



Dina B. Bier

YES, that's stenciled!

Simple technique, Historic Beauty

One of my fondest memories of my high school trip to Washington, DC, was touring the government buildings and observing their magnificent interiors.

I remember standing in one of the cavernous halls, my head craned backwards, studying the beautiful, symmetrical designs carved and painted onto the inside of the dome, the artist in me wondering incredulously — how is it done? How are surfaces patterned so perfectly and colors applied so precisely?

(Now, if you have been to Washington, DC, and yet have no recollections of the elaborate ceilings and walls, fret not. All kinds of people in the world. Many colors in the rainbow. If everyone would only notice carved ceilings and painted walls, who would pave the roads, build the submarines, mine for copper, and bake seven-layer cream cakes?)

It was when I was experimenting with decorative wall stenciling some years later that it hit me. Stencils! Yes, those walls were hand-painted, carved, tiled, and glazed...but they were also stenciled! Those complex designs *can* be done with this (almost) easy technique. Like a child taken into the back of the bakery to see how her favorite desserts are made, I feel as if I've been granted small privy to a how-to of the hallowed world of complex art and design. There was a way — if not to mimic, then at least to understand a little bit of — how such perfect, gorgeous designs were applied.

It's a relatively simple technique — with a long, interesting history.

Stencils in Historic Design

Today, join me for a little tour of some beautifully stenciled historic interiors. We'll talk about the stencil's history and dispel some of its mystery. We'll learn how stencil designs have evolved over time. Why decorators favored stencils so. About the stencil's ability to repeat intricate patterns again and again with a degree of precision that would've been impossible to accomplish freehand.

This first image is a ceiling and balcony in the Connecticut Capitol's Senate Chambers. Wondering where

they found custom wallpaper that fit the dimensions of the elaborate architecture in this building, such as in the underside of the arch? Well, they didn't. They *stenciled* the designs.

Notice the complex coordinating patterns, the colors, how the intricate stenciling accentuates the architecture and the design. Now, imagine these surfaces in their raw state. If you would be the artist, would you come up with these patterns? With this splendid combination of colors? And could you execute the design with such precision?



Photo courtesy of John Canning & Co. Decorative Painting and Restoration



*Connecticut Capitol. Photo courtesy of John Canning & Co., Decorative Painting and Restoration Contractor
Photo Credit: © Robert Benson Photography*

Notice the light and elegant gold stencil work between the moldings in this English Rose Residence. That gold design bordering the molding of the wall and ceiling? Yes, that's stenciled.



Photo courtesy of John Canning & Co. Decorative Painting and Restoration



Stencils were a favorite tool of decorators when designing spaces with elaborate architecture and woodwork. They were favored over wallpaper because of their versatility and because of the skilled painter's ability to fit them into all sorts of spaces, such as the borders on the woodwork in this photo.



Photos courtesy of John Canning & Co. Decorative Painting and Restoration

Missouri Supreme Court stenciling at the wainscot and ceiling



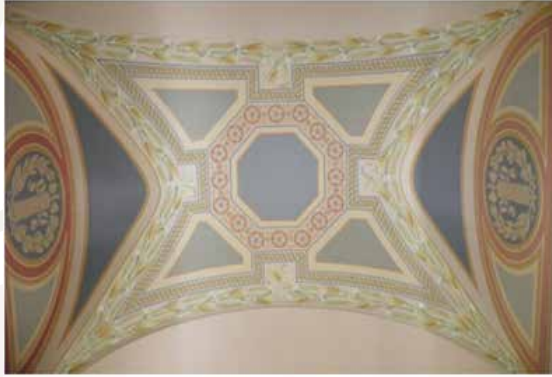
Some more beautiful stencil work in yet another historical building — Missouri Supreme Court

Photos courtesy of John Canning & Co., Decorative Painting and Restoration Contractor

Decorative painters were a skilled, hardy bunch with special knowledge in...geometry! They had to figure out how to measure the spaces they were designing and how to create and lay out their designs according to those measurements. They used math to figure out where to place their stencils without disrupting the patterns by bumping into architectural elements.

