



## **Volume 1, Number 1**

### **Three Views Of Wallpaper**

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#### **Introduction**

The main event is the thesis of Phillippa Mapes. Below are links to her work, plus links to three other theses worthy of study, all from the UK: those of Clare Taylor, Wendy Andrews, and Anna Wu. Taylor's research was published in book form by Routledge as *The Design, Production and Reception of Eighteenth-Century Wallpaper in Britain*.

Taylor: 'Figured Paper For Hanging Rooms'  
[http://oro.open.ac.uk/60714/1/518280\\_Vol1.pdf](http://oro.open.ac.uk/60714/1/518280_Vol1.pdf)

Mapes: The English Wallpaper Trade, 1750 - 1830  
<https://core.ac.uk/display/76987513>

Andrews: The Cowtan Order Books, 1824-1938  
<https://www.martincentre.arct.cam.ac.uk/downloads/wd-andrews-phd-thesis-2017/view>

Wu: Chinese Wallpaper, Global Histories, and Material Culture  
<https://tinyurl.com/wlywor5>

This issue considers three ways to look at wallpaper: by design (Catherine Lynn); by social values (Phillippa Mapes) and by material culture (Bernard Jacqué).

There is a fourth way to view wallpaper. This is epitomized by “Cow Wallpaper” (1966), a silkscreened print by the conceptual artist Andy Warhol. Cow Wallpaper has been accepted as wallpaper by the world’s finest design museums. This acceptance, however, raises a question about conceptual space. If Cow Wallpaper is defined without qualification as wallpaper and not as “wallpaper” - what then becomes of wallpaper, historical or otherwise? This issue will be explored in future newsletters.

## Part One

It’s past time to admit that the study of wallpaper in the United States is dead.

That should be cause for curiosity, if not alarm. Wallpaper crossed the ocean by 1700. Domestic production began in the 1760s and by 1850 at least 4 million rolls were being produced annually. The US went on to produce enormous amounts of wallpaper. Why then, are European books about historical wallpaper continually rolling off the press, while American wallpaper books are vintage in their own right and can be counted on one hand?

That question leads naturally to others: what is *American* wallpaper, as opposed to other types? For that matter, what is *any* wallpaper? Why has it been so popular? What does it represent? What, if anything, can wallpaper tell us? These questions are my subtext. I have found, I believe, a good framework for addressing some of these questions, if not answering all of them.

Over these first issues I shall compare and contrast the approach to wallpaper of Catherine Lynn, Phillippa Mapes, and Bernard Jacqué. In summary I will claim, and prove, that Jacqué’s view of wallpaper as material culture is superior to the other models for unlocking the significance of historical wallpaper.

Lynn’s masterwork published in 1980 rescued wallpaper from a century of critical neglect. *Wallpaper In America* opened consideration of wallpaper to the fields of sociology, philosophy, and economics. But while doing so Lynn fenced her subject within an art-historical framework. It’s certainly not my intent to disparage what she accomplished within that frame. Pulling her evidence from a wide assortment of documentary sources, she blazed a trail to sound conclusions. However, a close reading of her Introduction reveals that she interprets wallpaper design as the driving force in the wallpaper project. She holds that critical engagement with wallpaper design had all but ended by the 1880s with grave consequences for the significance of wallpaper itself. Her approach could be diagrammed this way:

fine art <—design —> applied art

For Mapes, wallpaper is a bundle of social values. As we shall see, her inferential approach puts analysis in the center. She states that “...analysis of the wallpaper trade has necessitated a multi-disciplinary approach across business, marketing, urban and consumer histories, also contributing to each of these disciplines in turn.” Her conceptual approach looks like this:

cultural studies <—analysis—> wallpaper studies

Meanwhile, Bernard Jacqué in his thesis “From The Workshop To The Wall” sees wallpaper as material culture. That Jacqué’s primary sources happen to center on the high-style French block-printed wallpaper surrounding him during his twenty-nine years at the Wallpaper Museum in Rixheim I take to be accidental. It must be said, though, that his single-minded focus on French high-style raises concerns about how well he can substantiate the large claims of his abstract to speak for wallpaper in all Western and Commonwealth countries over an immense time span. This problem will be addressed in future newsletters. His approach could be diagrammed this way:

previous culture <— material —> present culture

Returning to the American problem, we’ve been in a black hole ever since *Wallpaper In America* came out, broken only by an exemplary study in 1986 (*Wallpaper In New England*) and a handful of journal articles about high-style wallpaper which viewed their subject from an art-historical perspective. In summary, after Nylander there was darkness. The lone exception appears to be Jan Jennings article from 1996 (see Note).

