

An exhibition at the Autumn Decorative Fair, 3-8 October 2006

The folding screen is an elegant example of furniture which is both practical and decorative. Earliest references place them in China's Chou dynasty which lasted from 206BC to 220 AD. By the 8th Century they were synonymous with Chinese and Japanese interiors. The Chinese versions were made from heavy wooden panels bound together with cloth or leather, the panels painted or lacquered, depicting the 'Hundred Objects' that would be needed in the next life. This preoccupation was echoed on the walls of the underground graves of the ancient Egyptians.

For the Japanese, whose houses were simpler and more flexible than Chinese homes, the screen became an integral part of the interior with the familiar decorated sliding panel known as the Fusuma. These were made of paper applied onto seasoned wood.

With the arrival in the Far East of European merchant explorers in the 1500s there began a buoyant export trade in screens from both countries. This trade gave rise to the misnomer of the Chinese 'Coromandel' screen, so-called because it was shipped out via the East India Company's main port of the same name. The Duke of Marlborough used one on his campaigns. This was one of a pair commissioned on the accession of Leopold 1st to the Holy Roman Empire. When the Duke ceased his campaigns, the screen went to Blenheim Palace.

This influx of Oriental screens led to that era's equivalent of Mr Mandelson's Bra Wars. The European furniture manufacturers nearly got to the point of petitioning their governments to curb these imports. But instead they worked out how to make their own acceptable copies, giving rise to the term Japanning. They developed suitable methods for preparing the wood before lacquering and in 1720 a Jesuit, Filippo Bonani, published the first analysis of Chinese lacquer. The Chinese used Rhus Vernica (the sap from an Asian tree) but the French developed an equally effective lacquer which was easier to apply and dried faster.

Gradually leather became the favoured panelling and Europe had its own home grown 'Chinoiserie'. However these screens were rarely signed by either artist or manufacturer, and so are hard to date. A notable example of the French craze for 'Singerie', the depiction of monkeys dressed like humans, is in the Rothschild family chateau at Waddesdon in Buckinghamshire. It dates from the 1760s and was signed by Peyrotte, its designer.

An English example from the same period can be found in Somerset's Dunster Castle. This one has leather panels painted with hunting, shooting and fishing scenes.

Besides their practical uses for warding off the cold in draughty houses and castles, or hiding away the remains of the evening meal, screens in the 19th and 20th Century were also used as large scrap books. Hours of family fun was spent pasting up favourite magazine clippings from Punch or the Illustrated London News. This was known as the 'découpage' screen.

The screen went out of fashion for a period at the end of the 1700s when the discovery of Pompeii made the art from the Greek and Roman civilisations all the rage. The Crystal Palace Great Exhibition of 1851 which was such a tremendous showcase of human endeavour devoted quite an amount of space to Oriental art and the idea of the screen came back into prominence.

Subsequently the 'Aesthetic Movement' in England which so revered Japanese design made the screen popular. This resonated with the Arts & Crafts movement which favoured natural materials and images of nature and flora and fauna. Whistler's screen painting of Old Battersea Bridge

looks fresh even today. A little later Duncan Grant of the Bloomsbury set achieved a certain notoriety with his 'Blue Sheep' screen of 1911.

The sinuous forms of the Art Nouveau heroines leant themselves perfectly to a screen backdrop. And moving on into the crisper Art Deco era, Syrie Maugham the interior designer, married to the playwright, created a stir with her dramatic white rooms and mirrored screens.

Screens have never been out of favour with designers, who continue to use antique designs or commission contemporary pieces. Early oriental screens are also highly sought after by collectors. Examples of screens antique and modern will be on show at the Autumn Decorative Antiques & Textiles Fair, 3-8 October, The Marquee, Battersea Park, London. Some are on loan but many can be purchased.

Maybe a revival of the folding screen is just around the corner...

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