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## Jacobean Textile Design: Surviving (and Thriving) Through the Test of Time

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Jacobean Textile Design:  
Surviving (And Thriving) Through the Test of Time

By

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## ABSTRACT

Jacobean textile design sprang from the Tree of Life motif, an ancient design that carried religious symbolism for many early cultures. It represented a greater power and as such could provide protection and even fertility.

When trade routes opened up between the East and West in the early 17<sup>th</sup> century, Europeans were eager for items made in the East and in particular for textiles from India embellished with The Tree of Life. This increase in trade provided a booming time for commerce.

During the reign of James I in the early 1600's, the English designers added their own creative touches to the Tree of Life, enhancing it with large, outrageous, exotic flowers, and highly designed leaves. Thus was born the Jacobean textile design.

The textiles being imported into Europe from the East were expensive and therefore largely limited to the wealthy. As a result, textiles were often status symbols and considered to have considerable value, however, as technology advanced and textiles could be mass-produced more affordably, they became available to people of all economic groups.

Over the years other artists, such as William Morris, have gained inspiration from the Jacobean textile design and made their own interpretations of it as well. Today, its complex arrangements of winding vines and fantasy flowers remain a popular design in home furnishings and other products.

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12. Upholstered chair with Jacobean revival textile, early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Museum Textile Services, <http://www.museumtextiles.com/blog/category/crewel> Retrieved on November 12, 2015.

## Introduction

What qualities make it possible for a textile design to survive the test of time, of hundreds and even thousands of years? How amazing to realize that a textile design which was desired and flaunted by the elite society of the 1600s in England, in the most ostentatious environments imaginable, would be so prevalent today in our own contemporary interior designs. Indeed a trip through any major fabric store would offer any number of Jacobean-styled fabrics, typically in the home furnishings department. Perhaps it is even more versatile today, for this same Jacobean textile design may be found on items from stationery to dishware.

Its longevity as a textile design begins with the history of the Tree of Life motif and its journey as trade grows between the East and Europe during the 17<sup>th</sup> century. It represents the sharing of arts from very different cultures and illustrates how commerce and technology played an important role in the resulting and long-admired Jacobean textile design.

## It Began With a Tree

One would not have to stretch the imagination very far to see the resemblance between the Jacobean textile design's twisting, meandering vines, laden with fruits and huge, strange looking flowers, as seen in the Schumacher fabric in Figure 1, and the ancient Tree of Life design growing forth with outstretched branches from a pot, vase or mound as shown in the 17<sup>th</sup> century coverlet in Figure 2. Indeed, it is the Tree of Life motif, later modified and embellished, from which the Jacobean textile design was born around the time of James I of England (1566-1625), thus the name "Jacobean" as "Iacobus" is Latin for James.<sup>1</sup>

This arboreal inspiration is deeply rooted in humankind as our affinity for trees has been with us since the beginning of time. Early cultures often believed that trees, as the largest plants on earth, held mythical and religious powers. There were sacred woods in pre-Christian Europe and even today, sacred woods may still be found in India and Japan.<sup>2</sup>

As proof of this very early reverence for trees, a carving shown in Figure 3, which belonged in a palace of the Assyrian empire, depicts the Tree of Life as the focal point of this piece. This artifact, found in Mesopotamia and dating from 883-859 B.C.E., portrays an Assyrian king and two winged figures with each raising his hands towards the Tree of Life in what appears to be a gesture of honor.<sup>3</sup>

Figure 1



Schumacher Company, *Jacobean textile*, 21<sup>st</sup> century, textile, web.

Figure 2.



Unknown, *Tree of Life*, 1<sup>st</sup> half 17<sup>th</sup> century, canvas worked with silk thread, Metropolitan Museum.



Another example of this very old cultural importance placed on trees is shown on a piece of felt bearing the Tree of Life in Illustration 4, which was discovered in the tombs of Pazyryk in Siberia, dating back to 500 B.C.E. In this felt, the Tree of Life is placed near the king, also suggesting its significance.<sup>4</sup>

The age-old mythological and religious associations with trees have been numerous with one of those being that the tree connects all of the three spheres of the world. The roots wind their way below the surface into opaque darkness, which could be associated with the unknown or with where we go when we die. Its branches reach up into the heavens, connecting humankind with a higher power and branches may also be viewed as the path to becoming enlightened. The trunk is the here and now, the link between those two places. Yet another interpretation is that the tree represents the regeneration of life through the birth, growth, death and rebirth by new buds, fruit and leaves.<sup>5</sup> To some societies, the tree even represented eternity, for through this "Cosmic Tree," -- their sycamore fig -- early Egyptians believed their dead were granted immortality.<sup>6</sup>

Religious cultures had their own spiritual connections to trees, for early Christians saw Christ as having been sacrificed not solely on a cross but as stated by author Roger Cook, "at the centre of the world, on the Cosmic Tree...which according to the scriptures stands at the center of the Garden of Eden at the beginning of time."<sup>7</sup>

Figure 3.



