

AMERICA AND DECORATIVE MATERIALS

BY HELEN CHURCHILL CANDEE

Author of "The Tapestry Book," etc.

THE Great War is doing for us what no tariff could have done. It is giving us a national consciousness of our own ability to produce house-furnishings of good taste and elegance. Whether it be the influence of tradition or that of the great American educator, the antique dealer, we have ever turned fondly to Europe for the touch of luxury and elegance that distinguishes the home of the tasteful. Furniture of American make has ever held a high popularity, perhaps because its bulk requires too great space in ship-holds to make it a desirable commodity for importation. But fabrics for draperies, for coverings, for ornamental bits of color, these come to us so safely and compactly, and in such satisfying array of beauty, that we have ever flouted the domestic make, and have turned deaf ears to the prayers and expostulations of the American manufacturer.

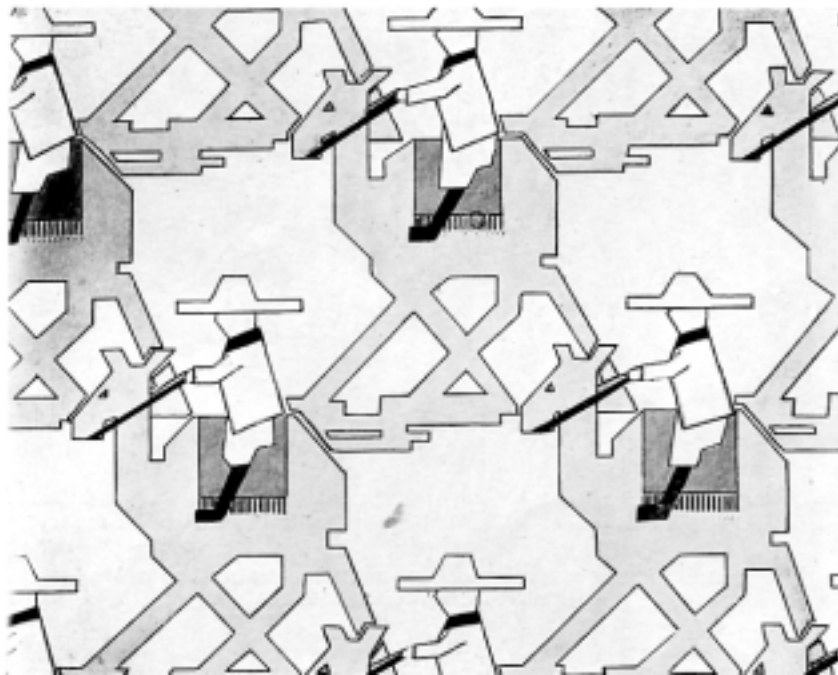
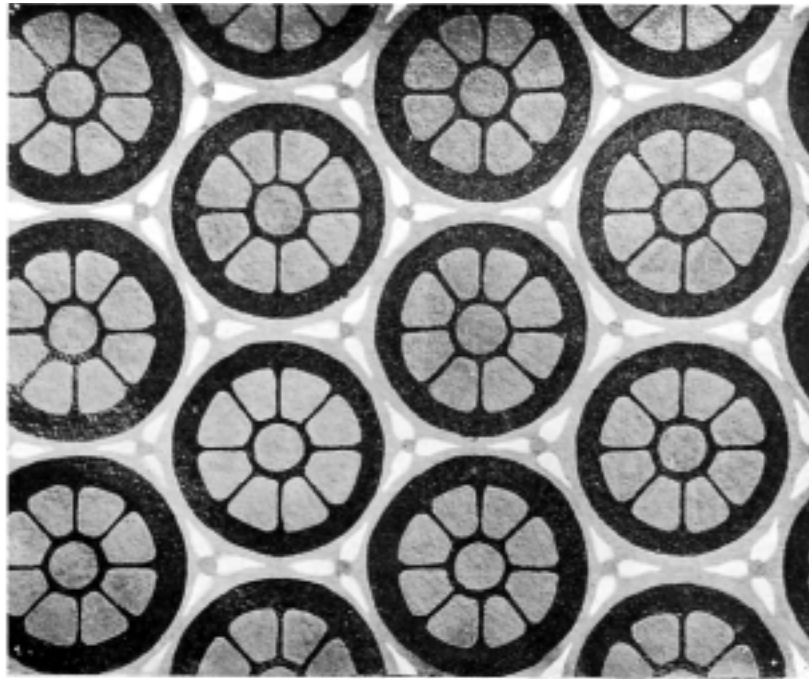
But now we come to the truth. And the truth is that our makers have been playing an increasingly good second to the European manufacturer. All at once we know this, but not all at once has it happened. Conditions imposed by the Great War have revealed the mild but effectual deception played on a public which held the tradition that art and beauty thrive not here. Native wines of California created only criticism, and lost capital, until labeled with French marks. Then they flowed fragrant and colorful over the glasses, and lips of the fastidious.

