



DECOR TOURS
Provence

PROVENCE DISPATCH

No. 6: Les Indiennes

The history of “Provençal” fabrics begins in India, and includes spying, lying, smuggling, royal intercessions, corporate espionage, botany, fashion, economic policy, and more.

A Fabric Revolution

Fashion has long been a significant economic force in France, pre-dating even the sartorial splendor of Louis XIV's court at Versailles. But perhaps surprisingly, no fashion has proven to be more influential in shaping France's textile heritage than printed cotton.



Consider this: Before the rise of printed cottons, the average European wore densely woven wool or linen clothing, in a limited palette of solid colors. Even among the wealthiest, who could afford silk, and the more finely woven linens

and wools, the fabrics were mostly solids, with embellishments added to the surface, through embroidery, appliqué, lace, quilting, ruching, etc.

So imagine how wonderful, how desirable, it must have been when Indian cottons—lightweight, fade-resistant, and brilliantly colored—first arrived in Europe.



The bold pattern, vibrant colors, (and, can't stress this enough, light, comfortable fabric,) were unlike anything else. Starting in mid-16th C., a very small amount of these printed and painted cottons made it to Europe. They were



so precious and rare, that it was less expensive for European fashion to emulate the look through intricate hand-embroidery, then purchase the real thing.

But by 1600, the British formed the East India Company, followed by the Dutch East India Company in 1602, bringing more of these amazing fabrics to Europe. France was late to the game, only launch-

ing its import company in 1664 to bring these *indiennes* to France. Bypassing the English and Dutch traders by landing goods at the port of Marseilles, domestic demand was overwhelming. So much so, that French silk, wool, and linen producers lobbied for protection, and in 1686, after only 22 years, the French banned both the import of foreign printed cottons and their domestic imitation, even criminalizing the wearing of such fabrics.

While similar prohibitions emerged across Europe, none matched the French restrictions in duration (lasting 73

years until 1759), scope, or severity of penalties. However, these measures proved largely ineffective. Smugglers continued to supply the coveted textiles, and consumer demand persisted unabated—evidenced most strikingly by the French elite's defiance of the ban, flaunting their prohibited *indiennes* in their homes and at court, while the “fashion magazines” of the day openly promoted their desirability and use.

Lifting the Ban

When the ban on printed cotton was repealed, France had to essentially import textile talent from





other countries. Some countries, including Switzerland and the Germanic states, had never banned cotton, while others, like Britain, banned the just the import of printed cotton. The language of the British law allowed for the sale of printed cotton, which encouraging both smuggling, and for interested companies to continue to try and reproduce those fabrics domestically. So all these countries had better expertise than France in cotton weaving, finishing, the science of dyes and fixatives, pattern reproduction, etc.

The new French textile industry developed rapidly, from individual hand-block workshops using plain woven goods, to full-scale factories that handled every step of the process—except actually growing the cotton. A series of paintings of Joseph Gabriel Rossetti of the Wetter Bros. (Swiss) textile factory in Orange, France, was completed in 1764, just five years after the ban was lifted, and illustrates how labor-intensive the process was. Shown here is just one department, the *pinceauteuses*, or women painters, who added color and detail to, or fixed mistakes on the printed fabrics.



Perhaps the most famous of these new factories was the Oberkampf Manufactory, founded by Christophe Oberkampf (German) in Jouy-en-Josas in 1760. The success of this firm, and its association with the French court, was so significant that *toiles-de-Jouy*, or fabrics from Jouy, became shorthand for a specific look. Now known for the single color repeat of pastoral scenes, originally created with finely etched copperplates, the Oberkampf factory was originally best known for its *fleuries*, small printed flower patterns that were used for

clothing. These fabrics were more valuable than silk, and because they were so comfortable to wear, compared to silks and woolens, very few survived. However, the larger scale copperplate fabrics, primarily made for interior design, managed to be passed along through generations.



One of most famous examples of an Oberkampf *fleurie* is the 1763 painting by François-Hubert Drouais, *Madame de Pompadour at her Tambour Frame* showing her in an informal cotton print gown. Again, completed just a few years after the ban was lifted.

Meanwhile in Marseilles

Marseilles and the surrounding areas in the south of France had greatly benefited from the increased shipments of cotton from 1664-1686. During the ban it was a well-known smuggling hub for both printed and plain Indian cottons. And, because nearby Avignon and the sur-

rounding *Comtat Venaissin* belonged to the Pope, due to a 13th c. treaty, French customs laws did not apply within its borders. So the south of France had the easiest access to cotton, and, with the ban in place, incentive to try and undercut the cost of the now-con-
traband printed goods by making their own, using the imported plain cotton fabrics.

