THE ZUBER PATRIARCHY: Spring, Part I

Spring: Jean Zuber, fl.1790-1835
Summer: Jean Zuber-Karth, fl. 1836-1853
Autumn: Ivan (Jean) Zuber, fl. 1854-1907

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Introduction

This multi-part series is a re-telling of how the Zuber factory made wallpaper over a 117-year period (1790-1907). It is closely based on the thesis “From the Workshop to the Wall,” see link at the end of this newsletter. Two disclaimers: the thesis is written in the French language. The possibility of errors in sense and transcription should be kept in mind; should these exist, they belong to me. Secondly, these technical and biographical sketches are a radical concision of the thesis, which takes a bird’s-eye view of the history of wallpaper.

The fame of Zuber, grounded in their scenics, is widespread. To this day the phrase Rixheimer Tapete in the Germanic world refers to any top quality wallpaper - just as in the United States any scenic wallpaper is likely to be labeled “a Zuber,” whether it was created in Rixheim or not. Quite aside from production,
the Zuber company is famous for the depth of its archives. Few present-day companies trace their origins to 1790.

But why was there a wallpaper factory in Mulhouse in the first place? After all, this town is far from Paris and has never had a large local market. Part of the answer must relate to character. The Republic of Mulhouse allied itself to the Swiss Cantons in 1515 but remained proudly independent. The tiny village of Rixheim is just outside of Mulhouse, which formed an enclave within Alsace. We’re used to thinking of Rixheim, Mulhouse, and Alsace as nominally within French borders. But the concept of nationality during the period under discussion was both fluid and contested.

Before March 1798, Mulhouse was not French, nor was it German. The inhabitants of the Republic of Mulhouse owed their identity to Calvinism. This meant that outsiders, especially Catholics, could not live there. Over many years the leading citizens of Mulhouse accumulated capital and this allowed an upsurge in textile production beginning around 1746. By the 1780s this activity had grown. The printed cottons of the Mulhousians - “indiennes” - were now competing with French production.

In 1786 Jean-Jacques Dollfus establishes a large indiennes factory in Mulhouse. One of his more important business contacts is Joseph-Laurent Malaine, a gifted designer of textiles (at Gobelins) and wallpaper (at Arthur & Robert, after 1789). Arthur & Robert is the successor company to Arthur & Grenard, a firm started by Jean Arthur, an English watchmaker, and René Grenard. Arthur & Grenard become a royal manufacturer in 1788. They seem to have been every bit as quality-minded and prolific as the better-known Réveillon factory. In 1789 the business is sold to François Robert, a stationer. Jean Arthur’s son, Jean-Jacques, becomes Robert’s partner. We are fortunate indeed that this changeover was preceded by the compilation of an extensive inventory over the winter of 1788-89.

After February 1789, then, Malaine is designing wallpaper for Arthur & Robert. He tutors Nicolas, the son of Jean-Jacques Dollfus, and becomes a confidant of the older man. Jean Zuber (1773-1852) writes in his memoirs that the senior Dollfus greatly admires Malaine's work. Dollfus and Malaine hatch a plan: why not start a second factory to fulfill the potential of up-and-coming Nicolas? This new factory will be devoted to a newish product: wallpaper.

The French tradition of rough dominos and the more sophisticated papiers de tapissiers of the Papillon family are of course relevant. But more important, roll wallpaper is being used in France by the mid-eighteenth century and by 1770 is enjoying a real popularity in decorative culture. For example, the factory of Arthur & Grenard referred to above began around 1772. The artisans involved with indiennes and wallpaper have a lot in common: block-printing methods, similar patterns, and craft knowledge of how to create a salable product.

It’s worth comparing pattern production in several other factories. The Réveillon wallpaper factory put an average of 53 motifs on the market yearly in the period 1770-1802. The Arthur & Grenard wallpaper factory similarly recorded an average creation of 55 motifs per year during the 1780s. On the other hand, the Jouy textile factory started by Christophe Philippe Oberkampf in 1760 had created no less than 12,700 motifs by 1797. When that number is compared to the 1,335 patterns that Réveillon made over roughly the same period, the ratio is nearly ten to one. It’s true that the textile designs also applied to clothing; but the point is made. Wallpaper designs are not to be compared to textile designs in terms of quantity.

