# LeBlond & Co., Printers

*By* R. W. LeBlond

*Fig. 1* — "Wedding Day," Oval
A first pull from the press, without embossing. 5 ¼ by 6 ⅝ inches

## The Process

NO SOONER had printing been invented, about 1445, than attempts to enhance its effects with color were begun. Not long after the first use of movable type came Fust's Psalter (*1457*) and its two-color initials, the first known to have been rendered by mechanical means. A few other instances of printing from woodblocks, in two or more flat tints, are known in the late fifteenth century; but it was not until the sixteenth century that printing in color came into general use. The early process is known as *chiaroscuro*. The printers employing it found that by using two or more blocks they could impose one tint upon another, so as to obtain varying intensities of light and shade. These men usually confined themselves to three blocks, the first printing the outline of the subject, the second an intermediate value, and the third a still lighter tone.

Then, in 1557, Hubert Goltzius, for the first time, used an intaglio-engraved metal plate for his outline instead of the woodblock. In this way he achieved greater delicacy and precision in his work. None of these early prints, however, reproduced the colors of nature; they were, indeed, little more than shaded monochromes. Although the Goltzius method was used from time to time during succeeding years, the genesis of colored pictures from metal plates run through a press must be credited to James Christopher LeBlon, not to be confused with LeBlond, though an ancestor. In 1720 LeBlon invented what he called "printing paintings." He may also be called the originator of the three-color process (now called four-color), for he pointed out that all visible objects could be represented by combining the primary colors, red, yellow, and blue. Acting on this principle, he employed three metal plates, one for each color, in addition to the key plate. These he combined in a variety of ways to achieve delicate and charming effects. There is more merit in this process than the troubled life and financial failure of LeBlon would indicate, but after the inventor's death few continued it.

The theory of woodblock printing was again revived in 1754, when John Baptist Jackson managed to publish some specimens in proper colors "as seen in nature." Again, in 1825, appeared a revival of this method and the publication of a book on the subject by William Savage, with illustrations turned out on his press that were a considerable improvement over anything previously developed. However, neither man had a following, and the process was used principally for printing calicoes and wall paper.

In the year 1836, George Baxter, an engraver who had spent many heartbreaking years in efforts to devise a method whereby he could "mechanically render a picture in its natural and proper colours," obtained a patent for producing printed oil paintings which he called "picture printing in oil colours." His process was a combination of the two already in use: that is, he combined the plate method of LeBlon and the woodblock method of Jackson and Savage. Thus he imitated LeBlon to the extent that he used an engraved metal plate for the foundation of his print in black or monochrome; then added his colors by the woodblock process. In addition he used oil inks, ground from the same materials employed by painters on canvas. Baxter must be viewed as an originator, for, though his basic methods were in themselves familiar, his use of a separate block for each color or color variation was something entirely new in the field of color printing. (See Antiques for October 1924, *p. 187*, and November 1926, *p. 360*.)

So the three features

*Fig. 2* — "The Leasure Hour, No. 112"
One of the rarer ovals, embossed on its card. The spelling of leisure is LeBlond's. 6 ¾ by 5 ¼ inches

essential to a Baxter patent process print are: a metal plate for the complete composition, woodblocks for the colors, and oil inks. In producing a single print Baxter utilized as many as thirty blocks to secure the proper chromatic variations. The labor thus involved was great, for just as each hue and value necessitated a separate block, so the print had to be passed as many times through the press. It was this complicated and painstaking procedure, however, that gave Baxter prints a depth of color, a subtlety of values, and a precision of form never before achieved by the printing press. It seems poetically just that the period of color printing from hand-prepared plates should begin with James Christopher LeBlon, the inventor, and after Baxter's perfecting of the art should terminate in the work of LeBlon's descendants, LeBlond & Company.