Decorative artists didn't buy stencils. Instead, they made their own. Emma Marconi Bologna writes in *American Decorative Stenciling: 1840 to 1940* that painters would often tailor their designs to suit the interiors they were decorating. In the stenciling done on the vaulted ceiling of the Minnesota State Capitol Building, for example, decorator Elmer Garnsey included corn husks to represent Minnesota's agricultural economy.

Photo
courtesy of
Emma
Marconi
Bologna



Sometimes, decorators played around with their designs. Notice the goat's head image in the stenciling done by William James McPherson in the Connecticut State Capitol building (the same building that is featured in the first photo). ▼



Photo Courtesy of Emma Marconi Bologna



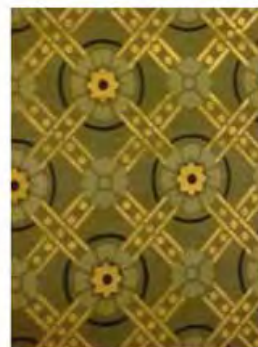
(See the goat?)



Minnesota State Capitol. Photos courtesy of John Canning & Co., Decorative Painting and Restoration Contractor

Here are some more photos of William James McPherson's elaborate stenciling in the Connecticut State Capitol.

Let's analyze these designs. How many colors do you see? Notice the skill, the complexity of each pattern. And of course, the colors — how perfectly they were applied and layered. ▼



Photos courtesy of Emma Marconi Bologna

◀ An intricate bird motif designed by Associated Artists in 1880 is featured on the wooden ceiling of the Veterans Room at the Park Avenue Armory in New York City.

Next, let's look at the heavily stenciled walls of the central hallway of the James Library Building in Madison, New Jersey. These designs were more challenging to apply because they were stenciled directly onto brick walls, not onto smoother plastered surfaces.

Notice the green designs stenciled all over the walls of this grand central hallway. ▶

How many stencils do you think were used in this space? Notice the thin rope-like outer border, the colorful, elaborate border on top, another rope-like border, a green leafy border, and the stencil on the green background on the bottom.



Photo courtesy of Emma Marconi Bologna



◀ This green leaf design borders the groin vaults in the central hall.

Heavy stenciling was very popular in the 1800s. However, by the early 1900s, it had petered out. Stenciled borders replaced the older designs. Notice the design in the hallway of the Hartley Dodge Memorial Building in Madison, New Jersey. The stenciled border is hardly noticeable from afar. ▼



◀ Notice the skill of the painter with this wider border painted onto the insides of the arching doorways. The design is shaded so that it appears three-dimensional. (Where are the typical gaps in the stencil's design, you want to know? These designs are done with many layers, so that layer number two covers over the gaps of layer number one, and so on...)

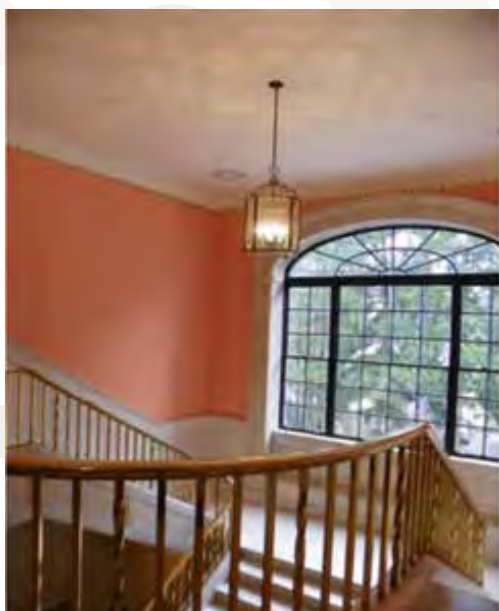


Photo courtesy of Emma Marconi Bologna

See this 1910 advertisement from Sherwin-Williams Paints, depicting stenciled borders. They're a nice touch, but they don't compare at all to the grandeur seen in the stencil's heyday.



