

The pursuit of the new

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Photographs by ESTHER DE PRADES MARIA

¹ *Manuscrit de Jean Rhyner*, 1766, MISE.

² This article is a summary of chapters 1 and 4 of the author's doctoral thesis. DANGLA, Assumpta. *Impressions sobre teixit. Els estampats de la fàbrica La España Industrial de Barcelona (1847-1903)*, supervised by Dr Judith Urbano, Universitat Internacional de Catalunya, Escola Superior d'Arquitectura i Disseny, 2016. <http://goo.gl/pNf72L>.

The success of printed garments hinges on the designs. In choosing these designs, the pursuit of the new has always been the crucial factor, a fact that was clear to the first European manufacturers of printed calicos. With a keen eye on the changing tastes of their customers they aimed to create an attractive product, making choices upon which the future of their production would depend:

Les dessins sont l'âme de l'impression; leur choix est essentiel et leur variété fait le début du fabricant – rien n'est plus difficile que le choix du dessin, parce que on doit réunir dans un dessin deux qualités fort différentes: il doit charmer l'acheteur par son élégance et plaire à l'imprimeur par la facilité de son exécution.¹

The new production systems of the nineteenth century brought a series of changes that strengthened the foundations upon which printed cloth could be marketed and distributed. The original calico manufacturers, who had worked with engraved wooden blocks, were supplanted by large steam-powered factories, in which printing machines with copper-plated cylinders were capable of increasing the production rate by a factor of forty. This, among other developments, caused stock to accumulate in shops and prompted a search for new outlets. The emergence of new trends became more noticeable through the course of the nineteenth century; printed fabric designs began to cross borders, and Catalan manufacturers began to look abroad for new ideas.

One particular case that we have studied is that of the factory *La España Industrial* in Barcelona, the leading cotton-producing public limited company in the Iberian Peninsula in the second half of the nineteenth century and a renowned manufacturer of novel printed textiles.² We have examined how the latest trends reached the factory as they emerged from the leading design centres, through a complex system of circulation and reception of innovations that involved close collaboration between different employees, in particular agents, designers, engravers and management. Further inspiration was gained

Sample of printed fabric with tree of life design (c. 1865), MEPM.



Sample of printed fabric with natural and synthetic dyes (c. 1870), private collection of *Manterol, SA*.



³ The archive of the factory *La España Industrial* has been conserved almost in its entirety and can be consulted at the Premià de Mar Textile Printing Museum and the National Archive of Catalonia.

⁴ The collections from *La España Industrial* are conserved at the Premià de Mar Textile Printing Museum, in the private collection of *Manterol SA* in Ontinyent (Valencia), at the CDMT and the Design Museum of Barcelona.

through the company's participation in industry events across Europe. The correspondence that the company maintained with its agents is living testimony to this rich and complex exchange,³ as is the work still conserved in public and private collections, which includes fabric samples, swatches, and original patterns and designs.⁴

La España Industrial developed an aesthetic language that was very close to that of the other leading European design centres. This ensured the success of a company that was noted particularly for textiles initially considered a “happy imitation of French fabrics from Rouen and Mulhouse”. During the second half of the nineteenth century, the company worked with some of the foremost French designers and its own team of specialists. The sources of inspiration varied widely. Some designers drew ideas from illustrated notebooks; kinds of dictionaries of ornamentation containing a wide range of themes and motifs that could be incorporated into textile design. The *Musée de l'Impression sur Étoffes* in Mulhouse contains a set of books with ornamental repertoires from the *Société Industrielle de Mulhouse*, which were used in textile design and other



Printed scarf, from a design by Oscar Schmidt (c. 1890), MEPM.