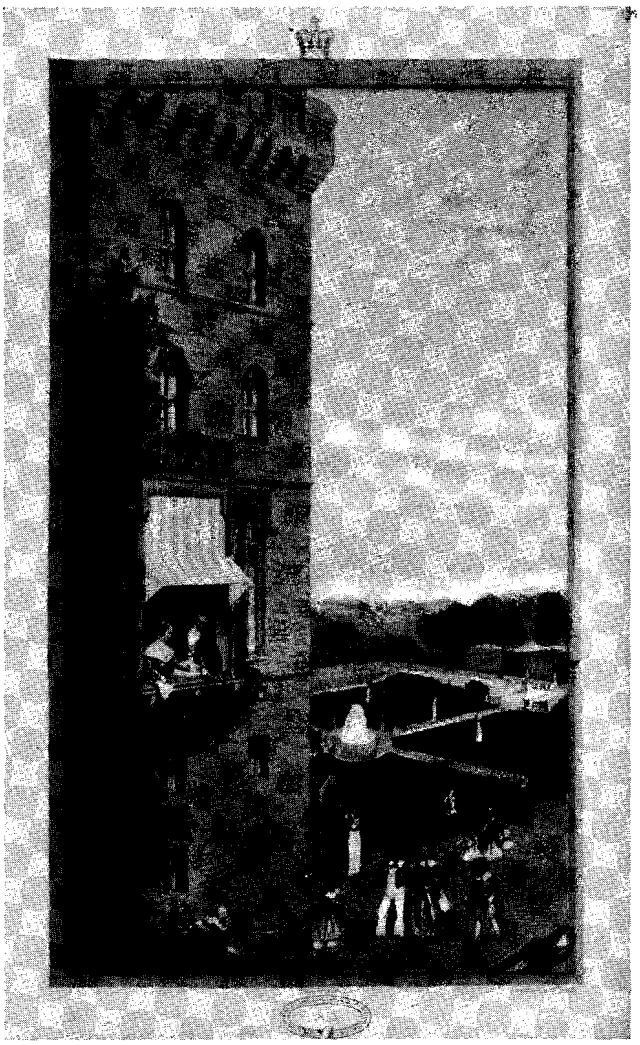

*Fig. 3* — "Scene at Windsor Castle and the Whole of the Royal Family" (*dated 1850*)
Printed on card. Below, *Printed in Colors by LeBlond & Co., Licensees. Drawn by Edwd. Wells. 24, Budge Row, London.*
4 7/8 by 8 3/8 inches

### The Company

The firm of LeBlond & Co. was founded in 1840 by the brothers Robert and Abram LeBlond. For seven years they carried on their trade as steel and copperplate engravers and printers in Walbrook, London, finally enlarging their quarters to include the building at 24 Budge Row. While during this period their work was of a general nature, they cast rather envious glances at their rival, George Baxter, then at the height of his success as a printer of pictures in color. So we find the brothers experimenting with color work, turning out a few polychromatic dress-goods labels by the woodblock method of printing.

Robert LeBlond, the elder of the two brothers, was born August 4, 1816, son of a successful miniature painter. After a brief schooling he was apprenticed to one Thomas Brooker, a copperplate engraver, whose sister Sarah he eventually married. Robert was restless and aggressive. Soon after entering into partnership with his brother, he became traveler for the firm, selling printing, dress-goods labels, and, in time, printed pictures, throughout the United Kingdom. In fact, during his first year in the business he made a short trip to America, presumably on business for his firm, but actually, according to letters written to his wife, to see "what prospects this new country held for a young man of ability." It was during this American tour that he first met L. A. Elliott of 322 Washington Street, Boston, an importer of European prints and engravings. What brought the two men together we do not know. We may, however, be certain that no arrangements were made for handling LeBlond products, none of which, at that time, were of a kind to interest Elliott or his customers. In 1856 Robert LeBlond left England to settle in America. With him he carried the exclusive franchise to distribute LeBlond prints and for six years did business through the South-Western Book Agency of Cincinnati.

