

Why Wallpaper...?

(for Ken and Glen)

I grew up with wallpaper. All of the houses in Llanyrafon, the council housing estate we moved to when I was seven, boasted wallpaper. Not that there was much to boast of, mainly run-of-the-mill stuff, what usually comes to mind when people think about wallpaper. When they think about wallpaper. Almost the first thing my parents did after we moved in, having returned to Wales after a failed attempt to emigrate to Australia, was repaper all the rooms. Putting their stamp on what was, essentially, a six-roomed box.

I loved choosing a new wallpaper. It always felt, gathered together at the kitchen table to pore over the patterns in the sample books, as if we were a real family—the sort you saw on television.

My father liked wallpapering. Perhaps because he knew that, given sufficient effort and common sense, things would invariably match up. Unlike almost everything else in life: his relationship with my mother, included. Given the choice, he preferred bland, modestly-priced wallpapers, my mother, large, colourful, expensive ones. When I was twelve, and my father away in South Africa helping to start a new factory, she repapered their bedroom in blue roses—one of the newly-popular pre-pasted vinyls. She had never papered anything before. I remember that, for some reason, I felt uneasy about the enterprise—not just that my mother was badly depressed at the time, as she often was when I was growing up—but that I sensed the underlying defiance. That my mother was trying to tell my father that she'd put down roots, that she wasn't going anywhere—least of all to Africa. I would later discover that, historically, a new wallpaper most often heralded a significant event—an engagement, wedding, bereavement, new baby, improvement in worldly fortunes.

Within months of my father's return, we were settled in Cape Town, in a new suburb —sandy and wind-scoured—on the wrong side of the Cape Flats. It was without trees. Or public transport. Or anyone who didn't speak Afrikaans or vote for the pro-apartheid National Party. By chance, we ended up living next door to the Mayor, in Viooltjie Street. Far from impressed by his status, my mother complained that they treated their cat badly. Always exacting of the neighbours when it came to animal welfare, she kept threatening to take it to the vet.

The wallpaper in the entrance hall to Viooltjie Street was entirely of my mother's choosing: an ambitious pattern of pink and green catherine wheels, each with a little lick of gold, the paperstock almost as thick as cardboard —the perfect foil, so my mother said, for our new pink and green cut-pile lounge suite.

In contrast, when, after twenty-five years on shifts my father was finally offered a day job and my parents moved to Durban, he papered their new house in a pale cream stripe. Every room. Oddly, it seemed to suit the place— to add some sort of gravitas to the raw brick bungalow set down in a half-acre of tropical dirt. I'm not sure how my father's taste prevailed, except that my mother was preoccupied that summer with establishing a garden in Durban's rich soil and humidity. Within a couple of years there were monkeys clambering about in the mango trees she'd planted outside the kitchen window.

I can only guess what wallpaper actually meant to my parents, aside from the obvious connection to their working-class roots, but for me it was my first introduction to art. I'm sure it was only because my mother had once papered our bathroom in giant sunflowers that, on seeing Van Gogh's painting, in Paris, years later, it seemed so familiar. I wasn't alone in this. American writer, Jeanne Schinto, in her journal paper 'The Wallpaper Museum': "...I grew up in a house without much art on the walls, (but) we did have wallpaper. The patterns weren't extraordinary. No William Morris designs among them; no French panoramas; no hand-painted Chinese export papers. But those wallpapers of my youth were, whether I like it or not, the layer upon which all the other layers rest: the base coat of my personal history of art."

Despite my early exposure, when I set out to write *Flock* I discovered I knew next to nothing about wallpaper. So, while on holiday in New York with my partner in the winter of 2000, in what was, in retrospect, a breathtaking act of naivety, I made an appointment with Joanne Kosuda-Warner, Assistant Curator of Wallcoverings at the Cooper-Hewitt National Design Museum, Smithsonian Institution, the largest collection of wallpapers in the northern hemisphere. As soon as Joanne asked me about my methodology, I knew I was out of my depth. I'd never done much research, I blustered—just read a lot of books. Joanne— young, vibrant, attractive, far from floral—soon put paid to any overly romantic notions I might have had about wallpaper conservators. She was down to earth. And helpful—though desperately busy (as wallpaper curators and conservators invariably seemed to be) she gave me a box of slides and showed me how to use the microfiche viewer—and by her mere existence began to bring to life a world I hadn't even begun to imagine—one richly peopled by men and women much like herself, young, articulate, erudite, passionate, with a wealth of knowledge about wallpaper and its history.

The conservation department, on the other hand, was a disappointment. I'd expected more—a wallpaper showroom. Or at least a few sample books. It was the first of many such cramped, poorly-underfunded departments I was to visit. My ignorance was revealed in even more obvious ways that day. The slides kept jamming in the machine and I was too embarrassed to ask for help after the first couple of times. So I jotted down notes, attempting to describe the few wallpapers I could see. It seems quite endearing now, my efforts to draw a verbal picture of a confoundingly complex 19th century panoramic wallpaper (it might even have been Dufour's "Psyche", later to make an appearance in *Flock*, though impossible to tell from my description).

