

Please cite the Published Version

Sykas, Philip A (2015) Book review: Wearable Prints, 1760-1860: History, Materials, and Mechanics. *Costume*, 49 (2). pp. 246-248. ISSN 0590-8876

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1179/0590887615Z.00000000079>

Publisher: Edinburgh University Press

Version: Accepted Version

Downloaded from: <https://e-space.mmu.ac.uk/246/>

Usage rights: © In Copyright

Additional Information: This is an accepted manuscript of a book review published in *Costume*.

Enquiries:

If you have questions about this document, contact openresearch@mmu.ac.uk. Please include the URL of the record in e-space. If you believe that your, or a third party's rights have been compromised through this document please see our Take Down policy (available from <https://www.mmu.ac.uk/library/using-the-library/policies-and-guidelines>)

Susan W. Greene, *Wearable Prints, 1760-1860: History, Materials, and Mechanics*. (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 2014). 568pp. 1600 col. illus. Hardback US \$100, UK £80.00, ISBN 978-1-60635-124-6

Susan Greene is a passionate scholar with an irrepressible urge to know. Her interest in dress began as a maker of her own clothing, and she retains a maker's sensual engagement with objects. When she and her husband purchased an 1840s house in upstate New York in 1972, this spurred not only an intense involvement with local history but 'addictive' collecting of historical dress. Add to this her training in art education and an ardent desire to communicate, and you begin to envision the character that has sustained the creation of this ambitious *door-stopper* tome.

Anyone attempting to describe the field of printed textiles for dress is faced with the thankless task of deciding upon a means of structuring the topics of dyes, techniques, designs, fashion and chronology. These are so intimately bound together that any effort to separate and treat them logically is ultimately challenged. Greene has opted to organise the book by colouration and printing methods. In its favour, these are the least understood aspects and ones crucial to connoisseurship; and this is also the time-honoured approach of the major nineteenth-century authors on calico printing. This choice exposes Greene to neglect the influence of design, and it may frustrate dress historians that there is no familiar stylistic or chronological summarising of printed motifs. But this is because frequent copying and recycling of patterns makes design clues less cogent in the printed textiles field. The advantage of Greene's approach is that the collector faced with trying to identify a particular example can quickly find relevant information based on something as direct as colour. This seems to be the way the book is intended to be read, propped on a sturdy table with printed garment lying close by, and perhaps a fortifying beverage within reach. It is a book to be dived into and explored, and perhaps hours later emerged from, feeling edified although probably still with as many questions as answers.

It can hardly be overemphasised that the book is a visual feast. With 1600 colour images (most of which have never been published before), this is perhaps the widest range of comparative examples of printed dress fabrics to be found together in one place. These images have been gathered from archives and museums in Europe and America, as well as from rare publications holding original samples. For British readers, it is an opportunity to discover the rich offerings of American museums, including the important dress collection formed by the author and now held at Genesee Country Museum. The book enables the armchair traveller to see more in an hour than could be encompassed in many weeks of arduous museum visits. The images are especially sensitive to the need to view particular details up close, or to glimpse a portion normally hidden from sight. We see and learn to recognise not just pristine examples, but also faded or altered colours. And many page openings contain liberal spreads that allow comparison of a dozen examples at a glance for the honing of connoisseurship. In general, the image captions do not repeat information given in the text, and form a parallel text of their own. Some may enjoy the captions as much or more than the main body of the work, which contains some heavy-going passages on dyes (although it must be stressed that everything is kept within the scope of the general reader and a generous glossary is provided). Dress historians, in particular, will value the section on American dress forming the second half of Chapter One.

Greene makes intensive use of several authorities to provide the historical basis for her own observations and synthesis: Persoz (1846), Parnell (1849), O'Neill (1862), Crookes (1874), and Knecht/Fothergill (1912). While these authors are among the most reliable, the selection is not evaluated, nor is the difficulty of the technical literature explored: its archaic chemistry and liberal copying from other sources. Likewise, it would have been welcome to have the major pattern book sources described; frequent reference is made to Zindell and Dunster but the context of their experience is only cursorily reviewed.

In summary, this is a brave and pioneering effort. Much of the territory is covered for the first time for the modern reader, most notably the chapters on cylinder printing and engraving techniques. The concluding chapter contains very useful caveats for those attempting identification and dating. Greene does not shy away from drawing innovative conclusions in order to provoke debate. For example, her assessment of printed greens differs from the prevailing literature and attempts to move discussion to more profitable areas of focus. Possibly, more could have been done to signal such moves from widely-accepted fact to new theoretical speculations. But the book is not written for the academic; its intention is to be widely inclusive, to allow anyone to begin to explore the world of printed dress, and to build the background knowledge in order to do so with sound reasoning and confidence.

PHILIP A. SYKAS
Manchester Metropolitan University