A LIGHT AND ELEGANT ORNAMENT

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Though Robert Adam was by no means the first architect to be concerned with the furnishings of his houses, he is probably the only one whose name is perhaps more closely associated with interiors than exteriors. To those who have visited the great houses of England the phrase “an Adam room” will recall not merely perfect proportions, classical columns, and delicate plasterwork but furniture, draperies, and rugs, all exquisitely harmonious, all contributing their notes of color and subtle variations of form, so that the complete ensemble becomes a work of art in its own right.

Adam’s “light and elegant ornaments,” said Sir John Soane in 1812, “were soon applied in designs for chairs, tables, carpets, and in every other species of furniture. To Mr. Adam’s taste in the ornament of his buildings and furniture we stand indebted, inasmuch as manufacturers of every kind felt, as it were, the electric power of this revolution in art.”

It is thus more than usually important for an Adam room in a museum to be furnished with pieces in the same style and of outstanding quality. The dining room from Lansdowne House, a perfect example of Adam’s work, on display in the Metropolitan Museum since 1954, has been enriched in the last three years with Chippen-dale chairs and other splendid furniture, and recently with sumptuous silver, but the necessary color could only be added by a carpet. English carpets of all periods are rare and it is thus an exceedingly fortunate chance that has produced one of the right date, quality, and size to adorn this great room.

The pattern of the new acquisition has naturalistic flowers as well as purely classical motives; other carpets of the period, including one at Osterley Park known to have been designed by Robert Adam, show the same combination. On the deep blue of the central square lie four tall wicker baskets filled with flowers, red, pink, white, purple, lavender, and blue; roses and honeysuckle can be easily identified. Between them are four rose sprays, each with a single red flower and three buds, drawn with lively realism. The eight-leaved central medallion is a deep pink on a dark blue ground; the wide ring around it with twining sprays is yellow. The oblong panels at each end of the rug are pink, the elongated diamonds within them yellow. All the ornamentation here is classical, chiefly in shades of purple, blue, pink, and brown. A yellow border surrounds the whole. The patterns are given vividness, and sometimes even an appearance of relief, by an occasional very dark brown edging on one side of the leaves and stems.

The carpet is not entirely in its original condition. It was made with an outer border, about twenty inches wide, showing a zigzag pattern on a dark blue ground. This had been removed, but a detached portion came to the Museum together with the carpet. At some time, also, a small, rectangular section was cut out from one of the ends to enable the carpet to be fitted round a fireplace; the missing piece has been restored with such skill that the modern work is almost indistinguishable from the old, as can be seen from the reproduction. The carpet is now twenty-three feet long and sixteen feet wide.

All that is known of the history of the carpet is that it came in 1947 from Southam Delabere, the seat of the Earl of Ellenborough. But this house did not come into the hands of this family until 1839, when it was bought by the first earl, who gothicized it violently, adding a Norman keep and medieval towers to a Tudor building. It seems very unlikely that he would have bought an eighteenth-century carpet for it, though he might have inherited one from his father. The latter, the first Baron Ellenborough, was a wealthy lawyer in the 1780’s and is said to have lived in magnificent style, both at his house in St. James’s Square and at Roehampton. The now missing narrow exterior border may have been removed when the carpet was brought to...
English carpet, probably Axminster, 1780-1790, shown in the Lansdowne Room (p. 194). Length, 23 feet
Our knowledge of carpet-making in England in the last quarter of the eighteenth century is derived from written accounts (often mere sentences in diaries or letters), from inscriptions on existing carpets, and from descriptions in bills and other documents, which can sometimes be correlated with the carpets to which they refer.