Unknown, *Tree of Life*, 500 B.C.E., Carving, Pazrak Tombs, Siberia, from web.

Figure 4.



Unknown, *Tree of Life*, 883-859 B.C.E., felt, Mesopotamia, from web.

Early cultures also believed the Tree of Life had the power to nurture and to encourage fertility. Roses, tulips, and carnations often grew from the Tree of Life and are identified as symbols of fertility.<sup>8</sup> One could easily imagine that the tulip represents the female vulva, and the pomegranate, packed with blood red seeds, is a strong image of fertility as well.<sup>9</sup> Woman and tree are each viewed as fruitful, going even so far as to connect sap to mother's milk.<sup>10</sup>

Among the numerous powers of trees, many societies thought that they had the power to protect. The Tree of Life motif was often embroidered into marriage shawls to protect the bride<sup>11</sup> and it follows that with its power to defend, it was also a favored design on bedcovers called palampores, which were exported from India into Europe by the early trading companies.

### The Tree of Life Travels West

Not all people saw the value of these textiles as symbolic of a religious or greater power, however, for as the demand for beautiful fabrics exploded, including those with the Tree of Life, the trading companies saw these textiles as representing the greater power of money.

Although textiles had been a commodity for barter in the Asian Exchange System among countries near the Indian Ocean as early as 1500,<sup>12</sup> particularly with textiles from India being a trade item in exchange for spices from the Indonesian islands, it wasn't until 1597 that the Dutch East India Company began exporting embroidered and printed textiles from India to Europe. The English East India

Company jumped into this hot trade market soon thereafter in 1600.<sup>13</sup> Commerce was bustling with these new and exotic Indian products to export.

One of the most eye-catching exports to Europe from India during the late 1600s and into the 1700s was the palampores, an example from the Coromandel Coast in India is presented in Figure 5. Many of these palampores were so large they were sometimes hung next to each other in multiples in order to cover entire walls for a look akin to free hanging wallpaper.<sup>14</sup> The Europeans must surely have been astonished by the life-sized trees, dramatic flowers and bright colors for between 1696 and 1697 the East India Company alone imported forty thousand palampores to those eager buyers.<sup>15</sup>

These textiles were coveted, not simply because they were stunning works of art from mysterious, far away places, but because they were also one of the ultimate status symbols of the seventeenth and eighteenth century elite. One can easily imagine that if a gown of that era might typically require twenty yards of expensive fabric and a draped bedstead might require fifty of sixty yards, such extravagance would clearly boast of a family's wealth and success. Consider that this was a time when textiles cost a greater amount proportionally than they do today because we benefit from mass production. In fact, so high was the value put on quality textiles at that time that the only estate items considered of higher value were land, buildings, slaves and occasionally silver.<sup>16</sup>

Examples of the value of textiles as a status symbol are apparent in the historic portraits of that time, such as the portrait of Madame de Pompadour in Illustration 6, as the clothing worn for these treasured paintings was made from the

Figure 5.



Unknown, *Tree of Life* on palampore, circa 1724 - 1750, textile, Victoria & Albert Museum.



sitters' most prized textiles. Further, the clothing and accessories worn in these portraits served a dual purpose as they were also intended to broadcast the wearer's worldliness by displaying purchases made while on distant journeys.<sup>17</sup>

And what a gift these portraits are for textile historians given that textiles do not survive the centuries nearly so well as oil paintings and thus these art pieces provide information that would mostly likely be lost to the ages.<sup>18</sup>

Dress to impress was the goal at that time in history and equally important was *decorate* to impress for the Jacobean style was described by historian Timothy Mowl as one that requires a "hearty aesthetic appetite" and "not the age for the fastidious." It was a period lavished in over-the-top embellishment, depicting the prosperous nature of the times and demanding the most extraordinary textiles.<sup>19</sup>

