

THE USE OF THE STENCIL IN MURAL DECORATION

By FRANCIS W. READER

The term 'stencil' has been so frequently misused in the description of ornament in mural paintings, and particularly those of the Tudor period, that it has led to much misconception. In many cases the misuse of the term seems to have arisen from a loose way of speaking rather than from ignorance of the real meaning of the term, and from using a popular form of expression when referring to any 'repeat' or 'powdered' pattern as 'stencil,' even though it has been drawn by freehand. So general has this misuse of the term become that it seems likely to rival that of 'fresco.' This latter term has now, by popular custom, passed into our language as a synonym for any kind of wall-painting regardless of its nature. Misleading as this is, it is less likely to cause confusion, as examples of true 'fresco' are exceedingly rare in this country. However futile it might be to try to overtake the misuse of the term 'fresco,' it is important that an attempt should be made to have that of 'stencil' employed only in its true sense.

It is generally well-known that stencil-work is a simple mechanical process by which a pattern is produced by means of a sheet of thin metal, or other substance, which is perforated with the design. This being laid on the surface to be stencilled, and the brush passed over it, the colour reaches those parts of the surface only which are exposed by the perforations, thus reproducing the pattern. The only artistic skill involved in the process is in the design and cutting of the stencil.

The operative using the stencil bears about the same relation to the artist as does the printer of a lithographic stone or an engraved plate. A certain amount of skill and care is required but ability to draw, or paint in an artistic sense, is not in the least essential.

Although this process is usually well understood,

it seems to be a matter of some difficulty for most people to distinguish the resultant work of the stencil from that which has been performed by the hand of an artist. This may be the reason why any repeated pattern has so commonly been called 'stencil,' and frequently by those who may be credited with knowing it to be a misuse of the term.

The stencil was known and employed during the Middle Ages, but was not extensively used until the fifteenth century. At this period powdered patterns were much in vogue for mural decoration in which appear stars, fleur-de-lys, suns-in-splendour, monograms, etc., as can be seen in our churches. Although few examples have survived, drawings and engravings of the period show that this simple scheme of ornament was the common practice also in domestic buildings, and this was probably the direct result of the extensive use of the stencil and the easiest method of its employment.

A good example of the use of the stencil at this period, can be seen in the recently discovered paintings at the Commandery, or Hospital of St. Wulstan, at Worcester.

The little room containing these was probably the Infirmary Chapel, the walls of which are painted with various subjects, one of these, 'St. Michael Weighing Souls,' is here figured (Pl. vii B). This is from a drawing by Miss E. Matley-Moore, who recovered the paintings from beneath layers of white-wash, and treated them for their preservation under the direction of Prof. Tristram.

By the public spirit of the proprietor, Mr. J. E. B. Littlebury, these interesting paintings are made available to visitors on written application.

An entirely new outlook came about when art was secularised in the sixteenth century, its aim and purpose being entirely changed. The traditional methods, and age-worn conventions were discarded, and gave place to knowledge of form, realism and richness of invention, accompanied by an enthusiasm and earnestness, that was shared alike by artists and patrons.

