Is Wallpaper Essential?

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Introduction

We start at that moment hundreds of thousands of years ago when a man and a woman (let’s call them Brad and Karen) woke up within their newly-invented shelter. It was an improvement over a cave. On previous evenings Karen had helped Brad struggle into his skins before they dropped to the ground, snuggled together, and fell asleep. But on this very different morning Karen and Brad awoke not in a cave but inside the first built home. In due time they were spreading the same types of claddings that had clothed them over a framework of branches and in that moment interior decorating was born.

So begins my affirmative answer to the title of this essay. I propose here that wallpaper is a type of cladding and that on this account wallpaper is an essence. More precisely: cladding is essential. And since wallpaper falls under the category of cladding, that makes wallpaper an essence, at least.

But what difference would this make?
First, considering wallpaper as an essence would lift wallpaper out of such pseudo-categories as minor art, lesser art, or decorative art. It would help explain why wallpaper is still popular some 350 years after it was invented. Reclassifying wallpaper as an essence would also sharpen our ability to examine its past. We may be able to assess some of the slippage that has occurred with terms such as design, decoration, and wallpaper.

To clarify my outline: the need for cladding sets off a chain of corollaries. This need causes decorating, which is done through artifacts; one of these artifacts is wallpaper; wallpaper causes paperstaining; and decorating with wallpaper causes wallpapering. I use the nineteenth-century term paperstaining to stand in for all manufacture because it was during the nineteenth century that wallpaper rose to unprecedented importance in Western interiors.

I. Cladding

Cladding is a useful term. It captures two important qualities: it masks, and yet it never ceases to be a substance in its own right. Furs and rudimentary textiles protected the bodies of our primeval couple but these artifacts were also somewhat decorative. It could well be that Brad was especially fond of wearing a jet-black pelt as opposed to a mousy brown pelt on chilly nights. But whether clothing is found, invented, felt, or seen, it is personal: we choose it. Clothing is also adaptable. These same qualities must have been in play when cladding was first secured on the studs of the interior.

This story of the transition from human cladding to wall cladding follows the doctrine laid down by Gottfried Semper: that interior cladding makes up the visible boundaries of interior space. Since wallpaper is visible and since it is often used in interior spaces, it fits the description. No doubt woven reeds, textiles, and furs were among the first materials used for wallcovering. Has grasscloth ever really gone away?

II. Modes

A. Wallpaper As Mechanical Art

In this section we come to terms with modes and meanings. I suggested in previous issues that the ambiguity of wallpaper is a positive quality. At the same time ambiguity is a potential problem, so let’s explore it. Wallpaper is for rich or poor; it can look modern or traditional; it can be block-printed or machine-printed; its surfaces can be smooth or textured; it can come from Europe, America, or any nation. But, how important are these distinctions? The answer seems to depend on which qualities are ascribed to wallpaper and where these discussions take place. The domestic world is quite different than the art world or the museum world.

All arts and artifacts are human inventions. Some arts produce utilitarian goods - these are the mechanical arts; some arts produce beautiful goods - these are the liberal arts. If wallpaper is made primarily with cladding in mind, as I suggest, it would seem to answer best to the definitions of a mechanical art. This type of production is far removed from the concerns of the liberal arts, which center on the production of unique and creative artifacts which stir our minds and spirits. On the other hand, when we busy ourselves
with wallpaper we seem to be going after simpler pleasures. We now take a closer look at some of the things most highly characteristic of wallpaper: that it is affordable, flexible, and made for decorating walls.

We should keep in mind that Karen and Brad’s clothing made them happy before interior decoration made them happy. The happiness that results from the protection, warmth, and security that clothing provides is intensely personal; the connection to touch is obvious. Equally obvious is that the colors and patterns of their clothing must have been secondary. In the same way, after cladding leapt onto the walls for primarily practical reasons, its decorative features began to unfold. They have never stopped unfolding. Clearly, wallpaper considered as cladding makes us happy in a way that underlying building materials such as plywood and cement do not. Clearly too, as some incidents in my career have taught me, wallpaper does not invariably make people happy!

So, when does it? The answer comes back: “when it is successful at what it does.” And what does it do? Wallpaper decorates.

Highly-decorated veterans of military service are those who have earned our acclaim. They make us proud, secure, and grateful - happy - and this fact explains our desire to decorate them. Similarly, we have good reasons for decorating our walls with wallpaper. It’s why we deck the halls with boughs of holly. This decking (ornamenting) with boughs can be done over the tops of doorways or along the slant of a staircase, but how it is done is not as important as why it is done: ’tis the season to be jolly!

