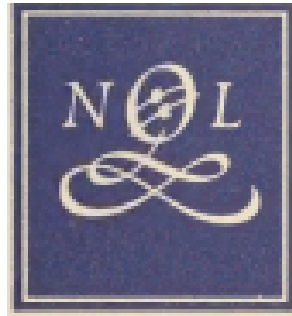


*The Book Club of California
Quarterly News-Letter'*

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Elisabeth Sanders Arbuckle

Harriet Martineau and the London DAILY NEWS

Adela Spindler Roatcap

Pochoir: The Art of Coloring with Stencils

Roger K. Larson

The Elusive Letters of George Sterling

Gifts & Acquisitions

In Memoriam

Serendipity

The Book Club of California
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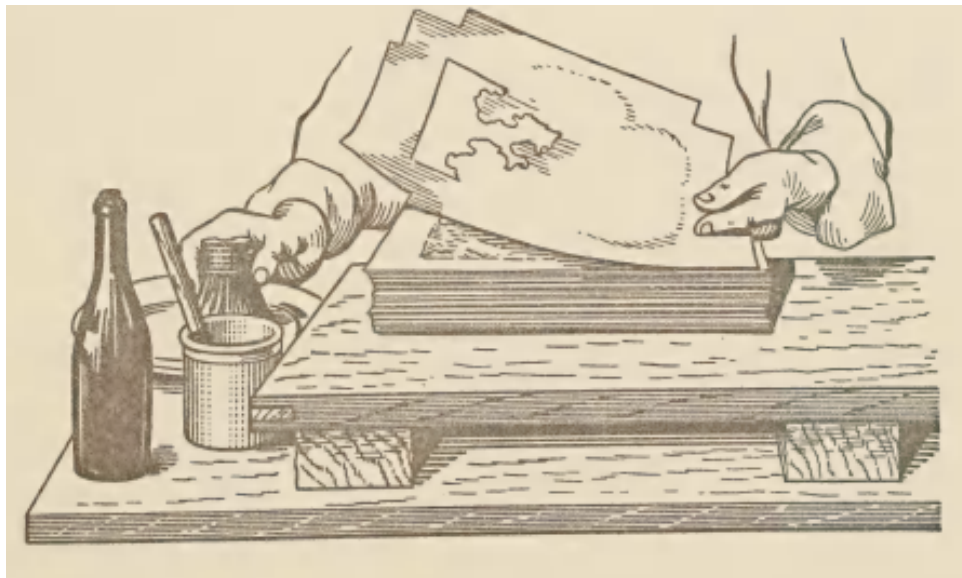
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Pochoir: The Art of Coloring with Stencils

Adela Spindler Roatcap

Pochoir is the French word for hand-coloring by means of stencils¹. How does one discern whether stencils have been used to color a particular book or portfolio? Peruse the colophon: Are the illustrations colored *au pochoir* or *au patron*? Have they been “colored by hand,” or “reproduced as gravures, then colored by hand,” “printed and stenciled at the studio of...” or even “colored in the French style”? Does the colophon include the name of one of the great Parisian colorists — Jean Saudé or Daniel Jacomet? It was these two craftsmen together with their teacher André Edouard Marty who (inspired by Japanese fabric dyer’s stencils — *katagami*) transformed traditional European stencil methods into the French pochoir process by devoting themselves to the study of printing in color, the psychology of color, color photography, and even the interaction of dyes and paper. As a result pochoir illustrations left photomechanical color reproduction far, far behind in their freshness and vibrancy — and they continue to delight connoisseurs and collectors.



