The point of this issue is that the material culture methodology of Bernard Jacqué as displayed in his thesis is not only apt - this methodology holds great promise for reviving the study of wallpaper in America.

Previous issues have focussed on the shortcomings of other methods. The methods of material culture, which can be controversial, are defined here to be sure we’re on the same page as we head into exploring Jacqué’s thesis - “From the Workshop to the Wall,” also known by its French title: “De La Manufacture Au Mur: Pour une histoire matérielle du papier peint 1770-1914” (hereinafter MauM). To aid this exposition we introduce another scholar, the art historian Jules David Prown. It was Prown who codified much of the standard material culture approach in the pages of the Winterthur Portfolio in the early 1980s (see Notes).

I am aware that a redefinition of wallpaper is also necessary if a renewed project of study is to succeed. I leave that aside until next issue on the grounds that a greater sensitivity to how it is studied - methodology - is also needed. The focus of wallpaper historiography in the US has been essentially wallpaper-as-decorative-art. Another important strand coming from England has been wallpaper-as-social-value. These have been discussed at some length in previous issues. Let’s add here that the term “decorative art” is problematic as well because it is redundant. “Applied art,” the preferred British term, is better even if it still falls short of expressing the singularity of wallpaper.

Jacqué’s abstract, which I have quoted from in the previous issue, promises that he will concentrate on the foundations of culture and on the context surrounding the design, production, sale, and use of wallpaper. In summary:

a. wallpaper was the premier decoration in Western interiors 1770-1914, which
b. has been studied until recently in terms of style, however
c. we know little about wallpaper as a material object.

These assertions raise questions: What are these cultural foundations? Why and how do they give wallpaper meaning? Is “premier” being used in a qualitative or a quantitative sense? Supposing that wallpaper did permeate society in the years covered by the thesis, why does that still matter? And, if wallpaper is valued for what it looks like - its appearance - why should we care about its underlying materials?

These are the major questions raised by and presumably answered over the course of the thesis. But, there appears to be at least one other thesis here. The collective lifespans of three men (Jean Zuber, Jean Zuber-Karth, and Ivan Zuber) map on almost exactly to the period covered. This can be no accident. This shadow thesis might be: How did the Zuber family carry out their responsibilities? What is their legacy? Additionally, I have to admit that a wicked thought did occur to me while studying this 200,000-word document late one night: could Jacqué have decided to simply publish every scrap of paper that he found during his thirty years at the museum?

In the early going Jacqué expands on his aims: “This work has the modest ambition of taking stock of the different material aspects of wallpaper, from the design stage to the installation stage, from manufacture to the wall, focusing less on contemporary production and more on "fine" production (to use the expression of nineteenth-century manufacturers) not only because it has proved to be an almost exclusive speciality of French industry but also because it’s better documented than the rest of production. We have at our disposal an exceptional source, the collection of the Jean Zuber & Cie factory.”

Jacqué’s vision suggests a way that wallpaper study can rise from the grave. But, this comes at a cost. His path demands a departure from the rutted road laid down by the hierarchies of art, architecture, and design. He encourages us to follow the materiality of wallpaper wherever it may lead. This is not to say that the phenomena of the gorgeously-printed tableaux, scenics, and décors of the Zuber company are ignored. But these showpieces are, for perhaps the first time ever, put into context within the totality of wallpaper. Putting Jacqué and his thesis aside for a moment, let’s address the most basic question in play:

What is material culture?

Here is a start, courtesy of Jules Prown: “Material culture is the study through artifacts of the beliefs - values, ideas, attitudes, and assumptions - of a particular community or society at a given time. The term material culture is also frequently used to refer to artifacts themselves, to the body of material available for such study. I shall restrict the term to mean the study and refer to the evidence simply as material or artifacts.” We will follow this Prownian definition not least because it echoes a helpful distinction made between “visual studies” and “visual culture” - the former is the field of study and the latter is what is studied.

Since Jacqué mentioned fundamentals in his abstract, let’s listen to Prown on that point: “the fundamental values of a society are often unexpressed because they are taken for granted….In architecture and the applied arts form and function are partners. Where the function is simple and constant, as with teapots or chairs, it can be factored out. The remaining variable is style, bespeaking cultural values and attitudes in itself and in its variations across time, space, class, and so forth.”
An important side note here is Prown’s attitude toward class: “I hold no brief for any particular class distinction in art….The extent to which certain objects convey information through their form seems to be more a matter of category - the type of objects rather than of the social class that used or enjoyed them.”

