

## How to Block Print Fabric

### Brief introduction to block printing in period

Using a carved wooden block to imprint inks and dyes onto textile for decorative purposes is a technique that has been described by the ancient Greeks and the earliest extant block printed tunic was discovered in Egypt and dates from the 4<sup>th</sup> century.

“Block-printed cloths have a history of use in Syria dating back to ancient Rome. Excavations of the desert city of Palmyra have revealed remains of block printed cloths from India dating back to Queen Zenobia’s time (3<sup>rd</sup> century AD). The patterns on these finds are exactly the same as patterns on contemporary block printed cloth from Rajasthan. . . . Block printing is a cheap and efficient means of producing hard-wearing patterned textiles. To ensure sharp detail, the blocks are carved from the end grain of densely grained hardwoods, such as box, sycamore, ash and pearwood.”<sup>1</sup>

Finds of block printed textiles have been discovered in Persia (sixth and seventh centuries) in red, black and powdered gold. (Robinson, A History of Printed Textiles, 1969).

Block printed textiles are not limited to the Near and far east persona, Western Europe produced block printed textiles, and blocks were used to print outline patterns for embroidery projects, wall hangings and altar cloths. “An important centre of this type of printing in the late Middle Ages was Venice. The earliest known pictorial print from Venice is the so-called Tapestry of Sion dating from the late fourteenth century. It is a mural hanging, printed in oil colours on linen. Red is used for the bands of line patterns containing the medallions of busts of famous animals, and black for a number of pictures showing a procession of dancing men and women. . . . the printer has made such mistakes as accidentally inverting a block and omitting parts of the border.” (Robinson, A History of Printed Textiles, 1969)



This piece of block printed Linen displayed on the Victoria and Albert museum website, shows, ‘block-printed grey (black) on natural creamy colour, 1350-1400, Italian or North European; motif of birds and foliage

Historical significance: Rare example of an early printed textile of a relatively under-documented type.

Historical context note: The origin of these textiles seems open to some debate. In the original accession register entry they were traditionally

attributed to Germany, although more recently very similar pieces have been labelled in the museum as Italian (monochromatic prints with brocaded-silk style designs). A larger fragment of this textile, showing the full repeat, is 8615-1863. There are also three fragments of blue dyed linen (7095-1860, 7095A-1860, and 1514-1899) that have a print which is identical to that upon a silk dalmatic preserved in Straslund. This print features a bird, probably a heron or a crane, reacting to a lion-like animal, entwined with flowing vines and foliage. It seems possible that the printed textiles emulated more expensive woven silks, making identical patterns and designs more accessible to consumers of limited means, although even so, they would not have been "cheap".

Little is known about printed linens of this period. Studies of medieval textiles often focus upon the weaving industry, or upon decorated silk and woollen textiles. Painters of the period seem to have favoured plain linen and cotton over their printed equivalents, reserving their portrayals of patterned textiles for silks and woollens. However, these flowing patterns, composed of flowering vines, and often incorporating birds and beasts, appear to be typical of the 2nd quarter of the 14th century (See Crowfoot et al., *Textiles and Clothing*. Museum of London, 2001, pp. 101 & 117) (Milford-Cottam, 2006)

Production Note from the Victoria and Albert Museum Website:

Originally accessioned as Flemish; similar textiles in the collection are labelled as German, but Donald King's key essay of 1962 proposed that printing may have originated in Italy and spread outwards from there to Germany and neighbouring states'

## So where do I start?

### Fabric choices

Block printing textiles is a very easy and fun way to personalize your fabric stash. It is best to stick with natural fibre textiles, as described on the V&A website plain linen and cotton were favoured by the printers of the time. Linen and silk both take block printing well. Rayon does not wear well nor does it take an imprint well, and I would avoid any fabric blended with polyester.

### Preparing your Fabric

Wash your fabric to remove sizing. Don't use a dryer sheet or any fabric softeners as the chemicals can interfere with the ink or paint uptake or longevity. Wash your chosen fabric in cold, dry it and iron it. Printing over wrinkles will result in a gap in your design once the fabric is smoothed out. Always iron your fabric and smooth it out prior to printing.

One of the most important elements of block printing is that perfection is not the goal. There will be variation in paint distribution, pressure placed on the block, alignment, and impression. These variants are accepted as part of the esthetic, and as demonstrated by the period references, mistakes are period.

### Block choices

Printing blocks are often found for sale in import stores. Ebay or Etsy have many pre-carved blocks for sale on their websites as well. I have found an Etsy merchant who will make a custom block from an image and I used her service to create a block of the Avacal populace badge. The creation of wood

blocks for printing purposes, whether for textiles or paper was mostly done in collaboration work of skilled craftsmen. A draftsman created a design on paper or drew the design directly onto the block, which was cut by a cutter. (Fletcher, 2006 [eBook #20195])

Choose a design that is easily repeated in a period looking motif suitable for the esthetic of the project you have in mind.



