

## **STENCILING: A VERY SHORT HISTORY OF A VERY LONG TRADITION**

The use of stencils goes back thousands of years, for both practical reasons—before rubber stamps or printing presses or photocopiers were invented, stencils were used to teach children their ABCs; politicians used stencils of their signatures to get through their piles of official correspondence—and to make surfaces look more beautiful and more expensive. The Europeans who colonized America were familiar with stencil designs in the houses, churches and public buildings of their homelands and brought these traditions to the New World with them.

In early America, as soon as people began to have the time and money to beautify their surroundings they started to apply stencil decorations on their walls and even on their floors. In the later 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, stencils were also often used on other surfaces as well. These included textiles, especially bed and table coverings; furniture; and household articles such as tin and wooden trays, boxes and trunks.

Early stencils were usually made of oiled heavy paper or, less commonly, leather. Later, stencils were made of tin and specially treated linen. All of these materials are still used today, although the most common modern stencil material is flexible strong plastic. Usually, a multi-color pattern required a separate stencil for each color (three colors, three stencils).

Stencilers have always preferred to work with fast-drying paints to reduce smudging and speed up the work. The usual paint for stencil work today is acrylic. The type of paint used in early America depended on what was available. Both oil-based media and water-soluble mediums such as skimmed milk were employed. Until after the Civil War, most painters made their own paints by mixing the chosen medium with dry pigments. Typical pre-1850 colors were lamp black, yellow ochre, red ochre and (after 1704) Prussian blue. The colors used for early American stencil designs were usually very strong. After all, houses were dark and cold, and people wanted plenty of bang for their buck.

Examples of original stenciled work in New England can still be found in the country villages and prosperous farmhouses where owners wanted stylish surroundings, but could not easily obtain or afford the costlier wallpapers, printed or embroidered textiles and woven rugs which the stencil patterns imitated. This stenciling was usually the work of professionals. These were traveling artisans who rode from one job to the next with their collection of stencil patterns, dry pigments and stubby brushes.

Early wall stencils most often were inspired by the wallpapers of the time, with the patterns simplified and made larger in order to be more practical (stencils aren't good at reproducing fine lines and tiny detail) and more economical (a few large motifs repeated in widely separated strips is a lot faster to do than a small all-over pattern. Wall stenciling reached its greatest popularity in the Federal period (1783–1820s), the period in which the Historical Society house and many of the other fine houses in Holliston were built. (Note that the stenciling in the Historical Society house is authentic in pattern and color but it is not original to the building.) At this time, it was very fashionable to define the outlines or edges of patterns and shapes. This can be seen by the popularity of wallpaper borders, which were often imitated in stenciled wall treatments and in many other areas of designs and decoration: tape, braid or some other kind of edging on clothing, carpets, and fabric window treatments; paint or inlays of metal or contrasting colored wood on articles of furniture; silver and china patterns featuring border or edge designs to emphasize the outlines of the piece.

But back to the art of stenciling! For a while in the 1800s, it was very popular for young ladies at boarding schools to learn the art and craft of theorem (pronounced THEE-rum) painting. This special type of stencil work was usually done on velvet. The patterns were typically fruit or flowers, carefully arranged to make a skillfully shaded still-life “painting” that was framed and hung proudly on the parlor wall. (The Historical Society owns a fine example of such a theorem.) Also in the 1800s, the use of metallic powders for stenciling became popular. Elaborate designs in imitation gold and silver imitated the very expensive inlaid metals and Oriental lacquer that were much admired and collected at the time.

Later in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, as materials became more readily available and mass production of all sorts of household items increased, two important trends developed. One was that amateurs, including many housewives, began to beautify their surroundings with stencils. The other change was that numbers of women became professional stencilers for the first time. They didn’t work on walls and floors, but rather were employed to apply decoration to furniture in factories like the Hitchcock chair factory in Connecticut, or did piecemeal at home, stenciling on tin and smaller wooden articles.

But in spite of a few bursts of renewed interest, most notably in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century work of Louis Tiffany and the arts-and-crafts movement, during the last 150 years other technologies have steadily replaced stenciling as a means of quick, economical decoration. Printed wall coverings, printed and woven textiles, photography and computer images are a few of the many means available today for bringing pattern and color into our surroundings. Still, stenciling is an important part of America’s colorful past. And its modest revival today is a renewed expression of the universal human impulse to “make things look pretty.”

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#### Bibliography:

- Bishop, *The Art of Decorative Stenciling*. Penguin. 1978.
- Fjelstul and Schad, *Early American Wall Stencils In Color*. Dutton, 1982.
- Slayton, *Early American Decorating Techniques*. Dover, 1972.

## CLASS OUTLINE

### Preparation:

1. Newspapers will have been taped to cover the table/counter area.
2. Place a SMALL puddle of paint on a paper plate—one color per plate. Lay several sponges next to plates.

### Class Presentation:

1. Share some of the history of stenciling with children (from previous pages or other sources). Show some of the pictures of stenciled items from the book *Traditional American Crafts* (unfortunately only in black & white). Show a few of the available stencils and discuss the pattern/object depicted. Have students think about color, design and balance when doing their stencil.
2. Demonstrate technique for stenciling—dab sponge in paint; dab excess paint off of sponge; hold stencil firmly on paper; dab sponge in stencil area. If too much paint is used, the paint will run under the stencil, resulting in a smeared line.
3. Distribute ONE bag/paper to each student.
4. Distribute pencils for students to write name on bag/paper.
5. Students may use more than one stencil and more than one color on their bag/paper.
6. Stencils will need to be washed and dried between uses. Students should be encouraged to wash the stencils in warm, soapy water (one bin), rinse (another bin) and carefully dry the stencils using paper towels before getting a new stencil. Be gentle with the stencils. They break easily!
7. Completed bags/papers are hung by clothespins on clotheslines marked with the group number. Projects will be distributed to students at the end of the day.

### Clean-up:

1. Wash and dry all stencils; wash sponges and place loosely in bin to air-dry overnight.
2. Paint-spattered newspaper may be left on table. This will be used for the morning candlemaking session and then the wax-spattered newspaper will be replaced prior to the start of the afternoon stenciling class.
3. Thank you for your assistance!