Design Notebook

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A rich collection of wallcoverings.

I DID not grow up with wallpaper, and I married a man who would not have wallpaper in the house; he made it very clear, very soon, that our walls were to be painted, and that I could have any color I wanted as long as it was white.

Not only have I never lived with wallpaper, but I cannot confess to any sense of frustration or deprivation without it, or any secret longings for it. Wallpaper makes demands on me that I am not prepared to meet; visual serenity is my thing. Moreover, I am convinced that it has ruined more rooms than it has rescued, and if I were to grade the atrocities visited on architectural space by interior designers I would rank wallpaper as the original decorative sin.

All of which would make me seem singularly unqualified to write about the splendid display of wall coverings currently at the Cooper-Hewitt Museum, 2 East 91st Street, through Oct. 26. It is the museum's first formal presentation of an incredibly rich sampling of one of the finest collections in the world.

On the other hand, I see wallpaper with a special kind of eye, and, I believe, an appreciative one. I do not look at it like the householder with a compulsion to cover surfaces, or as an instrument of status or chic. I am fascinated by wallpaper as a uniquely revealing document — a vehicle of dreams and aspirations, a means of instant transformation, a carrier of infinite fantasies, and a democratic diffuser of styles. It is a record of taste and custom at any given time, reflected with unfailing accuracy on the most intimate and revealing level.

Wallpaper is to be enjoyed as a purely sensuous experience — the charm of the 18th-century scenic panels that put one in a remote Chinese landscape of pavilions, bamboo and improbable urns; the sunstruck colors of exquisite, illusionistic French flowers or the intricate, flattened skeins of blooms and leaves of the English Arts and Crafts Movement.

It is easy to be seduced by the extravagant architectural trompe l'oeil that makes up miraculously for a poverty of the real thing. What child has not awakened to discover and count a patterns' repeat and invent new variations? Wallpaper is a kind of magic that deals in quick and easy enchantment; it turns ordinary rooms into instant gardens of delight.

The design of wallpaper, at various times, has been an act of art, an esthetic manifesto, a moral statement, and a testament to creative and technical skills. The most accessible and least costly of the decorative arts, it tells us more about every generation's idea of beauty and suitability than any other of the arts of the home. Wallpaper is esthetic and social and cultural history — I just happen to like it on other people's walls.

All this delight and information is at the Cooper-Hewitt, and more. There are some 150 wallcoverings from the permanent collection, including Chinese, European and American examples, ranging from the 17th to the 20th century. The color spectrum goes from the most brilliantly and beautifully hued realism achieved through hand-printing with hundreds of wooden blocks to the grayed tones and "ashes of roses" favored by the esthetic reformers of the late 19th century.

The material is exhibited according to "themes" or subject matter, an arrangement that stresses the amazing variations possible, using such constant motifs as flowers, foliage and animal forms. There is one section on paper as imitation and substitute for all manner of materials, from the textiles that they first copied to tooled leather, marble and wood. Their styles are always a mirror of "high styles," such as classical, rococo, medieval, Oriental, Art Deco and Art Nouveau, absorbed into the decorative mainstream.

For historical, technical and stylistic information, two books based on the Cooper-Hewitt collection will soon be available. In November, W. W. Norton will publish a Barra Foundation/Cooper-Hewitt book on "Wallpaper in America," by Catherine Lynn, the former curator of the museum's wallpaper collection, who is also preparing a handbook of its resources.

A large part of the show is devoted to an exploration of the uniquely and curiously contradictory nature of wallpaper — its capacity for illusion versus surface pattern. The kind of pictorial realism that dematerializes walls, and the geometric repetition of elements that emphasizes and increases the walls' sense of physical presence, have been equally popular.

Catherine Lynn writes of the "seductive realism" of scenic papers: "They blasted away the reality of being shut inside and offered access through illusion to the vastness of all outdoors, catapulting the viewer into some remote corner of the earth. They delivered American provincials to the glamorous tourist meccas of Europe and soothed the nerves of city dwellers with vistas of serene countryside and garden."