Here are two wooden blocks I use to recreate the look of Ottoman style textiles. The black and white print out from an extant Turkish Caftan from the Topkapi Museum in Istanbul to the left of the block.

The three-spot design is commonly referred to as “cintamani” design and is a recurring design element in Turkish textiles and the wavy line is thought to have been inspired by tiger stripes. Both

these designs are seen individually and together in several extant Turkish textiles and velvets.

You can also create your own block in several different ways. Adhesive Craft Foam is an easy and cheap way to create a block:

- Choose a design and print it
- Peel off the backing of the craft foam and stick the design on.
- Use a very sharp craft knife on a cutting mat to cut away the negative space
- Take another piece of craft foam and place it over the cut out to form a backer



The green foam block is an example of a hand carved, simple design block which I hand cut and then used with gold acrylic paint mixed with textile medium on broadcloth which eventually became lining. As you can see from the image above, applying even pressure is very important.

For small projects, such as largess items (napkins, gift bags) you can use an eraser as a block. Trace the design on paper with pencil, place on the back of the eraser and rub. The graphite will transfer from the paper to the eraser and you can carve away the negative space.

### **Ink or Paint choices**

In North America, Michaels Craft stores sells a large variety of paints and inks that can be used for textile use. I recommend using water based inks or paints. Water based colours clean up well and dry faster.



Speedball Textile Ink is water soluble and comes in basic colours, black, yellow, red and blue. I used black speedball ink to print this Ottoman design on plain red broadcloth – which eventually found itself as lining for a caftan.

Speedball ink is quite thick and I thinned it with water to about the consistency of buttermilk.

For more colour choices or metallic choices I use acrylic paint with textile medium added, also thinned to a buttermilk consistency. Metallics were used to print textiles during the Middle Ages – textiles printed in powdered gold were found in Persia dating from the sixth and seventh centuries. Also gold and silver were printed on plain dyed cloth to produce a cheap imitation of the rare textiles that came from the near and far East. (Robinson, A History of Printed Textiles, 1969)

Whichever paint or ink you use, make sure you follow the instructions to set the paint. Some brands require ironing to heat set, tumble drying on high, and some require you to wait a period of time before washing. Whichever paint you use, remember to follow the instructions especially if this will be on fabric which will see frequent washing.

### **Applying the paint to the block**

Hardware stores and dollar stores sell small scale paint rollers for painting trim and edging. Multiple replacement rollers can be easily obtained and they are cheaper in price and more sturdily made than the paint tray/roller combinations that are sold at craft stores.

I prefer the sponge rollers as they hold a lot of paint and it is easier to control





the application of the paint on the block. Application is a trial and error process. Too much paint on the block results in the edges of the design losing definition, too little paint results in a faded or absent design.

Period sources describe inking the block from a pad and pressing it on to the cloth by hand or by striking the back with a wooden mallet. (Robinson, A History of Printed Textiles, 1969).

It was my experience that using a rubber mallet to tap the block once it was placed on the fabric was the best way to ensure an even distribution of paint on to the textile. However, caution must be used. I broke my long wavy wooden block clean in half by smacking it too hard with the mallet. I was able to glue the block back together again, however it was not an experience I care to repeat!

### The actual printing process - now what?



Use duct tape or painters tape and use it to tape an old towel firmly down on large surface, such as a craft table or kitchen table.

Printing yardage is best done starting at the short edge and printing line by line, pulling the un-printed fabric towards you. You do not have to clamp or stretch the fabric to print on it, rather just smooth it out by hand prior to printing.



Keep a yardstick or a large carpenters square on hand to ensure you are keeping relatively straight or use tailors chalk to grid out the fabric. If you are using a block with a continuous pattern, just be mindful of your block placement as

you work from one edge to the other.

If you are printing fabric for a specific garment, to save time and paint, cut out the pattern pieces and print the pieces individually.

This allows for careful placement of the design, in this case arranging the gryphons to face each other at the opening of the coat and facing gryphons on each sleeve.

### **Troubleshooting**

Keep some water, a large roll of paper towel or some clean cotton rags on hand to clean up any spills or drips. I dropped the block, face down, fully loaded with paint on front of the purple caftan. When accidents like this happen you have to work quickly. Put some towels or rags under the fabric where the mistake is. Get some water, soak a clean cotton cloth or paper towel and start wiping at the misplaced paint. If you catch it quickly you can clean up most of the paint without permanent damage.

Block printing textiles to customize your fabric stash or for individual projects is fun and easy. Enjoy the adventure and remember that perfection is not the ultimate goal. Have fun!

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### **Bibliography**

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