So with domestic fabrics. We have been draping our walls and covering our seats with American-made goods, whose origin was cleverly unmentioned in the shops. The shopper, whether a man in trade or a woman of fashion, has thus been prettily and worthily tricked into assuming that they were of foreign make, these materials of home manufacture. And this is no new happening, for we long have used domestic goods. The mills where the marvels of spinning are wrought have been willing to bide their time for recognition,

and, in the meantime, to produce better qualities and more beautiful designs. The result has been an advance so great that only a public with its thought hypnotized into inactivity could have let the matter go unrecognized. Year after year men of ideals have been at work, manufacturers who have been willing to spend much of their lives and millions of their capital to bring their products up to the high standard of older countries. They are easily decried, these efforts, as being commercial and done for the mill-owners' pecuniary benefit. But that fails to explain the idealism. In two words it is stated. The masses will take what is shown them over the counters as a novelty. But the manufacturer in America of today is unwilling to offer the masses a design or coloring that is contrary to his ideals of good taste. Therefore, the great mills at Paterson, Manchester and throughout New England, are ever striving to surpass their own work year by year, and to stand unashamed before the best producers in the world.

It is well that the truth about American manufacturers is out. The shopper, or the homemaker who puts all in the hands of a decorator, has had to be told frankly that European goods are now not obtainable, that certain desired patterns are "out" until after the war. This drives them to the correct conclusion that the beautiful fabrics which they can get are made in America. The shopman is no longer subtly evasive or silent. He exposes with frankness, and even pride, the fact that these shimmering silks and dignified damasks and velvets are "made right here in our own country." From scorning American fabrics and lauding European, this educator has of late turned into an exploiter of the very goods he once exhibited under protest, or with concealment of identity if their elegance warranted.

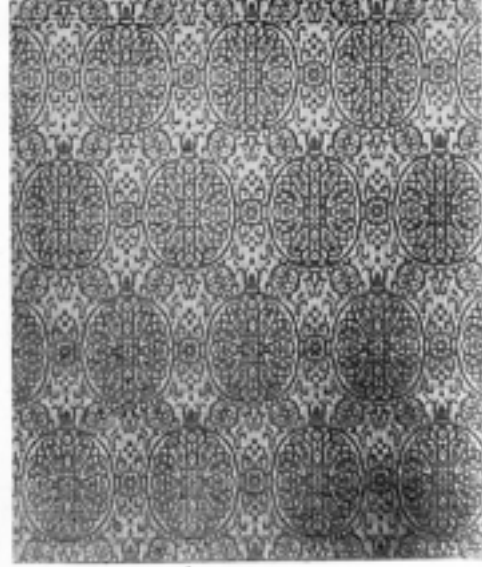
This, then, is the day of American fabrics. The gratification of the public is pleased and serene; that of the men who manu-



BLOCK PRINTED LINEN DESIGNED IN NEW YORK SCHOOL OF FINE AND APPLIED ARTS



SATIN DAMASK RENAISSANCE DESIGN



BROCHÉ SILK MOORISH DESIGN



GROS GRAIN DAMASK ADAMS DESIGN



JAPANESE CREPE JAPANESE DESIGN

FABRICS MADE IN THIS COUNTRY FROM DESIGNS SPECIALLY ADAPTED
CHENEY BROTHERS. MANUFACTURERS

facture is profound. Any thankless service of years gone by is past and the great fact is paramount, that in the hour when America needed beautiful fabrics—the mills of Europe being closed—America was in a position to supply them.

