PDF 2: Zuber’s “Indépendance” (1853), a hand-painted restatement of “Scenic America” (1835)

adapted from:

Bernard Jacqué, “From the Workshop to the Wall - Toward a Material History of Wallpaper 1770-1914,” a thesis written for the University of Lyon, 2003; (DE LA MANUFACTURE AU MUR: Pour une histoire matérielle du papier peint, 1770 - 1914), online at: <http://theses.univ-lyon2.fr/documents/lyon2/2003/jacque_b>

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Section 3.5.1. An Attempt At Renewal: The Painted Figure Panoramics

The panoramics begin to decline, as we have seen, in the 1840s. Reissues become more numerous and original creations more rare. However, some panoramics go out of style simply because of the clothing of their figures. This happens to Jardins français (French Gardens) despite the new figures introduced in 1837, and Vues de l’Amérique du Nord (Views of North America).

Some of them, in any case, have only a limited success. For example, la Grande Helvétie and les Vues d’Italie (Views of Italy). But, could others be adapted to new conditions? Faced with this question, Jean Zuber & Cie find an answer: the panoramic with painted figures. These will reuse the backgrounds of the older panoramics. The new versions will consist of painted figures to save the expensive engraving costs that new figures would have required (see Appendix 14 for inventories of hand-painted and block-printed versions).

The first example encountered is especially significant. The contest over the Texas territory between Mexico and the United States in 1846-48 presented an opportunity. An historic event could be exploited in a new panoramic to take advantage of the size of the American consumer market. Admittedly, a panoramic could have been created from scratch as was done twenty years earlier with les Combats des Grecs. But, the slow sales of the latter are reason enough to avoid an investment that may not pay off.

Hence the idea of using an existing panoramic - “without figures,” as the inventories put it - and to hand-paint acceptable substitutes for the missing figures. And so, les Vues du Brésil (Views of Brazil) (sic)! is transformed into the landscape of Texas and Mexico for the good of the cause. Of course, there are significant gaps in the scenes. But, since the topic is war, the cannon-shot which produces an abundance of dense smoke does not seem out of place. Similarly, the clouds of dust kicked up by galloping horses can be justified by the desert conditions of these regions.

The hand-painted clouds look quite different than clouds rendered by block-printing. The results are far from realistic; indeed, the armies almost seem to be floating on the clouds. Despite these shortcomings, the results are not without charm. Let us note, however, that political history does matter: it’s not a coincidence that among the seven subjects dealt with from 1848 to 1855, four have a warlike theme: la Conquête du Mexique (Conquest of Mexico, produced before May 31, 1849), les Révolutions d’Italie (Italian Revolutions, before May 1, 1850), Guillaume Tell (William Tell, before May 1, 1851) and finally la Guerre d’indépendance américaine (American War of Independence, before May 1, 1853). For their part, the French Gardens undergo a triple metamorphosis: they become Jardins espagnols (Spanish Gardens,
before May 1, 1850), then turn into *Télémique* (Telemachus, the following year) and end as *Danses espagnoles* (Spanish Dances, before May 31, 1855).[1997]

To study this phenomenon specific to the Rixheim manufacture, we have two sources: (1) the annual inventories of the company[1998], and (2) lithographs, sometimes colored, published with each new production. Preserved copies of the hand-painted scenics themselves are very rare. This work was not done in Rixheim but subcontracted to specialists. The inventories name two suppliers: Lemaire in Metz and Bauchat (or Beauchat) in Paris.[1999]

The second artist remains unknown, but Lemaire was a documented specialist in painted panoramics. His mastery is examined by Christiane Pignon-Feller in her study on interior decoration in the nineteenth century.[2000] Lemaire appears as a manufacturer of “landscape papers” in Metz in 1844: “he paints the landscape on paper.” His role with Zuber will be to paint the new figures. The inventory mentions also “models,” sometimes in Rixheim, sometimes in Metz, as for example: “1 Conquest Mexico collection with figures that serves as a model.”

