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BACKGROUND BUTTONS #5: METAL ***Fifth in a Series Concerning Background Buttons***

by Barbara Barrans, Claudia Chalmers and Joy Journey

Buttons with metal twinkle backgrounds are plentiful and appeal to a large audience of button collectors. Other metal backgrounds are less common but certainly beautiful. The National Button Society classification Blue Book sections on background buttons from the 2013-2017 edition is pasted below as a refresher.

From the NBS Classification Guide

SECTION 10 – METAL

10-11 Backgrounds (metal)

SECTION 23 – SPECIFIC TYPES

23- 1 Backgrounds assorted

23- 1.4 Metal assorted

23- 1.4.1 Screen

23- 1.4.2 Twinkle

Backgrounds

Refers to buttons of a composite nature that are usually, but not always, mounted in metal and have a separate contrasting material serving as an unimposing visual background for the entire design. Most backgrounds are flat, but may be contour as long as the rim of the mounting encloses the edge of the background material. When mounted in metal, the background material is the “base” material, not other material embellishment (OME). May include some designs under glass (fabric or foil behind cut-out ivory under glass, etc.). Backgrounds half obscured by the designs are acceptable. Buttons with prominent center escutcheon type designs are acceptable if other criteria are met. Buttons with a cut out design, backed by fabric or other material, are also acceptable, as are backgrounds that are sew throughs. Protrusions are not appropriate here.

23 – 1.4.1 Screen. Div I. The background is made of screen. Does not include “screenback,” an openwork metal button.

23 – 1.4.2 Twinkle. A highly reflective metal of silver, gold, or other color, serving as a background for the central design (not just the border), placed behind a cut out design in contrast with, or as an enhancement to, the design.

Buttons illustrating this article are from the authors' collections unless otherwise noted.

One of the attractions to button collecting is the endless variety of our buttons, and the multiple ways each button can be considered and classified. Backgrounds are a prime example because of their composite nature.

Composite buttons are frequently found in a variety of formats and this is true with metal backgrounds. You can find the same

stamped brass image solid or pierced to reveal a background. Likewise, the revealed portion can merely be painted brass (not a background button) or twinkle, steel, white metal, brass, etc. Just because a button illustrates this article with one background material does not mean it cannot be found with other backgrounds.

Any amount of background material qualifies as a background. The one exception is when a twinkle liner appears only behind a pierced border. This is a twinkle border and the Blue Book specifically cites (page 54) that twinkle under “just the border” does not qualify as a background button. It does, however, qualify for *Class 10-13.5, Twinkles*, where any amount of twinkle is okay.

The top NBS small textured and tinted brass button has a red glass ball set in the center and is classed under “10-14.1.1 Pigeon eye. *Division I*. It also fits under *Class 10-13.5, Twinkle*, but is not a background as it has only a twinkle border.

For the same reason, this NBS small brass twinkle border button of a bird, over a painted light brown center, does not qualify as a metal background button. The brown paint center is a decorative finish and, while it does contrast and enhance the brass bird, it is only a finish and not a separate material.

The lovely button depicting a young lady with her foot on an anchor also has a twinkle border. She appears in front of a black velvet background. This button is a fabric button. This button is called the *Spirit of Ocean Commerce (BBB 79-6)* and also is made with the velvet behind both the central design and the pierced border.

Two kittens play in a basket on this NBS medium button. The bright silver twinkle is behind the irregular border and does not show through any of the button design. Black lacquered back with a wire shank.



TWO PAGES OF BUTTONS THAT ARE NOT METAL BACKGROUND BUTTONS:

Before reading the descriptions, look at these buttons and see if you can spot the reasons they do NOT qualify as background buttons.



The two buttons on this page do not qualify because the background contains pictorial designs that are part of the button design, thus failing the test to “serve as an unimposing visual background for the entire design.”

WALL: Brass wall and potted plant in front of a detailed pewter city scene. White metal rim.



CHARTER OAK (so called): Brass design in front of a pewter background with a highly detailed architectural scene. NBS large.

NOT BACKGROUND BUTTONS:

These three buttons are open-work brass buttons. To qualify as a background button, a second piece of metal would need to appear behind the open-work brass.

The top floral button with cut steel OME is a screen back button.

Both the bird and satyr riding a lion are open-work conventional patterned brass disks topped by the images, like the screen



background.



TWINKLE BACKGROUNDS: (Clockwise from upper right.)

DOUBLE TWINKLE (BLUE & SILVER) behind a landscape containing cattails, reeds, trees, creek, bridge and railing. Set in white metal. NBS medium.

SILVER TWINKLE behind a triple pattern. Fleur de lis, interlaced & triad. NBS large.

GOLD TWINKLE behind a floral image. The gold shows through the round holes through the entire design.

GOLD TWINKLE under a dark tinted imitation fabric and cording brass design (tinted dark blue) and complemented by a clear glass paste. NBS medium.

SILVER TWINKLE behind a stamped brass image of "First a Kiss" (also known as "Pay Toll Here"). Note the lovely sea shell border. NBS medium. (Also found with a painted metal background.)



TWINKLE BACKGROUNDS:

(Clockwise from upper right.)

ARIEL (BBB 391-6) from *The Tempest* by Shakespeare. Pewter over a tinted and textured brass liner. The silver twinkle background represents water.

REPTILIAN DRAGON with outstretched wings. Stamped and tinted brass. A minute amount of twinkle metal shows through the lower part of the button design. It still qualifies as a background, even though there is only a tiny amount. This button dramatically demonstrates one of the basic rules of backgrounds—any amount showing qualifies the button as a background button—just not the border only (at least for twinkle backgrounds).

REBECCA AND ELIEZER AT THE WELL. Brass figures over a white metal twinkle background (lightened for illustrative purposes). Also found with a painted steel background.

LION TAMER. Stamped and pierced brass over a copper twinkle background (lightened for illustrative purposes). NBS small.



TWINKLE BACKGROUNDS: (Clockwise from upper right.)

SILVER TWINKLE behind radial cut surface with a central mounting of a glass pigeon eye (10-14.1.1). NBS small.

RED TWINKLE behind a brass fan painted in gold, silver and copper metallic paint. NBS small.

SILVER TWINKLE: Blondel, minstrel to Richard I of England. Stamped & pierced brass over textured brass and white metal twinkle shining through the building windows. Double rope border separated by a plant partial border. NBS large.

SILVER TWINKLE behind a brass shell depiction. Cut steel OME (other material embellishment). NBS small.

SILVER TWINKLE behind the thatched grass roof of this wonderful Stanley & Livingston original red tint button. BBB 491-5.



TWINKLE BACKGROUNDS: (From top)

TWO BIRDS. Brass pierced design over a bright gold twinkle background. Self shank. NBS medium.



MOSQUITO: Brass with bright shiny red twinkle background. Medium. Black lacquered back with wire shank.



FANNY DAVENPORT. Theater button. Actress Fanny Davenport with parasol. Brass with paint DF over bright silver background (hard to see in this scan). Medium. Black lacquered back with wire shank.



GUNTHER AND BRUNHILDE. Theater button. Brass design over bright silver twinkle background. Size NBS small. Black lacquered back with wire shank. BBB 582-20.



HONEYCOMB BRASS:

TWO DUCKS AND CATTAILS IN WATER. Pewter set in white metal over a copper tinted honeycomb background. NBS large.



WHITE METAL:

ARROWHEAD PLANT: Stamped brass above a white metal disk set in stamped brass. (Magnet tested.) Copper tint. Can be found as brass above a disk of steel set in gilt stamped brass and cut steel OME. NBS large.



CONVENTIONAL DESIGN: A small honeycomb patterned white metal background behind painted brass. NBS large.



STEEL BACKGROUNDS:

BOAR HUNTER the central steel disk is mounted in brass with an openwork irregular border. NBS large. **CONVENTIONAL DESIGN** above a steel disk mounted in brass with a lovely openwork border.



TEXTURED BRASS BACKGROUND:

This white metal image of a railing-topped brick wall, vase, and plant life is backed by a finely textured (detail below) brass disk set in the white metal Black japanned back. NBS small.

The fine texturing of the background on these buttons often goes unnoticed.



BRASS (Painted) BACKGROUND IN A STEEL CUP

Blue matte paint on an imitation fabric textured (detail below) brass disk set in a steel cup and topped with a stylized plant life design with cut steel OME in two sizes. Note the lovely stylized leaf and geometric border on the steel cup.



WHITE METAL WALLPAPER BACKGROUNDS:

BASKET OF FLOWERS: Stamped brass with cut steel OME (center flower and border) over a conventional designed white metal wallpaper background.

PLANT LIFE: White metal background of a floral wallpaper, further enhanced by a twinkle border.



BRASS WALLPAPER BACKGROUNDS:

CUT STEEL CROSS: Cross and points above a slightly-domed brass disk set in a steel cup. NBS medium.