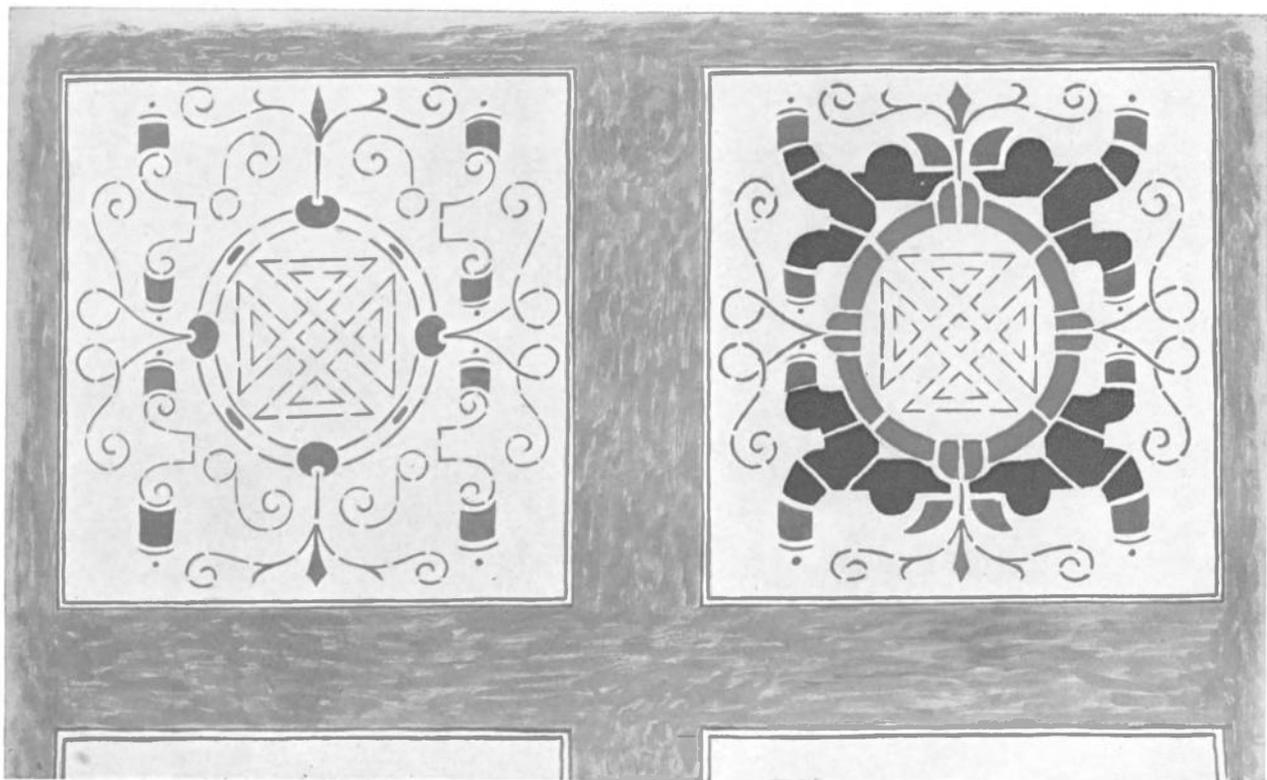
Thus we find that the former scheme of wall-decoration by powdered ornament entirely disappears, as among the now somewhat large number of examples that have been recorded not a single instance occurs, so far as I have found. This may be attributed not to prejudice but to the fact that the stencil was regarded with aversion and was discouraged, as we know from the regulations of the Painter-Stainers' Company of London, who described it as: 'a false and deceitful work and destructive of the art of painting, being a great hinderer of ingenuity and a cherisher of idleness and laziness in all beginners in the said art.'¹ A similar regulation would seem to have been made in other centres, as both the powdered pattern, and the stencil, appear to have gone out of use entirely over the whole country, and it is not until quite late in the period, when the rules of the guild were breaking down, that the stencil again makes its appearance.

Although many of the sixteenth-century designs were of a flowing description, there were many of a geometrical nature where the ground was cut into squares, lozenge and other shapes, each of which was filled with the same ornament, for which the stencil could suitably have been utilized; these were invariably painted freehand, producing a far more pleasing and satisfactory effect, although at considerable labour and cost. (See Pl. ix B, *Arch. Jour.* xciii, 234.)

So far as I have been able to ascertain, only two instances of stencil work of this period have been discovered, and both are quite late in the sixteenth century, or of early seventeenth-century date.

A portion of one is preserved in Colchester Museum, from which my drawing (Pl. i) was made. It is a remarkable example of the painted pattern simulating panelling, with cartouche shields in the panels. The framing is simply ruled by hand, the filling of the panels being by stencil and alternately in one and three colours. As a stencil design it is elaborate and

¹ W. A. D. Englefield, *History of the Painter-Stainers' Company of London*, pp. 95-96.



STENCILLED WALL DECORATION FROM 'JOSCELYNS,' LITTLE HORKELESLEY. PORTION IN COLCHESTER MUSEUM.
LATE SIXTEENTH OR EARLY SEVENTEENTH CENTURY

(From a drawing by F. W. R.)

ambitious, and has needed a large number of the little 'ties' which are necessary in a pattern of this description, to keep the stencil together. These 'ties' have been used very effectively and serve to break the lines so as to soften the usual hard and mechanical appearance of stencil-work. The form of the shield is degenerate, and to a large extent lost, but it is quite evident that it has been derived from the pattern which in hand-painted examples has been found so numerous in recent years.

The main part of this interesting work is still preserved in the house where it was found, 'Josselyns,' Little Horkesley, a village near Colchester, and which by the kindness of Dr. Philip Laver, I had the good fortune to see during a recent visit. A large part of the walls of one room still retains this design, and in two other rooms are remains of similar stencilled patterns.

The second example is one that has already been referred to, and figured in a former paper.¹ This was found in an old house at Royston, on the borders of Cambridgeshire and Hertfordshire, and was recorded by Mr. F. W. Kinneir Tarte in 1902² (Fig. 1). In this case stencilled pilasters alternate with Renaissance panels drawn freehand in black outline on a white ground. The stencilled pilasters are of strap-work ornament, the stencil being cut in the form of the pattern, the interstices being the background, so that when the stencil is placed on a white surface the black paint brushed over it forms, through the detached openings, the background, and leaves the pattern in the original white ground. In similar patterns painted by hand, the background is first laid in flat and on this the ornament is painted in a lighter tint. (See Pl. iv, *Arch. Jour.* lxxxvii, p. 84.) In this class of pattern the stencil is sufficiently strong not to need 'ties,' and was the method adopted for the bordering of the texts that were ordered to be painted in the churches during the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries.³

After the early years of the seventeenth century

¹ *Arch. Jour.* xcii, 262, Fig. 2.