Yet wallpaper will develop its own design conventions, and thereby claim its own identity. First, wallpaper will adapt designs from many related fields. The form is simple: vertical and somewhat narrow strips are joined on the wall. Yet this simplicity belies how versatile wallpaper will become. Through the agency of entrepreneurs like Arthur, Robert, Réveillon, and Zuber, wallpaper will successfully adapt itself to the changing interiors of the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries.

Malaine brings his design expertise to the new factory while the Dollfus family brings their craft knowledge - and their capital. It is relevant that Nicolas Dollfus is twenty years old in 1790 and about to
marry Anne Barbara Eck, daughter of a wealthy family. Nicolas is soon investing 40,000 FR in his own company.* A large network of family, friends, and business partners (described below) will play an important role.

The Dollfus wallpaper factory opens in Mulhouse on January 17, 1790 as a subsidiary of the Dollfus textile company. Although there will be at least a half-dozen investors over the first decade, it seems fair to say that Hartmann Risler, Malaine, and of course, Jean Zuber (hereinafter Jean), will shape its future. Risler, described as “an experienced indiennes manufacturer” joins the company for a period of nine years. He throws 8,000 FR into the pot. As for Malaine, a typical two-year contract with the new factory assures him of 4,000 FR per year and 10% of the profits. Jean signs on as a salesman receiving 1,200 FR yearly. Only seventeen years old, he will soon test his schoolboy Italian when he crosses the frigid Great Saint Bernard Pass in search of new markets.

At first the Dollfus wallpaper company is largely a distributor. They buy from Jacquemart & Bénard and Legrand in Paris as well as the Ferrouillat factory in Lyon. They are not shy about moving the product, as a few quotes illustrate: from a letter to Arthur & Robert in February 1791: “We do not sell in France, but only in distant countries and in Germany and Italy.” The implication seems to be that “We will not compete with you on your home ground.” Jean confesses elsewhere “I would point out, by the way, that most of my sample book was made up of Arthur & Robert's items that I had to pass off as my work.” The Dollfus wallpaper factory sends a bundle of Arthur & Robert paper to a Strasbourg freight forwarder in September 1791 with a request: “Please change the number 965 which will be marked at the end to number 228 so that we do not recognize the old.” By the end of 1792 the factory is supplying more wallpaper from their own tables.

Now the French government must be discussed. The National Assembly had already established a new departmental political structure. They follow through in late October 1790 by tightening the political boundaries. The Republic of Mulhouse was from that date in near-constant danger of political and economic isolation. Naturally these challenges matter a great deal to the owners of the new factory. Their livelihood depends on moving goods across borders.

The Dollfus enterprise now acquires workspace in Dornach, a suburb marginally connected to Mulhouse. But, as Jean explains, this is only a pretext: "From time to time, a few bundles were brought to the pseudo-fabricator at night to be taken away the next day as French goods.” Nor is this the only creative business move. In May 1790, Nicolas buys supplies from the Ferrouillat factory in Lyon. He takes care to use a straw man, he explains, because “We have poached many workers from them.” One of them is a color-mixer (chemist) named Harivel.

The confrontations with custom officials continue. An inventory taken by Jean in 1794 records a liability of 90,000 FR. These challenges help to explain why, in 1795, a liquidation of the factory’s goods becomes necessary. This is publicly announced by the George Dollfus Company, which claims itself as the successor to Nicolas Dollfus & Cie. This legal proceeding is violently contested by other members of the Dollfus family, but to no avail.

The ownership of the factory is now assumed on a long-term basis (to 1802) by Risler. Jean continues with the company in a somewhat minor role. Jean’s marriage in 1796 into the wealthy Spoerlin family comes at a most auspicious moment: just when he is most in need of cash. In this same year Jean writes: “It was still necessary to use deception to get the goods out… it was feared that the ever-stricter customs measures would eventually make any shipment impossible.” The solution to a host of problems is becoming obvious: the enterprise should abandon their ambiguous quarters in Mulhouse and plant themselves firmly on French soil.