This meant there were dozens of family workshops throughout Provence, mostly producing simple, single- or two-col-
or block prints for domestic use. Over time, the straightforward reproductions of Indian motifs became localized with olives, lavender, sunflowers, and cicadas rendered in madder (*garance*) red, woad or indigo blue, and weld (*guade*) yellow.



The Textile Business

When Wetter and Oberkampf started their factories, they were aware of Provençal *indienne* production, but they were not interested in clandestine workshops. In fact, either Oberkampf, or someone in the firm's management, was a savvy marketer. The location of the Oberkampf factory in Jouy-en-Josas was approximately an hour by carriage from Versailles, providing an immediate, built-in clientele for the fabrics. In fact, there's a story that Marie Antoinette would take her children there for "factory tours" and let them play with dyeing and painting the textiles.

In 1783, Louis XVI granted the Oberkampf factory royal status, and for a few short years, until the start of the French Revolution, the *chef de pièce* [maker's mark] on its fabrics included an em-

blem for *Manufacture Royale*, along with *prés Versailles* or near Versailles. So the mark on this Persian-influenced *indienne*, dates the production of the fabric from 1783-1789. After 1789, the company dropped the royal emblem, but kept *prés Versailles*, as shown of this *chef de pièce* of *L'Abreuvoir* [The Well, or The Water Trough] by the

best-known artist at Oberkampf, Jean-Baptiste Huët. All the marks included the phrase *bon teint*, or colorfast, as part of a legal requirement to guarantee quality, origin, and tax compliance.

The royal recognition of the Oberkampf factory was commemorated in another Huët design, *Les Travaux de la Manufacture* [The Factory's Work] which captures 14 different scenes involved in the textile production process. It starts with Huët and a female artist sketching outdoors, and



includes washing the fabric, mixing the dyes, tentering the fabric, block printing, painting, and ending with the drying of long pieces of finished goods on the ground.



The Oberkampf factory was so successful that for many years it was the second largest business in France, in terms of capital, after the Saint-Gobain glassworks. From a few workers at its inception, its staff grew to 900 employees around 1780, then to 1,021 at its peak in 1805. Huët also



painted a partial overview of the factory in 1807 focused on the drying fields.

Provençal Stylings

While the large factories to the north of Avignon quickly began to produce more elaborate and detailed indiennes, in Provence changes in fashion happened much more slowly, especially as some motifs had already become indented

with the region during the 70-year ban. These included:

- Natural looking flowers, inspired by Indian motifs, against a white or picotage background.



- *Bâtons rompus* [broken sticks], where (typically) small flowers are geometrically placed.
- *Bonnes herbes* [good herbs] which represents the sowing of herb and flower

seeds on fresh soil. Usually on a brown or black ground with so much dark green foliage, it almost looks bronze.



Another Provençal signature look that has endured is putting these patterns and interpretations of them on a yellow ground. It's a design approach Oberkampf definitely brought north with him, applying it to both stylized tree-of-life and the more detailed *fleuries* his factory became known for.

A Printing Tradition

The factory we'll visit on our tour is the last remaining traditional textile printer in Provence. The first factory on this site was built in 1818, and was purchased by the current

owners in 1948. The fabric production include traditional block prints, hand-screen prints, screen prints, rotary prints, and digital prints, all on various grounds, including damasks, sateens, canvas, terry, etc.



We'll get a walk-through of the entire process, from how incoming raw (greige) goods are processed, how dye-lots are developed and analyzed, to how fabrics are printed and finished.

And there will be time to shop at the factory store after the tour, which includes end-lots, roll goods, finished goods, and fashion, so bring a tote bag!



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Thanks for reading our Provence Dispatch series. If you missed any, or want to re-read, here they are:

- [Provence Dispatch 1: Pack it Up](#) ➔
- [Provence Dispatch 2: Money Matters](#) ➔
- [Provence Dispatch 3: Communication](#) ➔
- [Provence Dispatch 4: La Vie en Rosé](#) ➔
- [Provence Dispatch 5: Le Bleu Historique](#) ➔
- And this is Dispatch 6: Indiennes

If you have any suggestions for additional information you'd like before heading to Provence, [please let us know!](#)