1860s Fabrics 101 – Training the Period Eye

Handout

Quick notes…

The fabric FIBER is NOT the fabric TYPE or WEAVE!
Never has, and never will be!

Instead…

The Fiber is used to DEFINE the type of fabric you're looking for!

Typically speaking: Fiber + Weave + Weight = Type of Fabric!

► What fabric fibers and types were used?

WOOL

There are two primary categories of wool fabrics: Worsted Wool & Woolen Wool.

Worsted wool is a stronger, finer, smoother, and usually thinner fabric than most "woolens". Made from long-staple, combed wool fibers (from sheep with longer hair!) and has a more time consuming and expensive process in making than woolen wool does. Worsted wool has a smooth surface and you can often easily "see" the weave when it is woven.

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Worsted Wool:

Made from short-staple wool (from sheep requiring less land to keep!) and is usually “fluffy” or “itchy”.

► What most people think of when they hear the dreaded “wool!”

North Carolina Museum of History – Confederate Shell Jacket

A few wools to look for:

- Wool Gauze, Challis, and “Summer” /“Tropical Weight” wools (Use for summer / 3 season wear)
- Wool Flannel (Use for winter drawers & petticoats)
- Wool Broadcloth & Coat Weight Wools (Use for outer wear and broadcloth for winter dresses)
- Also Bombazine, Twill, and Serge!

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Silk

Silk may be used for ballgowns, evening and opera dresses, nice day wear, men's vests & cravats, and more!

Modern silks that are period consistent to the 1860's include:

• Taffeta • Organza • Faille • Rep • Twill • Gauze • Silk Velvet • Damask • Brocade • Satin • Broadcloth • & More!

Linen:

Linen was a popular fiber used for clothing purposes in America during the 18th and early 19th centuries. By the 1840's and 1850's, it was quickly being replaced by the increasing cotton textile production in the south.

Cotton:

Dresses, undergarments, sheer gowns, and accessories were commonly made from cotton!

Readily available "modern" cotton fabrics that are period consistent to the 1860's

- Cotton Voile, Lawn, Batiste, Organdy, Dimity, & Bobbinet: in white use for period accessories such as collars and cuffs and also in textured colors, prints, and whites, use for summer gowns and ball-gowns.
- Cotton sateen: Use for linings & strong support garments such as corsets.
- Polished/Glazed Cotton: Use for linings & vest backs, frequently in black, brown, and tan.

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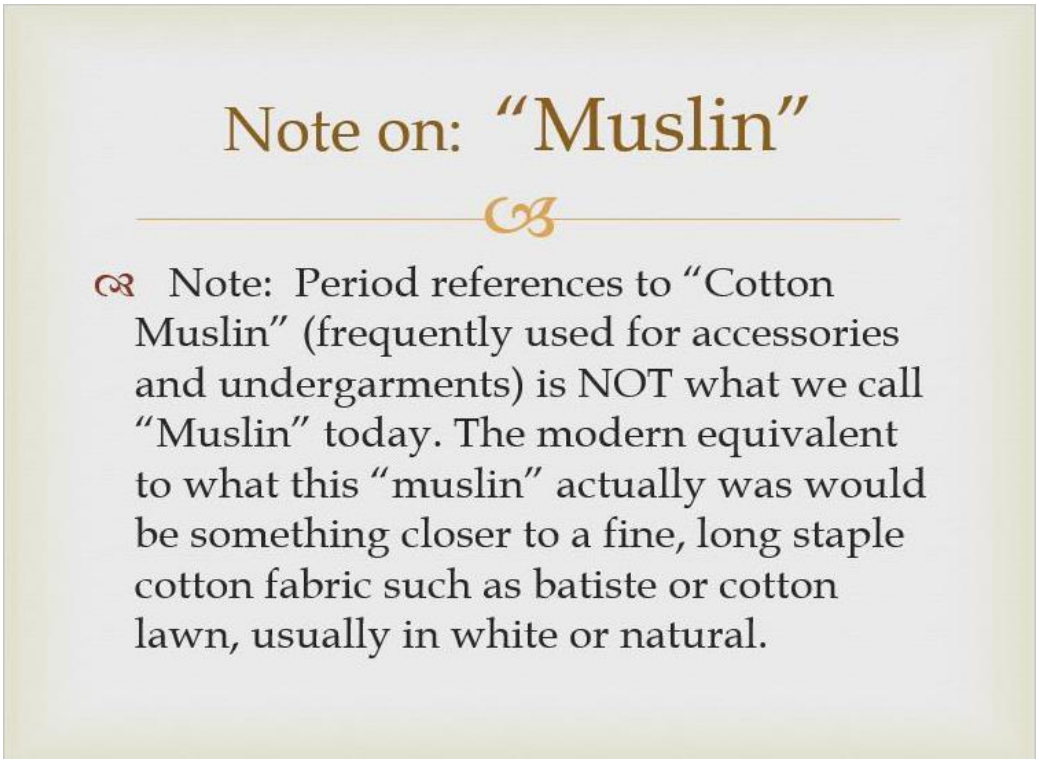