An opportunity arises in the village of Rixheim just over the border: a half-century earlier, the Teutonic Order had built a large Commandary. The Teutonic Order sprouted from religious roots during the Crusades but has long since become secularized. In addition to its location in French territory, the
Commandary boasts quality construction, a water source, and a vast park. This magnificent building becomes a national asset following a decree in July 1791. It is then used as a prison and military hospital. It’s sold to Risler for the modest sum of 25,200 FR. What was essentially a feudal estate is now swiftly adapted to the needs of a wallpaper factory.

But legal and financial headaches persist. Despite infusions of some 50,000 FR in new capital, Risler and Jean are under the cloud of an impending bankruptcy, partly because their credit had suffered from the Moutrille affair. The plan for this collaboration with M. Moutrille, a Parisian businessman, had been to force a pipeline into the difficult Parisian market by establishing a depot in the city, aided by the fact that Moutrille already owns a small factory nearby. This proposition collapses the day that Jean discovers that Moutrille is a crook. The agreement must be broken up, but it’s not easy. Claims and counter-claims ensue and these legal matters hamper Jean and Risler’s plans as late as mid-1801. Meanwhile, the bankruptcy previously referred to takes place in early 1801. Finally, on February 20, 1802, Jean Zuber emerges from the ashes of the former Dollfus/Risler wallpaper factory as sole and undisputed owner.

1. The Factory

As previously noted the physical plant of the Zuber factory has a feudal character. This is on display in an Engelmann lithograph from 1823. It shows a large well within a courtyard shaded by numerous plane trees. Six trees are still there. In the print, workers are using the well water to scrub block-prints. The dyes don’t look particularly harmful since a dog laps the overflow (we note as a matter of historical interest that arsenical colors are rampant in the industry at this time). Elegantly-dressed visitors have arrived by carriage, and carts carry goods. This genre scene has an aristocratic air except that the factory stands in for a stately building and busy workers replace deferential servants.

Another important structure for the early years of the Zuber company is a paper mill at Roppentzwiller, south of Mulhouse. It had produced twenty-three tons of paper in 1798, a few years before it was acquired by Jean to “finally realize our old desire to make the white paper we use ourselves.” In 1806 under Zuber twenty-five women and eight men work there. Owning this mill helps Jean control the quantity and quality of paper. More important, his ownership ensures wallpaper production throughout the year. Previously, intermittent water supplies and labor rules peculiar to the papermaking industry had played havoc with wallpaper production. This mill will undergo a massive reconstruction in 1841 and remain in Zuber hands until 1851. There will be an offshoot - the l’Île-Napoléon stationery business.

Backtracking now to 1790: when the wallpaper factory first opened its doors it had the advantage of joining a network which was already in place selling printed cotton in the Netherlands and Germanic territories. This network was linguistic, national, familial, and religious. The indiennes industry includes financiers such as Schmidt in Frankfurt and re-sellers such as Engelbach in Hamburg. In Spain, Jean will sell wallpaper most often to German nationals, for example, to a “German glazier” in Cartagena. The Mulhousian patriarchy are essentially the same people who run the indiennage factories; a core of industrialists in Mulhouse such as the Dollfus family, but these networks also extend into Switzerland and Germany. A Protestant (if not necessarily Calvinist) helping hand exists, even if it is discreet.

Once the sales trips are decided on, the system swings into action and the word gets out. Acquaintances and business associates in these networks, many of which overlap, recommend their contacts in the territories to be visited. The itinerary is carefully scheduled and even written out: it includes lists of cities, companies, and clients, and mail drops are specified. These tried and true systems of the Dollfus and Risler era just described will continue at the wallpaper factory once it falls into the hands of Jean Zuber.

2. Personnel

Many changes happen over the Dollfus/Risler/early Zuber era (1790 to 1810). In general, a half-dozen skilled employees fill key roles and the manufactory is staffed with dozens of adult employees and many more dozens of child laborers. After Jean is in charge, a Swiss native named Jean Jacques Nägeli invests
25,000 FR; he will serve as a valued employee for fourteen years. Rafflin, a holdover from the Dollfus era, is a skilled paperhanger. He is sometimes sent out to hang paper for clients and on other occasions sells wallpaper in western France. The archives tell us that Charles designs installations but no doubt he had other duties as well; he was trained by Malaine. There is plentiful correspondence about the disastrous Frédéric Schmidt project in the early 1790s in Frankfurt. Rafflin hangs wallpaper for the demanding Schmidt (an important banker), while Charles contributes installation sketches from the factory.

