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How We Learned to Stencil.

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It was in a spirit of adventure, rather than with any fixed purpose, that we started to investigate our old barn, with its lofts, sheds and enticing doorways. But it was with a sudden appreciation of its thousand possibilities that, high up in the second story, we discovered a great loft which, when cleared of its venerable cart-wheels, poles and cobweb-draped boards and boxes, bid fair to make a good-sized work-room or studio.

We took possession at once, and spent the following days cleaning the old hand-hewn beams of a half-century's dust and grime, and dealing uncompromisingly with hordes of wasps and spiders.

By special invitation, the village carpenter was allowed to enter and employ his time cutting two small windows to the east, giving us a beautiful view of pastures and woodland, while below lay our apple orchard and row of prim, white hives. A sweep of air came as we opened the big door opposite on its creaking hinges, and looked west across the house and gardens.

But now that we had our studio, to what use should we devote it? We had

to send us two tubes. She left, and, after easing her conscience of the tubes, she might have resigned us to our own devices, quite forgotten. And, had she done so, our old brown-raftered room would doubtless be deserted now,—its fascination departing with its novelty and its spiders. But she did not. And the enjoyment, and the work of many happy days that have followed, will always remain in our minds as something of a gift from her, through her sympathy with the vague ambition of two girls.

In course of time,—a week at most,—we received from her an order for a pair of curtains for her daughter's room at school, and were flung in consequence into a state of excitement equalled only by our perplexity. What should we do, and what could we do it with?

We found the tubes of color, on examining them, quite as terrible as we expected—a shrill pink and a poisonous green. That was all we had, and, taking heart from the thought that at least they could not last, we mixed them. The pink softened the green and the green subdued the pink; it was better than we had dared to hope. We cut from cardboard, with a sharp knife, a stencil of a little cabbage rose, quite formal in shape, and its bud. We bought soft cheese-cloth (our first outlay) and made a half-inch hem all around. Alternately

we placed the rose and the bud on the curtain, and, using our stiff paint-brushes and our strangely-made colors, mixed with water, we rubbed the dye over the stencil. We worked very slowly and painfully with blotters under the cheese-cloth to keep it from running, and when the curtains were covered with the pattern we colored the little hems all around to make a dull-green border.

That was all—except that our backs were quite broken, and our brains reeling from the unwanted concentration.

We have had a good many orders since then, and we have discussed the affairs of nations with the habitués of our studio-loft, the while shifting elaborate stencils and mixing complicated colors without a tremor; but the joy of creation has never come again in like degree to the making of those simple little rose curtains, which I am sure by now must have faded quite away.

"Once felt, so felt
nevermore."

Shortly afterward we learned that, during this interesting period of our lives,

the world was already wise enough to know that naphtha mixed with oil-paint makes a practically indelible mixture, and consequently offers great scope for the kind of work we had in mind.

We learned also, from friendly and professional sources, that it was best to take out sufficient paint for the day's work and leave it on blotters to absorb all the oil possible. We learned, too, that it takes much patience and much despair before you can make the mixture of naphtha and paint stay on the spot designed for it; for, unless the brush is rubbed almost dry on a piece of cloth, it is prone to run, and so spoil many a curtain.

All this knowledge we had to acquire as soon as possible, for our friends and promoters, while we were yet dazed at having produced anything at all, were flourishing our little achievement in the face of anybody or everybody then en-

gaged in the decorating of a house. The next paralyzing moment occurred when we received inquiries in regard to our prices. What did we know of prices, forsooth? It was but another problem to grapple with.

We were then given by a humorous friend two volumes for double-entry book-keeping. I think there must have been a twinkle in that eye which we missed. For, as the only double-entry bookkeeping we had ever done dated back to our school days, and the one classic example with the barrel of sugar, we say all we have to say in the ledger, and press our stencils in the other. It's a nice book for almost anything.