² *St. Albans and Herts Arch. Soc.*

³ *Arch. Jour.* xcii, 265, Pl. viii A.

Trans. I, part iv n.s., p. 385.

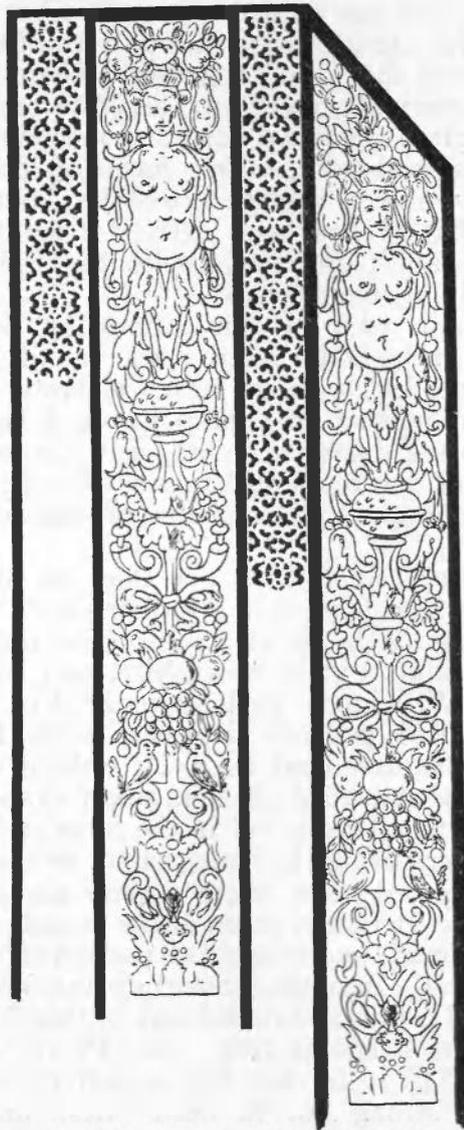


FIG. 1. WALL-PAINTING, ROYSTON, HERTS. From a drawing by
F. W. Kinneir Tarte

(By permission of the St. Albans and Herts. Arch. Soc.)

there is a long gap before we find the stencil being used
in any form of mural decoration. Wall-paintings occur



STENCIL WALL-PAPER, COLCHESTER, NOW IN THE VICTORIA & ALBERT MUSEUM



but rarely during the greater part of this century. There is one in the Victoria and Albert Museum from Broome Park, Canterbury, dated *circa* 1640, and one from Fore Hamlet, Ipswich, is dated 1657, which is recorded by Mr. Guy Maynard, and a drawing of which is preserved in Ipswich Museum. There are also a few figure subjects and landscapes that may be attributed to this period, but had the practice continued as a general craft, examples should be even more numerous than those of an earlier date. We may therefore, reasonably conclude that Stow's statement : ' The art of staining has now departed out of England,'¹ is substantially correct.

The more usual method of wall-covering during the seventeenth century was plain panelling, and it is on the removal of this, that most of the sixteenth-century paintings have been discovered, well-preserved behind this solid protection, but unfortunately most of them were destroyed, or covered with wall-paper, in the nineteenth century, and with no more record than the bare mention of their discovery.

The great time of the stencil, however, was yet to come, when it was to develop into a fine art.

Towards the end of the seventeenth century the reaction against Puritanic austerity created a desire for something better than the barrenness of plain walls, the covering of printed papers began to develop as an industry, but it was not until the eighteenth century that it assumed anything like importance. The introduction of tinted papers, and the application of colours, superseded the old white paper printed in black, which hitherto had been the usual method. Colours were added to the printed outline, but owing to the difficulty of register by printing, these were mostly applied by hand, or by means of the stencil. In this way stencilling became established, and in time elaborate and remarkable results were attained in numerous colours entirely by the use of the stencil.

Many fine examples are in the Victoria and Albert Museum, one of which is here reproduced by the kind permission of the authorities (Pl. ii) was found at

¹ Survey of London, under Painter Stainers' Hall.

Holly Trees House, Colchester, and is dated as *circa* 1750. A further portion of this paper is preserved at the "Holly Trees."

Such an elaborate paper as this must have been very costly to produce, and probably not less than hand-painting, which in general effect it closely resembles. Most papers were of a much simpler nature, but in these the stencil played a great part and ultimately led to a revival of painting directly on the wall. There is no known record of this, but it has come to light through examples that have been recently discovered.