Over the years, about 200 panoramics pass through Lemaire’s hands. Bauchat apparently does the same work in Paris, but little is known of him. Curiously, the subcontractors do not specialize. The Conquest of Mexico is thus painted by both workshops. On the other hand, Parisian production seems much less important than that of Metz.

The Conquest of Mexico seems to have been the most prolific; about one hundred copies were painted.[2001] The American War of Independence and William Tell were painted about sixty times each. The remaining scenics did not enjoy the same success: only about thirty copies were made of each. But, the entire experiment ceases after 1860. Panoramics, whatever their theme, are now out of fashion. The panoramics with painted figures are no exception to this rule.

The suggested retail prices show the viability of the operation: Views of Italy [block-printed] are to be sold at sixty francs, the Italian Revolutions [hand-painted] at ninety francs; Views of Brazil [block-printed] at seventy-five francs, the Conquest of Mexico [hand-painted] at ninety francs, according to a price list of 1849-50.[2002] These panoramics also reach the United States: one finds them, for example, offered by Josiah Bumstead in Boston in the spring of 1853: “…The Spanish dances….Scenes in the Life of William Tell…”[2003]

The American War of Independence also went out of fashion, which helps to explain its singular destiny. The United States started rediscovering panoramics in the first years of the twentieth century. In the 1920s, Nancy McClelland established herself as an antique dealer in this field at 753 Fifth Avenue in New York City. Her career as wallpaper historian began with *Historic Wall-Papers* published in 1924.

In that same year she visited the Rixheim factory, and while there she saw photographs (she later wrote) of the American War of Independence.[2004] On January 23, 1925, she wrote to the Zuber factory about a set of American War of Independence in bad condition; this copy, which she would like to restore, was promised to the Hartford Museum, Connecticut. The correspondence shows Ms. McClelland eager to obtain colored photographs from Rixheim to carry out this restoration.[2005] She writes that some elements are “done with a brush which look like clouds of smoke,” but, she believes that some of the figures are printed and therefore: “I think you must have the blocks for them still.” However, a different path is taken. On April 12, 1925, the factory manager writes back to the American:

> In response to your letter of March 25, I will tell you that, having found no economical way to reproduce the models [2006] that interest you, I first contacted a photographer who made me wait a long time for trials and tests. Yet after all I could not find a person who was willing to undertake the painting. In short this painting is not done yet. But I agree with your opinion that it is a real pity that we cannot find a way to put on sale this
beautiful scenery and until now it has been impossible to find the blocks that certainly exist. I then wondered if it would not be easier to send us the parts of the décor that you have which would do us great service and at the same time we could undertake the repair of the strips here very easily. I ask you to think about this question and to give me your thoughts on this subject. Of course, this precious piece of luggage should be insured....I think you're going to have a lot of hesitation about what I'm asking you to do. But, you will have contributed to the restoration of something I think is of high historical value for the United States!

Nancy McClelland's nationalistic (and possibly commercial?) interests were piqued by this letter. The project soon moved forward, despite the property issues raised. The Zuber engraving records for the year 1927-8 contain the following summary:

Grand Décor American War of Independence from the old hand-painted document sent by Miss McClellan[d] décor exhibited since at the New York Museum after being restored by us.[2007] The engraving of the military characters only; the background being that of North America was begun in 1925 and finished in August 1927. The wood cost 5000 francs, the engraving 31320, the assembly 5000. 1038 new blocks. 958 blocks for the décor North America for the ground of the décor Independence. 1996 blocks.

Both the design and the block-printing of the new elements are mediocre; but perhaps the originals were, too. A note accompanies the new panoramic overlaid onto the Views of North America:

By chance, just when the United States of America was going to celebrate the 150th anniversary of their liberation, a citizen of America found some of this beautiful, almost ancient decoration. They were kind enough to put it at our disposal and thanks to the documents in our archive, we were able to achieve a perfect reconstruction of this unique work.