Young Nicolas Dollfus works in the office. In the early days the color-mixer (chemist) is Gaspard Dollfus, trained as an apothecary. He's soon replaced by Harivel, the man recruited from the Ferrouillat factory. According to Jean, “we (...) abandoned the care of manufacturing [to Harivel],” Saint-George is a designer and Bochter is a block-cutter. Jean writes in his memoirs that immediately after the takeover the company is short-handed, so he must personally man the counter. There, with the help of one apprentice, he keeps track of 190 open accounts. He works many late nights and weekends. Despite these rigors, Jean must have been pleased with the company’s initial profits of 42,000 FR (1803) and 40,000 FR (1804). These healthy sums give wings and a headwind to his dreams.

As already stated, Jean had been hired as a salesman for 1,200 FR yearly in 1790. His fellow salesman is Aubin, invariably described as “a handsome young man of Frankfurt.” Aubin travels with samples of indiennes from the associated Dollfus factory as well as wallpaper sample books. He handles cities in the north including Hamburg and Warsaw, while Jean travels by stagecoach across Switzerland and on to Italy by snowbound passes and the treacherous Via Mala. Unlike Aubin, Jean sells only wallpaper.

The personnel who matter most in the next phase will be the offspring of the founder. The first son will be named after the father, following the Calvinist tradition of Stammsohn. The younger Jean born in 1799 is called here “Jean Zuber-Karth” for clarity. His name “Karth” comes from his first marriage, to Henrietta “Mélanie” Karth (1800-1830). Young Jean is educated in accordance with the Pestalozzi method at the school of Aarau in Calvinist country.

The second son, Frédéric, is born in 1803 and trained at the Colmar school. There he becomes friends with Amédée Rieder and François-Eugène Ehrmann. The first will one day run the paper mill, the second will excel in the color-mixing lab and atelier. Frédéric (called here by his nickname, Fritz) sells wallpaper during his apprenticeship. But, he’s allowed to attend concerts and visit palaces and libraries to feed his artistic temperament. By the time he joins the company officially in 1825 he’s already designing wallpaper. Fritz and his brother Jean do not get along.

During its first decade of production the Zuber factory prospers. Jean continually re-invests and within a few years owns half the company. Jean’s brothers-in-law, Michel Spoerlin** and Henri Rahn, are hired as salesmen. These young men buy into the company, each acquiring 20%. It must have helped all concerned that these in-laws, like Jean Zuber, have inherited some of the fortune of Pastor Jean Spoerlin, father of Jean Zuber's wife.

Next, these two men leave Rixheim in 1809, apparently on good terms, to set up their own wallpaper factory in Vienna. It, too, is destined for success. One other family connection should be mentioned: a son-in-law, Frédéric Feer, becomes a partner from 1816 to 1825. After the brothers-in-law leave for Vienna, Jean again strengthens his position, apparently buying back some of their share. He now owns 75% of the company while Nägeli, the long-time Swiss employee, has the other 25%. This arrangement lasts until 1821.

3. Design

Although “artistic director” was never a formal title, that’s exactly the role that Malaine fills at Dollfus, Risler, and now Zuber. Malaine settles in Rixheim but no amount of persuasion will induce Darmancourt,
another respected designer, to follow suit. Darmancourt is apparently too fond of the excellent archives in Paris. After 1801 Darmancourt disappears from Zuber factory records.

Malaine appears to have difficulty facing the turning point in decorative art at the end of the century. In August 1798 Risler tells his correspondent in Paris: “Recommend to Malaine that he change flowers, it would take more than poppy roses & etc. Nature is so rich and we love it so much for its variety.” Risler ends by favoring the designs of Saint-George, perhaps for financial reasons. However, it’s a different story when Jean takes over: “As Saint-George was not up to the task, I replaced him with Father Malaine, one of the founders of the company, whose talent had not diminished in any way.” Right from the start, Jean embraces floral naturalism.

