



Aesthetic Movement silk lampas, c. 1870s



William Morris woven wool, English



Stamped 19th century mohair velvet plush



Detail of fabric for Hope chair, c. 1806

A stitch in time...

With the passing of time, soft furnishings in their original condition are increasingly hard to find intact. Even where they have survived, the inevitable deterioration is not a true representation of what these pieces once were. Early fabrics containing vegetable dye oxidise over time, completely changing colour—blue often becomes khaki, green becomes yellow. Sometimes, where the fabric is historically important, it may be worth restoring for its intrinsic quality and contribution to the total value of the article. An example of this would be an 18th century *Aubusson*, purpose-woven as an upholstery cloth for a chair. However, this approach is mainly for museum pieces or pieces that are not longer used for their original purpose, but are simply for appreciation.

Silk weavings are still available with great authenticity to original colour, style and scale

More often than not, a fine piece of furniture is acquired without any trace of its original upholstery or, at best, a few clues found beneath subsequent coverings. Having found a rare link to the furniture's origin, it is another matter to attempt to source a replacement or replica fabric.

The emergent interest in accurately restoring furniture as closely as possible to its original state, and reflecting the aesthetic ideal of its creator, has been fuelled by a lack of skilled craftsmen. Public museums worldwide now strive to present their collections in an accurate and well-researched manner. A notional representation of style based on personal predilection or even 'Hollywood' influence, rather than fact, has been abandoned

by museum curators and increasingly, also by knowledgeable collectors.

For many years, the range of practical possibilities for upholstery within a given style, was very limited. Velvet, printed linens and cottons, although derived from original sources, are often re-coloured, re-scaled, and reduced in complexity to cater for both contemporary 'tastes' and economies of reproduction. Even among rarer cloths, horsehair, which in recent years has become the 'safe' selection for much early 19th century furniture, was not a universal choice at the time the furniture was created. Other fabrics such as English wool camlets, moreens, tammies, fine cottons, chintzes and linens were available.

Given the increase in demand, these cloths have once again become available through specially commissioned re-weaving. Silk weavings are still available with great authenticity to original colour, style and scale. Silk can also be custom woven on original looms to render the cloth as close to the original as possible.

This technique was used, after extensive research, to reupholster the Thomas Hope suite of furniture acquired by the Powerhouse Museum in the mid 1980s. Custom woven silk trimming gimps and braid, together with an 'Empire' pendant fringe, were remade entirely by hand. The detail for this restoration came from Thomas Hope's published treatise *Household Furniture and Interior Decoration* from 1807, which contains his line drawings of the furniture in the 'Egyptian Room' of his Duchess Street mansion in London.

Somewhat less exotic, but still very important, is the use of a gauffered mohair velvet plush, custom woven for the reupholstery of an early 19th century colonial sofa in the collection of the Art Gallery of South Australia. Woven in a deep black-green colour, the fabric was sent to France where it was embossed with archival rollers to recreate a cloth that was highly regarded throughout the 19th century. Reference to such a cloth

appears in Rudolph Ackermann's *Repository of Arts* in 1821. Again a specially woven matching gimp was produced to complete the upholstery, also made using time honoured methods and materials.

Of course the cost of these fabrics is high compared with commercially available cloths woven for a mass market in synthetic yarns, but the end result is a triumph of achievement that few would question ■

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Right: Late 19th century English printed linen
Below: Pure silk French brocade, c. 1780



Modern printed cotton emulating French verdure tapestry



William Morris printed cotton

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