applied arts. Some of the designers who worked for *La España Industrial*, such as Oscar Schmidt, are known to have consulted these notebooks. Specialised in the drawing of original designs for scarves, Schmidt often borrowed collections of iconographic motifs from Pillement and of designs for scarves and **furnishings** from the *Société Industrielle de Mulhouse*. Other sources of inspiration were the trend books sent by design houses to their subscribers. In 1865, *La España Industrial* received a copy of a trend book with samples of French and English prints, and for decades the company subscribed to regular bulletins from the Camille Claude design house, and subsequently that of Claude Frères. In addition, directors and agents bought fabrics abroad, whose novel designs provided further inspiration. For example, one collection of scarves came from the city of Cosmanos, which was particularly renowned for the manufacturing of this item. The surviving examples are now housed in the Premià de Mar Textile Printing Museum.

Much of the success of *La España Industrial* was achieved thanks to forays into markets outside Spain. From the very beginning of the company's activity its designs were entered in major national and international competitions, for which it won numerous honours, including a gold medal at the Paris Universal Exhibition of 1878 and the highest award at the Barcelona Universal Exhibition of 1888. The many events in which the company took part were a great showcase for its products and provided a network of invaluable contacts, through which it gained direct knowledge of the latest fashions around Europe.

The company's agents played a key role as product advisors. They determined current needs, provided information on the latest innovations abroad, and identified the designs that were selling well, the most popular colours, and the

Detail of a roller-printing machine, MEPM.



Other professionals who introduced innovations were the engravers of copper-plated cylinders for the printing machines. They often sent fragments of original designs and textiles by post, with detailed indications about colours and printing systems. The company managers personally supervised the integration of new models, requested any necessary amendments and finally sent the designs to be engraved. The Nathan & Stington workshop in Manchester had a long relationship with *La España Industrial*, and for decades sent cards with printed samples and technical notes regarding the colour pastes and the type of engraving that best suited each drawing. The managers' training and judgement was crucial in the selection of designs. They knew that they needed to compete with other Spanish manufacturers, and that it was essential to make continuous progress. They monitored the competition, altering their own designs when this was deemed necessary, and strived to launch their collections before the other manufacturers. Strict conditions were imposed on the engravers who, for example, had to agree to send their cylinders to *La España Industrial* before they were distributed anywhere else in the Peninsula, so that the company would maintain an advantage over its competitors. In addition, the company insisted on attending all printing tests, to ensure that samples could not be sent to competitors without their knowledge.

The incorporation of new models and the monitoring of customer tastes were strategically important, and production rate was also a key factor in driving sales. *La España Industrial* was so concerned with the rapid changes in trends that, if a design no longer coincided with the latest fashion, it would cancel the order and print only a small selection of the various drawings received. The management was insistent on this point, no doubt out of a concern to increase



Original design for clothing, attributed to Benoît Picard (c. 1860), MEPM.



5 Record of correspondence, 20 May 1868, addressed to the designers *Petitdemagne & Doriot* in Mulhouse, National Archive of Catalonia.

6 *La España Industrial. Contratos de servicios* (1847-1853), 14 January 1954, MEPM.

sales. Customers requested “*dibujos modernos*” (modern designs) or designs “*de la más alta novedad*” (of the greatest novelty). These terms were made abundantly clear to designers, most of them based in Mulhouse and Paris, and detailed instructions were regularly sent by the company’s management. This characterised production in the second half of the nineteenth century, as revealed by correspondence from the period: “*nous ne manquerez pas de chercher la nouveauté & la beauté des formes dans cetttes collections*”.⁵

Benoît Picard, from Rouen, was one of the first designers whose creations were regularly purchased. The contract that he signed with *La España Industrial* contained several strict conditions. He could not create designs for any other manufacturer in Spain, he had to be present when the rollers were engraved with the final design, and he had to produce his work with great speed:

“*Sr. Picard is obliged and committed to sending exclusively to the Srs. Muntadas an exact copy of the drawings that the aforementioned Picard creates for manufacturers in Rouen and other places in France, and he cannot create designs for any other manufacturer in Spain even through any French commissions he may receive.*”⁶

Original design for textile printing,
by Joan Rabadà Vallbé (c. 1900),
MEPM.



