

BLOCK PRINTS FROM INDIA FOR TEXTILES

by

ALBERT BUELL LEWIS

Assistant Curator of Melanesian Ethnology

24 Plates



ANTHROPOLOGY DESIGN SERIES NO. 1

FIELD MUSEUM OF NATURAL HISTORY

CHICAGO

1924

BORDER DESIGN ON THE END OF A WOMAN'S CLOTH (*sari*).

In this design the black and red have been stamped, while the yellow and green have been put in by hand. Ten different blocks have been used, separate impressions of nine of which are shown on Plates III and IV. That used for band 1 is shown in Fig. 5, Plate IV; those for bands 2 and 4 in Figs. 1 and 2, Plate III; for band 3, Figs. 1, 2, and 4, Plate IV; for band 5, Figs. 3 and 4, Plate III; and for band 6, Fig. 3, Plate IV. The red dots of band 6 were printed by a narrow block which is not shown. This border is a fair example of the ordinary work done in cotton printing, neither the best nor the worst. In most cases the places where the impressions join can be readily seen. $\frac{3}{4}$ natural size.

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PREFATORY NOTE

With this issue Field Museum of Natural History inaugurates a new series of publications calculated to render accessible in convenient form primitive and oriental designs from material in the Museum collections. It is hoped that this series will render good services to teachers and pupils of public, high, and technical schools, as well as to professional designers, craftsmen, manufacturers, and any students interested in decorative art. The series will mainly consist of collections of designs accompanied by one or two pages of explanatory text, but without scientific discussion.

B. LAUFER,
Curator of Anthropology

BLOCK PRINTS FROM INDIA FOR TEXTILES

The use of wooden blocks to print or stamp designs on cloth, especially cotton, is still quite common in India, though by no means so general as in former years. The designs used vary considerably from place to place, but the method is much the same everywhere. The designs are first drawn on paper, which is pasted on blocks of wood. The wood is then cut with a crude engraving tool to the depth of about one-third of an inch. Holes are often cut through the block to allow the air to escape from the cavities formed by cutting out the design. This allows the dye to penetrate all the parts without danger of air bubbles. Such holes may be seen in Figs. 1 and 2. The wood used must be firm and fine grained. Different woods are used in different parts of India. Teak and ebony, though not the ones most commonly used, are said to be preferred in certain regions. The making of these blocks is a special industry. Occasionally iron wire (see Plate IX) or iron strips may be set in the block to give the pattern.

The old native dyes have been largely displaced by the aniline colors, but are still used in many places, especially since the war. Black, reds, and blues are the most common and permanent of the colors used. The fabric, which must first undergo special preparation, is laid on a low bench on a pad formed of several thicknesses of cloth (see Plate II). The printer squats in front of this, with the dye in a pan or earthen vessel at his side. In this vessel is a frame which is covered with one or more thicknesses of heavy cloth or blanket forming a pad which becomes saturated with the color, and on which the blocks are pressed before stamping. Besides being used for applying the dye, blocks may be used for the mordant, and, in some places, especially southern India, wax or some resist is often stamped on the cloth.

The designs herein illustrated are all full-sized impressions of blocks obtained by Dr. George A. Dorsey at Ahmadabad in the Bombay Presidency. Many of the blocks are old and somewhat imperfect, but the impressions have not been retouched. As they were made with ink instead of the fluid dye, the effect is not quite the same as it would be on cloth. Where it was intended to print a solid color, the blocks are cut out and filled with a fibrous mass (see Fig. 1) which takes up the fluid dye better than the smooth wood, but gives only a stippled effect with ink (as in Plates III, Fig. 3; IV, Fig. 5; V, Figs. 1 and 6; VI-VII; XVIII-XX). The block illustrated in Fig. 1 has lost this fibrous filling from one compartment.

Borders sometimes show several colors, as in Plate I, but, as a rule, not more than two colors are used, black and some shade of red being the most common. Other colors, such as green and yellow, are often put in by hand, as in Plate I.

Paired blocks for printing in two colors are shown in Plates III, IV, VII, XIX, XXIII and XXIV. Many of the others, such as those on Plates VI, X, XX, etc., are intended to be used in combination with other blocks.

The finest and most elaborate of Indian colored cloths were hand-painted, though certain parts, such as the borders, might be stamped. Good illustrations of such cloths and designs may be seen in the colored plates of the expensive work on "Calico Painting and Printing in the East Indies in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries," by George P. Baker. The coarser cotton fabrics in common use were either plain dyed or stamped, and this industry is still quite prevalent throughout the country, though factory-made cloth has largely replaced the hand-made. *Saris* or woman's cloths, wall hangings, and covers for cotton quilts are some of the articles still colored in this manner.

Illustrations of print designs from other parts of India may be seen in "Cotton Painting and Printing in the Madras Presidency," by W. S. Hadaway, and in several numbers of the "Journal of Indian Art," especially Volume VII.

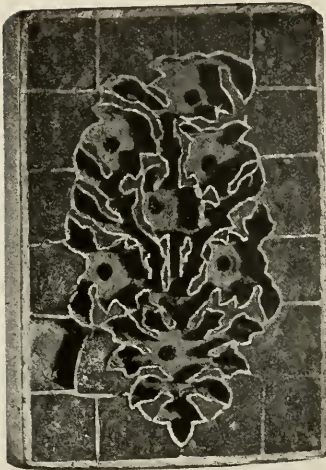


FIG. 1. $\frac{2}{3}$ natural size.

This block shows the same design as Fig. 3, Plate III, but is a different block from the one from which that impression was made. The holes at the bottom of the cut-out design go through to the top of the block. The design is bordered by a thin wood partition, which shows lighter than the rest of the surface. This part of the block has also been hollowed out, except for partitions every so often, and a fibrous mass firmly packed into the cavities thus formed. One of the cavities has lost its packing.

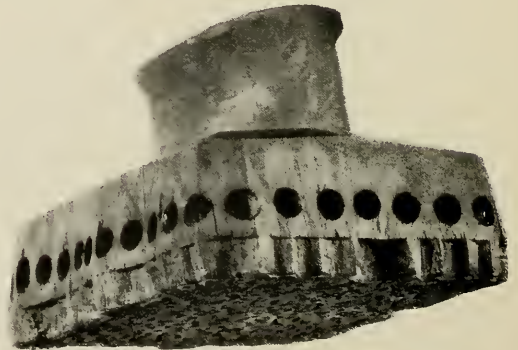


FIG. 2. $\frac{2}{3}$ natural size.

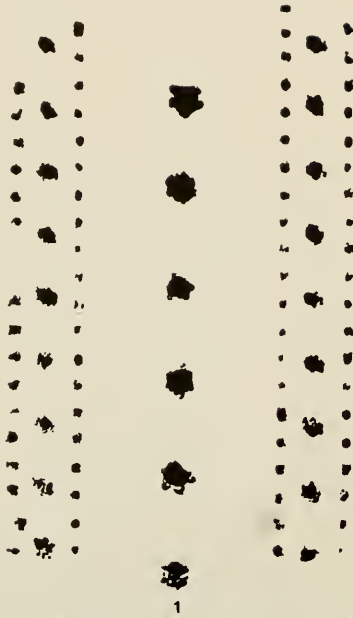
The design on this block is shown in Fig. 1, Plate XX. A row of holes has been bored through the block from end to end, and another from side to side, and into these the small holes from the cut-out design open. The depth to which the design is cut is clearly shown on the side. The handle is part of the same piece of wood, as is usually the case, though occasionally it is cut out of a separate piece and pegged on.



