



TOPIC NOTES FOR TEACHERS

4 *Techniques & Materials: Block Printing on Wallpaper and Fabric*

This topic sheet looks at the range of products produced by Morris & Co and the techniques and materials involved. High standards of craftsmanship and the use of quality materials were key to the Morris brand. Many of the techniques were revivals of traditional crafts which Morris researched and taught himself and to his workers.

A gallery worksheet on this topic, suitable for Key Stage 3 and 4 Art & Design and Design & Technology students is available.

'Block Printing' or 'Woodblock Printing' is a method used to print text, images or patterns on textiles and later paper. This method was widely used throughout East Asia, originating in China in antiquity.

How it works: patterns and letters are carved into wooden blocks, so that the letter or pattern is chiselled and protrudes 'in relief' from the wooden block. These blocks are then coated with ink and pressed firmly and evenly onto the paper or cloth.

When creating a repeat pattern with block printing, the area of the repeat unit will be limited by the size of the wooden block that can be picked up and stamped.

When more than one colour is used, care needs to be taken to 'register' the design so each successive layer of colour 'matches' with the previous layer.

The William Morris Gallery has a number of original woodblocks used to print Morris designs. These can be seen in the Learning Space Handling collection. In one you can see the metal hook used to mark where to line up each block to achieve the registration (matching up of the colours).

Printers would normally lay down the larger lighter colour areas first and work up to the finer details. Some papers such as *Chrysanthemum* (1877) needed 30 blocks to complete the design.

Sometimes there would be slight errors where the colour block overlapped. However this showed the distinctive handmade nature of the paper.

Morris disliked the effects and colours produced by contemporary wallpapers – mass-produced on engraved rollers – so he turned to traditional woodblock methods creating his first simple wallpaper designs in 1862, for example *Daisy* (used in his bedroom at Kelmscott), *Trellis* (Gallery 2) and *Fruit* (Gallery 1).

To create the blocks, Morris would create a clear line drawing with black ink from the original design to show one complete unit of the repeat. The design was then sent out to specialist block-cutters to translate into wood, usually using a pear or fruit wood which are soft to cut. Fine lines would be reinforced with metal to ensure durability. The actual printing of the wallpaper was also done by a specialist external company – Jeffrey & Co – for Morris.

Block printing on textiles was a similar process. Morris produced designs for blocks that were printed externally. However, he ran into many problems in finding colours that would not run or fade. This prompted his research into the more lasting colours made from natural dyes found in medieval tapestries and fabrics. When the Merton Abbey site in south-west London opened, Morris started printing his own fabrics where he could quality control the dyeing and colour.

For more details on block-printing wallpaper see the William Morris Gallery film in Gallery 4, or back in the classroom watch a short film on the V&A website:

<http://www.vam.ac.uk/content/videos/b/video-block-printed-wallpaper>