If all of this is true, then wallpaper use seems to arise quite naturally. But, the use of wallpaper in any particular home is nevertheless an accident. A different cladding could have been chosen, for example, paint or paneling. The physical properties of wallpaper start with paper fibers, which have differed widely but not radically over 350 years. Flax, linen, cotton, and straw have been used. Even synthetic fibers contribute to an artifact still recognizable as paper. But which fibers are used, for any particular type of wallpaper, are accidental.

It’s important to recognize that when paper is pasted it becomes flexible and fabric-like and conformable to the wall. Wallpaper is not simply a laminate. It adapts to the wall in a way that tile, metal, or a plastic film can’t. Pasted paper expands about 1% across the grain. This adds up to an inch or more in extra width over a good-sized wall, which explains why seams must be planned. The flexible nature of the pasted paper allows it to be moved slightly during installation, for example, when a bowed wall makes it necessary to push two strips together. Walls are not flat; corners are not plumb; and ceiling lines are not true.

The principle of wallpaper production is templating, whether this is done by stencil, block-print, cylinder, or software. Printing does not copy a work of art - for instance, a painting. Printing consists of impressing a designed image onto paper. Woodblocks, because they are templates and need precise registration, have a strong affinity to cylinders. The essential difference between blocks and cylinders is the speed and efficiency of the printing, which certainly has an impact on the affordability of the product. The inks, substrates, and definition of the imprint must change as well. But these changes, too, are accidental.
The role of the paperhanger is to deck, as explained above: to be knowledgable about decking and have an understanding of the material (the boughs or the wallpaper); and to be aware of the potential for design presented by the architecture. The role of the decorator is largely visionary but they should also be master collaborators. All of these activities are aimed at the need of the consumer for cladding.

B. Wallpaper As Artifact

Wallpaper as artifact is largely paper and ink. What matters most is what is perceived and thought and felt about any particular wallpaper. More to the point for historical study, it's what our forebears perceived and thought and felt about any particular wallpaper that matters. That said, what are the special qualities of this artifact as opposed to how it is made or used? I suggest two: artificiality (because wallpaper is always an invention), and modularity (because wallpaper is always assembled).

It’s probable that at least 50% and as much as 75% of all wallpapers ever made have been sidewalls - also known as normal wallpaper - with decorative motifs no more challenging than alternating rows of bouquets or small flowers; trellises or stripes; or thousands of other vaguely familiar patterns.

On the granular level a leaf is joined to a stem and a flower and that positive motif is balanced by negative space. A wallpaper repeat is to a papered room as a brick is to a building. In this, wallpaper shares the forms of its sister artifacts: leather panels, units of papier-mâché, and yards of fabric. Modularity is also a process. It’s how the design of the wallpaper fits into and enhances the personal space of the room. On a museum tour or while leafing through the photos in a wallpaper book we might focus on a single motif, or a pair of motifs. But that’s not how wall decoration is seen. Walls are taken in all at once.

Wallpaper designers create visual rhythm through pattern and modularity. They also ensure that the motifs, whether pictorial or patterned, work nicely with the colors of the ground and the texture of the paper to make decorative sense. These attributes work with the architecture or in some cases simply break the wall space into geometric forms. It seems that modularity is so important that we might even call it the operating principle of wallpaper.

III. Meanings

A. Essential Meaning Of The Term Wallpaper

Wallpaper is a species. It belongs to the genus cladding; its specific difference is paper.

B. Non-essential Meaning Of The Term Wallpaper (based on properties and accidents)

Wallpaper is affordable and flexible, modular in form and design, ordinarily covered with a printed pattern, and made for decorating domestic walls.

To the best of my knowledge these predicates are properties, with the exception of pattern. Pattern is highly characteristic of wallpaper but also accidental - many wallpapers have none. Perhaps in these cases we can say that the texture, color, and other three-dimensional details of the materials take the place of
pattern. Because pattern is an accident and not a property or an essence, there is nothing necessarily feminine about the curling tendrils of a sweet-pea vine in a boudoir or necessarily masculine about dead game or antlers on a billiard room wall.

**C. Nominal Meanings Of The Term Wallpaper** (based on how the word “wallpaper” is used)

The conventional meanings of wallpaper are neither true nor false. They arise for practical reasons and change over time. The metaphorical use of the term wallpaper is common: “the problem was papered over”; “she was a wallflower”; “it was just wallpaper music.” Screensavers for laptops and phones are known as "wallpaper" for obvious reasons.

“The stuff that surrounds you” is the ironic motto of the upscale magazine Wallpaper*. Founder Tyler Brûlé invented the title while reading design magazines during a hospital stay. He explains the marketing plan: “Whether they’re a West Coast snowboarder, a copy writer for a hot advertising firm in Stockholm or a grunge kid working in an indie record shop that suddenly got a film deal, there’s a degree of affluence all of a sudden. They need advice on how to live a sophisticated lifestyle.” This use of the term takes a supposed liability - that one is surrounded by material goods not of one’s choosing - and turns it on its head. Might some of these newly-affluent (and newly-sophisticated) young adults choose wallpaper when they get around to reinventing their surroundings? It seems possible.