I just mentioned that there’ve been many European books. But few of these written in English break new ground. The dearth of interesting content in the Anglo/American book world, then, recommends the work of up and coming scholars like Wendy Andrews, Anna Wu, Phillippa Mapes, and Clare Taylor. The Australian Michael Lech has written a good book, and there are stirrings at The Museum of Domestic Design and Architecture (MoDA) in London. But these efforts feel distant from US concerns.

To conclude these preliminary remarks, I want to introduce (or, reintroduce) what might be called the Foundational Narrative of wallpaper. This account in one form or another has been part of the historiography of wallpaper ever since people began taking wallpaper seriously. This narrative began in Europe, was taken up by Kate Sanborn (1905) and Nancy McClelland (1924), and continues to inform our understanding. It goes like this:

“Once upon a time, there was a Age Of Tapestry when wallpaper was made for the upper class as a luxury good. But this made perfect sense: a direct line can be drawn from the hunting scenes embroidered in gold threads onto purple wool by Penelope to the rich tapestry of the Middle Ages when knights were bold, nights were cold, and castles were damp and drafty. These fine tapestries not only looked good, they blocked the chill. They were succeeded by a revolutionary new product which was just then replacing parchment - paper. Paper was soon strong enough to support fine flocks, arabesques, and oriental imagery. Wallpaper cost less than tapestry and reproduced in a lesser way what others had designed and made in richer materials. Wallpaper kept on imitating other things, always favoring Curiosity instead of Art. Meanwhile, wallpaper continually trickled down to the professional and middle classes. Then came the Machine Age. Machine-printing came in, block-printing went out. Wallpaper got even cheaper. Inevitably, wallpaper was used more but meant less. During the Depression, acidic pulp, mindless designs, and clay-based inks combined to make wallpaper fit only for the masses. Finally, even the masses could stand it no more. Today, wallpaper is found in two locations: in museums, where it is part of the past; and in a dwindling number of homes, where it has become a personal accessory.”

## Part Two

Wallpaper is a highly artificial and ambiguous product with a 350-year history.

Phillippa Mapes deserves credit, then, for trying to illumine an 80-year stretch from 1750 to 1830. Mapes displays ambition and tenacity. Ever since Lesley Hoskins' misgivings in *The Papered Wall* in 1994 about "highly regarded kinds produced for a cultivated minority," the need for a more careful examination of English wallpaper has been evident. Mapes promises to deliver the goods. She vows "to redress the elitist bias in this trade history."

She asserts that paperstaining throughout her chosen period was "essentially a London luxury goods trade." She further defines her subject: "As a decorative domestic purchase, wallpaper can be regarded as a non-essential, luxury goods item. As such we can investigate its history within the context of historiographies of other luxury goods made for elite and middle class consumption.... Whilst wallpapers could be marketed as a luxury item on the basis of the skill that was needed to produce them, as a reprographic technique based on wood block printing, once the means of production had been created, it could also be handled by the non-skilled."

Her primary aim is to contribute to business, consumer, cultural, and social histories. The secondary aim is to provide "a contextual basis from which research into the material object - the historic wallpapers themselves - can be more fully undertaken." She reckons that paperstaining was perfected around 1750.

She deftly places women married to paperstainers not only in a subservient workshop role alongside children joining paper and rolling up, but in managing roles as well, usually after the death of the husband. This role was played by Susanna Dunbar, Elizabeth Hands, and Elizabeth Birch. Mapes links these important findings to the work of Phillips, *Women in Business* and Barker, *Business of Women*. In her extended discussions of regional businesses, the parts of communication, production, advertising, and distribution lock satisfyingly into a whole picture.

