WHIMS AND MAGGOTS

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Somewhere between the monotonous plains of conformity and the horrid wildernesses of eccentricity lie the shifting boundaries of the kingdom of good taste. This is where every manufacturer of useful and beautiful objects would wish to establish his residence; “Be different—but not too different,” he tells his designers. In certain periods, such as our own, originality, pressed to the very limits of the possible, seems the most desirable of qualities in all the decorative arts, but time has a habit of tricking almost all, even the wildest artistic innovators. The sport is not unlike the simple game that, according to G. K. Chesterton, people everywhere and always have played with prophets; they listen to them politely, bury them when they die, and then do something quite different. Similarly, after a sufficient lapse of time, the inventors dead, the most extreme artistic novelties begin to look merely typical of their period, in the style of their century. Two hundred years from now the museum curator will not need a coronet on a man’s cravat to be able to place it in the mid-twentieth century.

This process has been at work on the textile designs of the eighteenth century, a period for which there is much documentary evidence to prove that originality was then profitable and greatly sought after. For instance, there is a book by a certain G. Smith, called The Laboratory: or School of Arts, published in London in 1756; one chapter is “An Essay on designing and drawing Patterns for the Flower’d-silk Manufactory, Embroidery, and Printing.” In it, Smith makes it very clear that he does not approve of the frenzied search for originality then, he says, the fashion; he believes that nature, in the products of the vegetable kingdom, has provided the best models. “From what I have advanced it will appear that ornaments, stalks, flowers, and leaves, are the principal objects in designing of weaving patterns; these seem to me the most becoming for embellishing a lady’s dress; and notwithstanding that for many years past, the manufacturers have puzzled both their own, and tortured the pattern-drawer’s brains to contrive new fashions and uncommon devices, and have endeavoured to change the face of nature, by introducing whims and maggots of their own, they have seldom succeeded, but nature has always had the pre-emi-

Venetian brocaded damask of the type known as “bizarre.” First half of the xviii century. The lighter parts of this elaborate design are in the yellow damask ground, the darker are brocaded. Rogers Fund, 1948
Venetian brocaded satin, first half of the xvii century. The design is woven mainly in pink, white, and green on a yellow-green ground; it comes very close to showing "sea-shells upon trees." Anonymous Gift, 1955
Venetian brocaded silk tabby, mid-xvIII century. The drummer boy in a blue uniform and the woman descending to a fountain filled with pink and silver dolphins are both dwarfed by huge flowers and fruits. Rogers Fund, 1941

nence, and her charms have ever prevailed, and been the admiration at a brilliant court.”

But he goes on to give a horrifying example of the other point of view. “Whims have, to my knowledge, been carried to an extravagant rate, and no jack-pudding, on a mountebank’s stage, ever had more ridiculous trumperies on his jacket, but what have been imitated on silk. Pitchforks, and hangers, ropes and ladders, seashells upon trees, and I know not what, have been, by some weavers, thought proper devices for a lady’s dress. I here call to mind a ridiculous instance; a manufacturer, whether mercer or weaver I am not positive, came to a pattern-drawer [identified in a footnote as, “Mr. Budwine, who was the first that brought the flower’d silk manufacture in credit and reputation here in England.”] in Spital-fields, ordered him to draw a pattern for a silver brocade lutestring; the pattern-drawer, made several sketches with a charcoal on a piece of paper, but none pleasing his customer, he ask’d him, what he would have him draw? The servant-maid happening to broil some sprats on a gridiron, the customer, pointing to the chimney, said, you ask me what you must draw; draw the gridiron and sprats, it will make as odd a pattern as you can think on; his order was obeyed, the pattern was drawn, approved of, put into the loom, manufactured, and had the desired end; it was a good pattern, because it was odd, and it sold well.”

How modern this anecdote sounds! Who can
Italian brocaded damask, early XVIII century. The brocaded design in silver and pink shows Cupid aiming an arrow at a man reclining beneath a tree, who seems to contemplate sadly a large bird flying away with his heart. Elsewhere Juno, in a canopied chariot, guides her peacock team; a castle is seen in the distance. The green damask has its own pattern of plants, birds, and butterflies, which only show in certain lights.

Rogers Fund, 1955

say that there may not be on sale today a remarkable design based on the cryptic drugstore slogan, "Burn two, sunny side up"? How one would like to have a piece of that silk with sprats on a gridiron tastefully sprinkled across it! And yet one can be sure that its style would now say very clearly that it was made in the first half of the eighteenth century.

The Metropolitan Museum does indeed possess a number of woven fabrics, typically eighteenth-century, that G. Smith would certainly have dismissed as "whims and maggots." Moreover, thanks to a recent most generous anonymous gift, it is now exceedingly rich in a group of silks that contradict the above-stated law of the always evanescent character of originality. For there is an exception to the rule; an outside influence, if sufficiently exotic, can produce such a shattering change in style that the works of art made under its domination may remain surprising for all time. This is true of the silks made under Chinese influence at Lucca in the fourteenth century, and it is true of certain silks, known as "bizarre," from the eighteenth century. Some of these, now the property of the Museum, were described in the Bulletin in October 1944, when it was very rightly said that they defy description and "must truly be seen to be believed." An example acquired since the publication of this article is a brilliant yellow damask (see p. 105), with a brocaded pattern in silver and pink (probably originally scarlet), and small
touches of green and lavender; spiked rings, long piercing thorns, great upswung bells—one might as well try to describe a painting by the late Jackson Pollock. Recently an attempt has been made to attribute the manufacture of these silks to India rather than to Europe, but not all authorities on Indian textiles have been convinced by the arguments.