Until the outbreak of the Civil War he did well. But in 1862 we find a letter from his brother demanding cash payment in advance on future shipments, a ruling necessitated by chaotic conditions in America. It is believed that this situation prompted Robert to dispose of his distribution rights to Elliott, with whom we know he had already resumed his early associations of friendship. This surmise is sustained by the fact that none of the LeBlond prints issued prior to 1862 carry the Elliott imprint, and, further, that during the same year LeBlond severed his connection with the Cincinnati firm, to start a printing venture of his own. The printing of the Elliott name on LeBlond prints may well have been arranged to circumvent the rigid custom rulings of Civil War days. Robert's new venture as a printer was ill-timed and unsuccessful. In 1863 he returned to England, where he died October 18 of that year. Though he was himself a financial failure, his success in introducing LeBlond prints into America kept the London firm active for many years.

It has always been apparent that the younger of the two brothers, Abram, was the stronger personality. His ability and stability kept the business in operation from 1856, when his mercurial brother left it, until almost the end of the century. Abram LeBlond was born February 11, 1819, and learned his trade from the same source as did his brother Robert. In 1842 he married a cousin and moved to Kingston, Surrey, where he lived until his death in 1894. At the outset of his partnership with his brother, we find him spending much of his spare time in experiments with color work. He was an excellent engraver, and until prosperity permitted the employment of skilled assistants, he himself wielded the engraver's tool. In 1849, when George Baxter was selling licenses to utilize his patent process, Abram LeBlond personally visited Baxter's shop to study the inventor's methods. So LeBlond & Co. became the first, and probably the most successful, of the licensees authorized to produce "picture printing in oil colours" by the Baxter method.

A clear idea of how the LeBlond firm utilized the Baxter process may best be derived from a letter written by Robert E. LeBlond, son of one of the partners in LeBlond & Co., to the editor of the *Inland Printer:*

Cincinnati, Ohio, January 12, 1909

. . . I worked in the office of LeBlond and Company, 24 Budge Row, London, who were the licencees of Baxter; this was in 1854 and 1855. . . .

The actual printing of the oil prints, as they were designated by us, was carried on in the workshops at No. 4 Walbrook, a small street leading out of Budge Row and coming out on Cheapside by the Mansion House. This work was all done on hand presses; in fact, outside the newspapers and large book offices, there were no power presses then. We had over twenty hand presses at Walbrook, and at Budge Row half a dozen lithograph presses and as many copper-plate presses. I pulled a hand press in the room just outside of the one where the oil prints were

printed. I was then fourteen years old. As a rule, the other employes were not allowed in there. . . .

According to my recollection, these prints were first engraved on a steel plate, as Dawson says, a key plate, or, as I should call it, a master plate. From transfers from this the different color blocks were engraved, mostly on boxwood, some on copper. In printing, each form contained two blocks, each of a different color, two colors being used at a time on the ink table. The roller had about two inches cut out of the center, so that the colors would not mix. When the top sheet on the tympan was printed, it was taken off the points and put on a lower set of points and a new sheet was put on above. At times, the pressman touched up a certain part that needed it with a little pad of composition carrying a different tint to what was on the roller. This, as you may imagine, was slow work; I should say that nine hundred [prints] a day was the maximum.