The first to be noticed was found at the Crown Hotel, Aylesbury, in 1932, and was recorded by me in the paper 'Tudor Mural-Paintings in the Lesser Houses in Bucks.'¹ The method employed was first to lay a buff colour wash all over the wall, upon this bunches of flowers in black were powdered, and between these were light sprigs of foliage in black, white and brown, tying the whole together and combining to make a very pleasing decoration produced entirely with the stencil (Pl. iii). This was superimposed on two earlier paintings, one of 1603, the other of the time of Henry VIII. Directly over the stencil pattern, came the first wall-paper, but in places pieces of a newspaper of 1843 had first been pasted in order to level up the surface. We may assume therefore that this stencil-work was executed about the end of the eighteenth century, or in the early part of the nineteenth century.

In describing this discovery I remarked: 'Although no similar example seems to have been noticed, there is little doubt from the great quantity of the stencil patterns that this method of wall-decoration must have been extensively practised during the early part of the nineteenth century, before wall-papers appear to have become sufficiently economical to obtain general usage.'

During the winter of 1936, our member, Miss Helen Donovan of Bourton-on-the-Water, kindly wrote to tell me of the discovery of some painted walls in the

¹ *Arch. Jour.* lxxxix, p. 162, Pl. xvii.



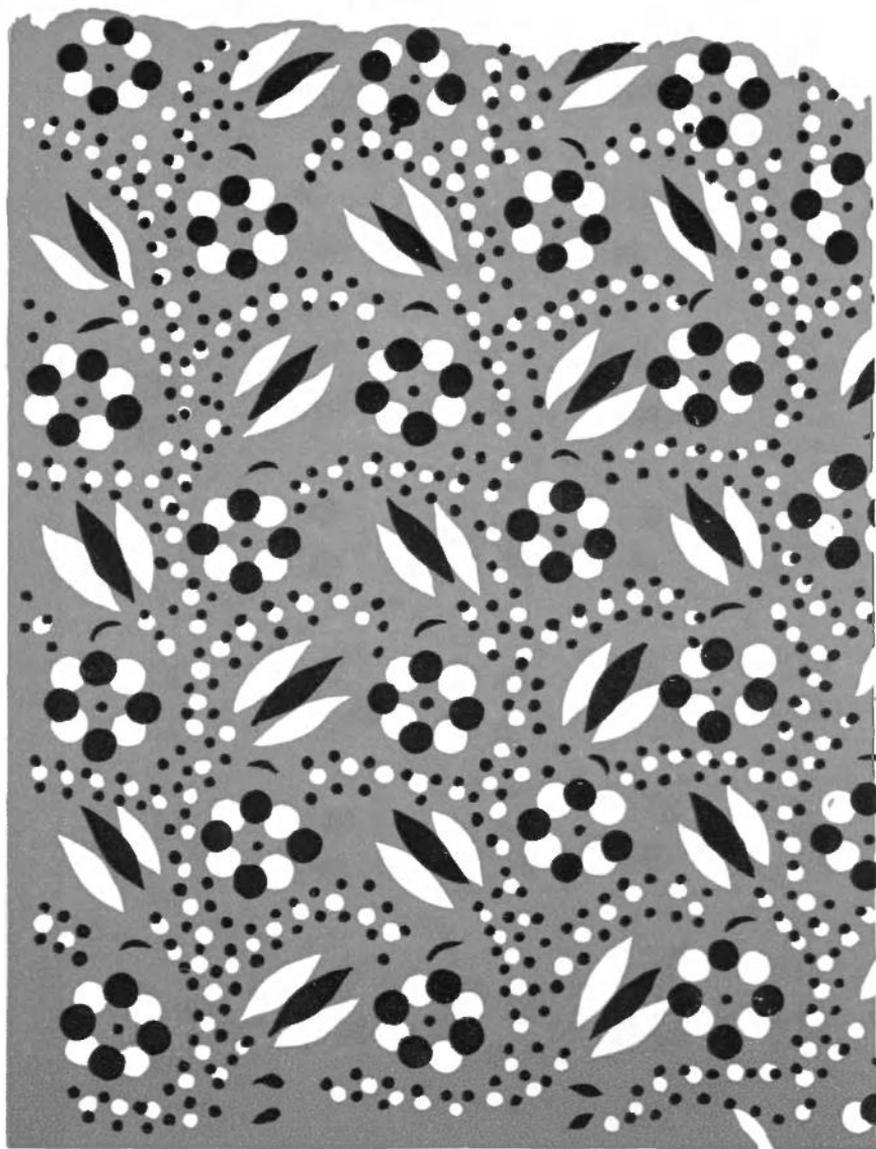
LATE EIGHTEENTH OR EARLY NINETEENTH-CENTURY STENCIL WALL-
DECORATION. THE CROWN HOTEL, AYLESBURY

(Drawing by F. W. R.)



STENCIL WALL-PAINTING, EIGHTEENTH CENTURY. FROM THE GREAT HOUSE, NORTHLEACH, GLOS.