Sherwin Williams Company Decorative Studios

And now, stencils are making an exciting comeback. They charm hobbyists with their ease, versatility, and exciting designs. Stenciling has become a fun, somewhat addictive, hobby. Here are three samples of Royal Design's current stencil designs. Walls, furniture, floors, and whatnot are being transformed by this age-old technique.



Tatum Tile Stencil by Royal Design Studios



Blythe Trellis Stencil by Royal Design Studios

Okay. That was fun. If I have changed the way you viewed historic design — from heavy, overdone, somber, and just plain *old*, to charming, warm, personal, skilled! (the skill!), and marvelous attention to detail — then I have succeeded. If I leave you rubbing your forehead and wondering if perhaps they knew a thing or two in the past (patience? perseverance? grit?) that we have forgotten in our race to sleek sophistication, then not only will I have shared some decorating knowledge with you, but I will have left you with some food for thought, too.

With much appreciation to Yvette from John Canning and Co. Decorative Painting and Restoration for the beautiful photos and to Emma Marconi Bologna who so graciously shared her photos and research of stenciling in American Design. Much of the information shared in this article is thanks to Emma, as are most of the photos.



Star Quilt Stencil by Royal Design Studios

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The History of Stencils

Ancient craftspeople relied on stencils way more than we who have an abundance of methods for printing and illustrating. They used stencils to teach children the alphabet, to create elegant signatures, and to beautify interiors. The Egyptians stenciled hieroglyphics onto their tombs, and Roman emperors stenciled elaborate initials onto their documents.

All sorts of exotic materials were used in the making of stencils. In ancient Fiji they used bamboo and banana leaves, the Eskimos used dried sealskin through which they'd push colored pigment through the designs that they had cut out.

Stencils were also produced from leather, parchment and thin brass, and once paper was invented in China (around 200 CE), stencils were made out of paper which had been heavily oiled and thereby waterproofed. Later stencils were made out of tin and specially-treated linen.

Nowadays, heavy plastic is the most popular stencil material.

The Chinese and Japanese stenciled onto fabric. The Japanese had an elaborate reverse-stenciling technique called *katazome*. They'd stencil onto silk



Early stencils by PC Grierson, Courtesy of Avery Archives, Columbia University, New York, NY

with a rice paste and would repeat the process until the entire fabric was stenciled over. Then they'd dye the silk with several layers of pigment. When they were done with this painstaking process, they'd remove the paste to reveal beautifully designed silk.

In America, stenciling was very popular, particularly in the late 1700s and early 1800s. It was cheaper (and easier to get hold of) than wallpaper or embroidered cloth. Homes in those days were heavily stenciled, stenciled borders being considered very fashionable. Craftsmen would travel from city to city with their stencils and paints and stencil many homes.

There were not that many stenciling artists — surviving interiors from those times have been traced back to only about fifteen artisans! Stenciling, with all its practicality and charm, remained the preferred method of decorating until wallpaper became more affordable.

Once paints and stencils became easier to produce, many women took up stenciling. They stenciled on furniture, tin, fabric and more. Today, stenciling is experiencing a revival of sorts as it once again charms people everywhere with its practicality, creativity, beauty and versatility.

Now Hair This...

The Japanese came up with a brilliant stenciling technique regarding floating characters — human hair. They used hair to bridge the floating insides of the characters with the outer parts of the stencils. And it worked! When the stencils were lifted off the liquid surface, it left a beautiful design without any gaps. Later, the process switched from human hair to silk thread. ●

Sources:

Stenciling — A Very Short History of a Very Long Tradition by Jane Viator
History of Stencils by Leslee Russell
American Decorative Stenciling: 1840 to 1940 by Emma Marconi Bologna