COMMON DYES & COLORS:

Indigo (deep blue) was used for the ground of a fabric; Prussian Blue was lighter than indigo blue and could be used for both the ground and figure in a print; Turkey Red was the first ever truly bright red used for cloth dying in the 18th century and continued its popularity throughout the 19th century; Madder Dyes (browns, reds, and natural colors) were vegetable dyes that were colorfast and inexpensive; The first synthetic purple dye was discovered in 1856 and was used on silk and wool prints almost immediately; Chrome or "Canary-yellow" was quite popular for grounds and figures in cloth throughout the mid-19th century; Greens on cottons were created by natural dye combinations, and the infamous "arsenic green" dye was used strictly for silk and wool.

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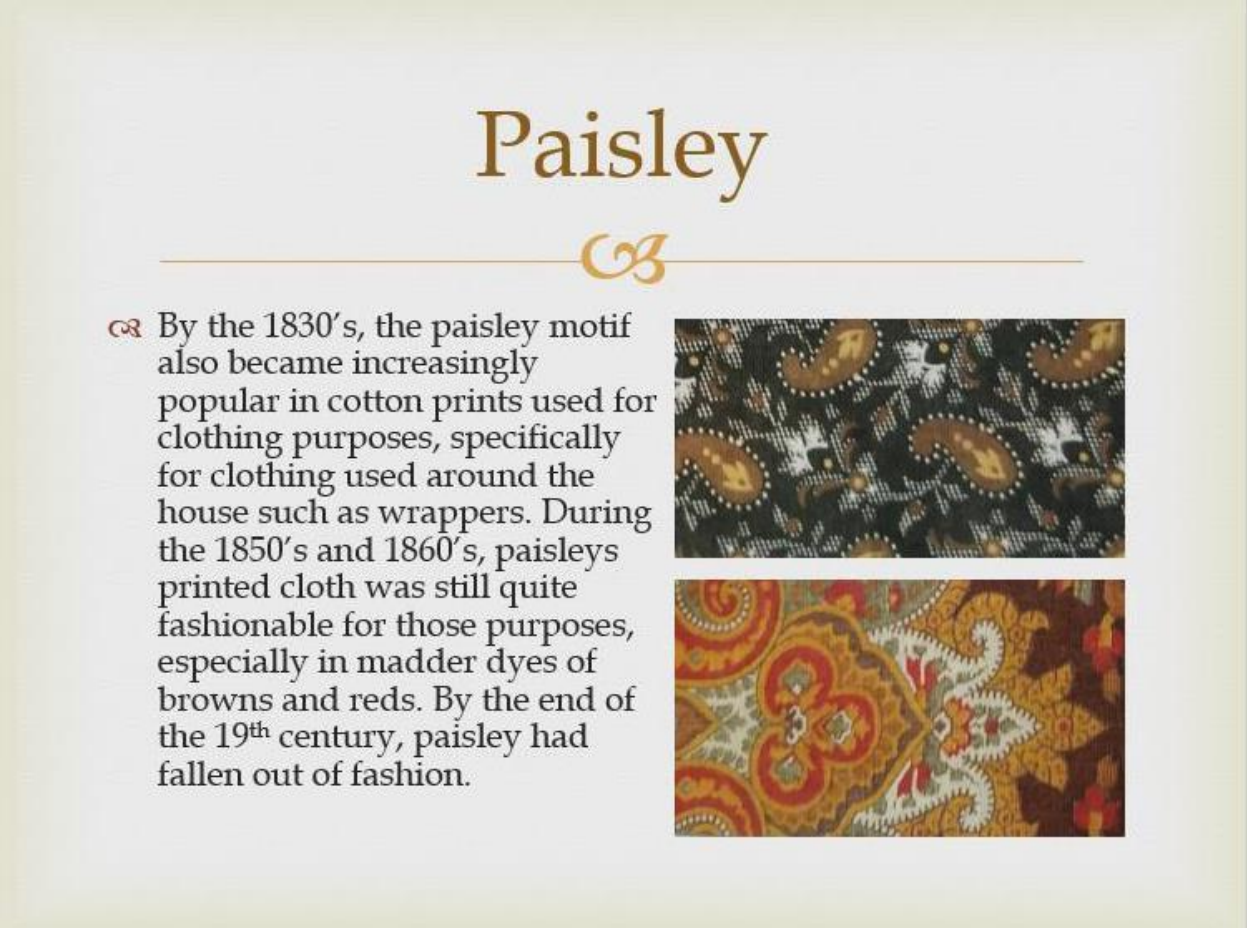