Some of her conclusions are well thought out: "Examination of the background of some of those involved in the trade and also of their business networks reveals that the trade was not led by small producer artisan-craftsmen, but rather run by successful businessmen who were often involved in cognate trades and who chose to take advantage of this burgeoning market. These businessmen were further supported by financial investment and business expertise brought in by family members and the wider business community." She backs up these summary statements with copious detail.

Mapes' account bristles with important details about unfamiliar territory. For example: trade with Russia and the North American colonies; the nature of apprenticeships; and London/regional trade. A bonus for Americans is that the ever-mystifying drawback becomes less mysterious; it seems that firms which consistently benefitted from this tax rebate were large.

She proves that "a significant number of those involved in the wallpaper trade were at least moderately wealthy." Abraham Hall, associated with the Blue Paper Warehouse, left his survivors "a large freehold estate in the City Road, over £4,500, and jewellery including a gold watch and a diamond ring in a red leather case." Thomas Bromwich's share in his firm amounted to £24,000 and from this he bequeathed an

annuity worth £12,000 to his much younger wife, Elizabeth. The personal investment in Bromwich's firm by his former clerk Benjamin Bradley was profitable.

Did you know that the Government's Bubble Act of 1720 precluded the emergence of the limited liability joint stock firm until 1825? I didn't. The importance of partnerships, often supported by extended family networks, is well-established by Mapes. This helps fulfill her aim to help scholars in other fields make sense of analogous business patterns and methods. Mapes has found precise details about the importance to the wallpaper trade of market-leading stationers such as Moore & Gough and Williams, Coopers & Boyle. These facts help explain why we find American paperstainers such as Zechariah Mills and Moses Grant Sr. cutting their teeth in the book and stationary trades.

Her careful interpretation of business data touches on many areas including Reform Protestantism's influence on entrepreneurs. This is one of the half-dozen areas she recommends for further study. The kinship demonstrated between the Hall family and the stationer William Lepard lends weight to the recommendation. Strong religious beliefs also played a part for prominent members of the American wallpaper manufacturing fraternity.

### **Part Three**

Mapes supplies several tables illustrating the output of London and regional firms, and thus (very importantly) the overall growth of wallpaper consumption. However, it must be kept in mind when calculating the number of rolls that a "piece" of wallpaper was packaged by the linear yard (usually but not always 12) but taxed by the square yard (always 7).

The mind aches to think of the hours she put into collecting and analyzing the wills, probate records, advertising, and dozens of other literary records. If Mapes demonstrates one outstanding skill, it is in calculating. How disappointing, then, that she undermines her own work. This is done in three ways: by blurring her premises; by continually adding to them; and by back-tracking among them. As a result the inferential chain weakens.

Mapes is on a last-name basis with dozens of fellow scholars such as Berg (83 mentions), Schwarz (41) and McKendrick (30). Leaders of various historical industries such as Wedgwood, Boulton, and Peel are name-checked with enthusiasm. Some of her comparisons are apt; but many land with a thud. One of her better demonstrations is a chart showing the significance of the Sun Fire Office Policy Registers (insurance). This is doubly important because it links up data from the same source analyzed by Berg.

In another comparison she cites Berg's research about product innovation: new, cheaper, or lightweight materials such as Sheffield plate began replacing solid silver; printed cottons came into use instead of heavy wool worsteds; and cheaper earthenware pottery began to appear alongside porcelain. These changes do sound significant. But, the evidence that Mapes cites from the wallpaper field to compare with Berg's data is thin. She mentions spangles, mica, flock, mock flock, varnish, and satin finishes. The use of these may have increased as wallpaper output grew. But, they were all well-known and utilized prior to 1750, if we can believe prior accounts. Her arguments about the profound effects of "interchangeable" design motifs in the wallpaper product are similarly unconvincing. These too were common in the first part of the century.

