BACKGROUND BUTTONS #3: Fabrics
Third in a Series Concerning Background Buttons
by Joy Journeay and Barbara Barrans

From the NBS Classification Guide

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SECTION 23 - SPECIFIC TYPES
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    Includes woven wood backgrounds as well as single piece.
    (from the appendix)
  23-1.7 Unlisted (galena, etc.)

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.

INTRODUCTION TO BACKGROUNDs

Fabric is one of the most common materials used in background buttons. As you assess your fabric buttons, keep in mind that the
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.

Before we begin an exploration of the fabric background button
types, let’s review three fabric buttons which do NOT qualify as background buttons.

These three do not qualify as fabric background buttons. The button at right is a woven fabric in metal. The central button is needlework on a woven green fabric. While the black fabric of the button at left is behind the cording, trim and beading, this is not a background button, as it is not mounted in metal, but is a fabric button with OME.

**FABRIC BACKGROUNDs**

Barbara Barrans refers to the most common type of background button as a “positive design” — where the button subject matter or design is defined by the surface material. The button at right would fall into this definition: the black velvet fabric background enhances a painted scroll design with cut steel OME and cut steel border.

Barrans describes a less common type of background button, 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.

While Barrans notes that these negative fabric buttons are often referred to as “perfume” buttons, there is no evidence to support that they were actually used for that purpose. It is likely that the perfume would have discolored and deteriorated the velvet. She acknowledges that the name however, does have whimsy!
“POSITIVE DESIGNS” BACKGROUNDS (clockwise from top right)
Stamped brass buttons with woven fabric backgrounds (velvet is a woven fabric).
Knight of the Holy Grail, with club, sword, shield and lance. BBB 79-10.
Flower-tailed cockatrice dragon. BBB 430.
Stag leaping a fence. BBB 79-25
Flower and ribbon
Linear and clematis. Note the very large weave in this background button.
Center buttons: stylized plant forms.

FIVE ESCUTCHEON BACKGROUND BUTTONS
RIGHT: woman’s head with a velvet background which now has most of the velvet rubbed off. Door knocker over black velvet background. BELOW: Three Division III brass background buttons; the right two are backmarked “Sam Biern.”

ABOVE: An unusual fabric background behind a pierced, molded celluloid rose set in brass with a white metal collet. RIGHT: Tinned brass stag head over a purple woven background. Hoof and whip border.
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**THREE BUTTONS WITH COMPLEX BACKGROUNDS**

RIGHT: Brown velvet background complimented by a gilt, textured background behind the imitation cording fabric design.

BELOW LEFT: Brown velvet background behind a stamped brass depiction of a building with a train crossing a bridge, PLUS a twinkle border beneath the ivy and vine border.

BELOW RIGHT: Black velvet background and a white metal background behind the round brass screen mesh.

**FIVE VELVET BACKGROUND BUTTONS:** Auubon with a bird, Pyramid and palm tree, Berries, Bear claw, and Stag with a purple original tint.