Damask Linen Manufacture and Marketing at the Turn-of-the-Century: Interpreting the Biltmore House Collection

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Damask linen manufacture has a long and varied history. Appearing in Europe around the fifth century, damask linens quickly became desired by those possessing great wealth. Figured damask linen was especially prized and was often the only type of table cover to be used by royalty. Heraldic crests, hunting scenes, historical events, and other symbols or occasions of cultural importance were memorialized in figured damask linen. By the end of the nineteenth century, the use of figured damask linens was a symbol of royalty, luxury, and beauty.

These attributes figured prominently in the appointment of George Washington Vanderbilt’s home, Biltmore, at the turn of the century. A grandson of Cornelius Vanderbilt, George Vanderbilt purchased 125,000 acres in western North Carolina on which to construct his 250-room home. Architect Richard Morris Hunt drew inspiration for Biltmore’s design from three French chateaux. While similar in extravagance to the Vanderbilt mansions built in Newport, Rhode Island, Biltmore represented a significant departure from the social mainstream. A luxurious but quiet retreat, Biltmore offered a venue in which Vanderbilt could study and enjoy the fruits of one of his greatest passions: travel.

It was through his travels that George Vanderbilt managed to amass an impressive collection of damask table linens. Containing over 1300 napkins and tablecloths, the table linen collection at Biltmore House provides an excellent example of late nineteenth century damask. While cataloging this collection over the course of a year and a half, however, it became clear that many questions concerning the origin, design, and interpretation of this collection were unanswered. While attempting to describe and categorize the damask designs, it became obvious that the few published sources mainly contain illustrations of pre-nineteenth century damask designs, or of design styles not present in our collection. Digging deeper, we wondered if we could discover where these linens were manufactured and then somehow classify the designs through that avenue. No marks were found on any linens, however, and receipts in the Biltmore House archives were not helpful in determining origin. It became increasingly clear that further research on damask linen manufacture and marketing would be beneficial for cataloging and interpreting this collection.

Through the course of this paper, I will first summarize the historical information on this topic, which is extensive. It provides a good background for the development of nineteenth century damasks. Secondly, I will illustrate a few damasks from the Biltmore House collection. My hope is that publicizing the information about this collection will encourage further scholarship on damask table linens.

While damasks were produced for centuries in Europe by the drawloom, the Industrial Revolution and the introduction of the Jacquard loom profoundly changed the way damasks were created in the nineteenth century. Invented in 1804 in France, the Jacquard loom was in use by Scottish and Irish linen damask weavers by the 1820s. By the end of the century linen damask was woven in Belgium, France, Germany, and Austria, in addition to Scotland and Ireland. The city of Courtrai in Belgium and Ireland were areas with the highest production
during this period, with France a close third. Although the Jacquard loom allowed for higher production of table linens, goods made of linen were still reserved for the upper classes, due to the intensive production methods of flax and the relatively wide availability of cheaper cotton goods.

While the purchase of linen goods was still limited to the upper classes, linens were more widely available to these people due to a number of changes which were taking place at the end of the nineteenth century. Improved technology allowed for a greater exchange of both goods and people: railroads, concrete and steel bridges, and larger and faster ships led to increased world trade, while also allowing for extensive travel among the upper classes.

Improved transportation was just one factor which led to the rise of a consumer society at the end of the nineteenth century. European contact with Asia and the Americas; world’s fairs and international expositions; department stores; and the expansion of advertising and the mass media all led to the greater availability of goods and their purchase by a larger number of consumers.

Perhaps the most influential of these factors was the popular world’s fairs. The Crystal Palace exposition in London in 1851, especially, helped to encourage production of high-quality French made goods for consumption by the French bourgeoisie. The reputation of these goods then spread to the rest of the world, helping to establish France as the premier source for high-quality luxury items. Drawing on the popularity of these international expositions and world’s fairs were the developers of the first department stores in Paris, which induced France’s leadership in advertising and retail at the end of the last century.

As the center of cultural and commercial changes, France was an important influence on the lives of upper class Americans at the end of the nineteenth century. George Vanderbilt was one upper class American who was fascinated with French culture. In his lifetime, he visited Europe more than thirty times, owned an apartment...
in Paris, and based his most extravagant
home on French architecture. Other Gilded
Age Americans followed the same model.
Emulating European, and especially French,
style was a way to ensure the social position
of newly rich American families and satisfy
personal desires for luxury.

In late nineteenth century upper class
culture, the objects one put in the home was
just as indicative of social class and taste as
what one wore, where one traveled, and who
one associated with. Most often, the deco­
rating style was characterized by eclecticism.
Pattern books helped artists design goods
destined for palatial homes. Beginning in
the 1870s, anthologies of historic ornament
were published, such as Owen Jones’s The
Grammar of Ornament and Friedrich
Fischbach’s Pattern in Textiles. These were
used by architects and artists in manufactur­
ing studios.8

The diversity of design found on the
damask table linens in the Biltmore House
collection echo late nineteenth century
decorating styles. The majority of the forty-
five different damask designs extant in the
collection consist of damasks with a central
floral design. Thirty-three designs include
roses; daisies; berries; clover; chrysanth­
mums; fruit; asters; poppies; lilies of the
valley; fuschias; tulips; oak leaves; laurel;
and pansies in various combinations. Most of
the floral designs consist of one or two
orders of flowers and foliage intertwined
with various other elements, including
ribbon, beading, dots, and vessels. The
thirty-three floral designs can be organized,
for the sake of discussion, into two groups.
The first group consists of designs with only
one or two different types of flowers and a
significant amount of plain background
space. The second group consists of floral
designs with extremely intricate designs
which cover the majority of the space on the
napkin or tablecloth.