(Drawing by Miss Helen Donovan)



STENCIL WALL-PAINTING, EIGHTEENTH CENTURY. FROM THE GREAT HOUSE,
NORTHLEACH, GLOS.
(Drawing by F. W. R.)

eighteenth-century portion of The Great House, Northleach, then being demolished. Miss Donovan sent a drawing of one pattern (Pl. iv) from which it was clear that it was a stencil-produced painting of a similar description to that of the Crown, Aylesbury. On visiting the house, I was fortunate in meeting the owner, Mr. John Fox, who kindly gave me a portion of the plaster of another pattern (Pl. v). A third room had been similarly painted, but only traces remained which were too indefinite for the pattern to be determined.

The only difference of method in these Northleach examples was that the patterns were produced by two superimposed stencils in different colours, while in that at Aylesbury each stencil formed a complete detail, but of varied colours.

On a recent visit to Essex, I found three further examples. One in Colchester Museum, from Lower Dairy Farm, Little Horkesley (Pl. vi), curiously the same village which provided the early seventeenth-century stencil example already described. The portion preserved is on three boards, and has hitherto been regarded as belonging to the earlier series. The design which is painted in dark grey on a white ground, consists of vertical stripes of entwined ribbon and garlands, from which blossoms spring on either side, and at intervals, the blank spaces between the stripes are broken with a floral device. A geometric arrangement of diamond shapes forms a dado border, but the dado appears to have been left undecorated. The general effect is light and graceful, and suggests French influence. Its style is certainly not earlier than the eighteenth century, while the floral motifs and the border show its affinity with the Aylesbury and Northleach stencil paintings.

The other two Essex examples are in Saffron Walden Museum. One is specially interesting as being a pattern produced by two super-imposed stencils in dark green, almost black, and a light sage-green (Pl. vii. A). Only a small piece has been preserved about 16 in. × 9 in., which appears to have been the portion of plaster between two studs. Along the top is a

strong border about 2 in. deep, consisting of a row of conventional flowers supported on triangles, in dark green. This feature recalls the borders in the Aylesbury, Little Horkesley, Northleach examples.

The space below is divided vertically into two nearly equal portions. That on the left having a running floral pattern, the stems formed of dots in light and dark colours, flowers in dark, and the leaves of light green with the veins in the dark colour. The right-hand space is filled with a simple lattice pattern in the dark colour only. The crossing lines are formed of dots, and each diamond form contains a simple brush-mark. The general effect is that of a lace curtain.

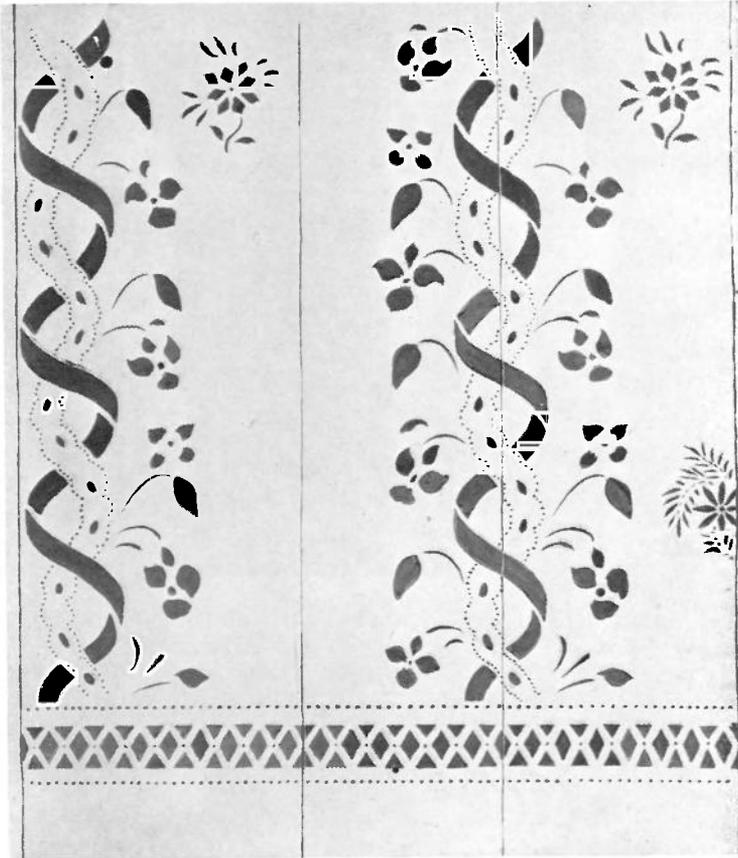
Owing to a piece of paper having been pasted on the right-hand lower corner which shows plainly on the edge, it was first considered to have been a stencilled wall-paper, and has been so labelled. A careful scrutiny, however, shows that this is merely a small patch, probably a repair of the plaster surface. It was later washed over with a white or grey lime-wash covering the paper and rendering it almost imperceptible except at the frayed edge.

