

# JUDITH MILLER'S GUIDE TO PERIOD-STYLE CURTAINS & SOFT FURNISHINGS



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& SOFT FURNISHINGS

JUDITH MILLER

PHOTOGRAPHY BY JAMES MERRELL



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# Introduction



Before the 20th-century invention of man-made fibres, furnishing fabrics were produced from silk, wool, linen or cotton and coloured mainly by vegetable or mineral dyes. Synthetic dyes have been available only since the mid-19th century. Patterns and textures were created by weaving, embroidery, hand-painting or printing. Raw fibres, manufactured goods, patterns and motifs, as well as methods of production, were being traded extensively between countries and across continents.

## Medieval and Renaissance silks

Prior to AD 552, when two Byzantine monks smuggled silkworm eggs out of China in bamboo canes, the West was dependent on Chinese exports for raw silk and silk textiles. Thereafter, however, European sericulture and silk-weaving began developing in earnest and dependence on the East lessened.

During the Middle Ages, Constantinople produced elaborately patterned silks on drawlooms and then exported them to Europe via Italy. Finely patterned silk velvets were also made in Spain. During the Renaissance, the Italian cities of Palermo, Lucca, Florence, Venice, Genoa, Bologna and Milan made a wide range of wonderful heavy brocades, patterned velvets, damasks, satins, taffetas, and silk trimmings. Lyons, in France, also became a leading centre for silk-weaving.

**Left:** A Duncan Phyfe mahogany sofa c.1835, covered in Scalamantré documentary red and gold lampas.



**Above:** Silk-damask curtains, dating from the mid-19th century, in an American Greek-revival house.

### Medieval and Renaissance woollens

Typical woven woollen cloths of the period included worsteds (such as say and fustian) and camlet – the latter prized for the softness of its angora wool (imported from the Near East). Most of the wool produced during this period originated in England, although Burgundy and Spain were also leading exporters. The main weaving centres were in England, Italy and the

**Right:** A modern reproduction of a mid 18th-century silk, with a chinoiserie pattern typical of the period.



Low Countries. Flemish woollen weaving declined in the early 15th century but it was replaced by a thriving linen-based industry – linen damasks became their most popular product and became a substantial European export.

### Opus Anglicanum

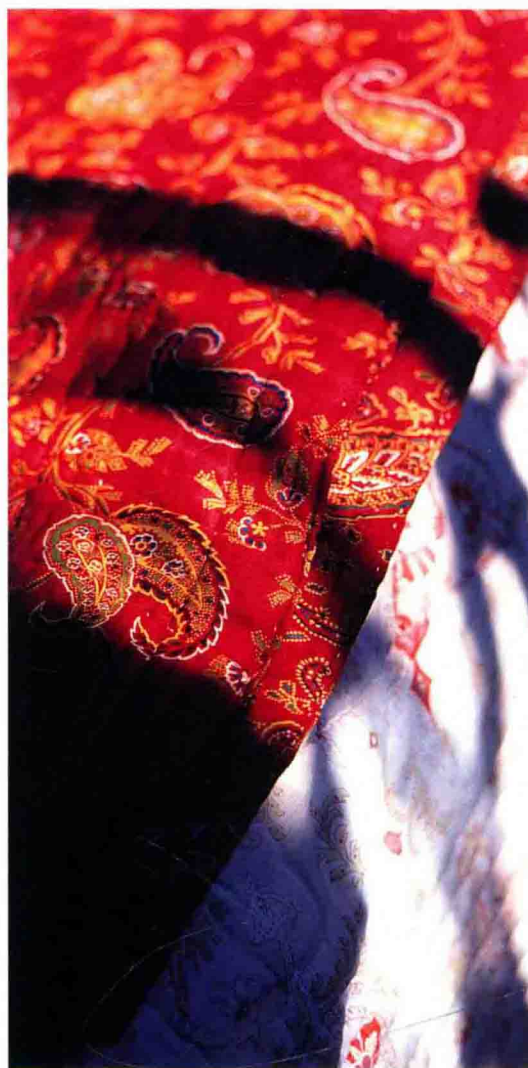
English embroidery or needlework (“Opus Anglicanum”) was highly prized in Medieval Europe. Embroidered tapestries, worked in silk, wool and gold thread on linen or velvet grounds, were widely used in wealthier households. As English needlework declined during the 14th century, the Low Countries, Burgundy and Florence became pre-eminent in this field.

### 17th-century expansion

The European textile industry expanded during the 17th century, following a rise in living standards and a greater emphasis on luxury and comfort. This was most evident at Louis XIV’s Palace of Versailles, where the lavishly furnished interiors set fashions for the rest of Europe. The opening of links with India and China, and increased trade following the formation of the English, French and Dutch East India Companies, further fuelled supply and demand – as did the foundation of American colonies.

### Indiennes

At the end of the 16th century, the first cotton *indiennes* (or chintzes) were imported to France from India. These brightly coloured, hand-blocked and hand-painted calicoes were



**Above:** A hand-stitched, 19th-century, paisley-pattern quilt, on top of a 19th-century French “boutie”. The fashion for quilting in America, Britain and France was primarily a domestic rather than a commercial activity.

colourfast (and washable). They became highly popular by the late 17th century, posing a serious threat to the wool and silk industries. European governments imposed severe restrictions on their importation and these were not lifted until 1720 in England and 1759 in France. Sanctions were also imposed on European copies of chintzes, although English manufacturers were allowed to export to American colonies.

