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Old Boudry and Cortailod printed calicoes

An important textile industry in the canton of Neuchatel in the 18th century

In the towns of Colombier (near Neuchatel) and Lausanne a magnificent exhibition was held this spring of printed calicoes, products of an industry which made its appearance in the middle of the 18th century in the neighbourhood of Neuchatel and prospered for about a hundred years. The number, variety and beauty of the fabrics exhibited made it possible to realise the importance of this industry which had reached a high degree of artistic and technical development but which has unfortunately disappeared from western Switzerland. Most of the fabrics came from private collections and were on the whole remarkably well preserved, some of them being quite large in size. We hope some day to have the opportunity of speaking again of block-printing which is still permanently carried on in Switzerland, although to a somewhat reduced extent. We believe it would be of interest to our readers to reproduce here an article by our collaborator Mme. de Chambrier, who is particularly well authorized to deal with this subject since she herself comes from Neuchatel.

We wish to take the opportunity of thanking here the National Federation of Swiss Costumes in Zurich, who very kindly put at our disposal the illustration accompanying this article.

The Editor

In Western Switzerland, particularly in the neighbourhood of Lausanne and Neuchatel, one still finds today a number of fine old mansions whose rooms and parlours are adorned with XVIIIth century printed cotton fabrics — curtains and hangings which arouse the admiration of visitors. They are indeed the last traces left of the Neuchatel textile craft which flourished exceedingly some two hundred years ago and whose reputation reached far beyond the bounds of national frontiers.

Despite two centuries of wear, many of these lovely prints have preserved their original glaze, stressing the brilliancy of the floral and leaf motifs. The charming printed calicoes and “painted cloth” of Boudry and Cortailod were contemporaries of the first English printed chintzes which indeed they rivalled by their quality and delicacy of design.

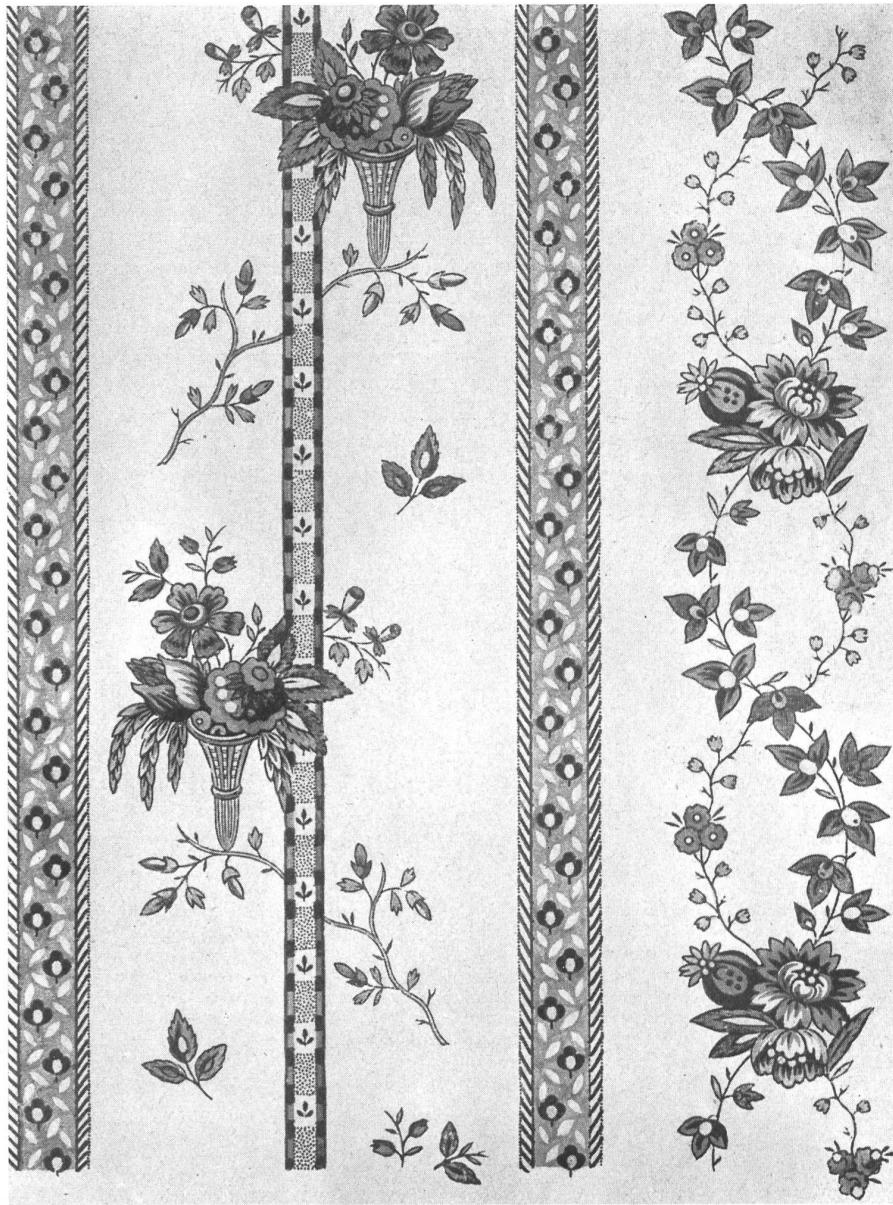
Although the Neuchatel craft of calico-printing disappeared some fifty years ago, it still lingers on as a memory among local inhabitants and most interesting specimens of its products are extant, recalling the prosperity it brought to the village of Boudry and its neighbourhood.

