Wallpaper And America

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I: An Alternate Foundational Narrative

Last issue included a Foundational Narrative. That story told us that wallpaper was born in a Golden Age of Tapestry, grew up in an Industrial Age, and petered out in the present. Before we plunge into *Wallpaper In America* (hereinafter WIA), here’s an Alternate Foundational Narrative to consider:

Once upon a time, after humans learned to build shelter, they turned their attention to their walls, which were hard and bare. Someone got the bright idea to weave reeds together and hang them on a wall. That wall got warmer, softer, and more interesting. People smiled, and interior decoration was born. But, this made perfect sense. A direct line can be drawn from the primitive need to clothe the human body and the primitive need to clothe interior walls. Both were essential. After all, the main purpose of the outer walls was to protect humans and carry the load of the roof; the main purpose of the inner walls was to divide space to live in.

The types of cladding grew to include many plant and animal by-products - wool, fur, leather, matting, blankets, and more. These were worked by mechanical art to suit the purpose. In early modern times a new artifact came along: imitation parchment. This newcomer - paper -
was soon enhanced with color and design. It became a favored and most prolific cladding during one century in particular - the nineteenth. This cladding we call wallpaper.

II: Lynn’s *Wallpaper In America*

WIA had the blessings of the art and design establishment of its day. But it also bears the unmistakable stamp of Catherine Lynn, trained as an art historian and schooled in the intricacies of wallpaper through her decade-long curation of the 10,000-item Cooper-Hewitt Museum wallpaper collection.

The Foreword by Charles Van Ravenswaay sets the tone. He quotes A. J. Downing that wallpaper should be chosen based on its “fitness and truthfulness” for the job at hand. The question of how truthful wallpaper can be runs through WIA. The forms that this truthfulness takes are also important. As we will see, the qualities of a given wallpaper - whether it is distinctive or imitative, for example - matter a great deal to Lynn.

Van Ravenswaay asserts that “by 1850, wallpaper had matured into an independent art form individual in character and serving many functions.” He praises wallpaper because it can “unify, aesthetically, interior architecture and furnishings while enhancing both, a possibility achieved only when the elements are compatible.” I would like to underline two points here which are important for understanding WIA: first, that the judgement of whether these three - historical walls, wallpapers, and furnishings - are compatible, is an aesthetic one; and second, that this judgement is conceived and pronounced by present-day writers.

On this account, WIA is essentially an aesthetic exercise. The cutoff date of 1914 was chosen by Lynn for two reasons specific to design: first, wallpaper by that date had been ignored by the “students and practitioners of contemporary architecture and design” for at least 20 years. Second, with the onset of World War I “the major movements in nineteenth-century design that affected wallpaper came to an end.”

This comment is directed at the constant tug of war between French floral naturalism and British reform styles during the last half of the nineteenth century. Lynn expresses a hope in WIA that someone will take her work further. She was clear that such work should chart the progress of the Art Moderne, Art Deco, or historical reproduction genres because “these themes dominated the fashionable wallpaper trade from the 1920s through the middle third of the twentieth century.” It’s likely, then, that she approves of the work done on the Art Nouveau wallpapers of Bergès House in Grenoble by Jérémie Cerman, albeit this is far from the continental United States!

Her Introduction addresses many of the ambiguities of wallpaper. Wallpaper is for rich and poor; it is machine-made and also hand-made. It is neither *décoration fixe* (part of the architecture), nor *décoration mobile* (movable). As a result of this in-between status, historical wallpaper is not often the subject of private collections. Yet, it is impossible to ignore if we want an accurate record of how people furnished their homes.
Lynn states in the Introduction that “imports continued to dictate the styles for American-made papers throughout the periods considered in this book. Paper hangings from England, France, and the Orient acted as style carriers bringing to colonial American houses superficial coatings of the latest European fashions, rendered in full color.” She next underlines the importance of how consumers exercised choice: “wallpaper tells us a good deal not only about [the American consumers’] visual sensibilities but also about their values that we did not expect to learn.” She states later in the book that the rules of taste influenced choice but were not binding.

Important passages occur on page 158 when she enumerates the resources and methodologies of sociologists, furniture historians, and economists. Wallpaper historians lack these resources. This, too, helps to explain her concentration on style and design.

In order to pursue her organizational strategy Lynn makes a few concessions. On page 168 she gives up as “pointless” the task of cataloging all nineteenth-century styles chronologically. In any event, she cautions, “styles were not simply started and stopped on signal.” On page 315 she stiff-arms a close statistical accounting of consumption on the grounds that popular histories have already done that. Although she provides a thorough grounding in the discipline of block-printing in the early chapters, Lynn proves to be only mildly interested in American factories once they arrive at the city block stage - say, over 200 employees. A typical comment about large firms is that they “churned out garish popularizations of all the types.” She conveys the details of this outpouring by adroit use of the images and text of a Scientific American series on wallpaper production (pages 308-11). Another somewhat technical achievement: her 552 footnotes. This elaborate scaffolding of facts alone has insured that WIA remains relevant.