What's the difference between modern and period 19th century paisleys?

• Spacing (Period paisleys hardly ever touch!)
• Regular pattern or repeat (Period paisleys are laid in stripes or have a visible repeat.)
• Plainer background (even if the background is "busy" it needs to have consistency!)
• Most period paisleys have a floral feel or element to them.
• Period colors tend to be on the natural or neutral (especially madder browns, reds, greens, purples, golden yellow, blacks).

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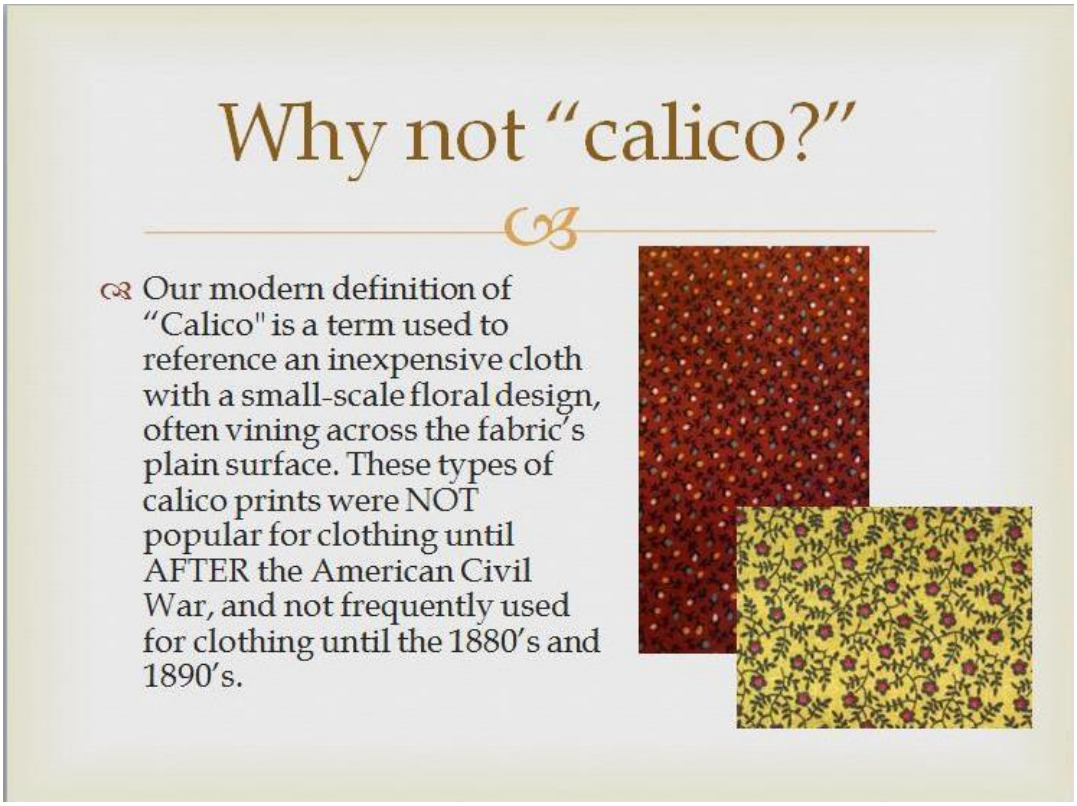