The second is a very unimposing specimen, but serves to illustrate this newly recognised class of work. The background is a leaden-grey colour on which an all-over floral pattern is stencilled in Venetian red, forming a particularly sad and depressing effect.

The method of cutting the stencils in all of this class, it will be noticed, avoids almost any necessity for the ties, as the patterns are on the lines of Chinese brushwork.

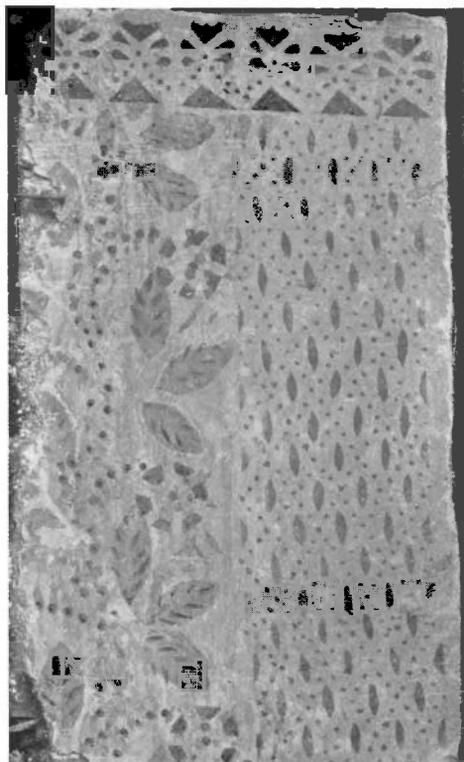
The Rev. Montagu Benton, and Dr. Philip Laver, also report other examples in Essex, but these I have not, so far, been able to investigate. However, we have now examples from four localities sufficiently far apart to show that the practice was general during the time that wall-papers were an expensive luxury.

When I first advanced this view, some objection was raised to it as being highly fanciful to suppose that hand-work could successfully compete with the



STENCILLED WALL DECORATION FROM LOWER DAIRY FARM, LITTLE HORKESLEY, ESSEX, EIGHTEENTH CENTURY. PORTION ON WOOD PARTITION IN COLCHESTER MUSEUM

(From a drawing by F. W. R.)



A. STENCIL WALL DECORATION IN TWO COLOURS. EIGHTEENTH CENTURY. FROM 5, MARKET HILL, SAFFRON WALDEN



B. WALL-PAINTING, ST. MICHAEL WEIGHING SOULS. LATE FIFTEENTH CENTURY. THE COMMANDERY, WORCESTER
(From a drawing by Miss E. Matly Moore)

printed commodity, but such criticisms were based on the present perspective of the wall-paper industry, and did not take into account the many disabilities under which the early wall-paper producers worked, a fault from which much of the literature on the subject is not altogether free.

For a long period wall-paper consisted of small single sheets, which although the makers took to joining them into 12 yards lengths, had to be printed separately on primitive presses, and hand-work was involved to obtain additional colours. In 1712 a tax of 1d. per square yard was imposed, and this was raised in 1714 to 1½d., again in 1777 to 1¾d., in addition to which there was a licence of £20 per annum.

It was not until the nineteenth century was well advanced that paper was made in continuous rolls and could be printed on cylinder machines. In 1835, the Official Report of the Excise Commissioners stated that on every 'piece' of wall-paper produced in this country costing 2s. 6d., the duty was 1s. 3d.¹ In 1847 the industry was assisted by the lowering of the tax, but it was not until 1861 that the tax was wholly removed.

When these conditions are considered there seems little reason to doubt that direct stencilling on the plaster would be more economical than wall-paper, while so simple a process might easily have been done by one of the household, avoiding the tax and almost any other expense. It has been urged also that if such a practice had been at all common, more examples would have already come to notice. The same might be said of wallpapers of this period, which are so rarely recognised, or looked for, yet we know from the Revenue returns, advertisements and other records, that they were a considerable commodity, although not in general use in the sense that wall-paintings were general in the sixteenth century, or as wall-papers became in the second half of the nineteenth century.

It would seem from my own observations that during the eighteenth century, and the first half of the

¹ *Catalogue of Wall-Papers*, C. C. Oman, Victoria and Albert Museum, 1929.

nineteenth century, wall-papers were used not only in houses here and there, but also in one or two rooms only of such houses, and that most people seem to have been contented to have their walls white-washed.¹

That wall-paper, at this period, was a consideration, even for those fairly well-to-do, has been strikingly illustrated recently in one of the houses of The Grove, Highgate.² Four wall-papers of the early eighteenth century were found covered by panelling of the same century. One of these which had, presumably, become soiled, or shabby, had the original printed pattern washed off; this was an easy matter, as the early papers were printed in distemper inks. It was subsequently stencilled with a flowing brushwork pattern, but beneath it, in places, traces of the original printed design can be seen (Pl. viii).