Since the function of wallpaper does indeed seem to be simple and constant - decorating walls - it must be the style or form of it which varies. But “style” carries important shades of meaning for Prown. He does not mean gross classifications like “gothic” or “rococo.” But he also excludes what an artifact does. The value he seeks is “rather in the way they are formed and the way in which they operate, that is, their style….Style refers to a distinctive manner or mode which, whether consciously intended or not, bears a relationship with other objects marked in their form by similar qualities.”

But what are the distinctive manners or modes of wallpaper? How does wallpaper “operate”? These are some of the questions to be grappled with in the next issue of this newsletter, as a new definition is constructed. Prown asserts that since “artifacts are primary data…they can be used actively as evidence rather than passively as illustrations.” The use of historical wallpaper as an illustration - say, the proposition that an image of a blue and white teacup on a terra-cotta ground, without more, can tell us something about social rituals - is relevant here.

If wallpaper is a form of primary data, it should reveal something aside from its basic use. This basic use is simple enough - wallpaper covers a wall. But the possibility that it might mean more is intriguing. This leads naturally into the area of choice: how and why artifacts are chosen. Aesthetics are involved, certainly; but sense impressions - how something feels to us and the effects that it has on us - seem relevant as well. If that is true, then someone’s choice of wallpaper, like their choice of clothing, would begin to challenge design as the center of gravity. This prompts questions: what happens to personal considerations when that person is no longer living? What happens later when wallpaper enters a museum?

On that topic, a tiny number of historical wallpapers have been placed in museums for study. There seems to be a basic irony here. When elite institutions started material culture studies, these were directed at understanding the other end of society, namely, prehistoric and non-literate cultures. The woven mats and other artifacts of primitive cultures contrasted sharply with the silver and gold candelabras (for example) already in the collections of the great museums.

Prown’s methods show a way to comprehend this irony. He points out that it is through historical artifacts (whether wallpapers, woven mats, or candelabras) that “we encounter the past at first hand; we have direct sensory experience of surviving historical events.” Through these artifacts we learn about other things. Some of these other thing might arguably include the “foundations of culture” mentioned by Jacqué: the things which lie beneath the wallpaper and cause it to be, and to which new versions of wallpaper will contribute.

As already mentioned, Prown settles on the distinction between style and function as the most promising mode of classification. And since the range of materials and methods of fabrication in the world are so broad, his scale of functions is wide. It ranges from aesthetic (1. Art) to utilitarian (6. Devices). Wallpaper, because of its memorable pictorial aspects, might seem to belong to Art. Yet wallpaper is quite a distance
Prown’s Hierarchy of Artifacts by Function, Aesthetic -> Utilitarian

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*wallpaper

from Art on Prown’s scale. It is placed next to the unglamorous category of “receptacles” as one of the applied arts. The chart above shows this.

How the materials of the artifact are put together should be noted. Prown calls this the articulation or configuration. Facts such as joined paper, widths, registration marks, trademarks, border courses, and printing techniques are part of the “how,” the content of the individual wallpaper. This type of analysis is exactly what Jacqué has done with the Zuber collection. But this is only a start. Jacqué has gone beyond artifactual analysis to include a range of written documentation, including much literary criticism. Still, the core of MauM’s accomplishment is the careful consideration of both the pictorial and the patterned types of archival wallpaper at Jacqué’s command.

Returning now more directly to Jacqué and his thesis, this work capping his career is ambitious. Nor is this surprising. From the start of his career Jacqué forged and maintained links with colleagues all over the world through a vigorous program of exhibitions, conferences, and publications. Somewhat typical of his output is the catalog co-written with Christine Woods for “The Story of Cupid & Psyche” in 1995 to highlight the Whitworth Art Gallery’s exhibition of several scenic wallpapers. A bibliography of some of his more important work is included with this issue.

Jacqué’s *Technique et Paper Peint* (1992) is one of the first scholarly texts to focus on *how* wallpaper is printed in addition to *what* is being printed. Its studies range from the single-sheet counter-proofing methods of Papillon to the inventive embossing of Paul Balin to the airbrushing and stenciling of Shand Kydd to the photogravure printing of Leroy in 1934. *Technique* is different because it centers on a single topic - production - thus anticipating MauM by a decade. This material culture approach to wallpaper was
preceded only by WIA (1980) and Anthony Wells-Cole’s *Historic Paper Hangings* (1983). To be sure, Jacqué’s thesis is not without its faults, and these will be explored. But, these faults do not take away from the coherence of MauM’s vision.