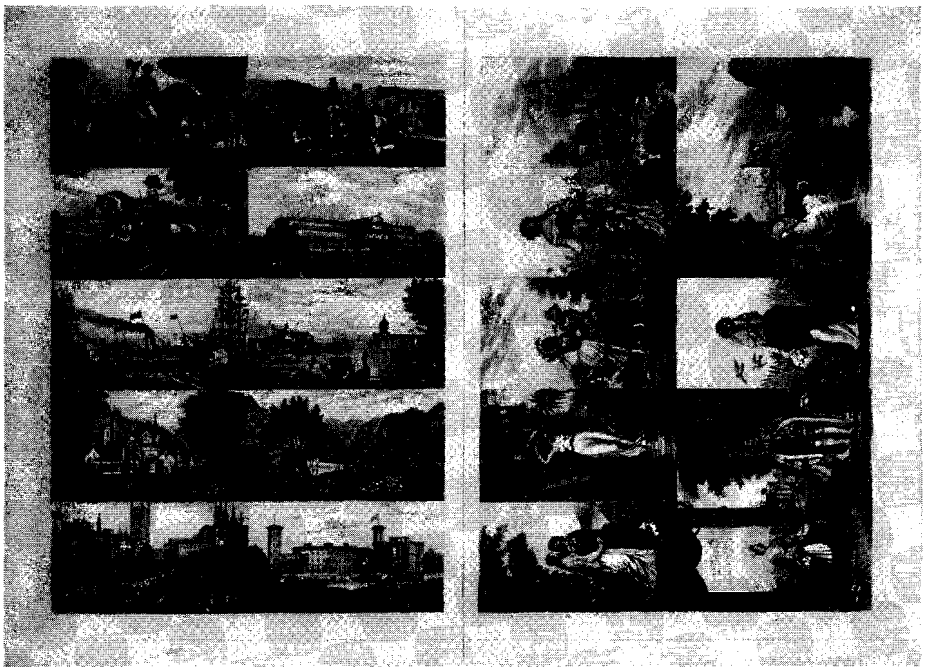

*Fig. 4* — A Complete Set of Needle-Box Prints on their Original Sheet
Printed from one plate. Each subject, 1 by 1 13/16 inches

The sheets were printed on dry stock. . . . The color was furnished us dry and was ground and mixed as it was needed, mostly by the apprentice, while the journeyman made the form ready. This was generally the rule all over the shop. All colors came dry, except chinese blue and black, and perhaps a few others.

A man was employed to grind most of the ink where comparatively large quantities were needed, but on smaller and more particular jobs, each pressman had his own stone muller and ground and mixed his own ink. In the oil-print department they had certain standard tints, of which they kept a little stock on hand, carefully protected from drying, and replenished them by fresh grinding when needed.

Most of these forms [those for prints] were kept locked up all the time. When a run was finished, the chase with tympan frame attached, containing all the make-ready, was lifted off the press and carefully stood aside, and the chase with the next two colors was put on. This, while involving quite an outlay for chases, etc., effected a considerable saving of time in making ready. A different point hole was used for each impression, as can be seen by some of the prints I have sent you; fifteen or more holes are on some, showing that number of colors have been used. It would take quite an expert to pick out and number the different colors.

Robert E. LeBlond

This involved process was first set up in his shop by Abram LeBlond himself. It was a closely guarded secret, and it was not until the demand for prints increased tremendously that he desisted from personally taking part in their production. Later, when the Baxter plates were acquired, and several of Baxter's former employees were hired, Abram felt that he was better qualified to set up the blocks than even those who had so long been with the inventor.

Unfortunately, the advent of chromolithography spelled the doom of the older modes of printing in color, and Abram LeBlond saw his business gradually slip away to competitors who commanded cheaper methods of production. In 1894, after a gallant struggle against overwhelming odds, the firm of LeBlond & Co. was dissolved. During that same year, his end undoubtedly hastened by financial reverses. Abram LeBlond died

*Fig. 5* — "The Lady Harpist"
Produced for a pocket book. Signed at lower left, *LeBlond & Co. Licencees*. Pasted with a gilt frame on a card. 2 7/8 by 3 7/8 inches

### The Work

From the organization of the company in 1840 until acquisition of Baxter's patent in 1849, LeBlond & Co. operated as a general printing firm, with a leaning toward the artistic. Shortly after their establishment as a company they began turning out dress-goods labels in color by the woodblock method. They led the field in fancy bill heads and calling cards, advertising matter, and bookplates. Even after the adoption of the Baxter process of printing in color, they kept twenty presses busy on miscellaneous work.