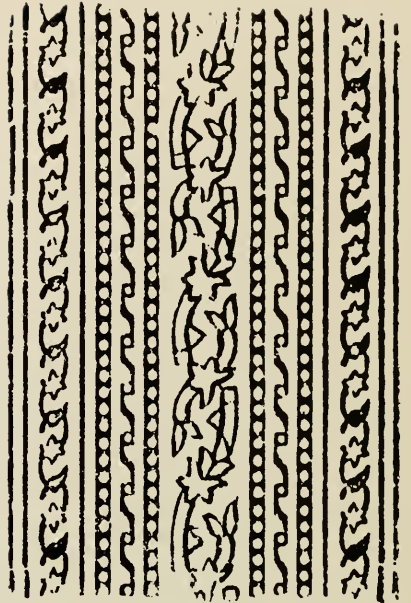
A COTTON PRINTER AT WORK.

(From the *Journal of Indian Art*, Vol. II, No. 23, Pl. 6.)

On the ledge behind are shown two large blocks and several smaller ones.



1



2



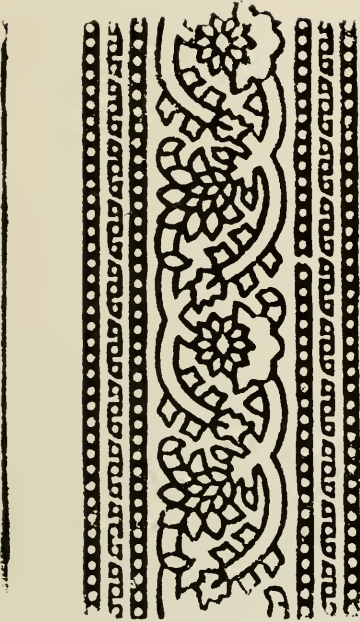
3



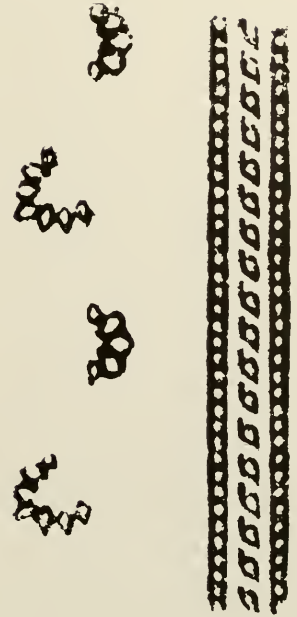
4

BLOCK PRINTS FROM INDIA—BORDER DESIGNS.

Fig. 1 is the red and Fig. 2 the black design of band 5, Plate I; Fig. 3 is the red and Fig. 4 the black of bands 2 and 4, Plate I.



1



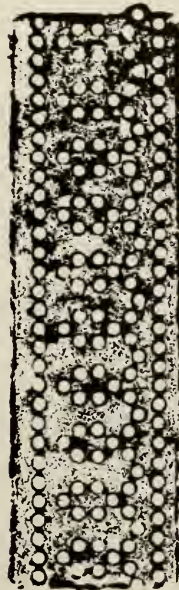
2



3



4



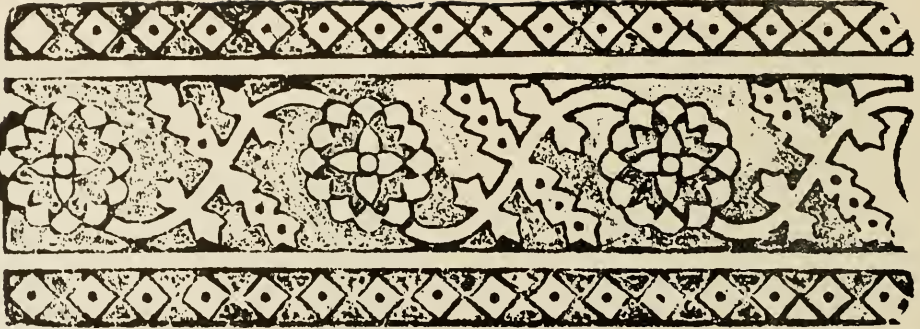
5



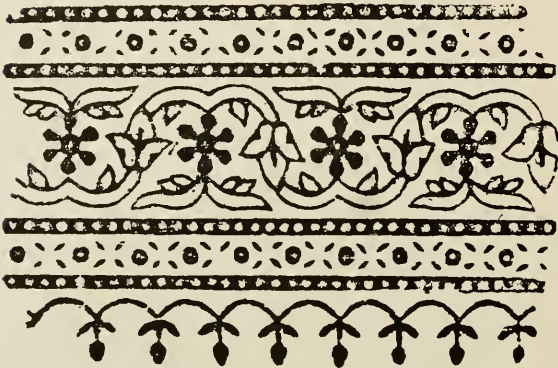
6

BLOCK PRINTS FROM INDIA—BORDER DESIGNS.

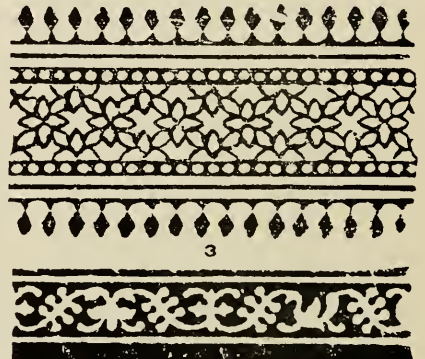
Figs. 1, 2, and 4 are seen in band 3, Plate I, Fig. 1 being the black and Figs. 2 and 4 the red. The color used for Fig. 4 is a darker red than that used for Fig. 2. Fig. 3 is band 6, Fig. 5 band 1, Fig. 6 is a separate design.