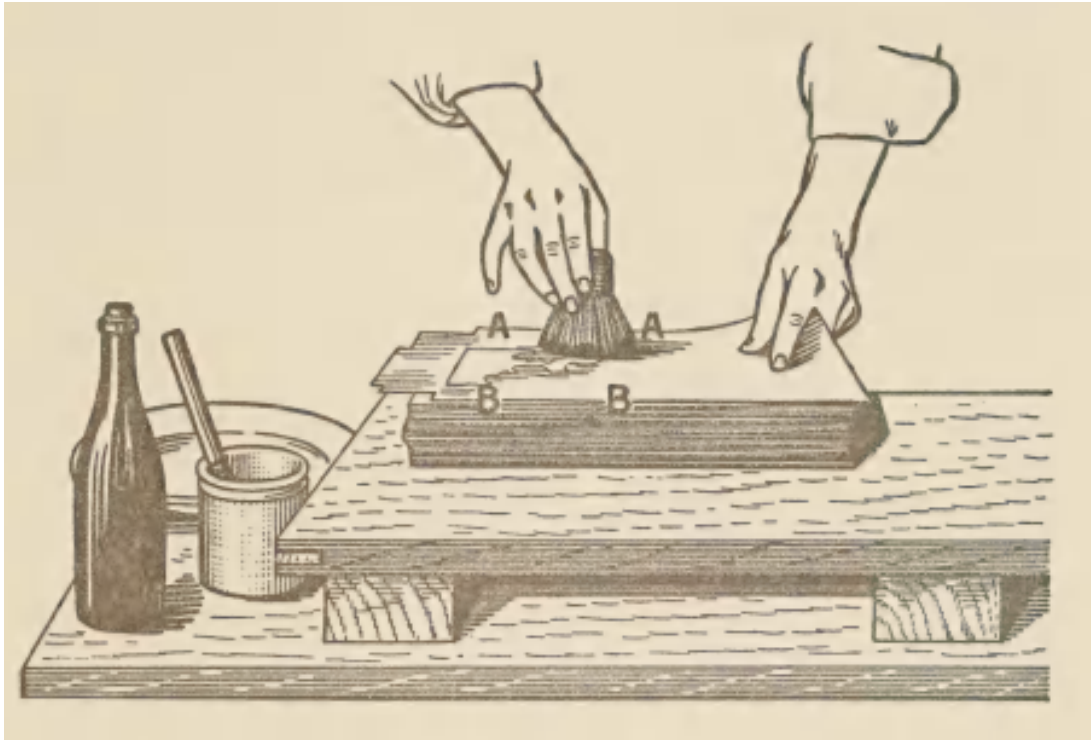
From the book by Jean Saudé 1925. See note 1

Alas, there never was a Mr. Pochoir. According to Paul Robert’s “*Dictionnaire alphabétique et analogique de la langue française*”, the word *pochoir* was first used in 1874. Applying color by means of stencils is an ancient practice, requiring only rudimentary skills and simple tools. Imagine a pre-historic man or woman placing an open hand against a rock wall and spraying a color substance — possibly ocher mixed with blood or animal fat. Stencils, probably cut from papyrus or parchment, were used to decorate the inner walls of the pyramids and palaces of Egypt and Babylon. In Pompeii the houses of the wealthy were stenciled with geometric motifs, borders, and

The Book Club of California
Quarterly News-Letter'

copies of famous Greek easel paintings. It is conjectured that the Roman legions carried playing cards stenciled on leather strips. Quintilian, the Roman teacher of writing and rhetoric, taught children their letters by the use of stencils. André Edouard Marty in his *l'Imprimerie au XXe siècle*, Paris, 1906, attributes the first use of stencils to the sixth century Ostrogothic King Theodoric, who signed decrees by tracing his name with a stylus through a pierced golden plate because he could neither read or write. The earliest surviving stencils, discovered by Sir Aurel Stein in one of the Caves of a Thousand Buddhas in Western China in the early years of this century, were made of paper approximately fifteen centuries ago.

The word "stencil" derives from the French *etenceler* or *etincelle*, which originated in the Latin *scintilla* or spark — a sparkle of color which gives life, makes an object more desirable. It is, perhaps, a medieval allusion to the sparkle of stars, which, it was then thought, allows one to see through the heavenly canopy to God's own light. During the fourteenth century, as the French began wearing shirts, mills were provided with linen rags for papermaking. European printing of woodcuts, images on paper, has been traced to about 1370; the earliest surviving printed woodcut, stencil-colored in red, green, blue, brown, and violet, dates to 1418. Two German *Briefmalers* or French *imagiers* could print and color up to five hundred sheets a day. Their customers preferred bright colors and, because the inexpensive images quickly faded, new ones were eagerly snapped up to enliven drab medieval walls. In Paris during the seventeenth century, even the meanest gambling den called itself an "Academy" as a frenzied card-playing public turned printed and stenciled playing cards into a profitable enterprise. Tools and methods were not much different from those described by Jean Saudé in his *Traité d'Enluminure d'Art au Pochoir*. But *imagiers* also stenciled designs onto pleated paper fans, paper boxes, broadsides, choir books, as well as onto garden books and fashion plates. A Frenchman, Jean Papillon, pioneered the use of matching wallpaper sheets called *dominoes*, which were stenciled by *dominotiers*. Stenciling was a labor-intensive occupation — perfect for otherwise idle children, women, political refugees, and families.