The craft, strangely enough, sprang up and became localized all along the banks of the River Areuse, a picturesque stream which flows into the Lake of Neuchatel after it has poured down the Val de Travers and bounded through the rocky gorges so delightful to the heart of the romantic Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Early in the XVIIIth century, the first mills were

established in the villages of Boudry and Cortailod and the neighbouring hamlets of Isles and Grandchamp.

Legal documents dating from 1732 and 1740 mention ground sold for a “manufactory for the painting of cotton and other kinds of cloth” and for a “calico-printing factory with the faculty of using the waters of the stream called Rosetta for the needs of the said factory”. In 1771, the Cortailod factory comprised “two large buildings for the drying of the cloth, one building for the furnaces, two washing rooms, a finishing (glazing) and a bleaching room.” The manufactory was thus composed of a succession of small, complementary buildings, very different from the lay-out of great modern plants.

By 1765, Cortailod's annual production had reached 25,000 pieces of cloth, each about 10 to 16 ells in length. During the mill's last, really prosperous years, output increased even more, totalling yearly some 30,000 to 40,000 pieces of 30 to 40 ells. Nevertheless, the effects of the French Revolution brought about the liquidation, in 1795, of the powerful trading firm of Pourtalès & Cie. Then, during the Napoleonic Wars, the continental blockade and the French Government's decree prohibiting the importation of printed cloth into the French Empire and the Kingdom of Italy, gave a final blow to an industry which had brought great prosperity to a whole region. Today, part of the old mill buildings have survived the years and are occupied by a cable factory, “Fabrique de câbles de Cortailod”.



The Boudry calico-printing mill survived until 1880, at which time the textile crafts were finally and quite definitely removed from the Canton of Neuchatel and transferred to Alsace (France). For some years after this event, the mill buildings were used by a hat manufacturer.

Cortailod and Boudry printed or "painted" calicoes were remarkable for their quality, beauty of design and fastness of colour. At first, the printing was operated by means of wood blocks; later, wood blocks inlaid with copper or brass were used and, finally, engraved copper cylinders, similar to those used in the English cotton industry, were adopted. Neuchatel printed cotton fabrics were in great demand and appreciated for their clearcut patterns and excellent finish. New processes were constantly adopted to improve on older methods of production. The technicians of the industry usually came from watchmaker families and were therefore accustomed to precision craftsmanship. Famous engravers composed and executed the patterns which compared most favourably with English and French textile designs of the best periods. The colours were "fast" enough to survive the centuries: the bright pinks, reds, blacks and lilacs have proved particularly resistant and the glazing was as fine as that of the best English chintzes of the period.

The unbleached cotton fabrics for the industry was imported from India via England, through the intermediary of Pourtalès & Cie. Neuchatel printed calicoes won quite an international reputation for themselves: they were exported to France, Germany, Italy and the Near East. The local costumes of women in certain villages in the Rhine district were at one time made entirely of Boudry prints.

Today, in local museums and among the private collections of families descended from leading manufacturers of the period, one can still see and admire the fine engraved wood blocks and copper sheets used in the industry. These survivals of the past are now preserved with the greatest of care, but unfortunately there was a time, early in the present century, when the local inhabitants used great quantities of these blocks as firewood.

Even in our day, these lovely old fabrics can serve as a source of inspiration to modern designers. It is by seeing them actually in use in country houses — for curtains, wall hangings or upholstery — that one can really appreciate the quality and remarkable variety of the patterns which crowned this Neuchatel craft with glory and enhanced its prestige in the XVIIIth and early XIXth centuries.

Th. DE CHAMBRIER