

Velvet Background



The class of buttons known as “Velvet Backgrounds” forms a charming group and can be assembled into a very attractive arrangement. Usually a metal design has been placed over a background of velvet, which has been secured by sizing, to a metal back. A metal rim is applied and forms a frame for the center design. In some cases, the velvet is covered with a thin sheet of metal which has a cut out design, allowing the velvet to show through and make or enhance the design.

A number of the popular Victorian “picture” button designs were made up in this way while other designs seem to have been made up only as velvet backs. These metal buttons embellished with velvet are sometimes called “Perfume Buttons” because of a belief that a drop of perfume was customarily applied to the velvet. Whether or not this belief is founded on fact, I don’t know. Like many accepted theories, it is possible, if somewhat lacking in proof. The name “velvet back”, on the other hand, explains itself; and seems descriptive and suitable enough to serve as a title—until a better one is suggested. *

The button at right has a metal design placed over a background of velvet. It depicts a bishop with miter and crozier in a Confirmation scene. The button has a hump shank. At left is another example of a metal design over velvet. It is called the Knight of the Holy Grail. The metal is stamped, tinted and pierced on the black velvet background.



This metal button at right is cut out, so that the velvet itself forms part of the design. There are combinations of the different types, and some buttons consist of a plain velvet center in a metal rim.



As regards subject matter, Conventional and Floral designs predominate, with a scattering of Pictures.

At right an elegant example of a floral design over velvet. The open flower is complimented with a swirl of buds in the border.**



At left, bright cut pewter with accents of black velvet. This metal is not as common as brass.



Some of these designs are seen with celluloid or shiny metal liners. Some use other fabrics besides velvet.



The Deco-style button at left has a white metal twinkle in the sphere. The button at right illustrates the fashion during the Roaring Twenties, when one wanted to wear images of the mysteries of the pyramids, after the discoveries of the treasures of King Tutankhamen in 1922.



At left is a tinted metal button. The tint compliments the fabric.

The button on the left could be Audubon holding a bird. The button on the right is called a Dickensian character.



No group of Velvet Backs would be complete without one example of this design at left—the most ubiquitous of its kind. It has been found in twenty-three variations, of size, color, and shank. Fourteen of these designs qualify as Velvet Backs. To achieve such popularity, the design must have something! This button is small with japanned back and loop shank.*

According to The Big Book of Buttons Price Guide, 2011 edition, among the most expensive velvet back buttons are the stag leaping a fence; the “Spirit of Ocean Commerce”, which has a pierced border with the velvet showing through; and “Union Pacific”, which also has an interesting twinkle border. The all metal version of the Union Pacific is valued considerably lower.

*page 211, Button Parade by Dorothy Foster Brown, 1968 edition.

**Button in the collection of Mary Furey.

All other buttons from the collection of Marsha Cassada or the Internet.