If the exotic nature of the goods was not enough to make these textiles a status symbol, their inconsistent availability made them all the more alluring. While there was no shortage of textiles in the East, tariffs, taxes, laws, wars and even restrictions on navigation made fabrics difficult to get at times in Europe, particularly in England and France. As might be expected, this only created a market situation where these textiles became all the more valuable, which led to smuggling and other forms of illegal importation, a risk taken even by government officials.<sup>20</sup>

The Europeans were not the only people in a frenzy for these new and dramatic textiles, for the American colonies were also eager to own them. It is quite amazing that the same textiles available in London shops and warehouses were a matter of a few months transport time away from delighted buyers in the colonies.<sup>21</sup>

Figure 6.



Francois-Hubert Drouais, *Portrait of Madame de Pompadour*, 1763 - 1764, painting, National Gallery of London.

Surprisingly, since the colonies were not always impacted by the same restrictive situations such as tariffs or trade pacts as England, they frequently had easier access to these goods.<sup>22</sup>

In summary, the original symbolic and religious significance of the Tree of Life was somewhat lost on this new marketplace. Its new value rested largely on its worth as a commodity, for its beauty, and in its ability to project opulence.

### A Melding of Cultures

The early Indian Tree of Life design provided a springboard for the British designers who took the flowering tree, added their own creative ideas, and tailored it to their society's own tastes. Most notably the flowers became more exaggerated and took on a look best described as fantasy flowers for they show little botanical likeness to any real flowers. An example of these outrageous, bold flowers is demonstrated in the French Waistcoat in Figure 7. The flowers of some Jacobean designs are so unusual that they appear to be a cross between a flower and a pineapple and their leaves often take on a dreamy, loose and bending demeanor. Additionally, English designers often changed the background colors as their clients much preferred lighter backgrounds, referring to the more common Indian background colors as "sad red grounds."<sup>23</sup>

Another change to the Tree of Life was a greater emphasis on the branches. Business letters by the East India Company predicted this modification would look good for those textiles intended to be hung in rooms and thus would sell well.<sup>24</sup>



Figure 7.



Unknown, *French Waistcoat*, 1770 - 1790, textile, Metropolitan Museum of Art.

This change to a thicker, gnarled looking branch is still quite typical of numerous Jacobean textile designs today.

There was yet another notable alteration to the Tree of Life over time. In earlier designs the tree springs forth from a mound of soil or from a pot, but these containers disappear and the winding vine simply becomes a continuous pattern. This would have made it more useful for applications requiring longer pieces of fabric. Thus the Tree of Life blossomed beyond merely a wall hanging or a center design for a palampore into the Jacobean textile design, which is what we see in fabrics and wallpapers today.

These various changes made by designers were sent from England to the textile producers in the East and the finished textiles came back to the European market. As a result of this melding of ideas and styles into a hybrid design, it was no longer quite so obvious as to which textiles came from which countries. Oftentimes Chinese exports were wrongly identified as fabrics from India given they were imported to Europe by the same companies.<sup>25</sup>

This period in history was a very exciting and energizing time offering all manner of new and fantastic goods from far away places, which inspired a great deal of creativity. This multi-cultural creation was a success for all.

### Technology Makes Textiles Available to Many

While the Jacobean designs were largely done in embroidery, other methods of affixing designs onto fabric also included hand painted mordants. This involved hand painting mordants (fixatives used in combination with madder-dye which

resulted in a variety of colors) as well as the use of a resist, which might be a wax or paste. Lesser quality textiles would involve mordants that were applied by carved woodblocks as opposed to by hand, and resists could be applied in this manner as well. Each different color applied to a piece of fabric required a separate color bath.<sup>26</sup>

A major development in printing textiles occurred with the introduction of engraved metal plates developed by Francis Nixon of Ireland in the mid-1700s.<sup>27</sup> It is interesting to note, however, that impressions on paper had been printed in this manner dating back to the fifteenth century, and thus there was a surprising time lag before this method was utilized for textile printing.<sup>28</sup>

Printing textiles using metal plates was such cutting edge technology at that time that even one of America's Founding Fathers was enthusiastic about it. In 1758, Benjamin Franklin, who was in England at the time, sent some of these new fabrics home to his wife with the following explanation: "There is also 56 Yards of Cotton printed curiously from Copper Plates, a new Invention, to make Bed and Window Curtains," further describing the innovative new product as "very neat."<sup>29</sup>

