

Stevengraphs

"Stevengraphs " are small woven silk pictures made by Thomas Stevens of Coventry, England in the last part of the 19th century. They first came to my attention when I was browsing on the first floor of the National Museum of History & Technology. There in one corner was a mounted "Stevengraph" and a working model of the Jacquard loom that made them. I was intrigued with the punched out cards that resemble today's computer cards.

From time to time I ran across articles about "Stevengraphs" and I purchased a Bicentennial replica of an early bookmark produced by the same technique. In spite of the number of flea markets and antique shows I visit every year, I never saw a "Stevengraph" until a few months ago. The price was prohibitive but I resolved to do some more research about the lovely silk pictures. Then I ran across an article in the Mar/Apr 1980 ART & ANTIQUES. At the bottom of the article was the name and address of the President of the Stevengraph Collector's Association, Mr. Lewis Smith, Irvington-on-Hudson, New York. A phone call brought me in touch with the delightful enthusiastic collector who promised to send me a packet of material. I am most grateful to Mr. Smith for his assistance.

Thomas Stevens was born at Foleshill in 1828, one of seven children. Foleshill was a small village outside Coventry which was the hub of English ribbon manufacturing for 200 years. Some say that one out of every two persons living there, were engaged in the manufacture of ribbons.

There is no record of young Thomas being an apprentice or his being admitted as a Freeman of the city. He did, however, learn the art and craft of ribbon weaving with a Coventry firm. In 1854 he set up his own business on Queen Street and began with the weaving of plain ribbons.

The Jacquard loom was invented in 1801. It allowed the introduction of colors to make a fancy ribbon and increased productivity to make it more economically feasible. Mr. Stevens experimented with the loom to see if he could produce pictures. "For this, the picture was plotted on squared paper, in the fashion of cross-stitch embroidery design, and a large card then perforated to represent each colour appearing in every 'line' of the picture. The cards, arranged in an endless chain and attached to the loom, controlled the manipulation of the warp threads. Each time the shuttle crossed the loom a different card came into use, changing the arrangement of the warp threads and consequently, the pattern woven. When all the cards had been brought into operation,

the design was complete and, unless an adjustment had been made to the loom, the pattern was repeated for the required length of the ribbon. A bookmarker, about 13 inches long, woven at the exhibition held to mark the opening of the Market Hall in 1867 required 5,500 cards".*

The Cobden Treaty between England and France in 1860 brought disaster to the ribbon industry. One of the clauses provided that the tariff on imported ribbons be removed. English manufacturers couldn't compete with the finer designs and better made ribbons of France. The industry collapsed and thousands of workers were put out of work. Many came to America and the other colonies. It was estimated that in two years 9,000 people left the city.

In order to survive, Thomas Stevens had to do something drastic. He used his years of experimenting with the Jacquard loom to produce pictures and began to make picture bookmarks. It has not been proved who made the first bookmark, but Stevens was certainly one of the first. His bookmarks were a great success because they were a perfect, small souvenir cheap enough for everyone to afford. They were made by the tens of thousands.

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* Lynes, Alice, THOMAS STEVENS and his SILK RIBBON PICTURES, Coventry City Libraries, Local History Pamphlets No. 2.



WOVEN IN PURE SILK BY T. STEVENS, COVENTRY.
Ye Ladge Godiva.

Then she rode forth, clothed on with chastity.

She took the tax away and built herself an everlasting name.

TENNYSON

Stevengraph courtesy of Paul's Antiques, San Francisco. Photo by Ed Gross

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Two Stevengraphs from the collection of Lewis Smith who owns one of the largest and most varied Stevengraph collections in the world. Photo courtesy Lewis Smith

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Mr. Stevens continued to expand and by 1880 he claimed more than 500 different varieties, or 900 if the variations in color are counted. In 1875 he constructed a new factory on Cox Street. For the first time the name "Stevengraph Works" appeared on the building facade and hereafter he referred to his products as "Stevengraphs." Today the term applies to the silk pictures which Stevens sold in cardboard mounts.

Industrial expositions were popular at the time and Stevens hit upon the idea of taking weavers and specially constructed looms to the expositions. He produced the colorful souvenirs before the eyes of the visitors who bought them as fast as the loom could produce them. For the American expositions he used subjects that would appeal to Americans, e.g., at the 1893 Chicago Columbian Exposition, he produced "Columbus Leaving Spain," and "The Signing of the Declaration of Independence". This type frequently had the name of the exhibition where they were sold, printed on the front of the mount.

"Stevengraphs" have an interesting dimensional effect which was achieved by using a very glossy thread for the figures in the foreground and contrasting them with a dull mat background. They vary in size from 1 1/2" x 4" to 7 1/4" x 13". The themes are varied and include patriotic, historical, sports, and architecture. Two of his best known are "Lady Godiva" and "Peeping Tom of Coventry"

For collectors, "Stevengraphs" should have their original mounts, and the colors should not be faded. A sure identification is the inscription "Woven in pure Silk by T.Stevens, Coventry."

Stevens also introduced and patented a hat ribbon with the name of the ship woven in gold wire and for many years was the sole authorized supplier to the Admiralty.

Mr. Stevens died in London in 1888, but the firm continued until 1940 when it was completely destroyed by the Germans.

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