Despite my unorthodox approach, I did eventually manage to get the hang of research; gradually decide what sort of novel it was I was trying to write; feel at home with all manner of conservators, historians, curators, librarians, however

eminent or erudite. Sometimes it felt like I'd joined a secret club. Or sect. Its members, fiercely loyal and devoted to one another, and to wallpaper. Much as I became, bristling if anyone so much as dared to suggest that flock paper was outmoded, more suited to the local Indian takeaway than the family home. Personally, I wouldn't have said no to a plush wall. I thought flock faintly erotic, in a sweaty, deeply human way. And useful, too, soaking up as it did volumes of perfume, dust, smoke, human and animal hair and detritus. I felt quite vindicated, and envious, too, when in the foyer of a friend's elegant Glasgow apartment I later saw my first contemporary flock, a gorgeous oversized pattern of what looked like giant tadpoles, flocked in a dazzling lime-green. The work, as I recall, of contemporary Glaswegian wallpaper designers, Timorous Beasties—renowned for their wonderfully loud, large and playfully subversive patterns.

In contrast to my fellow wallpaper devotees, family and friends seemed doubtful when I told them I was writing a novel about wallpaper. I didn't blame them. Or even much care, to tell the truth—I was far too much in love, by then. Obsessively so. I saw wallpaper everywhere—on hoardings, buses, trains, in books, magazines, films—I barely noticed the actors. I loved the way wallpaper so effortlessly set the scene—time, place, flavour, style. I began to keep my rapidly growing stash of wallpaper booty—magazine articles, postcards, advertising flyers, bits and pieces torn out of the newspaper—in boxes, under the bed.

A few years into researching *Flock*, I was sufficiently emboldened to make an appointment, on a trip to England, to see the Librarian at Christ's College, University of Cambridge, Candace Guite. After a brief tour of the College Library, Candace carefully handed me a glass sleeve under which lay fragments of wallpaper. Remnants of the first paper ever pasted to a wall, in 1509—the Cambridge Fragments—discovered (and very nearly thrown out) by workmen, during renovations of the College in 1911. They were the colour of dried blood. For some reason, I was deeply moved at the sight of them. Perhaps because

they were so pathetically nondescript. All that remained of what had once constituted the apex of human endeavour, knowledge, technology, artistry—a few crumpled scraps of what might have been a sandwich bag. There was an endearing little goose printed in the corner of one of the fragments, the rebus of the paper-maker, Henry Goes.

In those early years, I became something of a bounty hunter. On that same trip, in Erdigg House, in North Wales, I bagged my first original handpainted Chinese wallpaper and the next day, at Plas Newydd (once home to the Ladies of Llangollen), my first gilded leather paper, so beloved of Goethe. On a later trip, to France, I tracked down, near Mulhouse, the only museum in the world entirely devoted to wallpaper, replete with a Foudrinier printing machine, responsible for the first continuous rolls of wallpaper and where I enjoyed a private viewing of an original late 18 C Réveillon arabesque. In Champlitte, in a room sealed up like a tomb, with even the door papered over, I found myself entirely 'wrapped' in an original panoramic paper depicting the Voyages of Captain Cook: *Les Sauvages de la Mer Pacifique*, by Joseph Dufour. Even on holiday, in Chile, in a lean-to loo in the middle of the Atacama Desert and faced with a bright blue 1960s geometric print, I found myself taking notes. It seemed it was everywhere, wallpaper, if you only cared to look.

I grew to love wallpaper more, if anything, in the ten years it took me to research and write *Flock*. Not just because it so graphically illustrates our need to cover up our imperfections, whether it be our faces or our walls (after all, what is wallpaper if not a cosmetic procedure for a wall, and with the same attendant hopes and fears? Will it work? Will I be able to live with it?), but that it told me so much about myself. And my family. And gave me so much remembered pleasure, of being lulled to sleep by the repetition of a pattern. Of the comforting familiarity I always felt opening my eyes each morning to find the sun slanting across my wallpaper, or its pattern grown dull and moody, in line with the weather.

“Wallpapering,” as Jeanne Schinto, so eloquently puts it : “ is a little like writing autobiography...simultaneously disguising and revealing, hiding and embellishing. And the patterns we discern are our own creations, works of imagination, works of art.”

It’s only fairly recently that I realised that I wrote *Flock* for my father. Some months before she died, my mother told me that almost the first thing he did after they were married was strip off seven layers of wallpaper and repaper the front room. I know that, in Francis Sprigge, I gave my father another life. Not the one he had; the one that, obliged to leave school at fourteen, had seen him reduced for a time to hauling bags of cement; but the life of a man not merely gratified to paste up a new wallpaper—even now, I can see my father, a tall, darkly-handsome man, with a long reach, wielding a pasting brush at the kitchen-table—but one with the artistry and vision to design and make one. I think my father would have enjoyed that.

Besides, not since 1892, and Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s *The Yellow Wallpaper* has there been a wallpaper fiction. I reckon *Flock*’s way overdue.

(Jeanne Schinto, *The Wallpaper Museum*, SouthWest Review, Spring, 1999)

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