Malaine produces both panels (arabesques, flowering vases, “cameos,” and overdoors) and repetitive patterns. The flower is the main motif, often accompanied by birds. These flowers - roses, poppies, flame tulips, narcissus, lilies, and day lilies - come from Dutch heritage. His vases, always sophisticated, develop Louis XVI themes, associating the blue of Sèvres with sumptuous golden bronzes. But times change. The appeal of his floral virtuosity withers under an onslaught of cold colors, acidic harmonies, and rigor. Judging by his support for the established decorative formulas of Malaine, Jean does not fear to be left behind. But, as masterful as Malaine is with his specialities, ornament is not one of them: here, Darmancourt seems more comfortable. Malaine dies in 1809 but not before passing the baton to Mongin.

Pierre-Antoine Mongin, who studied at the Royal Academy of Painting from 1782 to 1785 with Doyen, effectively took over for Malaine as early as 1804. There is some question as to whether Mongin himself may have been poached from the Dufour company. Mongin is well taken care of. For example, in May 1814 he is paid 3,000 FR plus 6 FR per copy sold for his “Great Helvetia” scenic (not to be confused with “Views of Switzerland,” the first Zuber scenic, which is discussed below).

These lump sums for a single work may sound large. But, it should be remembered that they are amortized over many years. How much more, then, does this apply to sidewall patterns? Many of these patterns seem timeless; yet every time they are printed, more profit is achieved. As late as the 1820s and 1830s the factory continues to print Malaine's baskets of flowers and fruit borders from the revolutionary period.

It should not be forgotten, though, that most wallpaper designers remain anonymous, nor that a serious study of wallpaper designers has yet to appear. The factory employs dozens of designers between 1804 and 1835. These lesser-knowns were industrial designers much more than they were “artists,” even if this latter term appears in promotional literature from time to time. There is a gap between the worlds of art and industry, or at least many ambiguities.

Perhaps that gap explains why the factory is tight-lipped about its drawing studio: on this topic, industrial surveys and exhibition catalogs are silent. However, this atelier has existed since the beginnings of the company in 1792 when three draftsmen shared studio space with Malaine. Then too, designs can be bought. In the late 1820s, for example, about a third of Zuber wallpaper designs come from the Spoerlin shop in Vienna and another third from Paris. The remainder are generated by the Rixheim atelier, directed at that time by Henry Küpfner, trained by Mongin. Wherever the designs come from, color-matching is performed locally.

We now take a closer look at how annual collections came to be. This idea, so familiar to us today, was rare in the early history of wallpaper. Some time after young Fritz gets his feet wet in sales, he is introduced to the design world of Paris. As Ehrmann later wrote to Ivan Zuber (the leader of the third generation): “The establishment and choice of designs was the responsibility of young Fritz (Frédéric). He himself designed current articles and made frequent stays in Paris, from where he brought back drawings.” The finished collections are also the result of frequent contact with distributors and retailers.
For example, Fritz writes “New marbles: see those of Pignet.” He analyzes the offerings of his competitors: “Among the assortment of Dptn (Dauphin)...there are pretty oblique prisms in n genre, especially a simple & extensively established drawing with undulating uprights with leaves & flowers.” This observation is accompanied by a sketch. Fritz keeps an eye on his competition in “Thuringia, Saxony & the Harz.” He ponders how he can economically include velvety flowers and ornaments into border treatments. He matches, as nearly as possible, the selling prices of his competitors. He records technical data, especially concerning the recently-invented iridescent techniques from the Austrian workshops of Spoerlin & Rahn.

Ultimately, this data is gathered in sampling notebooks from 1825 to 1833, which then take the name of the Engraving Books. Astonishingly (although there are many gaps) these run from 1833 to 1952, a span of well over a hundred years. These notes often include the serial number of the wallpaper design, their titles, the name of the designer, the number of blocks, the costs and time spent on the engraving, and the number of colors. These patterns are grouped by year.

In Fritz’s review of the 1823-24 season, he notes that he personally contributes 8 patterns; M. Spoerlin: 32; Küpfer: 2; Parisian workshops: 13; designs from the Zuber archives: 2; for a total of 57 wallpaper designs. For the 1824-25 season, Fritz contributes 25 patterns; M. Spoerlin 8; Küpfer 5; Parisian workshops 10; Zuber archives 4; for a total of 52.