1



2



3

4



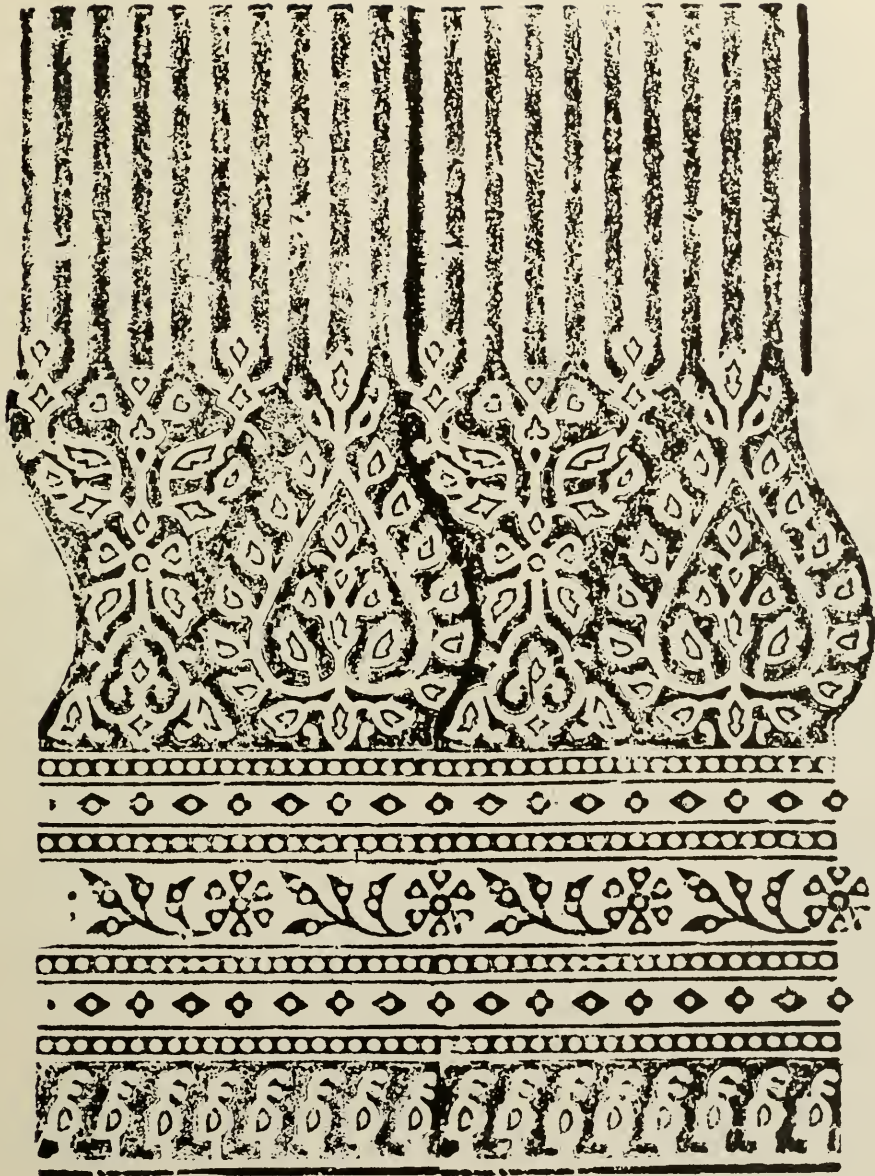
5



6

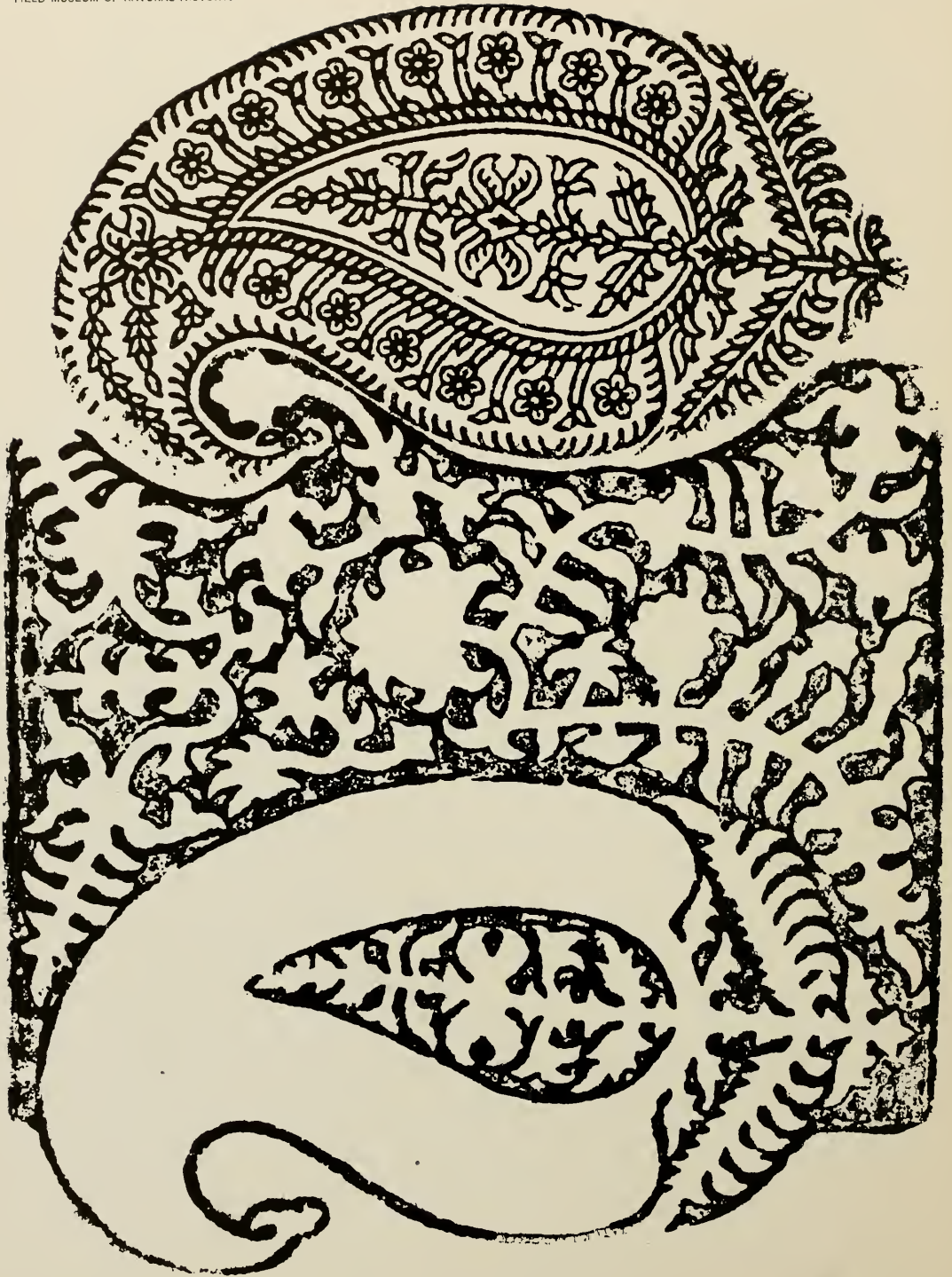
BLOCK PRINTS FROM INDIA—BORDER DESIGNS.

Most of these were intended to be used with other blocks in a two or more color design. Figs. 1 and 2 show single impressions of the blocks, that from which Fig. 2 was taken being somewhat broken at the ends. In Fig. 3 one end and in Fig. 4 both ends of the impression have been cut off. Figs. 5 and 6 show one impression of the block and a portion of a second.



BLOCK PRINTS FROM INDIA—BORDER DESIGN.

This shows two impressions of the block. With the fluid dyes, the line of juncture would not show extra heavy as it does with ink. Other blocks and colors would also be used with this design.



BLOCK PRINTS FROM INDIA—BORDER DESIGN.

This shows the impression of two blocks. The one above would be printed in black and the larger one probably in red. The block that should go with these for the foliage is unfortunately missing. Other colors might also be added, either by block or by hand, as in Plate I.



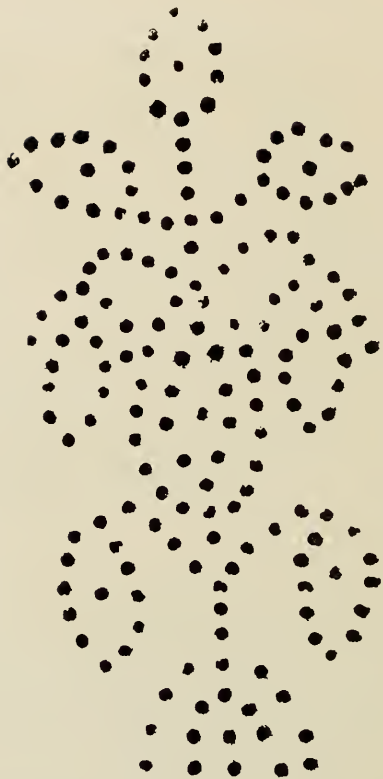
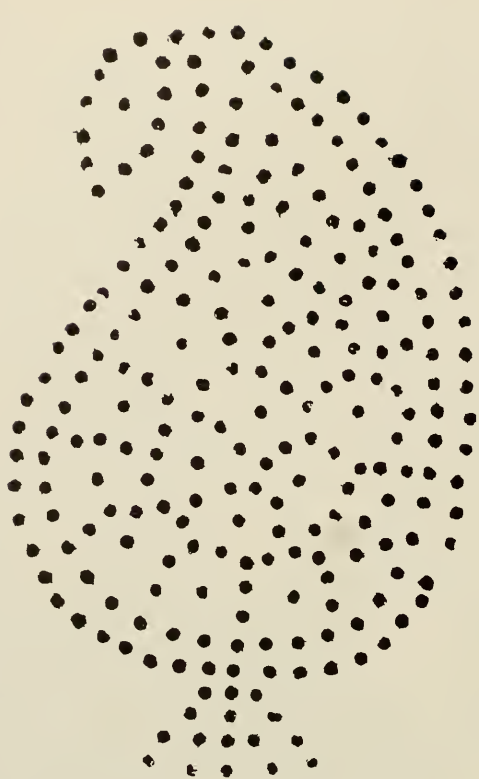
1



