

INTERIOR MOTIVES

Screens are an extraordinary decorative tool



NAOMI STONE LEVY

Just as there is an inordinate variety of screens there is an inordinate number of ways to use them. They should never be overlooked as an extraordinary decorative tool.

First let us explore the various kinds — existing antiques, new, and those made to order. The Orient has historically been the primary source and origin of screens. The earliest reference to screens in literary sources dates from the Chou Dynasty (206 B.C. to A.D. 220).

The ultimate, most rare and most exceptional is an antique Chinese "Coromandel" (17th century). This name is given lacquered panels that involve many layers of material, the last of these coated with a colored lacquer. Into this thickness, figures or designs are cut in intaglio, an incised process. This required great skill and extraordinary patience. The rare ones can be cinnabar red, ivory or black, and even in a lustrous wood grain. They are known to have been made in even-numbered panels, from two to 12.

Next, and much coveted (also antique), were those painted on paper, often gold-leafed, by distinguished 16th, 17th and 18th century Japanese artists. The panels were often bordered by wide brocade ribbon when mounted.

One that I particularly recall was of a huge chrysanthemum in pure whites, repoussed (raised from the back) and highlighted with flecks of spattered gold called Morishege. It could only be described as divine. Many of this type were from a set, as many as 12 pieces, described in 13th century poems. Spring was often shown with willows and a cuckoo bird in its environs. Autumn might display grasses and a quail. These were often set into sliding panel doors used to separate spaces in a very large room in a Japanese home. Other paper screens, both antique and new, depict garden scenes, peopled, with

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homes and bridges in a continuous story, always in wondrous polychrome colors.

A single panel screen at the doorway announced to visitors something of the owner's wealth and status.

Modern times

I have written at length about the origins of screens in the 17th century, but I would be remiss if I didn't include the wondrous contributions of the 19th and 20th centuries.

Louis Comfort Tiffany, of Tiffany lamp fame, around the turn of the century executed a three-panel opalescent stained glass screen that was framed in bronze. It allowed daylight to add to its exquisite beauty.

Some of the revered and venerable artists of these eras created examples that are incredible. Pablo Picasso got into the act with what is the equivalent of a four-panel painting entitled "Two Musicians" dated 1921, executed in mixed media on cheesecloth. Impressionist painters also applied their skills, but the list is too long to include.

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Thomas Hart Benton, circa 1925,

Painted an exemplary four-panel screen in an abstract sea motif of exquisite colors and framed in painted aluminum. Creativity never ceases!

Ansel Adams, the world-famous photographer, used some of his finest examples of silver finished pictures. One of very enlarged pine needles fashioned a fascinating example.

There were also leather screens, tooled or painted. Incredibly exquisite embroideries and tapestries exist in the history of screens, sometimes French or Italian.

Aspirations

We have explored the ultimate in screens, but for most of us these are unobtainable. Don't fret — there are many others to which we can aspire. We can fashion our OWN by buying a blank screen, of as many panels as desired. We can paint or lacquer the frame in a color that is permissible, but black is always acceptable. The center panels could be wallpapered in any manner of covering. "Chinoiserie," a bird and floral pattern, is available in a wide variety of qualities, from handpainted by skilled Oriental artists, to other costly printed papers. There are also more moderately printed papers of similar feeling, polychrome or multicolored.

There are mural wallpapers, also in a variety of qualities. Or why not find a fabric you love? It could be a printed chintz or an incredible, heavily textured cloth in divine colors. Create your own!

Uses

Now for the uses of this creation. A screen can be hung on a wall. You will locate appropriate hardware to accomplish this at a shop such as Russell Hardware in Birmingham. It will be sturdy brass, Oriental in description. A screen can occupy a corner, with its bi-fold hinges enabling the panels to fold in either direction and, handsomely placed, merely for its decorative value.

A screen can be pragmatic, and conceal a Murphy bed during daytime hours, at the same time being harmonious with the rest of the decor.

Another application might involve closing off an archway, using three fold-



DAN DEAN/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Screen star: Eileen Grey, an innovative designer around 1907, created this screen that was made of lacquered wood squares held together with long aluminum rods, no hinges.

ed panels on each side.

At one time I used an unparalleled very small four fold screen as a pair of doors to conceal a television that was built into an alcove in the wall. I obtained concealed hinges to hang them, also at Russell Hardware. It was a dazzling wall decoration as well as a marvelous unobvious fake during the TV's unused hours.

Review in your mind your personal needs, and then search out an incredible screen to fulfill the need, at the same time being an awesome decorative accessory.

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