How likely is it that Jacqué can deliver on his claims? We cannot ignore the urgency of this question, and in fact, this likelihood is in doubt. The first to object will be the English. Jacqué essentially ignores English wallpaper, except for such obvious landmarks as the onset of wide-scale industrialization in the northwest in the 1840s. But many nations should object. The North American contribution is equally slighted. Worse, in no part of MauM does Jacqué dwell on the consumption of mainstream, thoroughly mechanized wallpaper, even that of France. Nor is much of the text devoted to friezes and borders, the next most popular types of wallpaper after sidewalls.

Jacqué says, in so many words, that the block-printed wallpaper of Zuber has slowly dwindled in quantity and quality over the last one-hundred and fifty years until it’s become almost indistinguishable from other commodities in a capitalistic and democratic market. We are led to believe that worthwhile wallpaper was “then” whereas wallpaper “now” is clearly junk. We should remember here that the Golden Age - the Foundational Narrative - is a myth. Jacqué misses (or wants to ignore) the wallpaper of today. There is now a great welling up of boutique digital printing shops across the globe doing business almost exclusively on the internet. These deserve the name of craft.

Despite these flaws, Jacqué is consistent in his commitment to a grand narrative. He fits facts from the Zuber and Dollfus archives into the structure and evolution of the French industry. He explores in intricate detail the resources, talents, and ambitions which drove the high-minded wallpaper artisans at the Zuber factory (while not neglecting to mention the child labor); considers their marketing efforts; and celebrates the end result when wallpaper is hung in dwellings.

The floral naturalism embraced by the Zuber workshop was more than a style. This legacy is perhaps most distinctive in the elaborate flower paintings of Malaine. These constituted a small but influential genre of sidewalls and overdoors as late as 1850. But floral naturalism is also evident in the transitional scenic *Isola Bella* (1843). Suddenly, extravagantly costumed people and memorable events are replaced by plants.

Zuber’s scénics and tableaux won many awards, but this was hardly “art for art’s sake” as Jacqué’s quotes from the head office prove. Zuber’s rivals also indulged in promotional tactics. The difference seems to be that Zuber made money at it. Jacqué’s commentaries on the wallpaper competitions at exhibitions teach us the role of pictorial high-style wallpaper in the nineteenth century. Jacqué brings out the important fact that the value judgements of the jurors at the exhibitions were swallowed whole by the first generation of wallpaper historians in the twentieth century (Clouzot in France, Sugden in England, Sanborn, Ackerman, and Mc Clelland in the US).

Jacqué admits the limitations of French wallpaper collections and the strengths of American and British collections. The latter feature more wallpapers coming directly from *in situ* installations, along with more documentation to explain them. Also important are Jacqué’s warnings that “vast areas still need to be cleared in order to make old wallpaper ‘speak’ effectively…that is, to go toward a…more concrete
dimension, in what Daniel Roche has called ‘the history of banal things,’ of trying to define what the object ‘wallpaper’ embraces in terms of ingenuity, choice, and finally culture.”

In the first issue of this newsletter I suggested that the phrase “material traces of culture” might be even more appropriate than “material culture.” “Material traces” makes clear that wallpaper is a thing which is the result of purposive action and intent situated within a culture. Inevitably, each artifact also has an effect on future culture. The key, the thing in the middle, is the material.

This thing - wallpaper - is in dire need of redefinition. That will be the subject of the next issue of The Wallpaper.

Notes on the Bibliography

The bibliography of MauM includes an abbreviated list of Bernard Jacqué’s previous writings about historical wallpaper which is reproduced below.

Jacqué (Bernard)


Jacqué (Bernard), ed.:  
*Le Musée du papier peint*, BSIM, 1984, no 793.  
*Technique et papier peint*, BSIM, 1992, no 823.

Jacqué (Bernard) avec la collaboration de Nouvel-Kammerer (Odile):  

Jacqué (Bernard), Wisse (Geert):  


Below are a few other works by Jacqué not included in the bibliography which may be of interest:


Notes to *The Wallpaper, Volume 1, Number 4*:

All quotes from Prown can be found in one of two essays published in the Winterthur Portfolio:  

Michael Yonan urged a closer look at Prown’s approach to material culture in 2011:  