### 17th-century silk, wool and linen

The addition of a bobbin to the spinning wheel, and a more sophisticated use of the drawboy loom, resulted in numerous “new draperies” during the 17th century. Silk damasks and plain, ribbed, watered, brocaded and taffeta silks were produced in quantity, particularly by the French Huguenot refugees who settled in London and the north of England, while Genoa in Italy and Lyons in France made high-quality, boldly patterned velvets. *Gaufrage* velvets were also extremely popular, as was brocatelle. Raw and finished silks were also imported into Europe from China.

Large quantities of loose-linen chair covers and bed and table linen were made throughout Europe. Linen and woollen damasks were highly fashionable and less expensive than silk equivalents. Also, for the first time on any scale in Europe, wool was used to make woven and embroidered carpets. These began as turkey work copies of Persian and Turkish imports, but at Savonnerie in France, European-style patterns and motifs were introduced.

### 17th-century needlework and lace

Crewelwork cushions or pillows were fashionable during the 17th century, while petit-point needlework was used for seat covers. Stumpwork was used for panel pictures and the decoration of mirrors. Flemish bobbin lace, from Brussels, Mechlin and Antwerp, was in demand from the 1550s through to the 1690s, while the Italian cities of Venice, Genoa and Milan became main centres for needlepoint lace. However, from the mid-17th century, French lace from Paris, Alençon and Argenton became increasingly fashionable in Europe and America, despite import restrictions.

### Early to mid-18th century

Although textile production flourished during the first half of the 18th century, international trade and the movement of skilled labour was often inhibited by governments protecting their home industries. However, there were ways around this and the smuggling of lace and silk became widespread. In the 1740s, Lord Wilton was said to have imported French carpet weavers into England hidden in wine barrels.

The silk industry prospered as the manufacture of window-, bed- and wall-hangings, and upholstered furniture, increased. Lyons in France and Spitalfields in England led the way,

**Right:** A collection of 18th- and 19th-century toile-covered cushions. Hand-blocked and machine-printed chintzes were tremendously fashionable from the last quarter of the 18th century through to the 1890s.





with much of their product exported to America. For the less wealthy, woollen stuffs, moreen and harateen provided alternatives.

The production of woollen carpets also increased – notably at Savonnerie and Aubusson in France along with Kidderminster, Wilton and Axminster in England. Linen cloths for tables, beds and linings were much in demand. Cotton chintzes, although highly sought after, were difficult to obtain in Europe and America – largely because of continuing government restrictions.

#### The Industrial Revolution

The period from 1750 to 1880 witnessed major innovations, and rapidly expanding markets and manufacturing output. The concept of interior design emerged and was conveyed to the new middle classes in England and America via publications such as *Ackermann's Repository of Arts* (1809–28) and Thomas Hope's *Household Furniture and Interior Decoration* (1807).

Technological advances were numerous and included spinning machines (1764–9), steam and horse-powered looms (1785–93), the automated Jacquard loom (1805), the dobby loom (1824), a velvet-pile carpeting-machine (1851), lace-making machines (1812–3), mechanized embroidery machines and the sewing machines of the 1850s.

Parallel advances included the development of engraved copper-plate printing (1752),

**Left:** Detail of a Victorian beadwork firescreen, in an early 19th-century American mansion.

and water- and steam-powered roller-printing (1783). Improved dyeing techniques were developed during the early 19th century, and the arrival of synthetic aniline dyes in the 1850s widened the palette of colours available.

#### 19th-century cottons, silks and woollens

As a result of these technological advances cotton gradually superseded silk as the most fashionable fabric. Vast quantities of printed, and often glazed, pictorial and floral toiles (chintzes) were produced from 1770 onward. *Toiles de Jouy* (in France) were the most famous – although Paris, Rouen, Nantes, Bordeaux, Marseilles, Provence, London and Philadelphia were also home to key manufacturers. Cotton checks and stripes were also increasingly used for furnishings, and muslin was widely employed for sheers and drapes.

However, silk furnishings remained fashionable, with the new looms of Genoa in Italy, Lyons in France and Spitalfields in England, weaving complex and elaborately patterned damasks and velvets well suited to grander interiors. Similarly, small-patterned wool damasks and moreens, produced on Jacquard looms, were competitively priced against cotton and produced in quantity.

#### Pre-industrial traditions

Machine-made lace covered numerous surfaces in the average Victorian home. In many respects, it represented the Industrial Revolution's triumph of machine over man. However, a

return to traditional methods of production was encouraged by the 19th-century Aesthetic and Arts and Crafts Movements. This was reflected in the revivals of Opus Anglicanum in Britain as well as beadwork, crochet and quilting in the United States. It is echoed again today in the numerous documentary fabrics dating from the 17th century onward which are available from specialist manufacturers and suppliers.

**Right:** Scalamandré documentary white mull drapes, secured with mid-19th-century gilt metal and white glass floral-shaped tie-backs.

**Below:** 19th-century, machine-made lace.





# Window treatments

In her highly influential book

*The Decoration of Houses*, published in 1898, the American writer Edith Wharton suggested that better

houses had less need for drapery. In her view, many window treatments upset the architectural

symmetry of windows, often spoiling a good view. While this can be

seen as an understandable reaction to some of the excesses of the

later Victorian era, it ignores the fact that the vast majority of

window drapery since the 17th century has added architectural

interest to interiors, and provided colour, texture, comfort and style.

Indeed, it has more often than not hidden a multitude of sins.



**Above & Right:** A reception room at the Calhoun Mansion, in Charleston, South Carolina, USA. The reproduction 19th-century drapes are made of watered silk, with floral damask tails, deep fringing and tasselling. The original gilt poles are from the 1870s. The ensemble reflects the status of both the house and the owners.