The walls of our old houses have yet much to teach us, but unfortunately they are almost entirely neglected, and are fast disappearing. If closer observation of them did nothing more than help us to visualise that our country has existed for long periods, devoid of framed easel-pictures and of wallpapers, it would, perhaps, not be altogether in vain.

APPENDIX

PAINTED WALL DECORATION OF THE SMALLER HOUSES IN THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

The eighteenth century was essentially a period of experiment in wall decoration. Apart from wall-papers, and the stencil painting already described, there was little in the nature of ornamental design in the smaller houses.

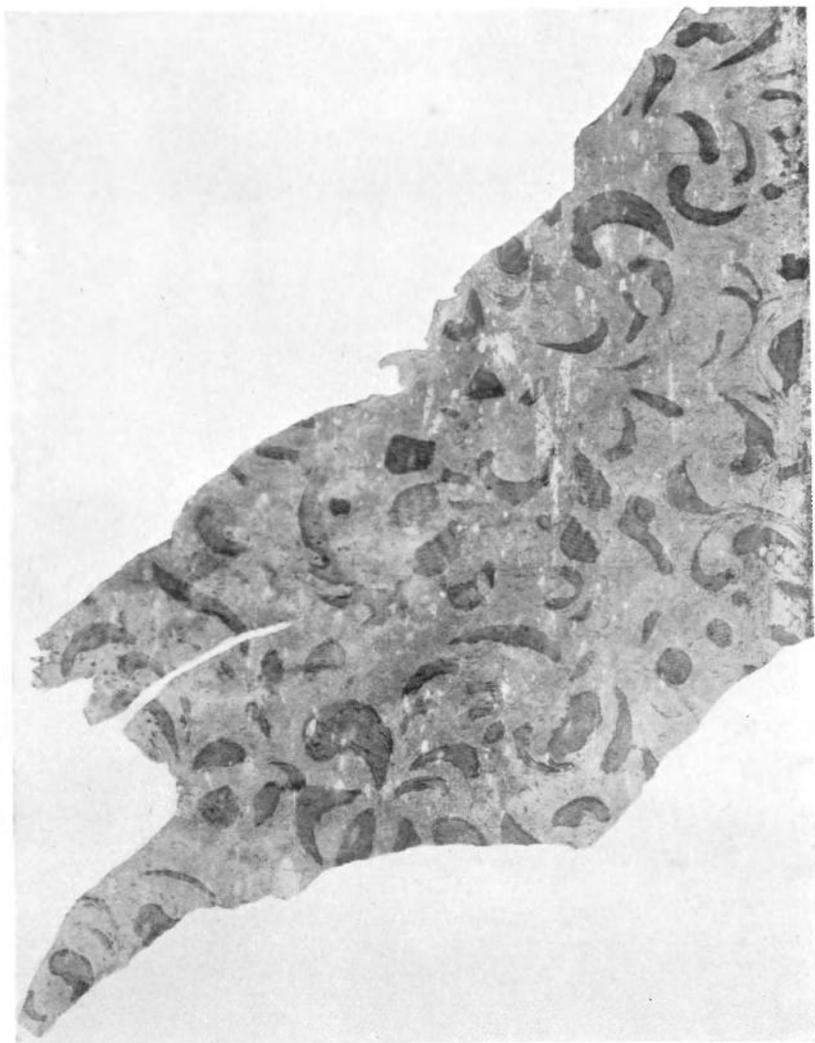
The traditional mural-painter of the sixteenth century does not appear to have survived after the first quarter of the seventeenth century, and mural painting was no longer carried on as a special craft. The easel-picture had become established, and the energies and training of painters was exclusively in this direction.

A partial revival of decorative painting was brought about towards the end of the seventeenth century, and flourished throughout the eighteenth century, by it becoming fashionable among the wealthy to have their mansions decorated, and in the performance of which

¹ *Arch. Jour.* lxxxix, 127.

of London, 1936, vol. xvii, 'The Village of Highgate, (St. Pancras, Part i.) p. 84, Pls. 66-69.

² *London County Council Survey*



STENCIL WALL-PAPER FROM THE GROVE, HIGHGATE, NOW IN THE
VICTORIA & ALBERT MUSEUM



EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY PAINTED PANELLING, MANOR FARM, HUGHENDEN

foreign artists were largely employed. This naturally gave a lead that was followed, in a limited way, by those of more modest means, and who were content to have the work of such native talent that was within their reach. In this way a considerable amount of wall, and ceiling painting was carried out in the lesser houses, from the end of the seventeenth century throughout the eighteenth century.

Many of these still survive, particularly in provincial towns, farm houses, etc. They are certainly more frequently met with, or perhaps recognised, than are wall-papers of this period, but as they are the work of unknown artists, and often of no great artistic merit, they have received very little attention.

