

Stencils Throughout History: Everyone Wants To Beautify Life!

By Phoenix Alexander

“A stencil is a template,(usually a cutout form) of a pattern, shape, symbol, letter, or design, used to duplicate the shape onto another object. The paint (or other medium) is applied around the outside of the shape to make an outline, (such as a hand) , or on the inside of the cutout template; to create a standard, uniformly, duplicatable shape”.--Phoenix

Stencils Around the World:

Anciently: 30,000 years BC in caves in Fiji, banana and bamboo leaves were cut and vegetable dye was forced through them creating a stenciled design--an example of a cutout template. Some of the earliest stencils were hands. Around 9,000 BC people put their hands on rocks, and cave walls and blew ochre pigment dust around their hands creating an outline—a reverse stencil. These can be found in Aboriginal art in Australia and in caves in France and Spain. You have to wonder if it was then considered art or more like someone saying “I was here” with their hands. As time progressed the stencils and what they depicted became more sophisticated.

Egypt: Tombs were decorated with stencil art to make them more beautiful. It was an elaborate process involving many artisans who drew hieroglyphs, and chiseled them, and another plastered and painted them for an elegant artful look.

China and Japan: Used stencils on cloth to create beautiful clothing. Later 500 to 600 stencils were used to create images of Buddha.

Ancient Greeks and Romans: Used stencils for mosaics, and to decorate their buildings and coliseums. Stencils were used extensively in Rome to make signs.

Middle East: Stenciling made its way to the Middle East and Turkey along trade routes from Asia, and then to Europe courtesy of the Crusades. The Damask patterns so popular in fabric and wallpaper even today are originally from Damascus, Syria. Stencils made from the art designs popular in the Middle East during the Ottoman Empire Era are still highly prized today. Stencils are often used on the tiles used to decorate homes and buildings. Turkish, Moorish and Arabic Art are made into stencils that are popular today.

Europeans: Used stencils to decorate their Cathedrals, buildings and for manuscripts. Stencils were eventually used to create wallpaper with was then pieced together. Today stencils are used as an alternative to wallpaper.

America: Early Americans used stencils to decorate their walls, floors, furniture, food tins, serving trays etc. A traveling stenciler, moving from town to town on horseback, was hired to decorate homes, taverns, and inns. Most of them mixed their own paints often using sour milk!. They usually bartered their craft for basic necessities like food, lodging and clothing. It was very exciting for the people having

their homes decorated because the stenciler lived with them while he made their home more artful and beautiful.

India, Africa, and the Middle East: Have use Mendhi- the art of henna for centuries. Culturally the henna plant used as the 'ink' to decorate the body is believed to bring good luck, love and to protect against evil. Stencils can be used for designs for the body art, although it is often applied by a skilled artist free-handing the design.

Modern Day Stencils: The arts and crafts movement made stencils very popular as a way to give the crafter freedom of artistic expression. Stencils are used on stairs, walls, vases, clothing, home décor and nearly anything else imaginable. Stencils are used for temporary tattoos and sometimes henna designs. Today's stencils are made with paper, metal, plastic, and mylar as well as other materials.

Stencils Have Been Used For:

- Books-used stencils for mass production .This was very popular in France in the 1920's. Illustrations were made with stencils and sometimes the story was often hand written.
- Playing Cards were printed with stencils also.
- Pictures around the 15th century old master paintings were printed on woodcuts in black and white and stencils were used to add color.
- Typography-stencils were the basis for modern day typography. Most of the fonts we use today are from stencils made in the 1500-1600's. that were used in typesetting machines to print books, newspapers etc. The first typography stencils were made from metal. Even many of the fonts used today on computers date back to stencils used centuries before.
- Military uses stencils to label things,
- Kegs of liquid are labeled with stencils.
- To teach the alphabet in the early days.
- Most recently stencils are used for art, in the community, in graffiti, in the home for custom art, and for body art.

Let's explore how you can use stencils for art. Are you ready to get started?