One of these family enterprises, the “*Imprimerie Pellerin*” in the French town of Epinal, was lately visited by Greer Allen, a retired Yale University printer. He was astonished at their “aquatype” — a machine that colors by means of stencils. Mr. Allen describes:

...black key plate images which had been stored on old litho stones from time out of mind — being inked, proofed and transferred to metal offset litho plates, which, in turn, were clamped on to a modern 30-inch Roland press to strike in the basic black outlines of the drawings. But then [quelle splendeur historique!] there, over in the corner sat a worker feeding these very key-lined sheets onto a long, clanking, nineteenth-century contraption. It consisted of nine separate stations, each of which automatically applied a separate color as the sheet advanced through the machine. At each station, a metal stencil —exposing only the area to be printed in a particular color — drops down on the sheet; and a thin, wide brush is passed at a right angle across the stencil, leaving a deposit of rather dry water-color in the proper places on the paper. After each coloring, the brush returns to the edge of the machine to renew its modest charge of color from a metal fountain cylinder which revolves at a controllable rate in a tub of water-color. Each sheet is then advanced to the next color station.”²

The Pellerins have continuously operated the business since 1735, when Nicolas and Gabriel Pellerin installed themselves in the Alsatian village of Épinal.³ In 1773 Jean-Charles Pellerin succeeded his father as playing-card maker and in 1822 Nicholas Pellerin expanded the business, spending the next fifteen years developing a series of very successful Napoleonic battle scenes before cornering the children’s market with a line of cut-out games, soldiers, jumping jacks, toy theatres, fairy tales, and nursery-

The Book Club of California
Quarterly News-Letter'

rhyme song sheets. During the 1840s, stencil-colored prints were exported in large quantities to "the log cabins of America."

In 1852 the Imagerie Pellerin adopted lithography and soon began printing from stereo-type blocks onto machine-made paper. Between 1870 and 1914 as many as fifteen million images d'Epinal were sold.⁴ The "aquatype" was installed in the 1890s and has been in operation ever since. Stencils are cut from enameled tin or zinc sheeting. Colors are laid on with brushes in order of increasing darkness of tone: first, say, rosette, then yellow ocher, followed by pale blue, lemon yellow, light green, sienna brown, dark blue, vermilion, and grey. Paper moves through at the rate of five hundred sheets per hour. The colors are brilliant and retain a charming primitive quality. According to Peter Allen, the "aquatype" is considered by one and all:

one of the wonders of the civilized world, even now that it's electrically powered—at first when it was steam-driven it was proudly considered to be the very latest technology.

Demand for Pellerin's images waned after 1914. At André Edouard Marty's Parisian atelier on the rue Bertrand, two apprentices were becoming masters of their craft: Jean Saudé and Daniel Jacomet. Saudé took over the "*Éditions de l'Ibis*" and went on to reproduce the work of such Art Deco artists as Georges Lepape, Edouard Benedictus, and André Derain as well as to write and publish the seminal "*Traité d'Enluminure d'Art au Pochoir*". Jacomet, an apprentice since the age of fourteen, was barely eighteen when:

..my master had a wonderful new idea. This was not unusual, for his head was always full of new ideas. "The frescoes of Fra Angelico," Marty went on, 'have never been well reproduced. Let us undertake this great task!

Thus Jacomet traveled to Florence; within a year he copied in pochoir the forty-three Fra Angelico frescoes at the Monastery of St. Marco, using 525 stencils — a mind-boggling accomplishment! As with all pochoir, Jacomet's method involved three major steps. First the composition's colors were analyzed. A stencil was then cut for each color and lastly, the density of the original pigments was precisely duplicated. Marty was eminently satisfied with his pupil's efforts; following World War I, the "Ateliers A. Marty — D. Jacomet & Co." was established at 61 rue Pernety, Paris. They specialized in facsimiles of original works of art: watercolors, paintings, or historical documents — for which they used thirty, forty (or even more) metal stencils over a black or colored collotype.⁵ A facsimile of Cézanne's "*Les Baigneuses*", 1947, colored *en pochoir* by Daniel Jacomet, came to the attention of Sir Geoffrey Keynes, the great English surgeon and eminent bibliographer; it resulted in a series of magnificent books published for the William Blake Trust by Arnold Fawcus at his Trianon Press. Daniel Jacomet was by no means the only Parisian colorist. Colophons of pochoir books include the names of MM. Beaufume, Duval, Hourdebaigt, and Crampe as colorists. In

