

What is a toile?

Technically, the word toile is French for fabric. The way we use Toile nowadays, it is as a shortening of “Toile de Jouy,” which means fabric from Jouy-en-Josas, a town in France that was the location of the Oberkampf manufactory, the most famous producer of copperplate-printed textiles.

We now use Toile as a generic term to mean any copperplate-printed textile, even those not from Jouy and not even from France, such as this particular piece, which is English in origin.

Copperplate printing actually began in Ireland, not France. But let’s go back a little bit to talk about cotton and bed hangings. The most sumptuous and warm were of wool and silk, but these were neither washable nor affordable. Bed hangings of printed cotton fabrics were known as “washing furnitures,” since furniture was a word used to refer to textile furnishings as well as the kind of furniture we think of today and the fact that these were washable was a major distinction between them and other types of bed hangings.

Cotton was not widely used in England until it was imported from India in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The first cottons used in England were grown, woven, and printed or dyed in India before being imported, but Britain quickly developed a cotton-weaving and printing industry to rival India’s. Cottons were frequently printed using wood blocks, creating colorful patterns called Chintzes. (SLIDE) These were first imported from India in the 17<sup>th</sup> century and were later produced domestically and made in Holland and France. Cotton became so popular for clothing and furnishings that the silk and wool manufacturers lobbied to have it banned, and were successful for parts of the earlier 18<sup>th</sup> century.

Wood block printing (SLIDE)

(SLIDE) Toiles were produced using a large and very finely patterned copper engraving plate. First produced in 1752 at the Drumcondra Printworks in Ireland by Francis Nixon, they were advertised as “Drumcondra printed Linens, done from Metal Plates (a method never before practiced) with all the Advantages of Light and shade, in the strongest and most lasting colours.”

The copperplate method made a much larger pattern repeat and higher level of detail possible, but it also limited designs to one color as it was next to impossible to accurately line up a second colored plate on top of the first without producing a slightly off, muddy appearance. Therefore, toiles almost exclusively appear in one color on a white or off-white background of bleached cotton or a cotton and linen blend. (SLIDE) The two most common

dyes for copperplate toiles were madder (red) and indigo (blue), both plant-based dyes that predated the Greeks and Romans and were very widely used.

(SLIDE) After closing his Drumcondra shop, Nixon later joined George Amyand at a printing factory at Phippsbridge, Surrey, England, and the two worked as Nixon & Company until 1789.

This example, produced for the English market by Nixon & Co. and dated 1770-1780 is printed with a type of Indigo known as “China blue” or “English blue.” This piece is in the collection of the Victoria and Albert Museum in London.

Jouy started printing from copperplates c. 1770. England also printed in blue, which was rarely done in France.

(SLIDE) As I said earlier, the most famous toiles come from the Oberkampf factory in Jouy-en-Josas, France. You can see one example of an Oberkampf toile on the right of the screen here. This particular pattern, designed by Jean-Baptiste Huet, is called “L’Hommage de l’Amerique a la France,” or “America Giving Homage to France.” It has some overlapping iconography with our piece, but is less focused on American patriotism and more on glorifying France’s role in the American revolution.

And now to our toile, one pattern repeat of which you can see on the lefthand side here. Our design was produced by an unknown English firm around 1785 and is called “Washington and American Independence [sic] 1776; the Apotheosis of Franklin.” We often refer to it as “The Apotheosis of Franklin and Washington,” but I’m not certain this is correct, as I’m not convinced that Washington is being apotheosized here. But more on that later. (SLIDE) We can be fairly sure that the fabric itself was not produced in England, as when the ban on printing on English-made all-cotton cloth lifted in 1774, three blue threads were woven into the selvages of pieces to prove that they were English (our pieces do not have this—could have been Indian fabric or not 100% cotton). Just as now, it was not uncommon for different parts of the fabric finishing process to be completed in different places. (SLIDE)

England produced many “washing furnitures” for domestic use but many more for export. In 1750, a report on the Manchester cotton trade stated that “the volume of business done with foreign countries is infinitely greater than with the domestic market.” Many more English 18<sup>th</sup>-c printed cottons have survived in America than in England.

In 1758 Ben Franklin sent home from England “65 yards of cotton curiously printed from copper plates, a new invention, to make bed and window curtains; and 7 yards of chair bottoms, printed in the same way, very neat.” Washington ordered “blew plate cotton furniture” in 1759.

