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**Richard J. Wolfe. Marbled Paper: Its History,
Techniques, and Patterns ...**

Sidney F. Huttner



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Wolfe, Richard J, *Marbled Paper: Its History, Techniques, and Patterns with Special Reference to the Relationship of Marbling to Bookbinding in Europe and the Western World*. Philadelphia: The University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990. 245p. \$95.00. ISBN 0-8122-8188-8.

As Richard J. Wolfe's 1981 A.S.W. Rosenbach Fellowship lectures progressed, word of their length and density seeped away from Philadelphia. One wag suggested the large number of slides intentionally provided cover under which those with trains to catch could slip away in relative obscurity. Some who attended the lectures may therefore doubt it possible, but this monumental book expands as well as records *Wolfe's* lectures.

Monumental it is: 192 double-column pages, almost nine inches by twelve, follow a brief preface and acknowledgements. The text, in turn, is followed by 35 pages of notes and 17 of index. On the order of a quarter million words, all told. Not included in the page count are 46 pages of color plates and their captions, some 350 images total. One 18-page section alone reproduces 192 “of the most common marbled patterns”—though Wolfe apologizes that even these “can never be enough to serve as more than a mere outline or guide to the most common patterns produced in Europe and America during the first four centuries when this art came to be practiced in the West” (p. 179). Another 80 or so black-and-white illustrations enhance the text. *Marbled Paper* is an astonishing accumulation of knowledge and experience, gracefully designed, carefully proofread, [1] crisply printed, Smythe sewn, sturdily cased, attractively dust jacketed in a reproduction of a marble of Wolfe's own manufacture.

In spite of its size it is a pleasure to handle and to look at. Richard Wolfe has no peer in his combined knowledge of marbling history and of marbling technique, the one expertise constantly reinforcing the other, and as a rare book librarian he has had ample opportunity to examine thousands of early marbles used as endsheets in books. These unique qualifications have made this impressive book possible. Unfortunately, Wolfe has not brought them smoothly into focus: he has produced at least four related books which intersect, overlap, and intertwine with great complexity—and no little redundancy. His work leaves the reader with an impression that no way resembles the image of sharply distinct colors, however intricately patterned, so characteristic of the marbles Wolfe greatly admires—and himself creates. It's rather more a muddle. Or, better, to modify the metaphor: there is a large bit of color here, another splash there, but the pattern fails to cohere.

The first book is a history of marbling as a craft industry in Europe and America; Far Eastern marbling is discussed briefly in the early chapters but not followed up elsewhere. This book is difficult because sources, documentary and otherwise, are scant, but Wolfe produces an always closely reasoned, frequently compelling, account of practices at particular places and in particular periods.

The second book is an extended bibliographic commentary on the Western literature of marbling. This book is difficult because the sources are intertwined with bookbinding literature; are typically, often intentionally, quite abbreviated descriptions of a complicated craft; and because the development of more precisely descriptive scientific language leaves their meaning no longer at all obvious. With his earlier writing and experimental marbling, however, Wolfe has made major contributions to recovering these texts—simply finding them in one of their few remaining copies, translating them, reprinting them, forcing them to yield practical results—and those contributions are reviewed and extended here.

The third book, somewhere between scientific treatise and how-to-do-it manual, discusses the chemistry, physics, materials and equipment of marbling. The fourth book surveys the “evolution” of marbling patterns.

Linking all this together is a prejudice never directly stated. There are myriad ways of putting patterned colors on paper from painting to printing—and several share the name marbling. One way is to create a size bath, float on it colors whose position on the bath surface can be tightly controlled, manipulate those colors with simple tools to create a repeatable pattern, then transfer the pattern to paper; this is what Wolfe sometimes calls “classical marbling.” What interests Wolfe—I don't think it unfair to say *all* that interests Wolfe—is a single question: when confronted with a piece of paper bearing a classical marble Wolfe asks, “how can this pattern be recreated?” Wolfe is certainly aware of a tension here: a classical marble is necessarily unique (no two examples of a pattern are precisely similar), yet to interest him it must be part of a family whose members are essentially the same. [2] And while the question is simple, answering it for now a 15th-century Turkish sheet, now a 16th-century German sheet, now a 19th-century British sheet, is far from easy. The answers are remarkably varied; and that is one of the great challenges of marbling.

His prejudice allows Wolfe to put aside a great many matters. Oil marbling is “actually a bastardized form of marbling, for it does not allow control” (p. 135), and gets short shrift (though the work of Swedish marbler Ingeborg Borjesson merits grudging approval). Artists concerned to exploit uniqueness of image interest Wolfe little: he never says directly but seems to believe that almost anyone can achieve an

arresting design once: to repeat it at will, aye, there's the rub. Consequently, while there is a longish recounting of nineteenth-century German efforts to mechanize the process, Wolfe's principal purpose is to demonstrate why it was a fatally flawed project: nothing can replace the skilled craftsman's hands, eyes and experience. Furthermore, his discussion of marbling in our century is limited—the period when craft-made marbles were widely used in bookbinding had passed—and, such as it is, reflects a deep skepticism about the essential seriousness of the rather sizable number of contemporary artists who have rediscovered the marbling process: they do not exhibit, for him, the discipline forced by craft conditions.