The largest chapter at 50 pages is “The Imprint of Machines, the Elaboration of Styles” (covering 1840-1870). The next-largest chapter chronicles what Lynn considers the two most critical decades (1870-1890). Another large chapter is on French Scenics which made, she declares, “the most conspicuous contribution to the history of wallpaper used in America.” This chapter is reminiscent of Nancy McClelland’s accomplishment in Historic Wall-Papers (1924): the panoramic artisanry of the French nation is described better by an American than by one of their own. Of WIA’s 483 pages, the three chapters just mentioned make up 135, or about a quarter of the book.

On page 163 Lynn suggests that in order to understand the incessant wallpaper moralizing of the English design reformers of the 1840s and 1850s we need to first understand the “separate spheres” doctrine. On page 167 she asserts that around 1850 artificiality in wallpaper design, in the form of an “elaborate ornamental vocabulary,” increased. Outdoorsy motifs in pure white and bright colors came indoors - a pivot toward femininity and domesticity. These traits helped provide at least the impression of a homely respite from an increasingly brutal male-dominated work life. It can hardly be a coincidence, she points out, that the hour-glass female form was a favorite mid-century device in neo-rococo and neo-gothic designs.

She returns to this mid-century “artificiality” theme on p. 180. Now, in the 1870s and 1880s, a second wave of English reformers under the banner of “Art Wallpaper” were poised for victory in the US. Lynn sees these Beaux Arts architects/designers as sophisticates who were capable of restating the puritanical agenda of the earlier English reformers. During this art revival of the 1870s and 1880s Lynn assigns a secondary but still important role to homeowners who simply wished to retain their freedom of choice -
even if those choices included ornament, now beginning to come under suspicion. But once again, just as at mid-century, “novelty” and a cheapening of the product prevailed. The elaborate ornamental vocabulary and heightened artificiality returned.

“Distinctive” is a key term (see pages 142-45). Not only are individual motifs distinctive but so are styles. She finds that even though patterns of the late-eighteenth century such as stripes, geometrics, common papers, and sprigs were somewhat interchangeable and “styleless,” that these nevertheless formed an international vernacular. These became standard in the trade, continuing on through the next century and contributing to the American trade. They are often encountered in historic house museums. Yet, because they lack a recognizable style they are not considered distinctive. This seemingly minor point will return.

The most curious tic in the narrative voice of WIA is a subtle but persistent distancing from wallpaper itself. This is conveyed largely through terms. Wallpapers are described as: “architectural fakery”; “pseudo-statues”; “pseudo-coffering”; “pseudo-balustrades”; “fake stone”; “well-executed fakery”; “fake wood and stone”; “pseudo textiles”; “pseudo stone” and “fake leathers”. This undertone occasionally applies to European wallpaper: “both the English and the French purveyed their eye-fooling concoctions to middle-class and rich Americans, and American manufacturers followed suit.” This attitude places wallpaper squarely in the “imitative” camp. Any suggestions that wallpaper might be capable of invention are foreclosed.

III: What Happened to Wallpaper in America

For those of us who first stumbled on the riches of wallpaper history through this book and fancy ourselves somewhat acquainted with the subject, to re-read Lynn is to be humbled. One can argue with some of Lynn’s interpretations but never with her command of the material. Lynn charts a measured course through the wallpaper sea. The concise section on tariffs is especially good. We realize that the increase in tariffs to 40% in 1824 protected development at a crucial time. By the 1850s domestic trade was roaring.

After forty years, many of her central findings seem only truer. She established the almost universal use of borders in the nineteenth century on a documentary footing. French scenics were not, as naive colonial revivalists thought, “costly importations.” Lynn proves that at least ninety-nine American retailers were in regular contact with the Zuber factory in the early nineteenth century, including some in the deep South and the Mississippi Valley.

She cites newspaper ads to great effect. The French are recognized for offering an “apparently inexhaustible outpouring of variety.” On pages 117-19 she reconstructs what American wallpapers probably looked like by relating them to the few written accounts about American patterns that exist and to documented French and English examples which they copied. The insight that machine-made papers in the late-nineteenth century became so cheap that all but the very poor could afford wallpaper has been picked up by social history sites like the Tenement Museum on the lower East Side of New York.

In the Introduction she makes the case that wallpaper peaked in quality and quantity in the 1880s. These central claims have been challenged by the passage of time. For example, new statistical information tells
us that per capita production continued climbing long past the turn of the century. As for quality, that is now seen in a subjective light more often than it was forty years ago.