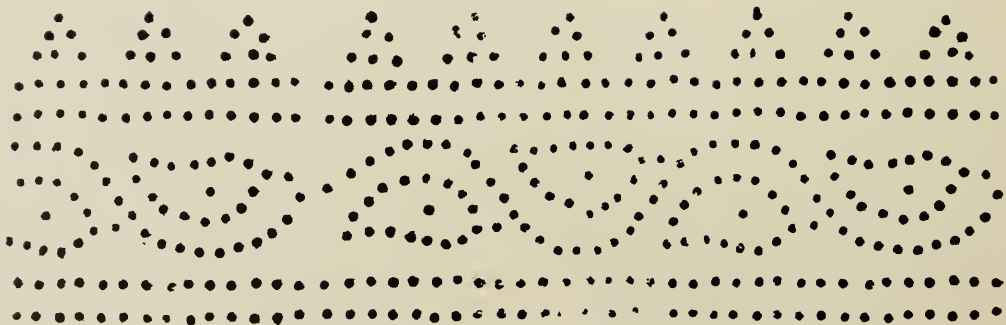
2

BLOCK PRINTS FROM INDIA—ALL-OVER DESIGNS.

Single impressions of two blocks. Another block, printing a different color, should go with Fig. 2, giving a diagonal striped effect.



1



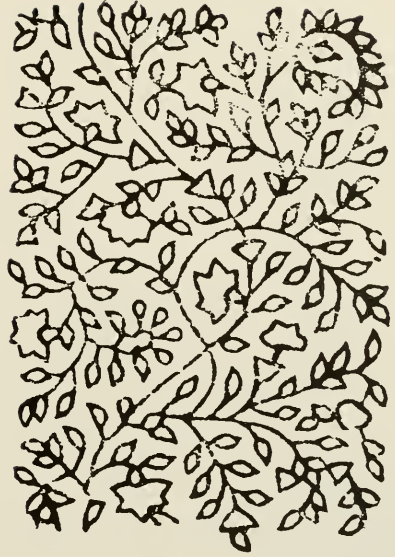
2

BLOCK PRINTS FROM INDIA—BORDER DESIGNS.

In these blocks the design is formed by short pieces of heavy iron wire set on end in the wooden block.



1



2



3

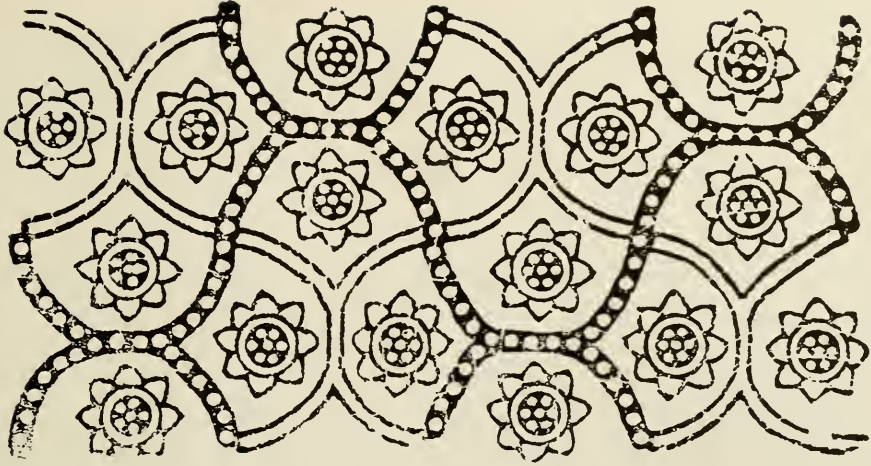
BLOCK PRINTS FROM INDIA—FLORAL DESIGNS.

All these would be used with supplementary blocks for other colors.

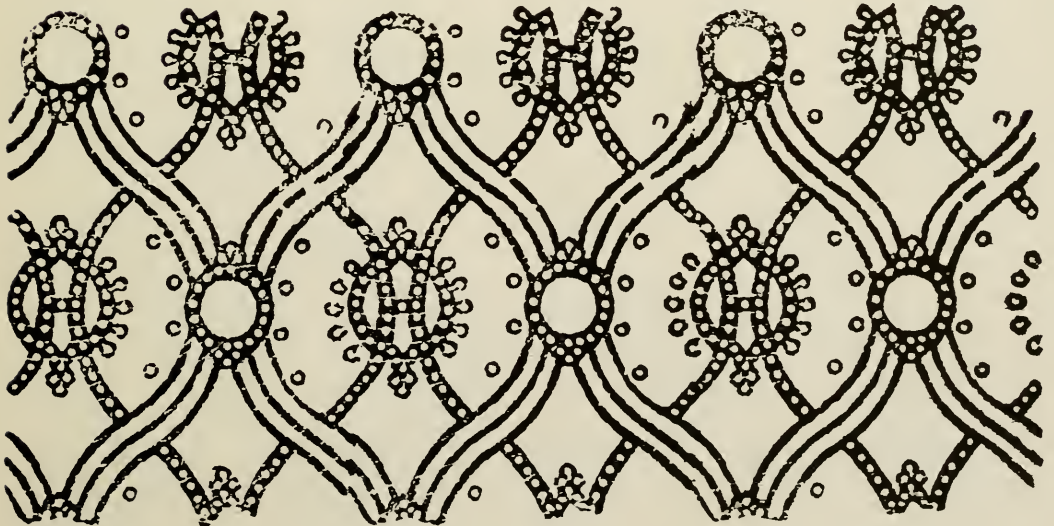


BLOCK PRINTS FROM INDIA—ALL-OVER DESIGN.

Fig. 1a shows a single impression of the block, slightly separated from Fig. 1 above, which gives four impressions. Fig. 2 is a small unit probably used to fill in a larger design.