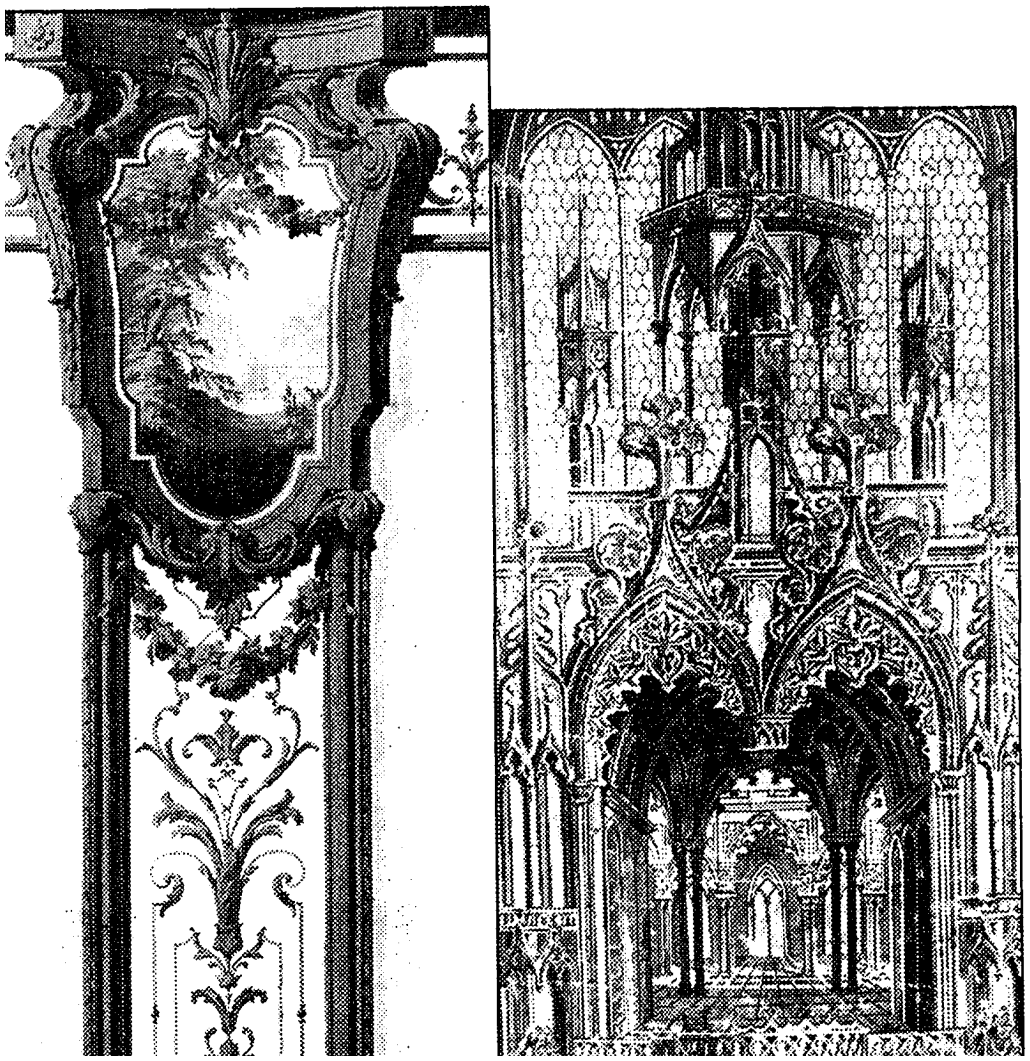
If nature could be commanded, so could architecture. Cornices, moldings, arches, "pillars" or columns, carvings in stone or wood that cunningly reproduce texture, ornament and shadow — all added the refinement of rich architectural detail to middle-class homes for instant palatial splendor. Complete trompe l'oeil settings could be created in any fashionable style. But why stop there? Popular 19th-century papers copied famous paintings and statues, framing them in appropriate borders, to put high art on the walls of the masters.

The reaction, and the return to surface treatment, came toward the end of the century, when the English Arts and Crafts Movement mounted an assault on the prevailing taste. William Morris and his peers preached that illusion was a sin, that only flat patterns belonged on flat walls. They left us swirling, sinuous, two-dimensional boughs, leaves, stems and flowers, with much emphasis on pears, pomegranates and sunflowers. Roses had to hang their heads in shame.

Suitability of paper to place has always been a concern. "La Chasse," for example, provided scenes of the hunt for dining rooms, with the implied sequence of spoils to table. Scenic views of cities and monuments were preferred for entry halls from Colonial times.

Suitability today follows the conventions of poodles in powder rooms and Disney animals for children and other offenses too numerous to mention. The pronouncement of one Marion Foster Washburne, writing in "Decorator and Furnisher" in the 1880's, that "next to whiteness, bareness is objectionable," still echoes through the decorating world.

For some of us, modernism gave many years of white-walled relief from visual assault. Now post-modernism has arrived, decreeing that white is out again. But until wallpaper rises from its present state as horror of a vacuum to the art form it once was, I will resist its pasty ooze. It has a long way to go to reach the standard of design at the Cooper-Hewitt, or to give an equivalent measure of delight.



Cooper-Hewitt Museum

Among wallpapers on display are, above from left: 1840 French frieze of Gothic stone arches, 1855 French detail of pilaster with capital and 1850 English Gothic pattern. At right, an 1800's French panel decoration.