Good taste has fallen like the gentle dew from Heaven upon our public, and we are more fastidious in design and color than in the time of Victorian aberrations. Weavers of decorators' materials had prophetic vision to see this coming. Preparation was made for it by sending clever young designers to museums and to modern studios to copy the antique and become infused with the new. From these sources come the infinitude of design.

On design, color, and weave all depends. Formerly we thought—eager children in a new world—that the way to success rested on novelty. In those days we went far astray. Designs for decorative fabrics resolve themselves readily into copies from the antique, and the ultra modern drawing, which is the bubble tossed off from the Viennese before the great conflict taught them better. Not that I would condemn these modern designs, but would merely suggest their lack of serious and enduring beauty.

A purist in style ever resents the tricks that are played with designs of fixed convention. A distorted or bastard design gives actual pain to the beholder. There are those who hold that tricks of combination in well-known motives constitute originality and show daring, and that peculiar beauty is found in laying a Louis XV shepherdess basket on a Gothic tracery. Designs from the antique are denounced by slightly trained designers as "slavish copies." But why? No design which has sufficient inherent beauty to remain dear to the eye through the centuries can be discarded. It expresses perfection. Its every line has been studied and tried, and is the result of civilization's evolution.

Copies are made here which are an exquisite satisfaction to those who appreciate the beauties of line, and the robust and noble ensemble of masses. Possibly at no time has copying from the old models included so wide a range as at present, and this is easily attributable to the im-

proved education in art in America, and the demand created thereby. All styles in architecture and decoration are searched to make beautiful the superb homes being so prodigally erected in our country. Fitly to accompany these, old fabrics of all kinds are reproduced in design, in color, and in weave. Arabic drifting into Saracen gives a class of design which sends one hunting for its origin into fascinating pages of history where Normandy, Spain and the East find themselves mingled in Sicilian scrolls and birds of an austere nobility.

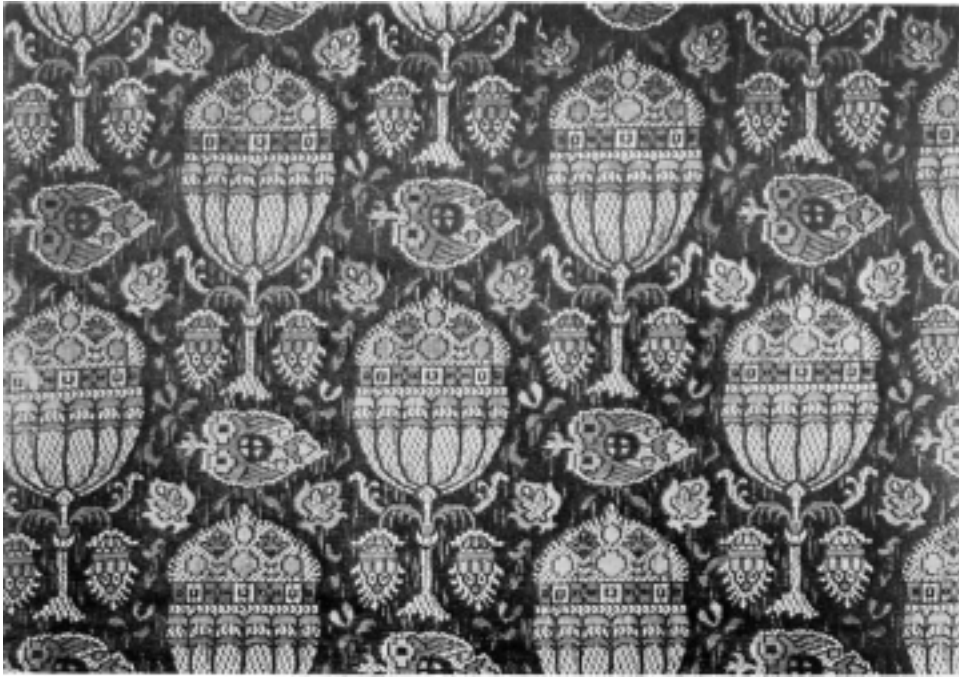
The earliest Gothic follows hot on this, and brings similar superb harmonies until it is expressed in that ultimate perfection of sparse-filled velvet which holds a wandering tracery. The eternal inspiration of the Renaissance shows the splendor of the time, the infinitude of design. The world was drunk with the wine of design at that time and drew patterns on every flat surface in the world. A fabric of velvet or damask weave gave unrivalled space for the play of fancy, and so came elegance and splendor and nobility.