I take one of Lynn’s major findings to be that wallpaper in America began and continued down an expedient path: “high styles born in European cities...were commercialized - diluted, distorted, and cheapened” (page 14). She sees that European styles continued to call the tune for American wallpapers long after colonial days. This reliance became pervasive and even characteristic. While she dutifully records the transfer of the materiality of wallpaper and its subsequent growth in the US, (let’s call it the “body” of wallpaper), the design (the “soul”) does not seem to be recognized by Lynn as anything other than European. Under these assumptions, there is nothing American about wallpaper in America. If this is true, then, for Lynn, American wallpaper is a strictly mechanical art. Perhaps she’s on to something. Perhaps specifically American styles never came into existence.

But, this seems unlikely, if we grant that wallpaper, across the board, is a craft, and crafts are capable of invention. Indeed, if we say that wallpaper in America has nothing to do with invention, then all of its styles must revert, whether to floral naturalism in France, the reform theories of England, or all the way back to the so-called golden ages of the Orient, the middle east, or ancient Rome. This resembles the Foundational Narrative. In this same vein, Lynn sets great store by the opinions of those at the top of design hierarchies: the architectural critics and theorists of every century. On the concrete level, she counts as important the appeal of the English country house to nouveau riche Americans in the 1870s, and the awards given to wallpaper companies at international exhibitions.

To return to the “distinctive” patterns mentioned earlier: Lynn’s data teaches her that the distinctions between eras are often found in (one might say encoded in) the upper classes. An example is on page 353, where vertical paneling is said to dominate prior to 1870, and horizontal paneling (or at least horizontal orientation) after 1870. This seems true. But, I think, largely among people who could afford such niceties. The majority of sidewalls before and after 1870 might arguably fall into simpler categories such as grids, diapers, and the iconic “alternate motifs in alternate rows.” If Lynn’s interpretation is that style per se belongs to the upper classes (as I take it), then this outlook seems again to conform to the Foundational Narrative. There, we remember, “pure style” starts at the top and inevitably (though at variable speeds) works its way down.

Toward the end of WIA she faces the legacy of harsh wallpaper criticism so prevalent in Europe which was beginning to bubble up in America. A sample is a statement from an Englishman who moved to Boston in the 1870s: “As a rule, all imitations, in whatever material, of a totally different surface from that which characterize the material itself, are false.” In short, paper must only look like paper. A stringent standard indeed! Lynn comments that, on this account, wallpaper itself should have been totally rejected for decorative purposes. However, the nineteenth-century love of ornament prevented such a drastic step. That final step, she says, was taken by 1914.

So, what is the upshot? What can Lynn tell us about wallpaper after that point? She organizes her summary by grappling with design theory. Influential twentieth-century architectural and design theorists saw wallpaper almost exclusively as ornament. That was enough to exclude it from serious consideration for interior furnishing going forward. As she points out: “a preoccupation with function as the basic generator of forms dominated” serious thinking about architecture and design at that time.
She rejects these rationalistic function arguments. She also dismisses the question of whether wallpaper is a fine or a decorative art, calling it a futile and outmoded question. But, her counter-arguments do not defend, let alone endorse, the status quo of wallpaper in 1914. After all, this was a period characterized by glut, and by the fading of the bright promise of the 1880s. Indeed, Lynn has earlier labeled this a twilight period - a “sad epilogue” to what had gone before. Instead, Lynn advocates a radical return.

She expresses a desire to get back to the “whole truth of nineteenth-century design and theory.” Here she restates her findings that the “great period” of wallpaper began in the late eighteenth century, flourished in the 1840s before being overcome in the 1850s (buried under a hyper-artificality of its own making). Wallpaper rose again by 1875 - only to be beaten back again, before petering out just after 1900.

On the one hand, Lynn ends WIA as a stalwart defender of design. She is pleased that because of the then-new discipline of Post-Modernism, her interest in nineteenth-century wallpaper design is no longer seen as an aberration. On the other hand, she clearly has no affection for wallpaper that is not “good” (not in a moral, of course, but in a design sense). Nevertheless, because it was ubiquitous, “wallpaper emerges as a key product for assessing the arts of the period.” Lynn underlines that the importance of wallpaper in America is that it constitutes “an important mass of art historical documentation.” Why this documentation is important is not entirely clear. As stated earlier, Lynn maintains that the distinction between decorative art and fine art is both futile and outmoded. So, if wallpaper is important, how is it important?

Lynn’s answer seems to be that wallpaper is important because it created the “architectural environments in which most people lived” during the nineteenth century. She also notes that “the middle class, which formed the century, was determined, like the Romans, to create a secure environment for itself.” Taking all of these observations together, we might take Lynn’s bottom line as follows: whatever questions are raised by the prodigious production, dissemination, and consumption of wallpaper in the long nineteenth century, this activity took place within, and can only be understood by, the disciplines of art history and architecture. Although it is not developed in any way, her linkage of wallpaper with the security-conscious middle class stands out as a shrewd observation.

Note:

Below is a citation for the article mentioned above about wallpaper in the Bergès House near Grenoble: