BACKGROUND BUTTONS #1: Wood
First in a Series Concerning Background Buttons
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From the NBS Classification Guide

SECTION 14 - WOOD
14-6.1 Background (including solid and woven wood types) I III

SECTION 23 – SPECIFIC TYPES
23- 1 Backgrounds assorted I III
23- 1.1 Celluloid I III
23- 1.2 Fabric I III
23- 1.3 Glass I III
23- 1.4 Metal assorted I III
23- 1.4.1 Screen I
23- 1.4.2 Twinkle I III
23- 1.5 Shell I III
23- 1.6 Wood I III

Includes woven wood backgrounds as well as single piece.
(from the glossary)

23- 1.7 Unlisted (galena, etc.) I III

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 enclosed 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.

INTRODUCTION TO BACKGROUNDS

For a basic understanding of background buttons, Barbara Barrans, the Classifications Chairperson of the National Button Society, has provided the following summary that is both understandable and succinct. We are indebted to her articulation to help us understand these wonderful buttons.

“Base material concept
For any single given material, most buttons come in two basic forms. The button body may be made entirely of that material, or that same material may be mounted in/on metal. In both cases, the two buttons are considered to be the same material.

Background definition
Of the materials that come mounted in metal, some have special qualities that qualify them as backgrounds. When used as a background, the material acts as a backdrop to enhance other surface elements laid over it. To visualize this, think of a table setting of plates, flatware and glasses. You can place these directly on a bare table, or you can first spread out a tablecloth and then set the table. Backgrounds are similar to a tablecloth; they lay under (behind) the design that surmounts them but they still show through as part of the surface design they enhance. An escutcheon may be attached down through the background material, but the background material should not appear to be pierced. It should appear intact, like a table cloth.

Background vs. OME
A material is either a background or OME; it cannot be both. If the material is laid underneath to create a background effect, the button material IS considered to be the base material of the button; it is not OME. In contrast, OME is added to the surface of the base material.

A background may be minimal and need not be completely visible, but it is assumed that it underlies the entire surface design element. Amount of background coverage is not important. Just a small amount of velvet peeking through a cut out surface design qualifies the button as a velvet background. This is in contrast to OME, which is attached to the surface of the base material.

Background materials
Wood, pearl, fabric and celluloid are the most common background materials. Celluloid is a great imitator of other materials, and the variety of celluloid backgrounds reflects this. Other scarcer backgrounds include glass, enamel, bone, vegetable ivory, and galena. The only limitation is the imagination of the artist. There are several types of metal backgrounds, namely, twinkle (a shiny metallic liner), screen, embossed metal wallpaper and crystallized tin.

Most, but not all, backgrounds are Division I (made before 1918). However, some later ones were done using celluloid and fabric.

Background Types
I like to think of negative and positive design focus to distinguish two different types of backgrounds. The “positive” approach, clearly the most common, is where the subject or design is created by the
Two roosters. LEFT: Brass escutcheon on wood background with a stripe-textured border. RIGHT: A steel cup with rooster head as a shaped cut steel above the brass rooster comb and ruff.

surface design. Escutcheons illustrate this well; they form a distinct image, with the background material lying underneath, just passively supporting this “design.” The two bird buttons above illustrate this “positive” approach.

There is a less common type, usually done with fabric. In this “negative” version, the design is created by the background when the top metal surface is cut out to create a “silhouette” of the fabric underneath. The background material outlines or defines the design, rather than the reverse.”

WOOD BACKGROUNDS

Background buttons are some of the most lovely buttons in our collections. Some collectors consider them to be “deluxe” picture buttons.

Probably the most plentiful background buttons are wood, so we shall start our series with these beautiful buttons. For those of you who enjoy competition, remember that wood background buttons qualify in two sections: 23–SPECIFIC TYPES and 14–WOOD.

Processed wood qualifies as wood buttons, but bamboo, coconut shell or pits do not qualify as wood.

Every pictorial category can probably be found on background buttons. Very often the subject matter in these buttons also occurs in multiple background materials, and with other background treatments that do not qualify in Section 23. For instance, a prevalent background treatment is painted backgrounds. These buttons are not Section 23 background buttons, as a painted background is a decorative finish, is not another material, and is not a construction technique.

NOTE: You may assume that all buttons illustrating this article are 19th century buttons composed of wood backgrounds beneath a stamped and often pierced brass piece, unless otherwise noted.

WOOD, BUT NOT BACKGROUND BUTTONS

First, it is important to clearly understand what is NOT a background. Carefully read the glossary excerpt at the beginning of this article regarding background buttons. Then examine these examples to familiarize yourself with button types that can often show up in error on background button trays. The first five examples were provided by Barbara Barrans.
These two buttons are also NOT WOOD BACKGROUND BUTTONS. They are both WOOD CENTERS mounted in metal. Because the central focus/design is not another material above the wood, and the wood is not “serving as an unimposing visual background” for a design, the buttons are not Section 23 backgrounds.

The lovely button at RIGHT is a WOOD BUTTON with a central stamped and pierced brass floral image enhanced with a single cut steel. It has a separate stamped and pierced brass vine and grape leaf border. This is a WOOD button: the back of the button is WOOD, not metal.

The BRASS button at LEFT is a stamped brass escutcheon over a metal background that has been PAINTED to IMITATE WOOD.

BIRDS
ABOVE: Tree creepers with two distinctly different finishes. Note also the disparity in quality of the design. The dark original tint button has much finer detail in the birds and tree bark.

ABOVE: Song bird in flowers.
RIGHT TOP: Hen on a fence.
RIGHT BOTTOM: Water bird identified in the BBB as “Crane in the reeds” (BBB 337-19).
Note the difference in the grain, quality, and condition of these background woods.
MORE BIRDS
Three birds. RIGHT: This bird appears to be carrying a baton and chain. Note the discoloration of the wood, a frequent result of oil or solvent contact.

ANIMALS
BELOW: Aesops Fable: Lion in a Lush Valley over two different wood backgrounds. Note the highr quality stamping on the button at RIGHT BELOW. This button is also found with PAINTED backgrounds (which is decorative finish and would not be “background” buttons.)

MORE ANIMALS
ABOVE: Stamped brass escutcheons of butterflies and plant material.

ABOVE: Rampant lion. Some vestiges of purple original tint remain on the brass.

RIGHT: Fable. Eagle and the Stag (Pilpay).
MYTHOLOGY

Neptune, God of the Sea, with his symbol, the trident.

Thor, the Scandinavian god of thunder, war and agriculture in very high relief.

Medea. Brass rope border.

Minerva wearing a rooster helmet.

Escutcheons of a satyr riding a lion. Lovely border on the button at LEFT. While the button on the RIGHT evidences more wear than the button on the LEFT, it does show more detail. This button would also depict non-human transportation.

Jupiter & Minerva (Athene and Zeus). The central design appears to be made of three slightly different images. The buttons are backed by four different woods.
FABULOUS ANIMALS

Flowery dragon darkened with heavy original tint. The fine-grained, light wood provides a totally different appearance than the dark, broad-grained wood on the right.

RIGHT: Griffin with a flowery tail.

Steel cup with the wood, brass, & cut steels.

LEFT: Egyptian cat (Bubastis, the cat goddess of the hearth).

PLANTS
CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE
Silvered brass EIDELWEISS escutcheon.

Lovely high relief GRAPE leaves and moveable wood bead “grapes” over a wood background. Engraved brass border.

Silvered stamped brass BAMBOO over a wood background.

LILY OF THE VALLEY over a woven wood background. Ornate multiple borders with white metal liner.

Stamped brass wheat with a rope border.
CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE

Three stamped brass roses; two are escutcheons. Cut steel OME and an ornate scroll border on button on right and steel cut embellishment.

Brass escutcheon arrowhead plant.

A flower and a bud over wood background. Geometric twinkle border.

Two brass escutcheon morning glory designs on different wood backgrounds. Cut white metal liner and engraved border.

COUNTER CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE

Stamped pewter escutcheon floral image. Lovely wallpaper design border.