Neither does our present intent of copying neglect the French periods, when the Grand Louis demanded fabrics with scrolls and flowers of heroic size, and his successor played with the eccentric curves of balanced relations, and led to the garlands and ribbons of the Sixteenth Louis, and the severe wreaths and stripes of the Empire.

Then there is the long line of English succession in fabric designs, reflecting the Continent but adding bits of her own history, and giving evidence of marked British traits.

All these things fit our modern homes which are dashed with symbols or reminiscences of older times, and with flowers of art for our enjoyment. And all these things the manufacturers do bravely well to supply to us.

I would do ill were I to neglect proper mention of the designers who are giving expression to the age of the moment in which we live. In the prejudices of many against copying, lives a keen desire to say something new. The result is something charmingly archaic, that is, among the best of the designs. Geometry seems to play a serious part in their drawing. A careful study of the Chaldean, the Assyrian,



DEEP TONED DAMASK. COPTIC DESIGN. ADAPTED TO MODERN LOOMS

the earliest Greek and Egyptian shows these schools to be so closely related in effect to this modern decorative design that the imagination asks quickly what is the kinship between our present art consciousness and theirs, that we should find similar expression. Simplicity and extreme conventionalizing of natural forms are salient points, and next comes honesty of color.

When velvets are treated in modern fashion the laws are different, and the softness of the fabric is used to produce varying color effects, more than is the design. The print is the natural field of today's originator, either the machine-made print in silk or baser stuffs; or the hand block is used with that varying subtlety that only hand work can impart. Tricks of weaving stuff are principally such as a handloom only makes possible.

The weaving of fabrics is a matter of mechanical skill, of perfect machinery and fine materials. All these are tested to the utmost in reproductions. When a specimen from the antique is to be copied, expert workmen are given *carte blanche* as

to expense. But for more popular use, a design suffers the process known as adapting, which accommodates it to the looms, and its cost is halved. This is the accounting for many designs which part from correctness in style. Although no silk cocoons are produced in this country we are among the largest consumers of the raw material, which is still more proof of the importance of our mills.

As to color, much may be said in blame as well as praise. Possibly the scientists will one day tell us that most American dyers are partially color-blind, and then we shall understand the crude hues that hit the eye and send a shiver through the spine. Even the copies of European goods miss often the harmonies of the original purely from lack of careful dyeing or color selection, though copying should be easy.

Worse yet are the goods of original make. A while ago France sent us a wondrous assortment of soft shimmering taffetas striped in delectable alternations of line and colors. American makers took the cue from this widely popular stuff and made gay sorties into original



RED SATIN BROCADE IN SILK RENAISSANCE DESIGN

colorings, with the sad result that no one cares to buy the inartistic combinations. It may be stated as a business fact that the bargain counters of our shops are filled with goods that can only be sold under cost because of their crude or inharmonious coloring.

It is more agreeable to stroke the eagle's feathers than to ruffle them, so we will turn from faults to realize seriously that this is the manufacturer's moment for achieving a permanent high position as producer of fine fabrics. The war is on in Europe, by which we are thrown upon our own resources, makers have been working for an ideal for years, and now the public knows that its much admired purchases are stuffs from home mills. It seems not too much to expect great things from this condition.

There is but one reef in the way of progress, one toward which American manufacture in all departments always steers. It is deterioration in quality as soon as a reputation and a market for fine goods are secured. On this reef lie many

stranded ships. Is it not a function of patriotism as well as of commerce to maintain standards of honesty in American goods?

One after another the arts called "liberal" are being encouraged in our educational institutions. Almost all of these are embraced in the curriculum of the colleges which teach the art of beautifying the homes in which we live, the towns where we work and the temples where we worship and play. It is an innovation for Universities to offer a course for decorators, but it has come (and Columbia is among the first to announce the course for the coming year). To the Museums go the students for examples of the arts they are studying. It therefore behooves the Museum of each town to own and display its collection of ancient textiles. The history of weaving is the history of mankind, and all the tale is told in the fragments of stuffs in a collection, beginning with the Egyptian and following through the Saracenic influence, the Gothic and the Renaissance to the brilliant French styles and to our day.