After the revolution, in 1784, Englishman Samuel Curwen writes William Pynchon of Salem, MA and cited “immense indiscriminate exports to America.” While nowadays we most associate toiles with pastoral imagery, toiles with political or historical themes were quite common. This pattern is an example of an English-produced design that was clearly intended for the American market, although we have at least one fictional account of it being used in England. A book called *Letters from England* written by the poet Robert Southey under nom de plume Don Manuel Espriella- pub. 1807- travel letters by a “Portugese visitor.” Inn at Carlisle- “My bed curtains may serve as a good specimen of the political freedom permitted in England. General Washington is there represented driving American independence in a car drawn by leopards, a black Triton running beside them, and blowing his conch—meant, I conceive by his crown of feathers, to designate the native Indians. In another compartment, Liberty and Dr. Franklin are walking hand in hand to the Temple of Fame, where two little Cupids display a Globe, on which America and the Atlantic are marked. The tree of liberty stands by, and the stamp-act reversed in bound round it. I have often remarked the taste of the people for these coarse allegories.”

He doesn't describe the piece completely accurately, but gives enough of a description that it is clear that he was familiar with the piece.

We have two pieces of bed furniture made from this fabric in our collection. One is the valance (SLIDE), donated to us by Mrs. Rosa Williams Miller, a Nourse descendant and Maryland Dame. The other is a full bed curtain (SLIDE), purchased in 2007, and does not have Nourse provenance. There are other examples of this pattern in collections such as the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, the Winterthur Museum, and the Wadsworth Athanaeum.

We are not certain whether this valance belonged to Joseph Nourse or to his father James. In the inventory taken at the time of James' death in 1784, “1 sett red and white figured copperplate bed furniture” is listed along with “1 sett cotton blue figured bed curtains (probably chintz),” “1 sett Green Damask bed curtains” and other textiles. The price listed for these is low for fashionable, new bed furnishings, and this print would have been brand-new in 1784 if it was around at all. The valance could just as easily have belonged to Joseph Nourse, as we know that he purchased more valuable “cotton furniture” for bed hangings.

Finally, let's explore some of the images and symbols in this piece. There is a lot here that can be taken apart, and we don't have time to get into all of it. But let's take a quick overview and then focus on a few elements.

We can clearly see the two protagonists of this scene, Franklin and Washington. (Describe). (SLIDE) Washington's portrait is based on a 1781 print by Valentine Green, which in turn was

based on a portrait of Washington by John Trumbull. (SLIDE) This image is used in other toiles depicting Washington, although this image is unique in showing Washington wearing a bicorn hat.

Let's quickly pick out some of the other icons in the picture. (SLIDE) (Give an overview)

(SLIDE) top half (SLIDE) bottom half (SLIDE) Join or die close-up

This iconography gets repeated in a number of other prints and toiles (which are basically prints on fabrics) from this time period and we can get a better idea about our piece from looking at some comparable pieces. (SLIDE)

This piece is a toile from the Met collection titled "America presenting at the Altar of Liberty medallions of her illustrious sons." (describe)

(SLIDE) you can see that the portrait of Washington also comes from the Valentine print.

(SLIDE) This next piece is called "The Apotheosis of Washington" and also features some common themes. (describe)

(SLIDE) These are repeated in the print "America Triumphant and Brittania in Distress," a print from 1782.

(SLIDE) Now let's zero in a bit on one of the most interesting figures in this piece, the figure that has been identified as "America." She wears a plumed headdress reminiscent of American Indian garb and she seems to be a classicized and Anglicized version of earlier depictions of America as an Indian Princess. She also carries in her hand a caduceus. The caduceus was associated in classical antiquities with messengers of the Gods, especially Mercury and Iris (shown at right). The caduceus has also been used as a symbol of commerce, with which Mercury is associated (and later, and erroneously, as a medical symbol). There has been some speculation that this figure is Iris instead of America, since this is an apotheosis scene and since Franklin is shown with a goddess. It is a possibility, but I am more comfortable with the traditional idea of her as America and I will describe why. First, she is not leading Washington to the temple of fame, but being driven along by him in a chariot (pulled rather inexplicably by leopards). The fact that he isn't necessarily heading to the temple of fame leads me to believe that he is not being apotheosized in this piece but celebrated. Secondly, the caduceus is shown in other, similar images as a symbol of commerce alongside America but not as a signifier that she is Iris.

(SLIDE) One example of this is in a print that we own an example of, titled "America Guided by Wisdom," c.1815, by John James Barralett. (Describe)

(SLIDE) We see this again in “America Trampling on Oppression,” a print from 1789 (describe). America is dressed as Minerva in this print.

(SLIDE) Finally, in a French print titled “Independence des Etats-Unis” from 1786, we see America depicted as the more traditional Indian Princess. On the side, the banner reads “In lifting myself up, I make myself more beautiful.” “America and the seas, O Louis, recognize you as their liberator.” (describe)

(SLIDE) Back to our piece: James or Joseph Nourse- a fashionable piece, popular, useful, relatively inexpensive, and particularly appropriate for the home of a civil servant in the fledgling American government.