Having defined wallpaper as a luxurious artifact in the early going, Mapes is obliged to keep this definition throughout her thesis. Thus, it's not surprising that at times she struggles to integrate non-luxurious wallpaper into the same conceptual space. This problem of definition is significant. In a way, it's like the problem of defining paper. Paper itself had been an imported luxury good in previous centuries. But, domestic production was well-established in England by 1700 and grew enormously in that century.

Mapes often presses an interpretation that over time there was a sporadic but overall loss of creativity in the trade (incidentally, this general concern is shared by Catherine Lynn and Bernard Jacqu ). For example, Mapes claims that "concentration on the widest market of the middle classes and the maximisation of profit through simplification of this traditional skill resulted in a move away from creative, design-led production. This ultimately had an adverse effect on the reputation of the trade...."

Furthermore, "wallpaper had always been dependent on imported patterns and textile sources [meaning the Continent]. A lineage of creative pattern design was less evident here then, and this became more marked as patterns in this period were increasingly driven by the manufactory owners' review of the previous year's sales, rather than the introduction of new design forms from a creative base within the firm."

From this, we can gauge that she ascribes the less-than-thrilling colors and simplistic designs characteristic of much English wallpaper to a lack of basic creativity (a view likely to be endorsed by French scholars). Secondly, Mapes is here faulting manufacturers for a new-found fixation on proven sellers that would satiate a growing market. But whether we call this greed or simply prudent management, I wonder if this conservative attitude is not typical of mass-manufacturing.

Mapes shows a particular interest in viewing wallpaper "through the lens of eighteenth-century 'polite culture'." In this view - which belongs to present-day scholars - cultural values such as "respectability, civility, erudition, hospitality and comfort" are ascribed to the choice and use of wallpaper. She says that "the wide range of wallpaper styles and prices available meant that these meanings were transferable across a broad range of social classes and possession of wallpaper implied a shared understanding of these."

In this view, the mere use of a lower-priced product by a middling sort of person could "carry," in so many words, certain polite values down an economic chain. If I have understood her interpretation correctly, this seems to be a string of positivist assumptions. She believes that her data shows an unseen hand of design and style at work. This force guides consumers as well as the design community. Indeed, this unseen hand is so compelling that it works irrespective of product quality: "Regardless of quality, however, in each case, wallpaper was used to convey a sense of politeness through association with status, comfort and propriety....Materially, these overarching values were also applied to consumer goods in both public and private spaces."

As a result (she says) the depiction of a blue and white teapot on a terra-cotta ground (Image 39) "indicates that the owner understood the symbolic implications of this genteel social ritual." To be sure, the image and symbol school of material culture has something to offer. But again, these conceptual

insights are only as strong as the weakest link in their inferential chain. This linkage seems especially far-fetched.

Mapes has contributed much to the understanding of the commercial environment in which wallpaper was made and purchased, thus fulfilling some major aims of her thesis. However, her exposition of the context - what wallpaper actually meant to consumers and how and why it became so popular in this period - is less successful, despite her strenuous efforts to fit wallpaper into existing scholarship. It will be remembered that another of Mapes' aims was to clear away biases of class and privilege. Some of this has been achieved. For example, her collation of many population and social studies in one place have yielded a truer picture of who was in a position to afford wallpaper. At the same time, it seems to this reader that at least some of the elite biases that she set out to dismantle have been modified and repackaged for an academic age.

She ends by calling for more efforts to discern product innovation in wallpaper, signaling her belief that this holds the key to a better understanding. That may be. But, in embracing highly conceptual methodologies as a means to this end, there may be a risk of perpetuating discredited traditions of supplied determinism. Nothing could be more inimical to the difficult work of determining what motivated people to make their decorative choices in times gone by.

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**Note:**

- Jennings, Jan. "Controlling Passion: The Turn-of-the-Century Wallpaper Dilemma." *Winterthur Portfolio* 31, no. 4 (1996): 243-64. <[www.jstor.org/stable/1215237](http://www.jstor.org/stable/1215237)>

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