The block-printed version, apparently faithful to the painted copy, gives us some idea of the methods used.

- The taking of a fortification on Weehawk Hill in the foreground of the view of New York is depicted. During the fight General de Lafayette seizes a cannon. The rough landscape and the fortifications skillfully hide all traces of the elegant promenade which was displayed in the 1834 edition. The unintentionally humorous description reports that “in the distance, we can distinguish the city of New York. The little island of the governor who commands the bay of the Hudson River is hidden from sight by battle smoke.” And for good reason! The smoke is a perfect artifice to hide the city skyline of the 1820s which is so different from the skyline of the eighteenth century.*

- The West Point Military Academy is transformed into Yorktown. The Hudson becomes the York River and the steep banks of the river stand in for the Virginia countryside. Cornwallis surrenders his sword to Washington. Some of the West Point review troops remain in place, now portrayed as troops maneuvering on a battlefield.

- The port of Boston frames Washington's triumphal entry into the city; the commander-in-chief, his staff, and the local citizenry have replaced the harbor gatekeepers; the steamboat has disappeared.
- The adaptation of Niagara Falls and the Natural Bridge proved to be more complex, especially since these regions were distant from any military engagements. Anonymous battles fill the spaces. The prospectus states pompously: “This formidable body of water (Niagara Falls) fails, in its deafening din, to overcome the sounds of the battle that the immortal Washington commands in person.” In the absence of historical truth, the episode takes on a dreamlike quality: we end up not quite sure if the horsemen are on solid ground or riding the mists of the falls.

Because of a lack of documentation, it's difficult to know the popularity of American War of Independence. We do know that in 1929 twenty-two copies were sold in America. But, this is not many, considering that well over 1,600 panoramics were sent in that year to the United States. The panoramic was reprinted several times during the century and was regularly featured in the advertising of A. L. Diament, the sole American distributor of Zuber products from the early 1920s until the 1960s. A copy was installed in the 1960s in the private dining room of the White House which gives it an iconic status matching that of the Views of North America which inspired it.

In summary, the panoramic, despite this renewed format with painted figures, is nevertheless overcome by the evolution of decorative modes. The interiors of the second half of the nineteenth century fill up with trinkets. These are omnipresent whether cluttering up the furnishings or the walls.[2008] Under these circumstances, to consider installing such an intrusive decoration as a panoramic was unthinkable. Other wallpaper formulas replace it, in particular the “tableaux” appearing after 1855.**

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Endnotes:

1997.
The inventories of 1858 have a solitary notation for four sets of “War of India,” probably a variant of l'Hindoustan (Hindustan). Sales of the latter were also in a steep decline.

1998.
In this context, Musée du Papier Peint (hereinafter MPP) Z 17, Z 18, and Z 19.

1999.
A man named Lucot in Paris appears in the archives as an associate of Bauchat.

2000.

No copies of this panoramic are known to exist.

2002.
Jacqué 1984, p. 59 (mistakenly dated as 1843).

2003.
Douglas (Ed Polk), in Daelemans (Frank) and Wisse (Geert), ed., Pour l'histoire du papier peint, sources et méthodes, Bruxelles 2001, p. 47.

2004.
She seems to have misremembered; she almost certainly had seen lithographs.

2005.
MPP Z 200.
Note “models” and not photographs: this is undoubtedly a reference to lithographs.

Which museum in New York? There is no trace of an exhibition of The American War of Independence at a museum in New York, nor has a connection to the Wadsworth Atheneum in Hartford been found.

* [ed. note: Much of the original artwork by Milbert and others upon which Views of North America was based dates from the 1820s; see “Imagining America in 1834,” by Rob Emlen, *Winterthur Portfolio* 32:2/3, (1997): pp. 189-210.]


** [ed. note: The tableaux appearing after 1855 were indebted to fine art paintings. They are not to be confused with the individual scenes within panoramics which were also called tableaux. See PDF 4 of this series for more about tableaux.]