7 Record of correspondence,
25 August 1860, ANC.

The company also asked Eugène Bretegnier from Alsace to send new ideas from Mulhouse and, above all, to maintain the utmost confidentiality:

“Notre ami Mr. Ventrillon nous a appris que vous avez assez de confiance en nous pour venir en Espagne sans vous avoir singé un engagement, dans lequel les principales conditions du contrat furent établies. [...] vous resterez obligé à travailler les heures acoutumées, à garder le secret de toutes les operations de la fabrique, à dedier tout votre talent et votre assiduité au meilleur accomplissement des devoirs de votre place.”⁷

Bretegnier was paid for the designs that he had created. However, designers could be either creators or “arrangers”. During the cotton famine at the start of the 1860s, the drop in sales meant that much of the output came from the specialised department of *La España Industrial*. In the design workshop were the Catalans Evaristo Clotas and Joan Rabadà Vallbé, as well as the Frenchman Charles Ventrillon. They created their own designs or “arranged” those of others. This was a time of discreet modernity and little variability, though exceptions did exist, such as a series of fabrics for interiors printed with

figurative, romantic compositions attributed to Joan Rabadà, which are notable for the quality of the artwork. During the 1870s, Charles Ventrillon played a key role, along with Joan Rabadà, as a creator and an arranger. Both tasks required intuition and a certain vision of the future to produce designs that would be in line with emerging tastes and to anticipate changes in the market.

Designers who were based abroad proposed ideas and received minutely detailed instructions from the management on the kinds of motifs, the measurements, the colours and the layout that were required. Communication with the company was fluid and continual, through written correspondence, foreign trips by the managers, or visits to Barcelona by the designers. Purchases in France were made for “*muebles*” in particular: fabrics for interior decoration. For example, in 1870 the designers E. Heussler and Jules Bildlingmeyer, from Alsace, were asked to follow the style of fabrics created by Koechlin Frères, one of the most famous manufacturers of printed textiles in Mulhouse, and five years later the same was asked of the designers Jacques Ammann and Henry Ast. These were well-known designers who maintained close contact with the company. In the 1870s, some designers from Alsace set up in Paris, and at the end of the decade the French capital had become the leading centre of original designs for printed textiles.

In 1886 *La España Industrial* began to establish contacts with a network of foreign designers. Two years later, the company’s chief in-house designer, Joan Rabadà, travelled to Buenos Aires. Both 1886 and 1888 saw the incorporation of designs from some of the most prestigious design houses in Paris. The Édouard Sins studio, located on the Boulevard Montmartre, supplied to several Catalan manufacturers and was a regular collaborator of *La España Industrial*: Maties Muntadas Rovira, then the factory’s director, gave Sins carte blanche to provide “*nouveaux dessins à votre goût en y apportant toute la variété possible*”. In this period, then, just as indispensable as the pursuit of the new was the search for variety.

The last years of the nineteenth century saw an increase in the use of designs in the Art Nouveau style as a strategy to boost sales. In 1887, Maties Muntadas sent a telegram informing the company that he had come across a new designer in Paris, Petitdemagne, who he would later commission to create “*vraies nouveautés*”. A series of textiles with quintessentially Art Nouveau floral motifs and a collection drawing on printed velvets by Alphonse Mucha are attributed to this French designer. This new style was presented to the company’s shareholders as a winning strategy and successfully generated considerable dividends.



Sample of printed fabric inspired by the work of Alphonse Mucha (c. 1905), private collection of Manterol, SA.



To sum up, with the help of a wide range of agents and designers, and a markedly international outlook, *La España Industrial* attained a privileged position in the industry, precisely because its managers knew how to assimilate the latest trends in textile printing and adapt them to their customers' tastes, using a complex system of creating and selecting new designs founded in the interplay between invention and reproduction, between creation and imitation. ●