¹ Her study of textiles had little impact on her own style,

for the designs for printed textiles then produced at the Central School were conservative.¹² Rather, the influence of the School on textile design emerged from the book production and design departments, where, between 1914 and 1925 other students included Margaret Pilkington, Dorothy Hutton, Elspeth Ann Little, John Farleigh and Joyce Clissold, all of whom, in varying degrees, were to become involved with textiles, whether their design, production or promotion. The Central School's textile department itself only became influential with the appointment of Adeney as head in 1931; meanwhile, in 1924 Reco Capey had started setting up the new textile department as part of the RCA's school of design. He became head of textiles and then industrial liaison officer, remaining until 1953.¹³ He also adopted the practice of cutting his own blocks and often employed the "white line" style. Among his first students were Doris Scull and Margaret Stansfield and, from 1931-2, Astrid Sampe, the latter having great influence as the head of Nordiska Kompaniet's design studio from 1937-1971.

Of the Central School students, it was Joyce Clissold, a student of both Rooke and Adeney from 1924-7, who spent the rest of her life associated with block printed textiles; she did so at Footprints,¹⁴ a workshop conceived in 1925 by Elspeth Little, Gwen Pike and Celandine Kennington, who funded the project. *text continues in the original publication...*

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notes

1. Arthur Wilcock, 'The Decorative Textile Industries and the Designer's Relation Thereto', *Journal of the Royal Society of Arts (JRSA)*, Vol.63. 1915, p.273.
2. see Angela Volker, *Textiles of the Wiener Werkstätte: 1910-1932*, Thames & Hudson, 1994.
3. Founded by Roger Fry, Omega (1913-19) had its prints produced in France; these were more likely to have been screen or stencil printed than block printed.
4. 'Arts and Crafts', *JRSA*, Vol.54, 1906, p.911; a similar comment was made in *JRSA*, Vol.63, 1915, p.257.
5. see Joanna van Antwerp Selborne, *The Break with Tradition: innovation in British wood engraved book illustration and typographical Renaissance 1900-1940*, PhD; University of London (Courtauld Institute of Art), 1992. Charles Ricketts was said to be the first to reject reproductive engraving, while a student at Lambeth School of Art in the late 1890s, see A J Finbery, 'The Wood-cuts of T Sturge Moore', *The Studio*, Vol.66, 1915, p.33.
6. W R Lethaby, 'Carpenter's Furniture', *Arts and Crafts Essays*, 1893, p.305. Lethaby was principal of the Central School from 1896-1911. Rooke also studied at the Slade, 1899-1903.
7. Ethel Mairet, *A Book on Vegetable Dyes*, Hampshire House Press, 1916.
8. see Marjorie Orpin Gaylard, 'Phyllis Barron...Dorothy Larcher...Textile Designers and Block Printers', *Journal of the Decorative Arts Society*, No.3, 1979, pp.32-39.
9. Barron's experiments prior to 1914 were with indigo, see Barley Roscoe, 'Phyllis Barron and Dorothy Larcher' in ed. M Greenstead, *The Arts & Crafts Movement in the Cotswolds*, Alan Sutton, 1993, pp.126-128. Alan Powers also notes that Barron observed Thérèse Lessore (Adeney's wife) etching, and nitric acid splashed on her French blue apron; see his *Modern Block Printed Textiles*, Walker Books, 1992, p.32.
10. Nash also taught at the RCA from 1938-40.

11. Except during the First World War, Adeney taught at the Central School from 1905-1940 and ran the school of drawing and design from 1908-1931 and the school of textiles thereafter. Butterfield taught textiles in the school of textiles and costume from 1918-1934.
12. see *Studio Yearbook*, 1921, p.91.
13. Capey studied at the RCA 1919-1922; see R C E Compton, 'Reco Capey RDI...', *Design History Society Newsletter*, No.50, 1991, pp.18-24.
14. The name is said to derive from the practice of printing by foot, a process illustrated by Janet Erickson in *Block Printing on Textiles*, Pitman Publishing, 1979; first published in 1961.
15. ...for a publication to accompany an exhibition at The Courtauld Gallery, entitled *Beyond Bloomsbury: Designs of the Omega Workshops 1913-1919*, and Foxton's.