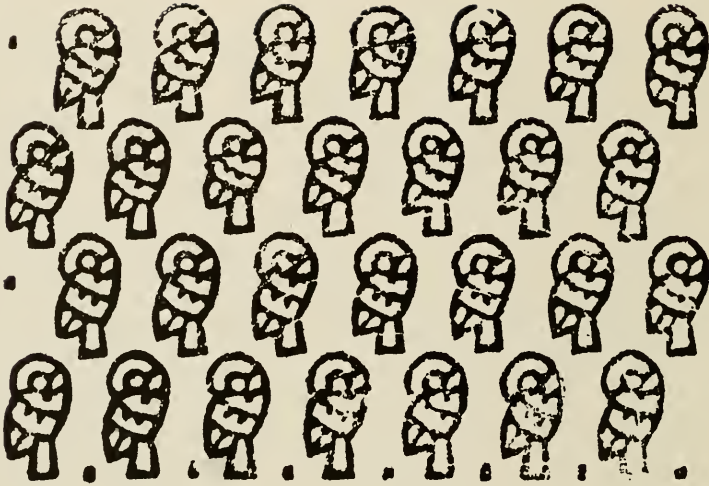
1



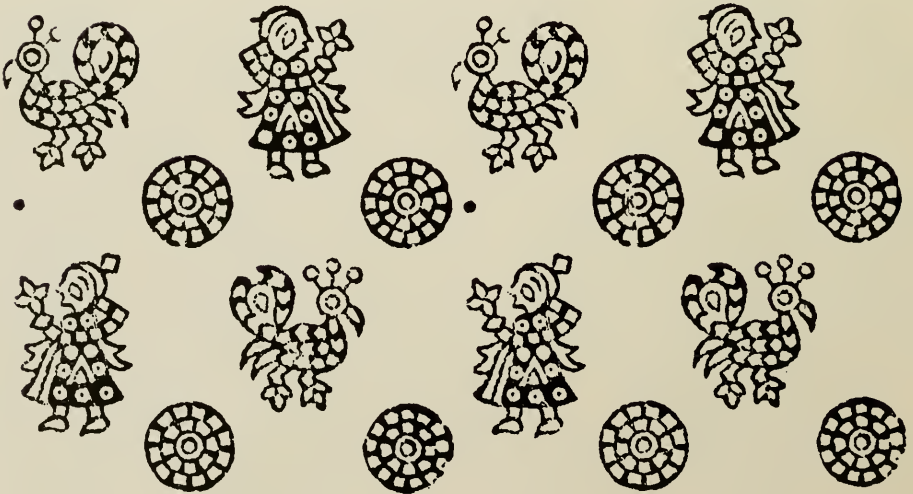
2

BLOCK PRINTS FROM INDIA—ALL-OVER DESIGNS.

Fig. 1 is a single impression of the block. Fig. 2 shows three impressions of a small block.



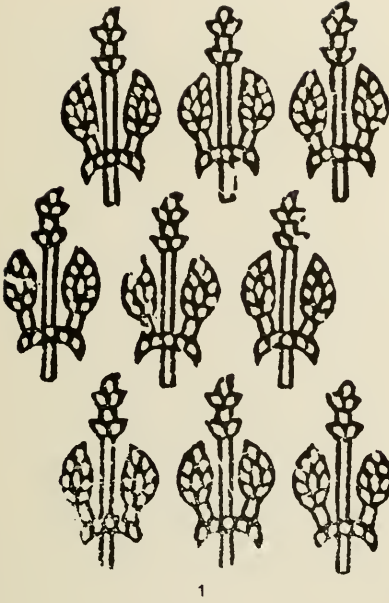
1



2

BLOCK PRINTS FROM INDIA—ALL-OVER DESIGNS.

Fig. 1 is a single impression of the block; Fig. 2, a double impression.

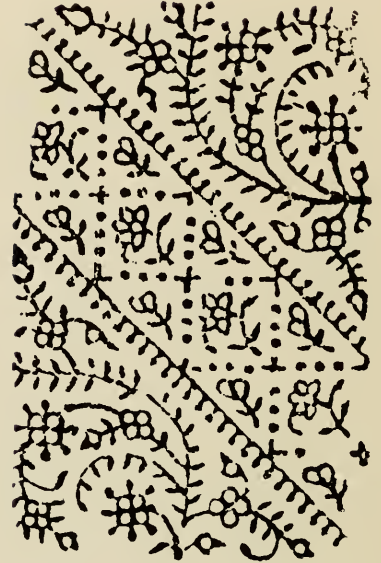


BLOCK PRINTS FROM INDIA—ALL-OVER DESIGNS.

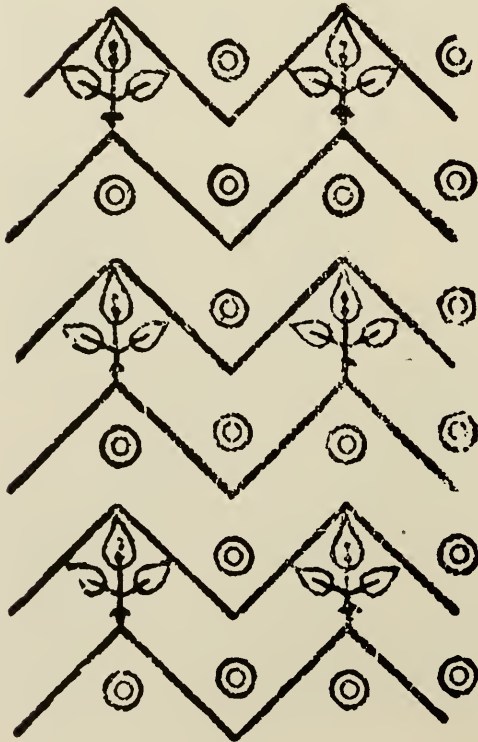
In Figs. 1, 3, and 4 only a portion of the impression is shown.



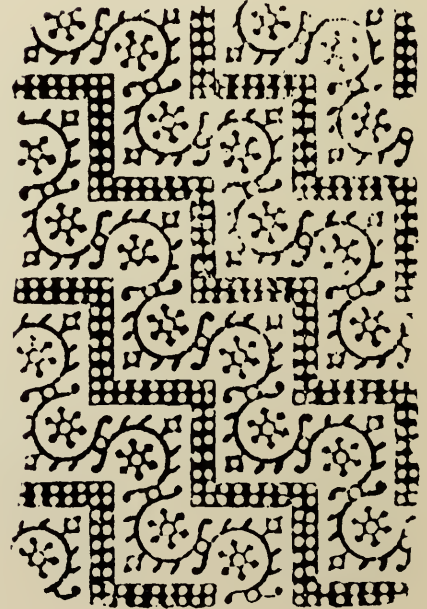
1



2

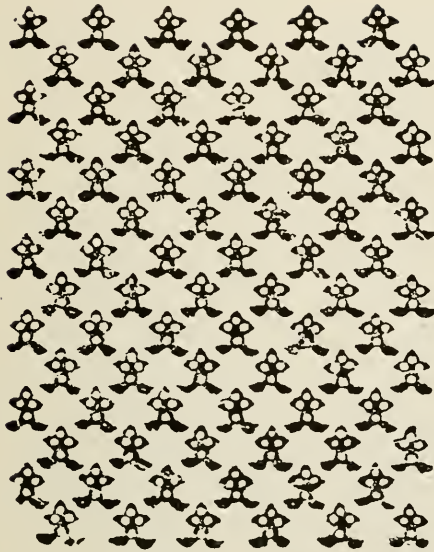


3

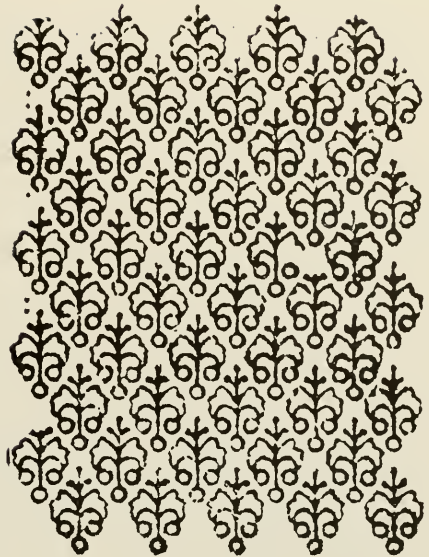


4

BLOCK PRINTS FROM INDIA—ALL-OVER DESIGNS.



