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187 ORIGINAL BLOCKS FABRICATED FOR DUBOIS'S COOK BOOKS

WOODBLOCKS. Collection of Original Woodblocks Used to Illustrate French Culinary Classics. Ca. 1880's. \$ 12,000.00



One hundred eighty-seven (187) original woodblocks (see photos 1 - 4) for illustrations of various dishes, surtouts, kitchen equipment, etc., that appeared in works by Urbain Dubois (1818-1901). Information provided on back labels of single blocks (more on this below) identifies the following sources:

La Grand Livre des pâtissiers et des confiseurs
La Cuisine de tous le pays
La cuisine d'aujourd'hui
La Cuisine artistique, étude de l'école moderne
La Cuisine classique

Given that each of these titles typically contained hundreds of illustrations and that identification of all of the woodblocks has not been achieved, it is unlikely that this group constitutes a complete set for any single title. It is possible that some were used in multiple works, but that remains to be verified.

Dubois is a pivotal figure in the history of French cuisine and certainly one of the most prolific culinary authors of the Belle Epoque. He is credited with introducing *service à la russe* to Western Europe, and some scholars attribute the usage of the term *chef*, as we intend it today, to his publications. Some of his works were translated into English, initiating an important cross-channel exchange of culinary methods.

The general condition of the blocks is quite good. Only three present damage (photo 5), perhaps due to the wear and tear of printing many editions. Many present traces of the solution of zinc white in gum Arabic that provided the ground for the artist's design before sculpting (photos 6 - 7). In these cases, the image is clearly visible. Others bear heavy traces of ink, making it more difficult to discern the carved image (photo 8).

A few of the blocks bear the trademark of the company that provided the boxwood: W. Güldenstein – Brandenburgstr 55 – Berlin or [Gül]denstein Fabrik für Buxbaumplatten – Berlin S – Brandenburgstr – 35 (photos 9 and 10).

Many (but not all) of the blocks bear back labels that appear to be recycled bits of stationery from the historic Librairie Salet in Paris (subsequently Salet & Soete and finally Flachard). These labels, applied with cello tape, are hand-written and contain the following information with some variations: title, date, and edition of the book where the illustration appeared as well as the name of the particular dish. Many also contain numbers written in various hands (Photos 11, 12, 13). Calligraphic numerals also appear on some blocks, peeking out from below the paper labels.

My tally is 136 blocks with labels and 51 without.

The woodblocks offer a unique view of a particular printing period and of gastronomical history. A motivated researcher could take this material in many different directions. How many times were the blocks reused? What impact did such a rich iconographic apparatus have on the price of the books at the time they were issued? Why were the woodblocks imported from Prussia? Perhaps it was due to the author's connection to the crown. For a time, Dubois was *chef de cuisine* to Wilhelm I, Emperor of Germany. What was the relationship between Dubois and the artist (unidentified as far as I know) who carved the blocks? Catherine Slessor has examined Dubois' works in relation to architectural history:

Dubois's fame spread through his widely disseminated culinary manuals, featuring an immense repertoire of designs with precise instructions for their manufacture. He was familiar with every style of architectural ornament down to its smallest detail and insistent on the correct application of various styles, scrupulously categorizing them according to the demands of particular materials. 'It is the unquestionable truth that ornaments in icing sugar are best compatible with the Gothic style of architecture', he writes, while 'designs in fat' are recommended for Classical subjects. He provided detailed drawings of the various architectural orders which could be formed into porticoes 'used for monuments and fancy buildings and applied indifferently to ornament cold meats or pastry'.

<https://www.architectural-review.com/essays/let-them-eat-cake-urbain-dubois>

More images available upon request.