



Serpentine Stripes & Eccentrics

BY BARBARA BRACKMAN

This is the first of several articles that Barbara has researched and prepared about popular fabric designs of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. They were first presented in her newsletter Material Pleasures. You will recognize many of the fabric designs from contemporary reproduction fabrics that use the same or similar designs. Barbara has provided the history behind the fabric, and a pattern of similar vintage.



A bold serpentine stripe from about 1830.



A serpentine stripe from around 1840.



Swatches from circa 1860 of serpentine stripes that would have been used as dress prints.

The study of the history of fabric design is a fascinating one. The popularity of a design style is influenced not only by the fashions of the time, but also by the technology and dyes available. Fabrics can be grouped into several design types, one of these being stripes.

Within the category of striped fabric, we find broad stripes and pinstripes, ribbon stripes and rainbow stripes. Serpentine stripes are one quirky category that was quite popular in American quilts from about 1830 through the Civil War. Stripes of all kinds were a necessity for home furnishings at that time. The curves and zigzags in the serpentine softened the hard edges of conventional stripes, making them more flattering for women's clothing.

A subcategory of the serpentine stripes is eccentrics, which tend to be geometric—fine lines with jagged or wavy distortions. According to historians, eccentrics were invented when a pinstripe crimped in a roller during manufacturing. The enterprising mill owner, instead of discarding the misprint, created a new fad by offering it for sale. This pattern became known as Lane's Net and was so popular that yardage was sold for 100,000 dresses. Another popular eccentric was called Hoyle's Wave.

Designers find inspiration everywhere, and it might be true that an English printer of the 1820s saw the possibilities in the misprint of a roller machine. But

ERA:

1820-1900;
most popular 1830-1865

CHARACTERISTICS:

Serpentine stripes are meandering lines of pattern, either floral or geometric that, like their namesake, wiggle across the surface. Eccentrics are a variation, a jagged or wavy geometric stripe.

AUTHENTIC COLORS:

The wavy stripes were printed in wood block and roller prints, and combinations of both, in colors from monochrome to the full chintz palette. They are found in the color schemes popular in natural dyes: Prussian blue and buff, logwood purples, madder browns and oranges, indigo blue with whites and yellows, drab combinations of olive, yellow, and brown from quercitron, chrome oranges, double pinks, and Turkey red with the bright colors of the provincial palette.

Lane's Net is far too regular to have been created by accident. Whatever the source, the designer of this pattern was savvy enough to create a fashion that lasted for a generation. In fact, Lane's Net is still available in fabrics designed by Jinny Beyer for RJR. (See examples on the next page.)

This history of Lane's Net is mentioned by Florence Pettit in *America's Printed and Painted Fabrics 1600-1900* (Hastings House, 1970). Susan Meller and Joost Effers tell a similar story in their book, *Textile Designs: Two Hundred Years of European Patterns* (Abrams, 1991), dating the event to 1820. Jeremy Adamson gives a date of 1824 in *Calico & Chintz: Antique Quilts from the Collection of Patricia S. Smith* (Renwick Gallery of the Smithsonian, 1996). ➤



The background fabrics in this mid-19th century star quilt, 66" x 82", are an eccentric and a serpentine.



AMERICAN FLAG, 33" x 22", by Wava Stoker Musgrave, Lenexa, Kansas, 1996. Wava's copy of a mid-century flag makes good use of serpentine stripes. The image of the flag, so standardized today, was more flexible in the past. Drawings and needlework often pictured unique variations.



An early 20th century farm wife in a skirt of serpentine stripes.



A mid-19th century toddler's dress sports a border of very eccentric stripes.

All kinds of serpentine stripes must have been the fashion rage during the mid-1800s, as we see so many of the scraps used in patchwork quilts of the time. Jeremy Adamson quotes an English fashion critic who noted the popularity of eccentrics in women's clothing, citing prints in "perspective representations of geometric solids."

In the twentieth century, stripes, in general, have not been as popular in clothing as in the past. Meller and Elffers note that stripes make a fabric directional, which narrows its uses, and makes it hard for the cutter and tailor to match seams. Weight-conscious women learned well the lessons of home economics teachers, who told them that stripes are rarely flattering, especially horizontals. The authors also cite a prejudice against sinuous stripes as being too "snaky" for today's market. A New York fabric designer concurred, saying that the mills know that "women don't like snakes."

But for reproduction quilts, serpentine stripes, with a recent revival of the snaky look, are in demand. And, if quilters buy enough wavy stripes, the fabric industry's conventional wisdom—that the female market is too empty-headed to differentiate a reptile from a design classic—will change.

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*FREE STATE
ALBUM QUILT,
74" x 84", by
Mary Will
Madden, 1996,
Topeka, Kansas.
Serpentine stripes
give a period
look to Mary's
album quilt.*



PHOTO BY JON ELLUM



*LOST IN THE
STARS, 88" x 88",
by Georgann
Eglinski, 1998,
Lawrence, Kansas.
Georgann
and friends challenged
each other with large
scale prints and simple
stars. Stripes both
straight and serpentine
add to the quilt's
richness.*

Above, These four blocks illustrate how serpentine stripes and eccentrics can effectively be used in a variety of traditional blocks.

Right, A close relative of serpentine stripes, this pattern is an eccentric known as Lane's Net. The brown swatch is from the last quarter of the 19th century; the red swatch is from the second quarter of the 20th. The third sample is a print Jinny Beyer reproduced for RJR Fabrics.





An eccentric stripe from approximately 1880 and two modern examples of eccentrics.



Hoyle's Wave wave was a popular eccentric stripe in the 19th century.



These contemporary serpentine and eccentric stripes were collected from the stacks of QNM staff. They represent a variety of fabric manufacturers including RJR Fashion Fabrics and P&B Textiles, and also include vintage and Japanese fabrics. Check with your local quilt shop or catalog for current reproductions.