But the years of their greatest activity followed their entry into the field of color printing. During this period they issued some 126 original color prints, that is, prints in which the design was their own. While they were but imitators of Baxter in process, they must be credited with a series of prints that depict life as it was in the days of our parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents in rural England; the homes, habits, and habiliments of the people, their labors and pleasures. Although the reprints from Baxter's plates, known as "LeBlond-Baxters," are careless in workmanship, the firm's original creations are virtually equal to those of Baxter.

The most popular and pleasing of LeBlond's original work is the series of prints known to us as "the ovals." These peaceful, wholesome prints depict the leafy lanes and green trees LeBlond loved so well, the village church, the fun and mischief of happy childhood, the faithful dog, the cottage homes and village scenes, each print suggesting a homely story. Although LeBlond had issued many prints prior to bringing out his distinctive "ovals," the latter represented his first venture in the purely decorative field, for ovals were made up as independent pictures, not as adjuncts to pocket books, needle boxes, or music covers.

The ovals, all alike in size and manner of production, were a distinct advance in the manner of issuing printed pictures. Instead of being pasted on a mount, they were printed directly upon an embossed mount itself, with title and distinctive number embossed on the lower

right-hand corner of each mount. The ovals proper all measure 5 ¼ by 6 ¾ inches, their full sheet approximately 8 by 10 inches. All the ovals carry LeBlond's imprint in the body of the print. In a great many the imprint of LeBlond and Elliott will be found. The set of thirty-two, with titles and LeBlond's number, are listed here in chronological order: (49) *The Image Boy;* (50) *Please Remember the Grotto;* (72) *Good News;* (73) *The Burning Glass;* (74) *Blowing Bubbles;* (75) *The Pet Rabbitts;* (76) *The Blackberry Gatherers;* (77) *The Soldiers Return;* (78) *The Sailors Departure;* (79) *The Gleaners;* (80) *The Mill Stream — Towing the Prize;* (81) *The Cherry Seller;* (82) *The Pedler;* (83) *The Showman;* (84) *The Young Angler;* (85) *May Day;* (86) *The 5th of November;* (87) *Crossing the Brook;* (88) *The Village Spring;* (89) *Snowballing;* (90) *The Fisherman's Hut;* (91) *Waiting at the Ferry;* (92) *The Swing;* (93) *The Birds Nest;* (99) *Grandfather's Pipe;* (100) *Grandmother's Snuff Box;* (101) *Sunday Morning;* (102) *The Wedding Day;* (103) *Dancing Dogs;* (104) *Learning to Ride;* (111) *Moonlight;* (112) *The Leasure Hour.*