The 33 wallpaper patterns for the collection of 1827-28 are ranked - “rich effects”; “fine satins”; “mid-fine”; “ordinary”; and “common.” The last category is not always priced, but the others are stepped up at regular intervals with the “rich effects” cresting at 4.5 FR (wholesale). Among the “rich effects” are gilt, satins, ceilings, and the irisé (rainbow) techniques from Michel Spoerlin. But not all the patterns are expensive. Fritz calls for “3 satins, current orders” at 1 FR to 1.5 FR, for example, and for “3 common papers” at 0.5 FR to 1 FR.

It should be kept in mind that once the design is completed, its coloring must be specified: the number of variants is enormous, usually more than ten, especially during the 1820s, thanks to the use of iridescence. Sometimes an old pattern is recolored or a color variant is printed for a particular customer.

In the notebooks from the 1827-28 season 28 décors or “frames” are itemized, as opposed to the 33 wallpaper designs discussed above. Sprigs, tone-on-tone (littré), velvets, and a multitude of border types are well-represented. Some of the terminology is specialized. There are references to “heels” or “talons” - these are narrow borders often used in décors. The somewhat vague content of these 28 “frames” will take on a new meaning during the mid-nineteenth century when they become more codified and even named. They will then answer to the definition of “Décor” as a mature type. Zuber will create 30 of these.

Who chooses the motifs? To the best of our knowledge this choice rests with the manufacturer, even if he hires designers. Apparently only the head of the company can know the capabilities of the company. The talents of the designers suggest a certain direction for the company. From the beginning, Jean chooses the high end of interior decoration. Elaborate drawings with complex block-cutting and many colors are favored. The sources available to us suggest that the successful manufacturer is a canny judge of his designers and their talents. He pays them well, tries to retain them, and gets the most out of them. But he readily exchanges them when their style no longer serves the company's needs.

As for the salesmen, these not only go forth - they also bring back. They’re expected to return with information about local markets. These often cater to a particular taste. For example, arabesques in large panels went gradually out of fashion during the last quarter of the eighteenth century, yet this taste remained popular in Dresden. As early as 1800 Paris is shifting to motifs of an austere and anti-naturalist neoclassicism - yet most of the rest of the country remains faithful to Louis XVI naturalism and floral traditions. A related question arises - how was it possible for entrepreneurs like Hartmann Risler and Jean Zuber to hold their own with highly trained artists like Malaine and Darmancourt?
After a general primary school education, Hartmann Risler and Jean Zuber had served an apprenticeship *(de facto if not de jure)* at low-end indiennes factories. They learned to keep books, travel, and sell on behalf of the company and they learned how - and to some extent, why - markets varied. It must be assumed that they acquired more than just know-how; in one word, they acquired *taste*.

As the craft routines of the Zuber factory matured, two innovations in particular will affect the “look” of the product. First, iridescence, and secondly (to a lesser degree) mechanical printing with a copper roller. Silks were a dominant force in high-end decoration at this time. While wallpaper design could reproduce the patterns, flat distemper inks were incapable of recreating the shimmer of silk. The discovery of the iridescent technique by Michel Spoerlin in Vienna in 1816 and its rapid introduction to the Rixheim factory by 1819 change this dynamic.

The subtle shades of *irisé* (or, rainbow) blends make it possible to launch, from 1822 on, collections of *lampas d'ornemental* which capture some of the qualities of Lyon silks. These are somewhat more expensive than other wallpapers. But their costs pale next to the costs of quality silk fabrics. With this advantage they become an attractive alternative for consumers.

The blending technique will also lend itself quite naturally to the remarkable horizons of the panoramics. It’s important to remember that these clear cerulean-blue and pinkish-yellow tones depend for their effects on the simplest of chalk-based colors. Only a few finely-ground pigments in a glue binder are used. It’s the brushing technique, which uses gradations of color, that makes all the difference. This same economy of color and emphasis on technique holds true for the rainbow sidewall patterns. These, too, use fewer colors than one might imagine.

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link for thesis:

http://theses.univ-lyon2.fr/documents/lyon2/2003/jacque_b#p=0&a=top

* The source documents include many denominations (pounds sterling, livres, francs) scattered among many nations. Here, it is expedient to use francs (FR) throughout; the actual denominations for each instance can be found by consulting the thesis.

** Also known as Michel Spörlin, or “Spoerlin” in French. Since he spent most of his career in Vienna, the French spelling will be used here.

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(end of The WALLPAPER Vol. 1, No. 6, Spring, Part I: the concluding sections to follow)