The less intricate floral designs of the
first group make up the majority of the table
linens at Biltmore House. The “aster and
poppy” contains a wide border of both asters
and poppies, which are also scattered

Figure 2.

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throughout the center field (figure 1). This set is unique in the collection, as it is only one of two sets which includes tablecloths, dinner napkins and luncheon napkins; every other damask napkin set only contains tablecloths and dinner napkins. This is the luncheon napkin, which measures approximately 26" by 26". The dinner napkins measure approximately 30" wide by 36" long. This set is woven in a 6/1 satin damask weave, with 124 wefts per inch and 144 warps per inch.

Another extremely intricate design is this “daisy basket” (figure 2). While the napkin consists of a single kind of flower in a basket surrounded by a simple border, the depth and detail of the design is evident in this slide. It is a 6/1 satin damask weave, with 148 wefts per inch and 180 warps per inch.

The “wild grasses” napkin is yet another variation on the intricate flowers and foliage design theme, having a 5/1 satin damask weave, with 140 wefts per inch and 192 warps per inch (figure 3).

The more elaborate floral designs include napkins of various styles. The “beaded border, vine, and spiral” includes a variety of borders and flower types (figure 4). It is constructed of a 4/1 satin damask weave, with 144 wefts per inch and 192 warps per inch.

A design of putti harvesting wheat includes a wide variety of flower types and design styles (figure 5). It also is a 7/1 satin damask weave, with 148 wefts per inch and 200 warps per inch.

The table linen collection also includes a design which consists almost entirely of fleur-de-lis (figure 6). As Biltmore is designed in the style of a French chateau, and there are fleur-de-lis motifs throughout the house, it is not surprising that this French motif appears in the table linen collection. This design, like most of the others, is woven in a 7/1 satin damask weave, with 128 wefts...
per inch and 120 warps per inch. There are only two patterns in the collection which are predominantly linear and geometric in design. One, nicknamed “geometric berry,” is woven in a 6/1 satin damask weave, with 128 wefts per inch and 140 warps per inch (figure 7). The second, termed “neo-Greek variation”, is woven in a 7/1 satin damask weave, with 128 wefts per inch and 144 warps per inch (figure 8).

There is only one extant set featuring a traditional chase scene design (figure 9). Woven in a 4/1 satin damask weave, with 136 wefts per inch and 116 warps per inch, there are fifty-nine napkins and two tablecloths in the collection.

The final napkin set to be featured in this paper is significantly different from the rest of the collection. It is a traditional design, featuring a central crest surrounded by three borders and various royal motifs (figure 10). It measures 36” wide by 40” long, which is a unique size compared to the rest of the collection. The other dinner napkins in the collection measure approximately 30” wide by 36” long. It is, however, like most of the other damask linens, a 7/1 satin damask weave, with 128 wefts per inch and 144 warps per inch.

These napkin examples are all part of sets, containing matching designs in both napkins and tablecloths. All told, there are 27 sets of damasks in the Biltmore House collection, with the sets containing as many as seven tablecloths and up to 81 napkins. The tablecloths are all large, with the exception of a small number which have been cut and re-hemmed in order to fit smaller tables. The larger tablecloths are approximately 9 to 10 feet wide and vary in length, reaching as long as 28 feet.

As mentioned earlier, the origin of these damask linens is still a mystery. There are receipts located in the Biltmore House archives indicating that linens were purchased from Madame Dufoir in Paris in
1895, 1896, and 1897. Entries in these receipts indicate the quantity of linens purchased, with only a few designs mentioned specifically. Most of the mentioned designs, however, do not seem to correlate with any designs remaining in the collection. The two exceptions are entries describing a St. Louis design and a chase design, which may refer to the heraldic crest and hunt scenes mentioned above. The number of linens in these receipts do not even approach the total number of linens remaining in the collection, but there are also only a limited number of receipts remaining in the archives. It is almost impossible to determine which linens were purchased at which date. Vanderbilt could have purchased large numbers of linens and other textiles for his numerous homes, only sending a few to Biltmore. Other family members could have received pieces from the original number purchased. Or many of the linens could have simply worn out from decades of use, further confusing the issue. Also, Madame Dufoir may not have been the only source of Biltmore’s damask linens.

In addition, the supplier of retailers such as Madame Dufoir is unknown. Did Madame Dufoir purchase French linen directly from the manufacturer? Or was it acquired through a large distributor who purchased linen from manufacturers in Belgium or Ireland? These are questions that require further research, time, and money.

The task of determining the origin of these damask linens is a tremendous undertaking given the limited published sources available on the topic of late nineteenth century damask linens. It is, however, a topic worth examining. The benefits for interpreting and cataloging the collection are many, but much more research will need to be done first. At this point, however, the research must consist of first hand examina-
tion of damask linen collections throughout the world. Hopefully this talk will provide a small start toward answering some of the larger questions about damask linens at the turn of the century.


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**Select Bibliography**


Biltmore House Archives. Original object receipts collection. Box #2.