Wallpaper has many meanings in the art world. In Clement Greenberg’s art criticism, wallpaper seems most often to mean “pattern.” The results of the action painting technique of Jackson Pollock came dangerously close, some critics felt, to the predictability of wallpaper pattern. Greenberg insisted, however, that something special was happening within Pollock’s field of vision. Greenberg argued persuasively that the textures and designs created by Pollock were creative and unique. In other words, they were art. Greenberg underlined this thought with an additional statement: that these canvasses were not wallpaper, by which he meant, “not pattern,” and specifically, “not predictable, monotonous pattern.”

That Greenberg did not bother to use quotes around wallpaper shows that he, a careful writer, knew his audience. He counted on them to understand that a flood of wallpaper pattern could overpower a discrete space and render it meaningless, just as Edith Wharton had said in *The Decoration Of Houses* a generation earlier. We leave aside whether Wharton got this right. The important point is that Greenberg’s audience understood the reference.

**IV. Discussion**

An influential characterization of wallpaper as decorative art came from Henry Havard in the 1880s: “One says of an object that it is decorative when it ornaments the place it occupies….In recent years the custom has developed of designating as decorative arts ornamental sculpture, wallpaper, ceramics, glassware, woodwork - in a word, all the industrial arts, which have as their particular aim the interior or exterior ornamentation of a dwelling.”

Here wallpaper is already being judged within a context of comfortable and self-aware domesticity in which every object works together. Unspoken here but nevertheless relevant is that historicism was rampant in this era. According to the cult of the collector, if a homeowner acquired a near-eastern rug and
a nicely-proportioned pot, the construction of a Turkish smoking room was well along. More rules: only one good artifact of an appropriate type was needed per room, and only one Turkish smoking room was needed per home.

When we recall from previous discussion about WIA (Wallpaper In America) that one of the key values ascribed to wallpaper by cultural critics is that it can unify interior architecture and furnishings, it raises some questions of whether and how the sensibilities and rules of the collector class influenced the museum world. The diorama-like rooms of the collectors seem to have reappeared in twentieth-century museums as “period rooms.” And, in that museum world, wallpaper has frequently been characterized rather simply as a two-dimensional arrangement of color, line, or patterning on a material covering a wall.

But, is this right? If wallpaper is cladding, as I argue here, and if it is a substance, and needs to be appreciated by touch as well as by sight, then something is missing from this definition. That something is the third dimension, another word for which is materiality.

A further problem for the study of surviving artifacts seems endemic in Havard’s definition. Let’s remember that the original installation of any wallpaper was defined as part of the whole decoration of the room and that the room was defined as part of the whole decoration of the home. As Havard wrote “it [an object] is decorative when it ornaments the place it occupies…” The integrity of these ensembles can’t help but vanish when the furnishings are disassembled and scattered. For these reasons the placement of a solitary household object in a museum is no simple thing. More important, Havard’s formula makes clear that the value of the object comes from more than the object itself. A significant part of the value stems from how and why it is in the home in the first place.

Finally, there are bound to be new problems cropping up alongside the new opportunities of our changing visual landscape. Museums are no exception. What happens when photos are taken of a scrap of historical wallpaper in a museum’s collection? How many qualities of it are captured? How many qualities are left behind? What happens when these images are disassociated further by being dispersed to an online audience? In summary, how do these new problems and opportunities relate to the essence of the material?

**Conclusion**

The thesis which will be studied over the next issues of this newsletter is ostensibly about all wallpaper. It has been pointed out that the sources consulted by Jacqué and the surviving artifacts of the Zuber factory are almost exclusively high-end. These conditions on their face present a strong impediment to Jacqué’s claim that he can speak for all wallpaper.

However, if it's true, as claimed in this issue, that wallpaper is paper cladding, and if “fine” wallpaper therefore falls under the category of accident as part of the extension of wallpaper, the problem goes away, and the coherence of Jacqué’s argument stands. Whether it can be proven is another matter.

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**Notes:**
- The definition of cladding drawn on here appears in the work of Gottfried Semper: “Hanging carpets remained the true walls, the visible boundaries of space. The often solid walls behind them were necessary for reasons that had nothing to do with the creation of space; they were needed for security, for supporting a load, for their permanence, and so on”; from The Four Elements of Architecture and Other Writings, Cambridge U. Press, 1989 (1851), p. 104.


- I would like to thank Bo Sullivan for his helpful comments about the nature of wallpaper and design.