To return, however, to the process itself. Little by little we learned to improve it in many particulars. We soon replaced the white Bristol-board with copy-press sheets, a cardboard with a glazed surface which does not absorb the moisture, and, consequently, break and ruin the stencils.

We felt that, as a stencil is of its nature very formal and somewhat crude, its possibilities are limited to simple and conventional forms, and, consequently, anything literal or realistic would be out of character.

After drawing a design, we trace it with a somewhat sharp point on the stencil-board, placing a blotter beneath,

to make a more incisive impression. When the tracing is completed, we cut with a very sharp small-bladed knife along the impression. This must be done with great firmness and accuracy, leaving strong, narrow stencil separations. This careful cutting means much labor saved, if there are many curtains to be made from the same stencil, for stencils wear at the delicate joinings and easily break.

One writer on the cutting of stencils advises to use great care, as one slip of the knife will ruin the entire piece of work, there being no way to mend it. I am quite sure that, had this been the case, our business days would have been short indeed. As we always let the knife slip at least once on each stencil, we were soon forced to look about us for some practical device, in order to survive at all. We then found that thin mending tape applied to each side of the wounded work of art did very well indeed, and we could be as careless as we liked. This did not, of course, prove us first-class workmen, but it showed us to be at least sufficiently resourceful in invention, and time has mended our methods.

For beautiful and perfect cutting, we would advise any novice to buy, or at least study, the exquisite and delicate work in Japanese stencils—made of thin paper, to manipulate which requires considerable dexterity.

Once the stencil is cut, we apply it in whatever fashion we have in mind—as a border or an all-over—to the curtain already stretched taut on a large table (ours is a ping-pong table, justifying in this way its otherwise cumbrous existence). It is well to have blotters under the curtains, to prevent as much as possible the tendency of the paint to run.

The stencil should be fastened securely with thumb-tacks before an attempt is made to paint over it. The brushes should be of varying sizes, according to the delicacy or boldness of the work, and should be held firmly and scrubbed hard. The solution, preferably naphtha, as the odor is less offensive than that of gaso-

line, should be as wet as possible and well mixed, to avoid paintiness.

In making borders for the curtains, a long straight-edged piece of stencil-board is pressed tight with the fingers, as well as with thumb-tacks, along the line of the hem. Then the brush, fairly dry, is rubbed quickly and lightly along. This makes a clean-cut outline, and is very effective with some arrangements and designs. Borders should be done on both the right and the wrong side of the hem, if the color has at all gone through from the right side; otherwise, the effect is spotty and far from attractive. As the double application of paint tends to make the borders stiff, the solution must be put on as lightly as possible.

The curtains may be pressed, after drying at least twenty-four hours, with a moderately hot iron; but it is our experience that they should hang nearly a week in an airy place before they are used,—unless, to some eccentric customer, the odor is agreeable.

In washing the curtains, or covers, etc., the water should not be too hot. Moderate care should be taken not to rub a coarse soap on the design itself,—otherwise the process washes with great success.

Fine cheese-cloth, unbleached muslin, cotton and linen scrim—in fact any soft hanging wash fabric—lends itself to this



Putting on the Color.

She is painting through the "holes" of the stencil. The stencil itself is not very evident here.



Cutting the Stencils.

process. Heavy linen is not so satisfactory. Owing to its fine, hard twill, it does not readily absorb the dye.

We find, in the matter of color, that the simpler the palette, the better it is for durability, as some colors are not fast. Most combinations can be made from the following list: Prussian blue, transparent gold ochre, chrome-yellows, burnt and raw sienna, crimson lake, carmine and vermillion and pink madder.

It is certainly advisable to clean carefully the front and back of the stencil after each application, otherwise the colors will become blurred and the work blotted. The brushes themselves should be kept in condition by cleaning them each day in naphtha.

A palette knife, cutting knives, a small whetstone and scissors for reaching in to clip clean corners, are indispensable tools; and among our latest acquisitions is a harness-punch, which makes round holes of different sizes. This fills a long-felt want, as a small round hole is undoubtedly difficult to cut free-hand.