From about 1756 Thomas Moore was the head of a manufactory at Moorefields, in London; several of his works, designed by Robert Adam, have been identified, including one bearing his name and the date 1769. But there is some evidence that, after 1780, a rival manufactory at Axminster in Devonshire (a county famous for its fine wool) was the leader in the field. It was founded by Thomas Whitty, described as "an ingenious and obliging person of the dissenting profession," who wrote an account of the enterprise in 1791: "On Midsummer-day, 1755 (a memorable day for my family)," he says, "I began the first carpet I ever made, taking my children and their aunt Betty Harvey to overlook and assist, for my first workers." In the same year this was written, a visitor also noted that the workers were women and children; his account reads, "From Bridport we came to AXMINSTER, famous all over Europe for its carpet manufactory. I was surprised to find such a little, paltry place, the origin of so much magnificence. The manufactory is all the property of one man. The work is chiefly done by women. We saw forty of these employed; the pattern lays before them, and with their fingers they weave the whole. This they execute with great quickness, and it is amusing to observe how fast the most elegant designs are traced out by the fingers of old women and children." In a report of 1779, the children are said to be none of them older than twelve or fourteen. Another reference is in a letter from the firm of Chippendale, Haig and Co. to Sir Edward Knatchbull in 1778, saying that they are sending "a design for an Axminster Carpet to correspond with your ceiling." The manufactory lasted until 1835, when its property was removed to Wilton; since that time, we are told, knotted rugs, as distinguished from the woven "Brussels" and "Wilton" types, have been known as "real axminster."

The carpet now in the Lansdowne Room is one of a group, all of which have similar over-all designs, a large central medallion flanked by narrow oblongs. One of the group was formerly at Woodhall Park, a house built by Thomas Tiverton for Sir Thomas Rumbold, brother-in-law of Baron Ellenborough; the furnishings were probably complete by about 1782. This carpet corresponds so closely in style to the decoration of the rooms that it is believed to have been designed by the architect. Like the Metropolitan Museum carpet, it has the double twining garlands of the center ring, but classical scrolls replace the bunches of flowers and the ground is mostly dark brown. Another member of the group is at Rocklease Manor, near Exeter, and the Victoria and Albert Museum has recently acquired a third, which, though smaller, is very much like the Metropolitan Museum carpet. The flowers, including the isolated rose sprays, are from the same design, but the central medallion is somewhat altered and the ground of the central square is beige instead of blue.

This carpet has kept its outer border, which is of the same pattern as the one removed from the Museum's piece. These borders link these carpets with one made for Carlton House, the Regent's town residence, about 1790, and now on loan at the Victoria and Albert Museum; it has the same pattern on its outer border, broken by medallions of birds and animals in classical style. Other details of its design also connect it with the medallion-and-oblong carpets.

The place of manufacture of the Carlton House carpet has not been ascertained, but in 1817 the Regent bought a carpet for the Royal Pavilion at Brighton which is known to have come from Axminster. The design of this is totally different, being wildly Chinese to suit its setting, but it is technically close to the Carlton House example and even more so to the Metropolitan Museum carpet; both have warps of four-ply white wool, ten threads to the inch; wefts of two shots of two-fold flax, and wool knots of the Turkish type, in the Brighton example six rows to the inch and thirty knots to the square inch, in our piece seven or eight rows to the inch and thirty-five knots to the square inch.

Working back, therefore, from Brighton Pavil-
ion to Carlton House to the Victoria and Albert and the Metropolitan Museum carpets, it seems probable that all were made in the "little, paltry place," Axminster, the medallion-and-oblong group being datable, from their style and from the evidence of the Woodhall Park carpet, to the decade of the 1780's. If Thomas Whitty ever imitated Thomas Moore and put his name on one of his works, this supposition may some day be confirmed. But it is of comparatively little importance to know whether the hundred thousand knots of the Metropolitan Museum's carpet were set in place in grimy London or twisted by infant hands in the soft air of Devon. What is of interest is that to the white purity of marble and plaster, the gleam of polished mahogany and of shining silver, have been added the rich colors of an English garden, blossoming in a correct classical setting and bringing the Lansdowne House dining room back to something more like its original appearance.


Carpet in the Victoria and Albert Museum, with an exterior border. English, probably Axminster, 1780-1790