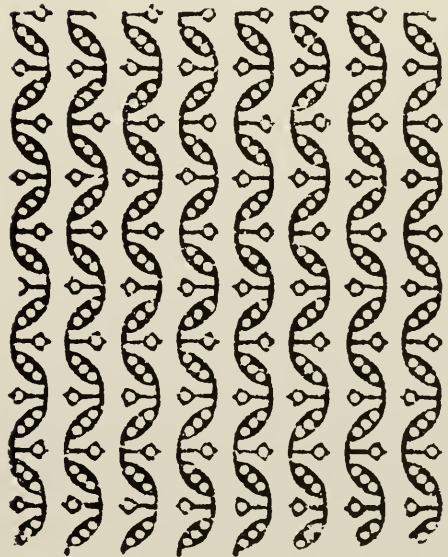
1



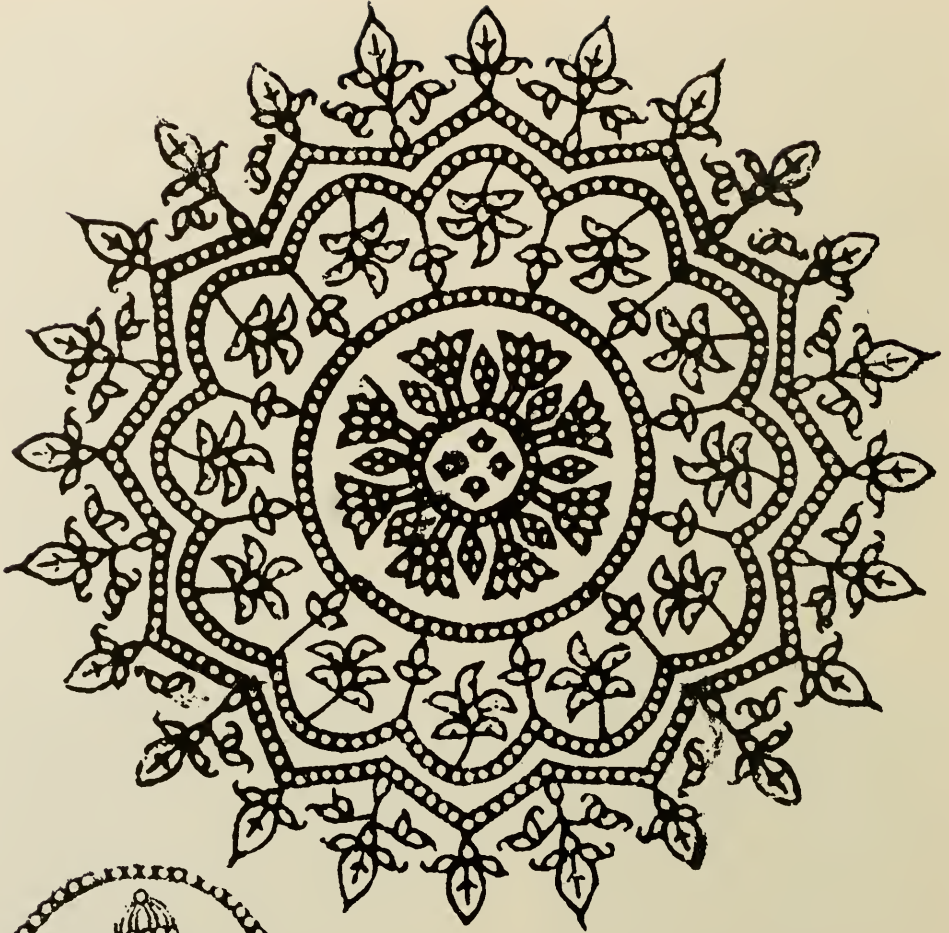
2



3



4



1



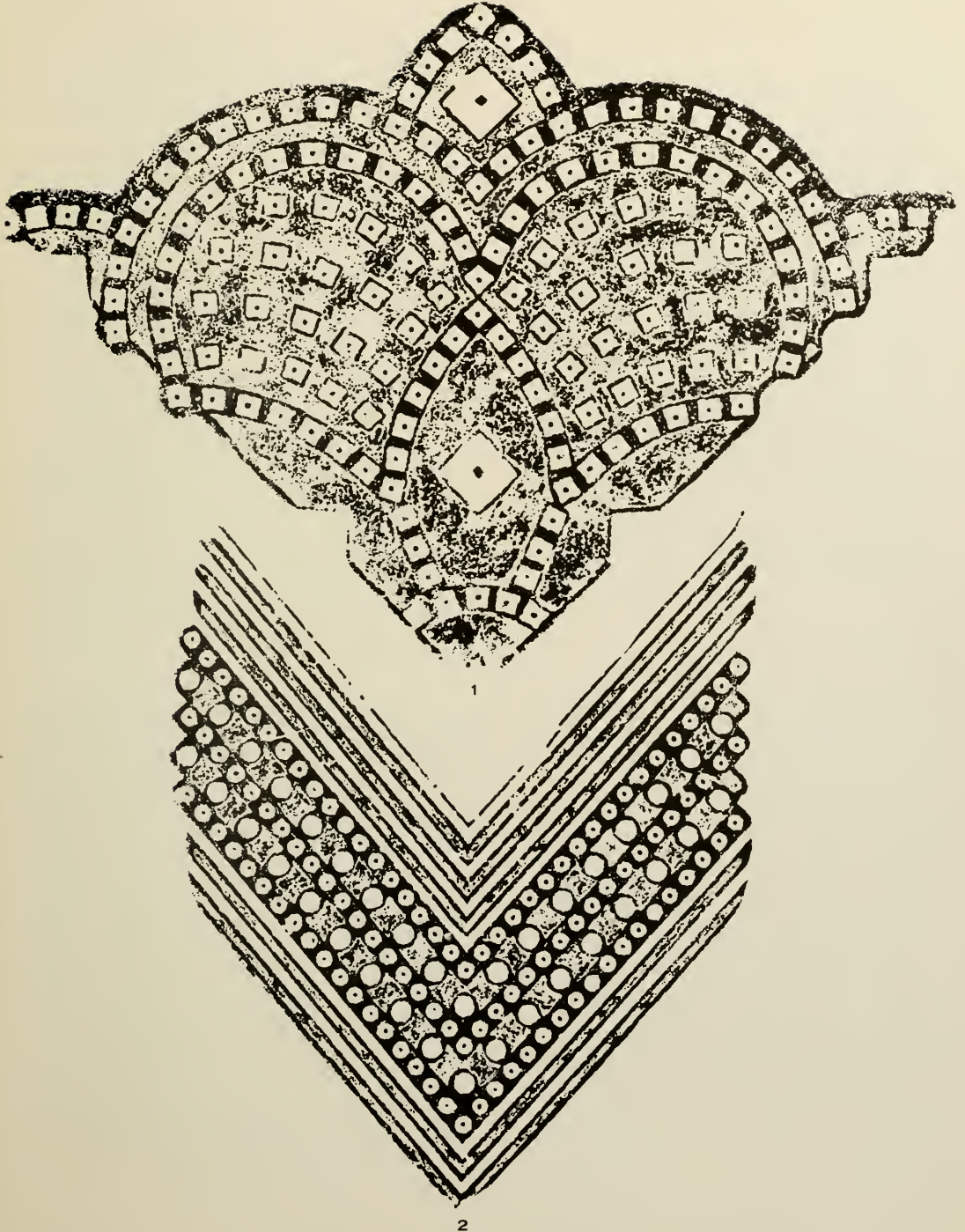
2



3

BLOCK PRINTS FROM INDIA—SPECIAL DESIGNS.