This is to be deplored as apart from artistic consideration, they are frequently of interest on account of costume and details that have some archaeological value. Their record is also necessary in order to give a correct estimate of the native art of the period, rather than judging it only by the work of the highest level and that of important foreign painters.

Such work was mostly that of men untrained to decorative art, but who endeavoured to adapt themselves to the new requirements.

There are among these works, various and very different styles, one of the most popular, but perhaps the least interesting, being the allegorical classic-figure subject, some of which possess a degree of skill which is surprising, in view of their humble position.

A good example of this is the ceiling of a small room in the Mill House, near Chalfont St. Giles.

Less ambitious painters chose figure subjects of more homely, realistic character, or if they aspired to decorative treatment, portrayed artificial shepherdesses, etc., in the style of Watteau.

The landscape painter found, in this new fashion, a fresh field for his ability. The studio produced, classic landscape of the period being specially suited to decoration.

In some cases the paintings are on panelling, which with its bold bolection mouldings form a series of large framed spaces which would naturally suggest great possibilities to an easel picture painter. How the opportunity was grasped is well shown by the discovery at Manor Farm, Hughenden (Pl. ix).

The decorative scheme in this case is formed by the panelling, which is in the two divisions known as 'filling' and 'dado,' the whole being again divided by uprights so as to form two rows of rectangular panels of equal width, but the upper row being about two and a half times the depth of those of the dado.

In each of these panels landscapes have been painted so that each is a complete picture, but in the upper row the artist has resorted to the device of running each picture continuously, from panel to panel, round the room. The distance consists of a mountain range, with rocks, streams and trees in the foreground. In some of the scenes figures are represented hunting and fishing.

The landscapes of the lower series are each independent subjects.

The costume of the figures indicates that the painting was executed about the time of George II. For about a century this work

proudly displayed its beauties, when it had to suffer the ignominy of being supplanted by another vagary of fashion. Canvas was stretched across its face to afford a level surface for wall-paper. Thus it remained for nearly another century, hidden and forgotten, until 1933, when the room was stripped for redecoration and it was again revealed.

A similar example at Colchester, has been made known to me by the Rev. G. Montagu Benton, at the Tea Rooms of Messrs. Neal and Robarts, 118, High Street. This differs only in the subjects of the upper panels not being continuous.

It would appear from these examples that this was a recognised scheme of decoration at this period. The fault from which they both suffer, is that of having a second row of landscapes in the lower panels.

It would have been a more satisfactory decoration if the lower panels had been kept sub-ordinate by some simple ornamental device that would not have detracted from the main subjects above.

Landscapes occur also, painted directly on the plaster, often singly and without apparently having formed any part of a decorative scheme other than that of a hanging easel-picture.

The rare ornamental designs are mostly of a very uncultured nature, but serve to show how much this branch of art had deteriorated among our native craftsmen, of which a good example is that at the George Inn (formerly the George and Dragon), at Chesham. Here in a little, third floor room, 12 ft. × 11 ft., are two painted walls. The paintings are on the plaster, and appear to be the work of some local, self-taught man, who may have been inspired by some of the sixteenth-century wall-paintings still, at that time, unobscured by wall-paper.

One wall bears on the right the representation of a man, about 5 ft. high, with three cornered hat, and a full bottomed wig, a sky-blue coat with wide skirts and gold braid. The star of the garter is on his left breast, and depending from a red sash is a 'George.' His right hand grasps a long gold-headed cane, and all round him are floral devices displayed in a sampler-like manner. In the extreme right-hand corner over his head is a looped up lace curtain (Pl. x).

There is little doubt that this figure is meant to represent King George I, it having been thought appropriate for a house bearing his name to honour his accession.

On the left, this painting becomes irregularly constricted, perhaps to avoid some fixture, and this portion contains a stag being pursued by dogs, drawn in style that resembles the art of the cave-age, or that of the Red Indian.

The second wall has a conventional floral design, covering a space of 10 ft. 6 in. in width and about 6 ft. in height, consisting of sprays of flowers of various sorts growing on the same stem, and with birds introduced, together with two diminutive old gentlemen in eighteenth-century costumes (Pl. xi).

With all their demerits, these compositions are entirely decorative in aim, and are, at least, mural paintings.



EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY WALL-PAINTING, THE GEORGE INN, CHESHAM



EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY WALL-PAINTING, THE GEORGE INN, CHESHAM

These few examples may be sufficient to indicate that the subject is worthy of some attention as at the present rate of destruction it may soon be too late. Probably few of them are worth preservation, but they should all be recorded.

Until recently, the eighteenth century was regarded as only yesterday, but the speed with which changes have come about in the last quarter of a century, have left it crowned with a halo of respectable antiquity.

Plates ix, x and xi first appeared in the Records of Bucks, vol. xiii, 1934, and are here reprinted by the kind permission of the Bucks Archaeological Society.