Creating patterns in textiles took two more big leaps forward in a relatively modest period of time. In 1780 a Scotsman named Joseph Bell gave the textile industry a method of printing fabrics by means of a cylinder or roller made from metal plates.<sup>30</sup> In 1801, Joseph Marie Jacquard introduced the Jacquard loom, which allowed a multitude of designs to actually be woven into fabrics and at a much lower cost than embroidery.<sup>31</sup>

The result of all of these advances meant that while initially special textiles like the Jacobean designs were owned largely by the wealthy, but by the middle of the eighteenth century and beyond people of all economic strata of society were enjoying the beauty of textiles bearing exciting new looks.<sup>32</sup>

### Jacobean Revival and Arts and Crafts

Most every type of design has its ebbs and flows in popularity and styles in general are often cyclical. Later in the 1600s, interest in the Jacobean design waned somewhat, but a renewed interest occurred in the early 1700s with the reign of Queen Anne (1665-1714). Indeed the Jacobean designs we see in Colonial America were of this period.<sup>33</sup>

A good design endures, and late in the 1800s the Jacobean design was an inspiration for William Morris, one of the fathers of the Arts and Crafts movement in England and whose work also inspired the Arts and Crafts movement in America. The Victoria and Albert Museum in London has an exhibit of Morris' work which offers an excellent example of this influence on Morris' designs, specifically an original piece of Jacobean brocaded silk velvet as shown in Figure 8 and described as having inspired a number of works he created after 1883. When compared to a textile designed by Morris in 1884, the "Wandle" design shown in Figure 8, the similarities are undeniable.

Many of Morris' woven textiles depict the oversized blossoms and curving nature of the Jacobean winding vine, although his designs appear to have a more

Figure 8.



Unknown, *Jacobean Brocaded Velvet*, circa 1500 - 1600, Italian textile, Victoria & Albert Museum, London.

Figure 9.



William Morris, *Wandle Design*, 1884, textile,  
Victoria & Albert Museum, London.



precise and repeating component which is also visible in in the carpet in Figure 10 of The Drawing Room at Wightwick Manor, West Midlands, England.

Figure 10



William Morris, carpet design, late 1800s, textile, Wightwick Manor, West Midlands, England.

Also at Wightwick Manor, in the Indian Bird Bedroom shown in Figure 11, the drapery fabrics hanging from the bed clearly show an adaptation of the Jacobean vine and flowers and the wallpaper echoes it as well, and in fact, utilizes the slightly thicker branches mentioned previously. What a perfect match for a Jacobean

inspired room for there is even a carved Tree of Life visible in the upper left corner of the headboard.

Figure 11.



*William Morris design, late 1800s, wallpaper and bed drapery textile, Indian Bird Bedroom, Wightwick Manor, West Midlands, England.*

The Arts and Crafts Movement in America followed the Arts and Crafts Movement in Europe, and with it appeared Jacobean textiles now referred to as



“Jacobean Revival,” a sample of which is shown in the upholstered chair in Figure 12. These textiles, which date from the early to mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, generally had less dramatic and more muted colors than the originals.<sup>34</sup>

Figure 12.



Unknown, *Jacobean revival pattern*, early 20<sup>th</sup> century, textile, web.

The Jacobean textile design was undeniably a creative inspiration for other designers long after its initial introduction to England and the courts of James I. It might be said that with each new set of hands, the design itself grew, blossomed, flourished and matured not unlike the tree it initially represented.

### Conclusion

Jacobean style textiles, with their wandering vine, unusual fruits, foreign looking birds, oversized flowers and strange but lovely leaves are very popular today and are most commonly found in home decoration stores. This design is also found in wallpapers and many carpet manufacturers have created versions of Morris' carpet designs. Well known contemporary textile manufacturers such as Schumacher, Kravet, and Lee Jofa offer many options in this Jacobean style design. Even the most affordable of stores offer pillows, upholstery and even dishware designs in this style.

While very few people today identify the Jacobean design as having mystical or religious symbolism, nor is it considered a status symbol or a demonstration of one's wealth given its accessibility among all economic groups in contemporary society, the appreciation for this design has endured on the merits of its beauty. It is an example of the magnificent end product that can result from the energetic sharing of ideas, technologies and techniques of different cultures -- and it all began with a tree.

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Notes

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