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Pattern Research Project: An Investigation of The Pattern And Printing Process - Acanthus

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Acanthus



Acanthus Wallpaper by William Morris

Hongyi Zhu

IDES251+IDES231

About the pattern

Few years after the founding of Morris & Co, Morris started to shift his focus onto wallpapers. In 1864, he issued *Daisy*, the first pattern of his series of flower pattern. Since then, Morris shows his strong interest on this field and started to yield out numerous fabulous wall paper design. The figure on the right is the original design drawing for his work, *Acanthus*.



Acanthus, original design (1874)
water color & pencil on paper¹

Pattern design

The pattern is a composition of overlapping scroll foliage. Each leaf extends and spouts to different directions. This design creates a sense of movement. Hence, the pattern conveys the randomness of the nature.

Pattern use

Originally, the pattern was used only for wallpaper.

Today, the manufacturers extended the possibility of its usage. This pattern is also used on fabric and furniture too.



Materiality

According to V&A, the color being used for Morris & Co's wallpapers is distempered color -- a type of water-based paints that made with pigments and organic binders, such as animal or plants (EwaGlos, 2016, p105). Depends on its material, the characteristic of the paint can be variable. Compares to tempera color, distemper is less durable and vulnerable to abrasion. However, since it is relatively cheaper and easier to produce, it is a suitable paint for wall paper manufacturer.⁷

Pattern color

There are several kinds of color schemes were used for this pattern. The color used are all low saturated, in my assumption, this choice is made because wallpaper should be the background and not overwhelm.

Old prints: Pictures on the right are the old print produced during Morris' period. The color been used there is shade (mixture of color with black).

Current prints: The picture below is the modern print made by Morris & Co, compare to the old prints, they are more bright. The color used here is tint (mixture of color with white). Also, the new technique provides a wider range of color choice for printing. There are up to five different color schemes available today.



Acanthus, wallpaper, privet color (present)
Sur-flex print on wallpaper⁴



Acanthus, wallpaper, stone color (present)
Sur-flex print on wallpaper⁴

About the designer

William Morris: A well-known English writer, socialist and designer during 19th century, Victorian era. Due to his close friendship with Pre-Raphaelite artists, Morris' was significantly influenced by the idea of medievalism. Which cause his strong interest on the reviving of traditional art and method of production. As a founder, he established SPAB, *The Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings*, a organization aims to protect old buildings from decaying and damage.

During his career life, Morris founded first Morris, Marshall, Faulkner & Co--a furnishing manufacturer and retailer-- and later the Kelmscott press; both of them have a significant impact on Art & Craft movement. Hence Morris becomes a towering figure in the furnishing field during that period.⁵

The Art and craft movement

A aesthetic movement that started at England in the late 19th century, and later spreaded to other regions of Europe and North America. The movement was caused by the disastrous effect of industrialization on craftsmanship. It aims to advocate a social reform on art and economic.⁶

History & Culture

Acanthus is a type of plant that wide-spreaded in mediterranean region. There leaves were used as ornamentation for thousands of years. The most well-known example should be the corinthian order columns of Greek temples. Later, it was inherited by the Roman Empire and its successor, Byzantine.

The foliage symbolize immortality, healing and rebirth; it was commonly used as a decoration for Cathedral architectures. However, it had never become a significant religious symbol in Christianity. The pattern remained as a decorative element. The pattern was developed and transformed into numerous different forms through the age.



Acanthus, wallpaper, old print (1875)
block-printed with distemper colours²



Acanthus, wallpaper, old print (1875)
block-printed with distemper colours³

Craft

The original prints (above) were made with block-print. According to V&A and Linda Parry, the entire pattern requires up to 30 pieces of separate wood block to complete it. They describes it as the "first of a group of large-scale, heavily patterned and deep coloured papers" (1996)⁸. This factor raised its cost. However, although Morris used wood-block primarily, he did use surface machine occasionally in his studio. Today, all those manual works are replaced by the surface-print machine.

One thing should be noted is that the later prints have a minor change on its design. If you compare the modern version to the originals, you would notice that the original prints have a background decorative pattern; their gaps between each leaves are filled with tiny vanes. The current prints' are filled with solid color. There is not an official document declaring the reason of this change. However, in my assumption, this change it made either to simplify the pattern to add a sense of modernity, or to simplify the process of manufacturing in order to increase the profit.

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