Wolfe has set himself many goals, achieved many of them splendidly, and created a store of information that many of us will gratefully return to again and again. It is therefore hard to account responsibly for the feeling that something still has gone missing. This feeling is, perhaps, most sharply felt at the point that most of us will most frequently consult this book: what assistance does it provide with the description of a particular marble? Is this a snail, a curl, a placard, a shell, a Stormont? Directly, sadly, the answer is quite uncertain, because Wolfe assumes we wish to know “what designs evolved in particular regions at given times” (page 179), a distinctly more complex question, as Wolfe explains in considerable detail.

Marblers have created a relatively small number of basic patterns—some few dozen or less from the evidence of Wolfe's index [3]—but each pattern can be varied in a much larger number of ways to produce a daunting number of sub-families and, in the end, an infinite number of unique examples. To what degree and in what ways must one example resemble another to count as a family member? Abstractly considered, there seem only two ways to create a taxonomy for what is, historically considered, a mess: either sort a huge number of examples by essential and accidental features into nameable families (patterns); or recover the process by which the sheet was made (thereby establishing pattern and variation). The first is problematic: no number of examples, however large, is quite large enough, and the criteria which define essential and accidental may collapse it into method two. Method two, however, seems quite promising, and Wolfe's natural choice in light of his hands-on marbling experience.

In his concluding essay, however, Wolfe, “after giving the matter serious thought,” “elected to discuss and arrange the following patterns by country and period” (p. 179), thereby preserving the historical blur and partially retracing his earlier text. Though titled “The Evolution of Marbled Patterns,” Wolfe admits “‘Progress’ in marbling, as in most other fields, has been marked by a continual search for cheaper and quicker methods” (p. 182), making evolution a dubious concept to introduce in this context. In any case, place and time are irrelevant to the definition

of pattern and variation. Once invented they remain timeless, their place and time of invention being accidental.

Take, for example, an early French pattern, the “placard,” illustrated as Wolfe's samples 1 and 26, and the same swirled, samples 2 and 27. One and two are of French manufacture, 26 and 27 of German. Wolfe attributes “very precise, superior technique” to the German (p. 182). Can anyone, even Wolfe, determine this *from the reproductions*? Surely not, as he would be the first to insist (“I must emphasize that it is often difficult and sometimes impossible to distinguish German and French production of a given design ... ” (p. 182). How would a traditionally crafted placard made today “look different” when photographed? Then what is the point of reproduction? And how is the placard pattern actually achieved? Wolfe's index has eleven page references to “placard,” the last of which reports that Woolnough (author of a well-known nineteenth century English manual) gives instructions on making it. [4]

For many patterns, certainly, it would be possible to relate illustration and process more closely, at the cost of considerable work teasing strands of information from the text. Still, many of us will be tempted to continue to consult first the frontispiece of Bernard Middleton's *A History of English Craft Bookbinding Technique* [5] with its mere dozen less well-reproduced but forthrightly labeled examples, then turn to Wolfe for nuances, modifications and refinements aplenty. Wolfe begins his preface, “The work that follows is the outcome of research begun more than twenty-five years ago,” research that included, he says, much collecting of material, much reading, much handling and close observation of books and paper, much travel, and the marbling of 20,000 sheets of paper. His report of that research is grounded in enormous respect for the individual sheet; and it is in that sense a work of extreme practicality, nearly devoid of theory. [6] Can we hope that Wolfe might be persuaded to balance this book with another, equally needed, which he is also uniquely qualified to write, and which lays out a theory of pattern commensurate with the precision and brilliance of the papers themselves?

Sidney F. Huttner, Rare Books and Special Collections Division, McFarlin Library, The University of Tulsa.

NOTES

[1.] I noticed only one typographical error: page numbers were not added to a “see” reference in the last paragraph of page 72.

[2.] It comes as a very considerable shock to have Wolfe say, only a few pages from the end of his text. “Essentially, there are only two kinds of marbled patterns: spot or thrown designs and combed ones; indeed, all marbled designs, including the combed ones, are merely modifications and refinements of the initial spot pattern” (pages 183-84). But Wolfe has been discussing (and discriminating) patterns and variations for thousands of words! What he perhaps means to say is that all designs are produced in two (or one) fundamental ways—he has said this before in other words. Nonetheless, the statement seems to betray a fundamental misunderstanding between the pattern produced and process used to produce it. Had Wolfe made this observation in his early pages, and developed it systematically, one wonders if his book would not have taken quite different shape.

[3.] Patterns are indexed under “Marbled patterns” without cross-references from individual designs. It takes a while to discover this.

[4.] *Marbled Paper* lacks a separate bibliography, which would have been useful in light of the large number of texts cited; but one can again use the index to locate a complete citation. Woolnough merits about three column inches of index.

[5.] London: Hafner, 1963; new editions by London: Holland Press, 1978 and 1988.

[6.] This is not to say there are no insights of theoretical value. Wolfe argues, for example, that while marbles used as endsheets can rarely be used with confidence to place and date a text they surround, edge marbling is inherently more regionally specific. Creation of a catalog of edge marbling deserves careful consideration. I owe my own appreciation of the value of this insight to John Bidwell.