The Book Club of California
Quarterly News-Letter'

England, during the twenties, The Beaumont Press and The Curwen Press issued a number of attractive illustrated books with plates enlivened by a stencil process. It is instructive to compare the results of their work with what is possibly the most gorgeous of all twentieth-century pochoir books—Henri Matisse’s *Jazz*, published by Tériade’s Edition du Verve in 1947. The strong primary colors were thickly laid on with gouache on Velin d’Arches—resulting in a tactile surface as rich as the finest silk velvet — a stunning livre d’artiste!

America’s reply to European pochoir has been silk-screen or serigraphy;⁶ however, stencils have been used by Andy Warhol, Jasper Johns, Larry Rivers, and Robert Rauschenberg. Contemporary artists are always ready to surprise an eager public with their latest creative discovery — but stenciling was already old when pre-historic men and women placed their open hands against cave walls and sprayed color around them.

L’Imagerie Pellerin, Quai de Dogneville, 8800, Épinal, continues its work. The “aquatype” clangs away — printing and coloring books and broadsides (now chiefly for tourists, alas). New enameled-tin stencils are cut for their “aquatype.” Visitors flock to Épinal’s Museum of Popular Imagery and to the Departmental Archives to see medieval woodblocks and printing apparatus dating as far back as the Renaissance. Every November the whole town dresses up in costumes taken from the old stencil prints and participates in an “open weekend” at the *Imagerie d’Épinal* — a festival honoring their incredible pochoir machine. Perhaps, sometime soon, we should join in the party.



Adela Spindler Roatcap, author of several books and numerous articles, is an art historian who teaches at the Fromm Institute, University of San Francisco. She mounted the exhibition “*Pochoir, The Art of Coloring with Stencils*” at The Book Club in Spring 1992 as well as “*The Bookseller at 75 Charing Cross Road, Cyril W. Beaumont*” in Summer 1994. In December 1993, Dr. Roatcap presented “*Doing It with Stencils: That Incredible Pochoir Machine,*” to the Colophon Club in San Francisco.

¹ The best description of the “how to” of stenciling is still Jean Saudé, “*Traité d’Enluminure d’Art au Pochoir*”, Paris: Aux Éditions de l’Ibis, 1925. A California artist has described his method: Vance Gerry, “*Pochoir: Practical Watercolor Stenciling of Illustrations & Designs for Books Etc.,*” Matrix 8, The Whittington Press, 1988, pp. 21-28; or *Pochoir: Practical Stenciling for the Book Arts*, Weather Bird Press Book, 1991.

² I must thank Albert Sperisen for this information. Greer Allen (no relation to Peter Allen) published his description in *Printing Historical Society Bulletin* # 32, St. Bride Institute, London, Summer 1992, pp. 16 - 17.

³ For an account of the *imagiers* and their *images*, see Peter Allen, "*Epinal's Imagerie, the Pochoir Image Factory of France*" *Matrix* 23, The Whittington Press, 1993, pp. 1-17. Peter Allen's MA thesis, "*Images: French Popular Prints before 1835*", University College of Wales, Aberystwyth, 1992, bound by Allan Wood of the Gregynog Press, and our correspondence are the basis of my knowledge about l'Imagerie Pellerin. Mr. Allen lectures in relief printmaking and typography at l'École de l'Image in Épinal.

⁴ An *image d'Epinal* is a French saying which describes an exceptionally picturesque scene or is used to denigrate someone's naiveté or disregard for the harsher facts of life.

⁵ Collotype is a high quality printing process based on photography. Collotypes for The Beaumont Press, London, were produced at Emery Walker's printing establishment.

⁶ In serigraphy, a stencil image, made either by hand or photographically, is placed on a piece of fine-gauge silk stretched on a wooden frame. In the colored parts of the design, the mesh of the fabric is left open and the parts meant to be white are filled with varnish. Printing is done by forcing ink through the open areas to paper beneath by means of a rubber squeegee. Unlike the French pochoir process, silk-screening is essentially finished by the time screens and inks have been prepared for printing.