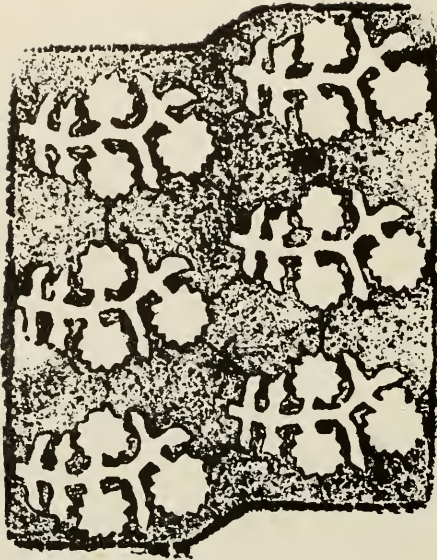
Fig. 1 is a centerpiece, formed by four impressions of the block.



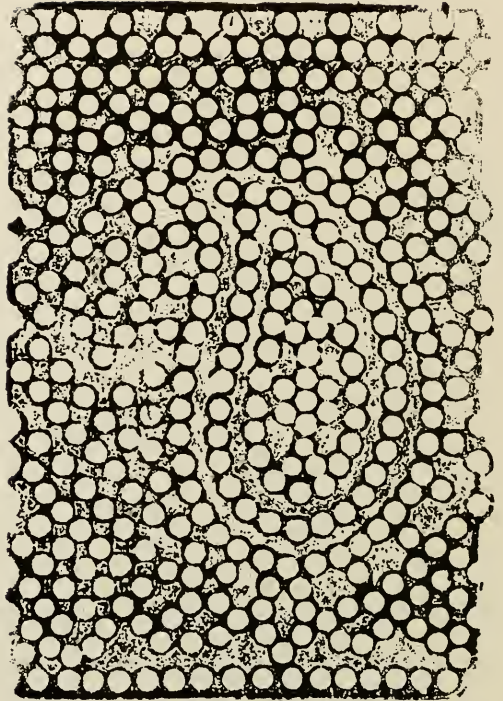
2

BLOCK PRINTS FROM INDIA—SPECIAL DESIGNS.

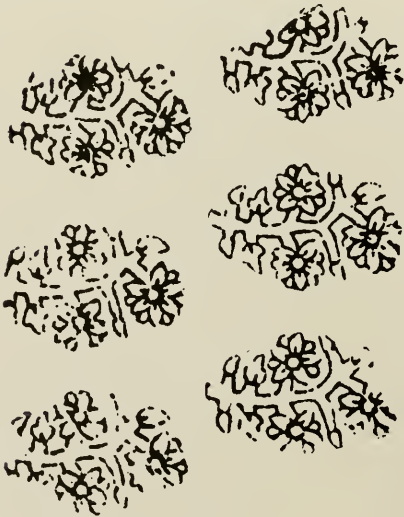
Fig. 1 is a single impression of a block which would be used to form a circular design similar to Fig. 1, Plate XVII.



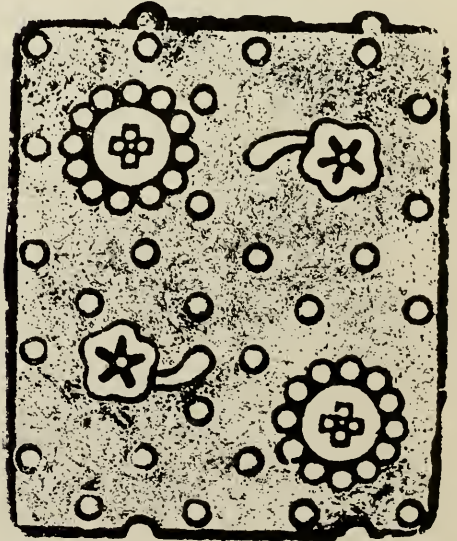
1



2



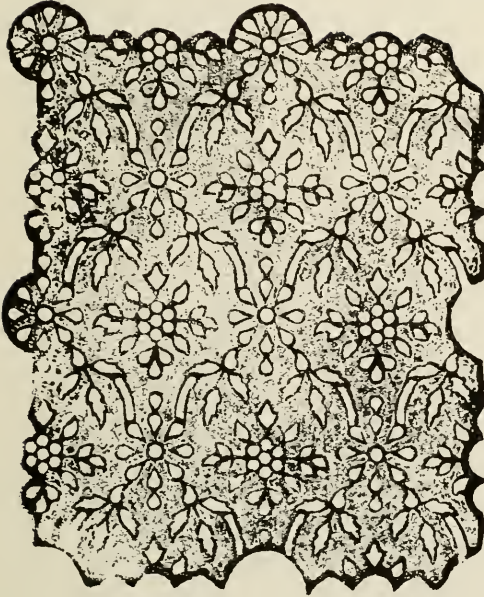
3



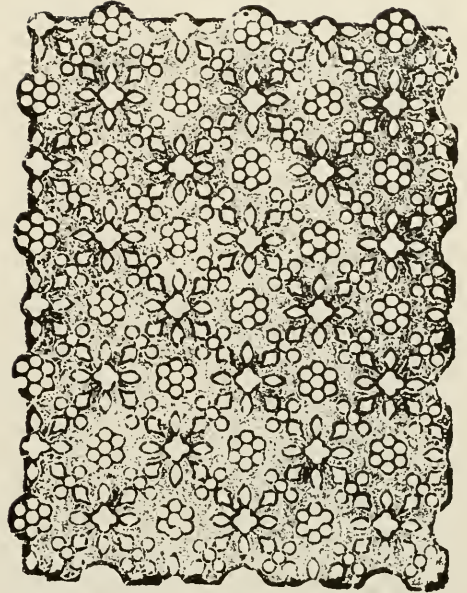
4

BLOCK PRINTS FROM INDIA—ALL-OVER DESIGNS.

Figs. 1 and 3 go together the same as Figs. 3 and 4 of Plate III.