Unquestionably European is another group of silks which are very close to the English “trumperies” despised by G. Smith. These are the brocades, probably mostly made in Venice, with huge fruits, flowers, foliage, or shells framing minuscule landscapes or figure scenes. In these, the designers have given, as Smith says scornfully, “the size of a cabbage to a rose” or “that of a pumpkin to an olive,” but the result, to our eyes, is charming. The Italian weavers, in the early eighteenth century, were losing ground to their rivals in Lyons, for France had already become, as she has since remained, the arbiter elegantium of the world. But, “in France,” says Smith, “when once a design is fixed on and approved, it becomes a fashion, and is followed by the manufacturers for a considerable time, till, by consent, it is thought proper to introduce another mode.” Perhaps it was in an attempt to take advantage of this conservatism that designers in other parts of Europe tried so hard to be different. As well as the sumptuous landscape brocades the Italians made small-patterned damasks, with lively little creatures and people brocaded in gold and silver thread; around these conspicuous elements of the design play other patterns, created solely by the contrast of weaves in the ground and so visible only under certain lights. When such a silk was made up into a dress, this second pattern, often including beings as fantastic as the brocaded ones, must have appeared and disappeared in the folds as the wearer moved.

Further west, perhaps in Portugal or Andalusia, a designer, who has been christened the Master of the Pagan Paradise, was producing brocades with even more fanciful imagery. The Museum possesses a chasuble made of silk in the design that has given him his name, as well as a small panel of the same material. The latter shows the paradisian inhabitants most clearly.

Portuguese brocaded satin, early xviii century. The Pagan Paradise. The narrow bands at top and bottom show that the panel is complete; it was probably made to cover a wall above a dado. Rogers Fund, 1952

At the top Pegasus, with outspread wings, stands with his hind feet planted on a golden Helicon, the water of Hippocrene spouting forth at his touch. Enthroned on the mountain sits a radiate
Apollo; a huge brown rabbit is perched among flowers above him, and two tall palm trees frame the scene. Below is a monstrous turkey (still an exotic bird in Europe at this date) and a diminutive couchant unicorn, flanked by two cup-like fountains. Each fountain holds a large bird, like a swan with crest and mane, from whose beak the water pours into the basin and out again through holes below. A cypress stands like an exclamation mark alongside a pink tulip, nearly half its size, separating two groups of Hercules and the Nemean lion; the combatants (very evenly matched for height and weight) are apparently only sparring at the beginning of the first round. Below is a peacock, even larger than the turkey, and a brown panther; the water, which trickles in and out from top to bottom of the panel, appears here again, issuing most curiously from the tails of two entwined dolphins, falling into another cup-shaped fountain and out again at its foot. Leaves and flowers are tucked into every vacant space.

In another design, surely by the same hand, the brown panther flees from a kneeling huntsman; yellow smoke swirls from the green gun barrel, and green bullets, like tracers, can be seen starting on their path toward the quarry. The beast places one hind foot on the mainmast of a boat with two furled lateen sails and three oarsmen; below sits a fisherman dangling his line into a pool and smoking a long green pipe. The example of this fabric in the Museum has been made up into a cope. Another piece of the same type shows what is perhaps the world’s ugliest mermaid, sitting in a fountain holding her two tails, with jets of water swooping up from her green hair. Birds and animals of every description crowd around her in admiration.

But the good taste of Lyons won the day over un-French originality. The vast majority of eighteenth-century silks existing today show the familiar, beautifully drawn, realistic flowers that G. Smith loved, undulating from side to side up the length of the fabric, or scattered across it with seeming carelessness. “Whims and maggots,” except in the form of chinoiserie (to which Smith gives a grudging approval), become less and less common as the eighteenth century progresses. We can be thankful that enough of the stuffs displaying them were made up into the most long-lasting of garments, church vestments, to enable us to know what a wish to be truly original could achieve in this fortunate period.

For the arguments on the Indian origin of the “bizarre” silks, see V. Slomann, Bizarre Designs in Silks (Copenhagen, 1953); for the opposite point of view, see the review of this book by J. Irwin, Burlington Magazine, xxvii (1955), pp. 153 f. and an answer by Dr. Slomann, pp. 324 ff; for the Master of the Pagan Paradise, see A. C. Weibel, Bulletin of the Detroit Institute of Arts, xxv, no. 3, 1946, p. 66.

The Laboratory; or, School of Arts . . . By G. Smith, Volume II, in the Museum Library was the gift of Bella C. Landauer; the British Museum owns the sixth and seventh editions of 1799 and 1810, both in two volumes, and identifies the author as Godfrey Smith. The Victoria and Albert Museum has a 1739 edition in one volume (presumably Volume I of the complete work), which contains no textile section. A reference to Hogarth’s Analysis of Beauty, published in 1753, shows that the textile chapter was written after this date. Smith states that he drew damask patterns for “the late Mr. Hindshill, at the great wheatsheaf,” and it is possible that he was the “Mr. Smith” who made some designs for Spitalfields silks between 1720 and 1726. I am indebted to Mr. G. F. Wingfield Digby of the Victoria and Albert Museum for this information.