FLOWER: Brass floral with cut steel OME over a brass wallpaper patterned brass disk set in a steel cup. NBS medium.



CRYSTALLIZED TIN BACKGROUNDS: (Clockwise from top)

NOTE THE VARIED TEXTURES FOUND IN THE CRYSTALLIZED TIN.

ROSE & PANSY: Stamped brass floral escutcheon of a pansy, rose, rosebud, and pansy bud over a crystallized tin background set in a dark original tint stamped brass button with an inner floral border.

BRIDGE: Pewter design in front of crystallized tin background. Medium.

RUNNING STAG: brass with black paint DF (decorative finish) in front of a crystallized tin background. NBS small.

CONVENTIONAL: Stamped brass design over crystallized tin background. NBS large.



DOUBLE BACKGROUNDS: (From top)

NOTE: The background materials in these buttons occupy the “same plane” in the buttons, but are separated under parts of the top design.

This complex little button depicts a “tussy mussy” and is part velvet and part twinkle. The tussy mussy tail and one of the top dots is backed with a twinkle background. Two dots and the main of the tussy mussy are backed with velvet. Small.

The red original tint brass design here is backed by both stamped white metal and dark red velvet. NBS small.

The Victorian style button below contains both a celluloid background (imitating tortoise shell) & a crystallized tin background. NBS medium.

The hexagon shaped button contains both celluloid and bone backgrounds—very unusual!



ENAMEL

Enamel pheasant with cut steel OME above a textured brass background. Set in a steel cup. Small.

BASKETWEAVE BACKGROUNDS IN STEEL CUPS

(Clockwise from upper right)

GRAPES: Brass with cut steel "grapes" over a brass basket weave disk set in a steel cup.

STYLIZED PLANT LIFE: Original bronze tinted brass with cut steel OME over a brass basket weave disk set in a steel cup. (Collection of Byron Buttons)

PLANT LIFE: Over brass disk in steel cup.

SHELL SHIP: Unidentified subject matter (Button Parade by Dorothy Foster Brown, pg 17-13)

CONVENTIONAL DESIGN: Brass with cut steel OME over brass disk in A steel cup.



It is accepted practice to accept all screens as background materials even if they are added to a brass button. Note that each of these backgrounds have a TWO-PIECE background construction: a second metal piece naturally appears behind the openwork screen as a liner underneath it. The liner is secondary, but necessary.

SCREEN BACKGROUNDS: (This page clockwise from top right.)

CROSS: Brass cutout above a brass screen background, further enhanced by cut steel other material embellishment (OME).

CUPID IN DANGER (note the quiver of arrows on his back): Cupid rides a rampant lion above a large serpent.

TWO CONVENTIONAL DESIGNS: Brass screen backgrounds over white metal. Round has red original tint decorative finish (DF). Square is enhanced with an engraved design.

ANDREA DEL SARTO: Brass screen background under a dark tint brass design. Interrupted twinkle border. BBB page 692-3. (Big Book of Buttons) NBS large.



SCREEN BACKGROUNDS:

LEAF: Brass leaf above a screen over a dull white metal background. NBS small.

RUMPLESTILTSKIN: Brass Rumpelstiltskin with a woman above a screen over a shiny metal. White metal rim. BBB pg 664-3.

Brass back with self shank.

TWO CONVENTIONAL DESIGN:

Both have gilt brass screen over shiny white metal.

NBS small.

TEASING MOTHER

BIRD or ROBBING

THE BIRDS: Brass

cherub climbs a

tree, with bird and

nest with young

birds. Over a brass

screen above

shiny white metal.

Geometric design



BRASS BACKGROUNDS SET IN STEEL CUPS

(Clockwise from upper right. All contain brass disks set in a steel cup.)

CRESCENTS & STARS: Steel over an imitation fabric patterned disk.

(Collection of Susan Porter.)

IVY LEAVES: Brass atop a brass screen background and brass disk. Cut steel OME (other material embellishment). (Collection of Byron Buttons.)

FLORAL: Pink tinted pewter over a patterned and gilt brass disk. NBS small.

CRESCENTS & STARS: Cut steel above a brown tint patterned brass disk.

RED TINT RADIAL: Steel stamped in a pierced radial pattern atop a patterned brass disk.

PETER PAN (as played by Maude Adams): Brass design above a gilt, textured brass disk set in a steel cup.

NBS large. BBB 487-14.