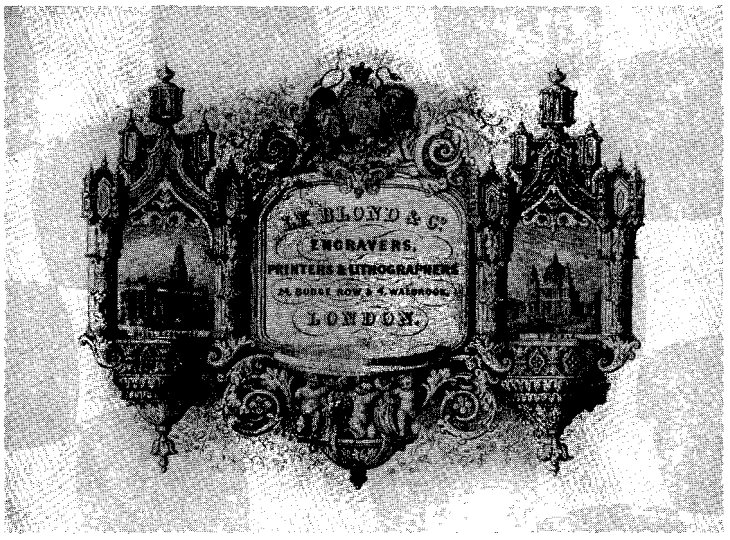


*Fig. 6* — LeBlond's Business Card
Line engraving

Next to the ovals, the prints known as the "small landscapes" enjoy most popular favor. It cannot be claimed that these little prints have the depth of color or delicacy of tone of the ovals, though they were produced about the same time. Neither are they printed directly upon the mount, the majority being pasted on a gilded or embossed mount. The majority of these twenty-three small prints bear no signature, although all but three carry the embossed number of LeBlond. Like the ovals they are uniform in size, the print itself being 2 ¼ by 3 ¾ inches, on a mount measuring approximately 4 by 6 inches. These prints were produced in the fulfillment of a contract with Peacock, Mansfield & Sons for pocket-book covers (similar to our memorandum books) and were turned out in generous quantities. This may account for their apparent scarcity today. A chronological list, with titles and numbers, follows: (No number) *Ayr;* (No number) *New York Bay;* (No number) *Chamouni;* (2) *Brothers Water, Westmorland;* (3) *Venice;* (21) *Bingen, Rhine;* (22) *Lake Lugano, Italy;* (23) *Coblentz, Rhine;* (24) *Rheinfels, Rhine;* (27) *Castle of Heidelberg, Rhine;* (28) *The Britannia Bridge;* (34) *The Gate of Justice. The Alhambra;* (35) *Londonderry;* (36) *Lock Katrine, Scotland;* (37) *Abbotsford;* (39) *Head of Windermere;* (40) *Head of Derwentwater;* (55) *Ullswater;* (56) *Durham Cathedral;* (57) *Ballinahinch Lake;* (58) *Ben Lomond;* (95) *Brighton;* (96) *Ramsgate.*

Less known among LeBlond's work are the prints known as "fancy subjects." These, like the landscapes, were turned out to serve as needle-box covers, for pocket books, and as illustrations on sheet music. Their mounting was an afterthought, and it is quite difficult to secure many of them in that state. In fact, several have never been seen mounted. These fancy subjects represent LeBlond's initial venture into color work under the Baxter patent process. Their workmanship lacks the quality visible in the firm's other work. These prints, however, were not intended for decorative use, but were sold in lots at a very low price to needle-box and pocket-book makers. Few prints in this series bear LeBlond's signature, but when found mounted will carry the distinctive number embossed on the mount. Examples are becoming scarce. Nearly all of them depict the fair sex, often in scanty raiment, and as no other printer in color produced any subjects of this type, LeBlond's may be readily identified.

Any attempt to catalogue the rest of LeBlond's original product would be impossible, for the subjects are far too numerous and diversified. Nevertheless, eighteen small prints pertaining to royalty deserve mention. Those are usually found on mounts, and a majority bear LeBlond's signature. The larger examples represent the last efforts of LeBlond to produce original works. After their issuance we find him turning out nothing but reprints from Baxter's plates. The nine large prints seldom appear upon a mount, and the best method of identification is by the blue label bearing LeBlond's name and number on the reverse of the picture. These larger prints were not disposed of until after the death of Abram LeBlond, at which time they were thrown upon the market in large quantities, and often in an unfinished state. Among them one deserves particular attention, *Highland Lake,* probably the finest as well as the rarest of LeBlond's works. It was printed from twenty-two blocks. Seldom, if ever, is it seen on a LeBlond mount.

Regardless of latter-day criticism, LeBlond in his ovals and small landscapes left to posterity a group of prints original in design and deft in workmanship. Our admiration for him will be intensified when we realize the difficult transitional period in which he lived, and the obstacles with which he had to contend. He seemed to take much pride in his own creations. The quality of the ovals bears excellent witness to this. As an industrialist, LeBlond was a failure; but he is certainly deserving of a niche in the gallery of great color printers. The time will undoubtedly come when the value of his achievement in the field of color printing will be fully recognized.


*Fig. 7* — Bill Head Printed by LeBlond
Doubly interesting because the bill was made out to LeBlond when he was traveling for his firm. Mrs. Turner charged her guest one shilling ninepence for breakfast, two shillings for dinner, eighteen pence for tea, the same for his bed, and sixpence per day for service