Swatch book

Place of origin: Lyon (made)

Date: 1764 (made)

Artist/Maker: Unknown

Materials and Techniques: Silk, taffeta, linen, brocaded, leather bound, paper and ink, sealing wax

Credit Line: Acquired with the help of Marks and Spencer Ltd and the Worshipful Company of Weavers

Museum number: T.373-1972

Gallery location: In Storage

Public access description

These samples of dress silks from about 1763 are attached to different pages in a travelling salesman's book. They show the range of colour combinations available from the workshops of different manufacturers. Above each group of samples is a heading which reveals the name of the fabrics and their width, their price per ell (about 45 inches) and the initials of the manufacturing company that made them.

The book of samples was used to offer potential customers previews of the forthcoming season's fashionable designs and colours so that they could make orders. The initials for the company titles would have been familiar to the salesman but not to his clients as he wanted to ensure that they made purchases through him rather than directly from the manufacturer. He made his living from the commission he received on his sales.

Descriptive line

Book containing 99 pages of swatches or samples of silk, Lyon, 1764

Physical description

A large leather bound ledger with swatches of plain and patterned woven silks stuck on to the pages with red sealing wax. Each page has an inscription in ink at the top which indicates the name of the textiles, their width and price, and gives the manufacturers’ initials. Some are French silks, named, priced and numbered with their widths. Some may be English samples, usually large loom-widths.

Some of the swatches have fallen out at some date and been stuck back on the wrong page (as comparison of textile and inscription reveals). Some swatches have had bits cut out of them. Some swatches date to later than the original date of the book, and are probably of English manufacture.

Textile 77v: A crimson and yellow woven silk with formal stylised foliage, disposed in three motifs. A major scrolling, oval one, a vertical stripe of stems, and a smaller medallion type repeating motif in the ground.

Textile f. 57: The heading for this sample is found on a different page (f.67v.) of the book because the sample has been moved at some point.

Textile f. 55v: Shot silk in lavender blue and pink, brocaded with lace meanders in white intertwined with flowers in white, red and greens, and bouquets of mixed flowers in yellows, pinks and reds. A scrap of paper is stuck to the corner with the number 999. The inscription at the top of the page does not correspond to the textile which must have fallen out at some point and been stuck back in the wrong place.

Textile f. 37v: Bronze plain weave ground (taffeta), brocaded (patterned) in a design of meanders of foliage and lace, alongside bouquets of multi-coloured flowers. The bouquets are in gold and a tightly twisted yarn (cordonnet), their hearts are green, red and white; the meanders of foliage and lace are in cordonnet and silver, and intertwine with multi-coloured floss floral swags in reds, greens, blues and yellow.

Textile f. 9 v: Samples 172-175. Three rectangles of plain weave silks in different colour combinations, all with a self-coloured ground and a simple brocaded floral motif in a contrasting colour. Above the samples is an inscription in ink: 'Florence broché 5/8 de large de 6# 15s a 7# 6s de J.C.B'. These initials have not yet been identified.

Textile f. 7 v: Plain weave silk. There is a selvedge on the left hand side of the swatches but the right hand side is a raw cut edge. The pattern consists of a check woven into the fabric and a stripe flowers created through the chiné process (the warp and/or weft was dyed before the fabric was woven up, hence the clouded effect). Above the top sample is an inscription in ink. The upper sample is in pink, green and white; the lower one in purple, yellow, green and red. Each bears a small rectangular piece of paper with a number 165 and 166. The heading above the upper sample reads 'Florences chiné 5/8 de large de 5# 15 a 6# 5 de SCB'. This manufacturer has not yet been identified.

Textile f.4v: 32 samples/swatches of self-coloured taffetas. In the lower half are 11 samples of checked taffetas. Each section has spaces where samples have fallen out, the red sealing wax used to secure them in place remaining. Above each group of samples is an inscription in ink. The heading above the upper samples reads: ‘Angleterre changt. rayé et cadrillé pr. robe et pr. robe et pr. habit d’homme 5/8 de large de 6# 10 de
V.M'. The heading above the lower group of samples reads 'gros de florence du 7/12 de large de 7# 8 lon peut faire les memes couleurs en angres 5/8 de large de D.G.M.'.