What's the difference between modern and period calico?

- Spacing: Period calico has SPACE between motifs
- Repeat: Period calicos have obvious repeats
- Backgrounds: Period calico has a plain background or a background with another dimension!

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Florals

- Large floral prints were the height of early Victorian fashion in the 1840's and 1850's, but began to fade by the early 1860's. The florals that were still in vogue during the war years usually consisted of large spaced motifs on cotton and wool, and fuller bouquets and other florals on sheer cottons and silks.

1861 Cotton Dobby - France

Geometrics

As large floral prints began to fade out at the end of the 1850's, geometrics and forms of geometric prints became the rage just before and during the war years in wearable textiles.

► Notice the woman wearing a striking geometric square pattern on her dress made of silk!

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Construction pointers based on fabric:

- (Except for sheers, which were both) cotton dress bodices should generally be gathered at the waist and not darted, unless you're making it from a cotton that's supposed to be a wool reproduction print!

- Aside from undergarments, accessories, linings, facings, and vest backs, only use solid colored cotton fabric for outer fabric if you're making children's clothing, and be careful to use only pale pink, blue, or tan chambray when doing so, to remain consistent with the majority of surviving examples of extant pieces we have today.

- Only cut large open or pagoda sleeves from wool, silk, and sheer cotton. For every-day working class cotton, use a slimmer sleeve such as a coat or bishop sleeve to remain period consistent!

Available fabrics in the West vs. the East

A deep-dive into period newspapers show that there was not a divide in the availability of fabrics from the East to the West. Any divide across the United States in the availability and transport of textile goods and fashion was primarily across the Northern and Southern States and those in the Union and those who had succeeded.

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Recommended reading for further information:

Wearable Prints, 1760-1860: History, Materials, and Mechanics by Susan W. Greene; The Kent State University Press
(Fabulous book with detail on the manufacture of cloth!)

Printed Textiles, British and American cottons and Linens 1700-1850, by Linda The Monacelli Press
(Emphasis on period home décor)

Textile Designs by Susan Meller and Joost Elffers; Abrams Books
(Fantastic pictorial history of both paper and fabric textiles!)

A Time Traveler's Guide to Printed Cottons, Volume 1 by Margo Krager
(Handy quick reference)

Dating Fabrics: A color guide 1800-1960 by Eileen Jahnke Trestain; American Quilter's Society
(Excellent quick reference with tons of pictures!)

America's Printed Fabrics 1770-1890 by Barbara Brackman; C&T Publishing
(Fantastic readable resource on dyed and printed cottons in America!

The Dressmaker's Guide 1840-1865 by Elizabeth Stewart Clark; ESCPublishing.com
(Amazing resource for the beginning dressmaker desirous for a period conscious mind!)

chroniclingamerica.loc.gov - A great newspaper site for documentation on what fabrics were offered and available across the USA!