Floral image with scroll over a wood background. Folded ribbon border. Steel cut embellishment.

Water lily over wood background.

Stylized buckeye or chestnut leaf. Brass with a single plain border.

BOTTOM: Three plant images over wood backgrounds with slightly different rim borders.
CLOCKWISE:
Stylized lyre or harp festooned with flowers. In brass with chain link border. Brass purse escutcheon. Escutcheon hand with flowers. Silvered brass escutcheon lock.

TRANSPORTATION
RIGHT: Boy on a sailboat. Ill fitting wood background on this example. Modern versions of this button can be found with a flat brass background. The modern versions are scarcer. This older version has a rope border, appropriate to the sailing theme.

BOTTOM RIGHT: Caravel II (Hughes and Lester, pg. 773). The wood background on this particular button is unusually dark.

BELOW: Jaunting carriage. Also found with a full brass background.

OBJECTS
COUNTER CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE
Three Victorian doorknockers, very similar in design. The stamped brass escutcheon of the button at RIGHT is detailed. The button has an ornate border pattern. The center button has a very plain outer border and a thin, plain, white metal liner. The bottom button’s escutcheon is a lower quality molding with less definition. The ornate border is replaced with a cut/shaped white metal liner. (I think it’s interesting that there are only three doorknockers in the big book – none of them like this one.)

A beautifully detailed and ornate helmet. Closed visor.

Brass helmet escutcheon with weapons. This button has a cut white metal liner. The full brass version of this button has a pictorial border of screw heads.

Helmet with closed visor. One piece pierced brass design over wood background. Ivy leaves in border.

Pewter escutcheon of helmet (visor closed), sword, shield & lance.
CUPID, CHERUB, AND CHILDREN

COUNTER CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE
Cupid with bow and arrows riding an eagle on a nest. Pierced ivy leaf twinkle border.

Musical Cherub (Hughes and Lester, pg. 641) with a partial inner border of laurel wreath. This example has a shiny metal liner.

Hair Pulling. Two children fight from the confines of their high chairs. In some versions, there is a doll lying on the floor, presumably the cause of the fight.

Watering the Flowers. Cherub type figure tends his garden. Interrupted white metal liner. This example retains a bit of original color finish.

“Child or Fairy Wearing a Collar of Leaves” (Hughes and Lester, p. 652). This button can also be found with a celluloid background.

OBJECTS
CLOCKWISE FROM RIGHT
The Swiss Hunter (Hughes and Lester, pg. 668). Man carrying rifle and walking stick crossing a footbridge.

“Called OPHELIA from Shakespeare’s Hamlet” but actually from a painting called “Listening to the Fairies” (Hughes and Lester, pg. 584). Another wood background cut in a scalloped shape.

Female Egyptian head, or possibly an Egyptian funerary mask.

An art nouveau style profile of a woman with an elaborate hair style “in the style of Alphonse Mucha, the Czech Art Nouveau illustrator and painter” (Hughes and Lester, pg. 740). Silvered brass. Note the cut-away border on the wood background, and the characteristic dried splitting of the wood on the upper left and lower right sides.

ORIENTAL
ABOVE: King Yama from a Japanese folk tale. This button can also be found with a textured brass background.
RIGHT: Two very similar buttons. Called Mme. Chrysantheme, an opera button. Different original color finish on the brass and different borders give these two otherwise identical buttons a very different look.

MIDDLE EAST
The Desert Rider. Different versions of the same button with variations in original color finish and type of wood in background.

MISCELLANEOUS
RIGHT: Known as “Ivanhoe.” Equestrian emerging through gate or drawbridge. Chain border.
BELOW: Fanny Davenport who was a popular late 19th century actress. This button can be found with several different backgrounds. This one, and most variations, has a twinkle border.

BELOW: Known as “Halley’s Comet,” this button has a slightly different moon border with two different types of wood in the background.

SINCERE APPRECIATION
Buttons images were provided by Bruce Cole, Tom & Barbara Barrans, Claudia Chalmers, Deb Hanson, Jane Quimby, Judy Schwenk, Joni Goldbarg, Connie & Bud Weiser, and Joy Journeay.