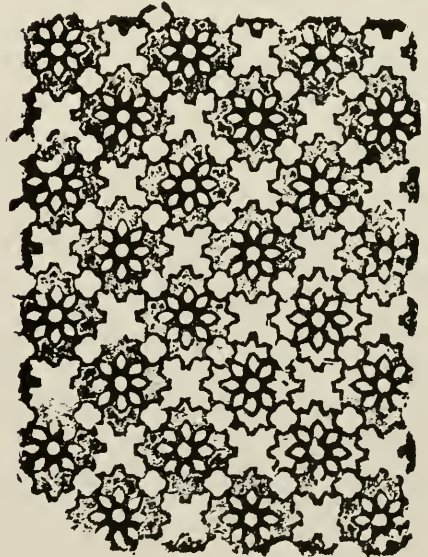
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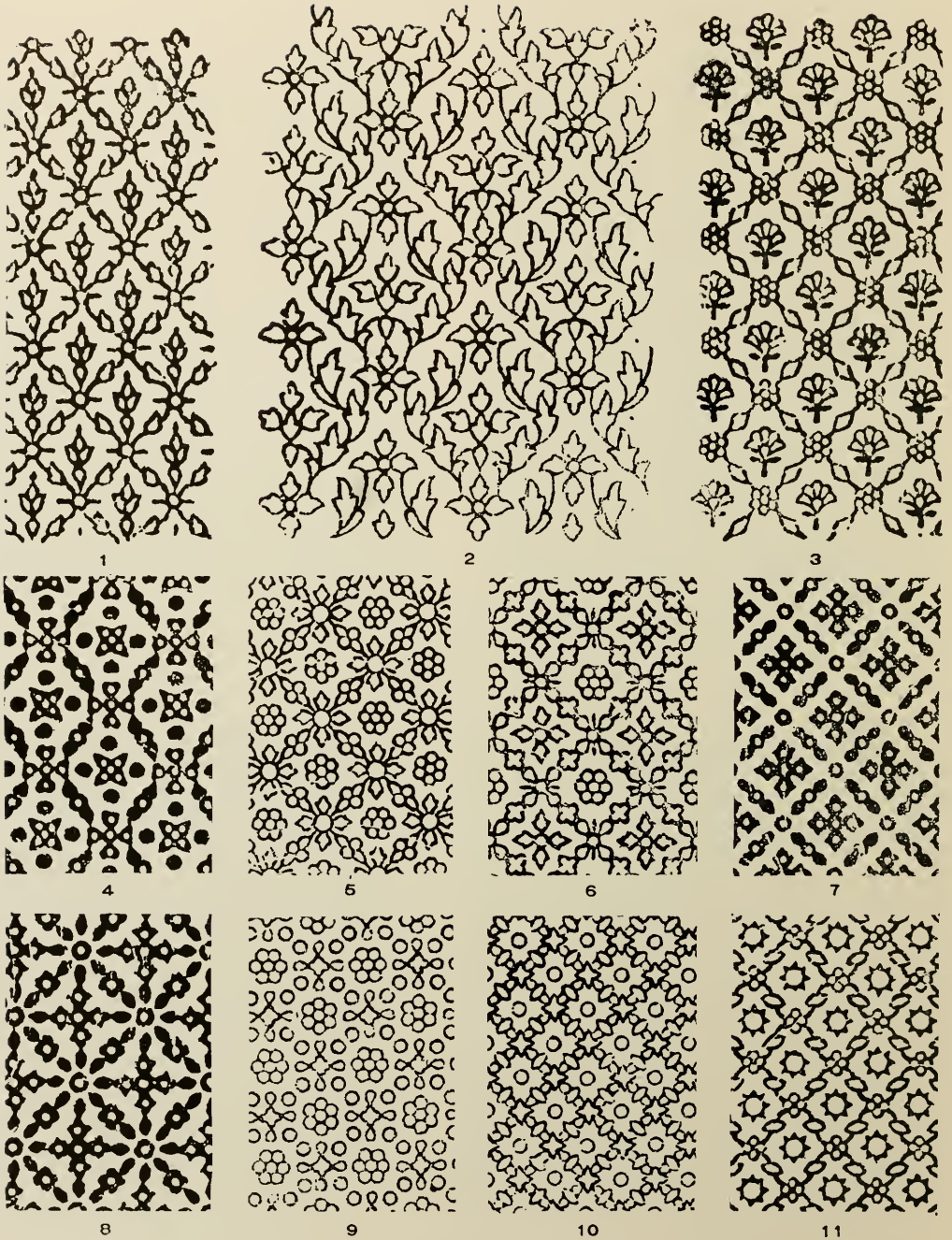
2



3



4



BLOCK PRINTS FROM INDIA—ALL-OVER DESIGNS.

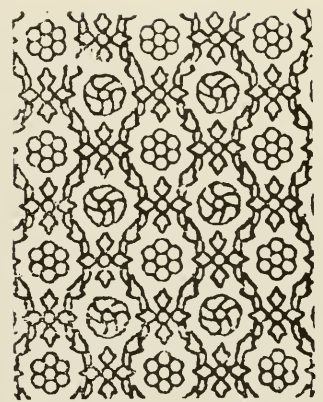
Except Fig. 2, these show only a portion of the whole block.



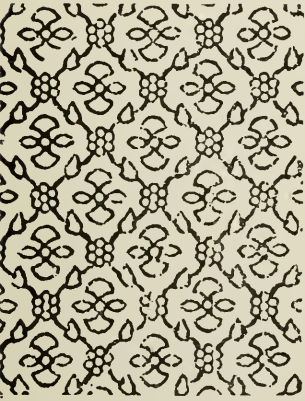
1



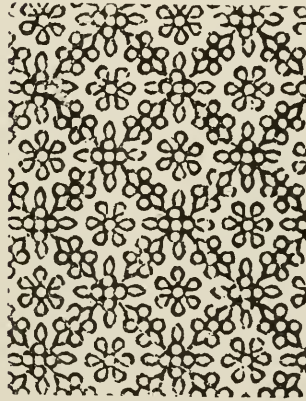
2



3



4



5



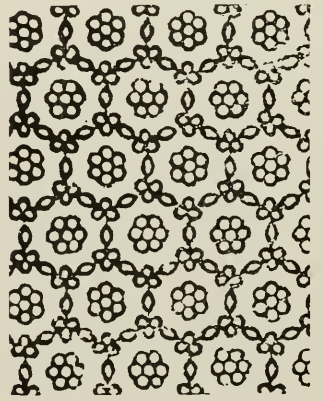
6



7



8



9

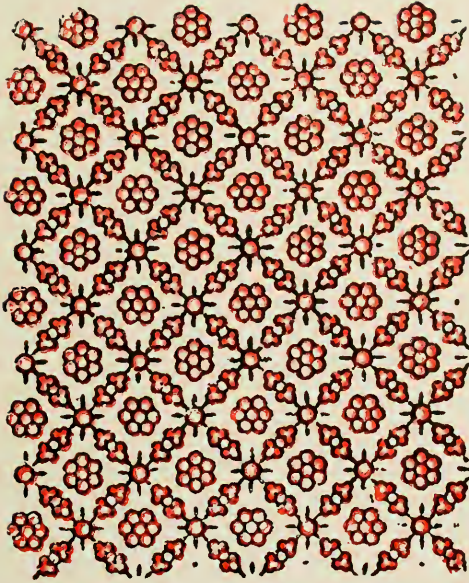
BLOCK PRINTS FROM INDIA—ALL-OVER DESIGNS.

Only a portion of each block is shown.

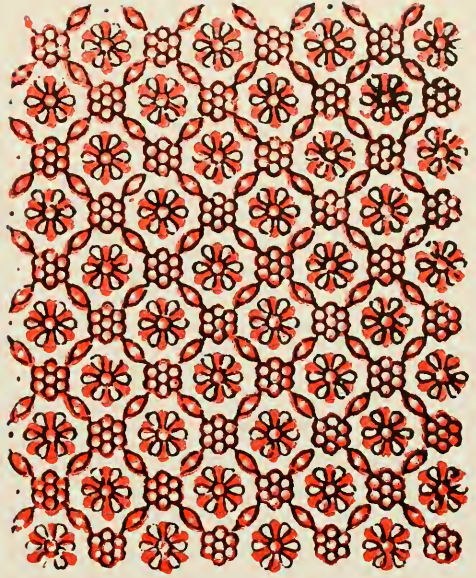


BLOCK PRINTS FROM INDIA—SPECIAL DESIGNS.

Figs. 1a and 1b go together as in Fig. 3, Plate XXIV.



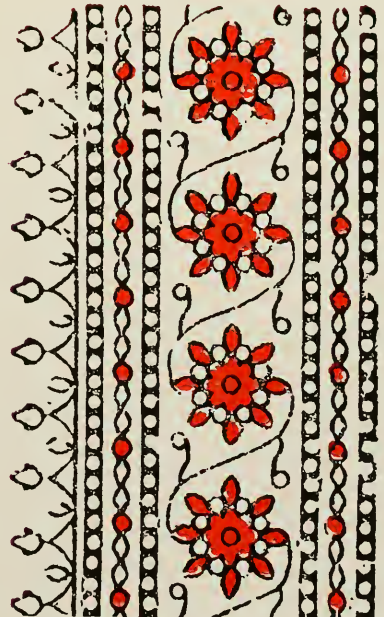
1



2



3



4

BLOCK PRINTS FROM INDIA—TWO-COLOR DESIGNS.

While the colors used for these designs may vary, the fine-cut designs with narrow lines are usually printed in black, and the heavier masses in red. The lack of perfect registration of the two colors is in the original blocks, and the agreement is at least as close as in ordinary cotton printing.

