Wallpaper and textile superimposed – removal & destination in a reconstruction. The Chinese ‘boudoir’ ceiling at the Château d’Issou (Yvelines, France)

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Abstract
An investigation of the wall coverings in the château d’Issou provided a great deal of information about the history of the decorations and modifications to the building and provided insights into the social status and aesthetic taste of the last occupants. Although in poor condition today, the interior still provides an overview of an eclectic variety of wallpapers dating from the 18th century to 1900. Wallpapers and textiles were installed over each other. In the boudoir, a Chinese wallpaper dating from the late 18th century was discovered on the ceiling under a ‘toile de Jouy’ cotton fabric printed with a Chinese design. The removal of the various superimposed layers of this boudoir raised questions about their conservation and their exhibition out of their original context.

Keywords
Wallpaper, Chinese wallpaper, reconstruction, ‘Toile de Jouy’ cotton fabric, superimposed decoration

Introduction
Among the multitude of materials used in interior decoration, wallpapers are particularly significant, reflecting the inhabitants’ taste and social class. In spite of their proliferation in 19th century working-class homes because they were considered insulating, clean and easy to install, for a long time wallpapers were considered the finishing element of interior design due to the sumptuousness and richness of their materials and design. Despite the high cost of some wallpapers, especially the fake flock Damask and Chinese papers of the 18th century [1], the history of wallpaper shows that most of them were cheaper substitutes for more precious materials like textiles and leathers. This is why they tended to be more replaced according to changes in fashion.
Rarely removed from the wall, papers were covered over by other papers. There are many reasons for this. Leaving a paper on the wall rather than removing it was a significant time saver for the hanger. It was quite difficult to remove papers from some surfaces like wood panelling. Old wallpaper was an ideal support for the new wallpaper and provided a reinforcement of the wall’s insulation. Nevertheless, the number of complete old wallpapers found in-situ is relatively small mainly due to « savage » or ignorant removals. The fragility of paper, the length of time wallpapers are on display, and changing fashions causing them to be replaced, make complete and untouched wallpapers unique and rare.

Over the last few years, wallpapers have been the subject of historical as well as technical research bringing to light important information about the history of the decorative arts. Many decorative interiors of historical, stylistically or material importance are not listed yet. Some are in such fragile conservation condition that they require emergency care in order to be saved. Indeed, the state of preservation of in-situ wallpapers depend on the building they are in. The factors that cause deterioration in historic houses are numerous and they endanger the decorative elements within of which wallpapers are the most fragile.

Eclectic decor into the Château d’Issou

In June 2006, investigations were undertaken which would lead to the preservation of the historical wallpapers at the château d’Issou, Yvelines (West of Paris), France [Fig. 1]. The 18th century building was largely redecorated in the 1880’s prior to its acquisition by the Chaperon family in 1903. Although in poor condition, the chateau contains an important, eclectic array of wallpapers from various periods. Eclecticism in interior decoration was quite widespread in that period. A decorative theme is peculiar to each room. Among the room and wallpaper styles are a Gothic and Pompadour bedchamber, a

Fig. 1: Vue of the château
Jean-Baptiste Martin, Wallpaper and textile superimposed

Renaissance office, a Napoleonic guest room and a Chinese boudoir. In each room, the wallpaper plays a predominant role while fitting with the furniture and works of art. This ‘mise-en-scène’ creates what is today called a « period room » [Fig. 2 and 3].

The goals of the intervention into the château were to save the last 18th and 19th century wallpaper fragments and to create a database of the chateau’s wallpapers.

Most of the interior elements had disappeared as a result of the vandalism that followed the opening of the château to the public after Mrs Chaperon death in 1976.

Research has been undertaken to date the wallpapers and identify the designs, materials and mounting techniques. Understanding and interpretation of the interior will be attained by an in-situ examination of its decorative elements, an investigation of archival evidence such as inventories and household accounts, and scientific analysis. Additional investigation was carried out in the Chinese boudoir where a Chinese wallpaper ceiling was discovered under a ‘toile de Jouy’ cotton fabric.

Wallpapers should be considered as decorative units composed of different materials: wood panels, textiles, decorative paintings, and elements made from metal. Various specialists must collaborate in order to facilitate an understanding of the technical aspects of all of the materials.

Fig. 2: The Library in the 1970’s
Fig. 3: The Renaissance Room
The Chinese Boudoir

Fig. 4: Vue in the Chinese Boudoir

Fig. 5: The ‘toile de Jouy’ on the ceiling
The Chinese boudoir is a small rectangular room with two entrances, a large window looking on to the French garden and two inside ovals window. When the room was examined, the wallpaper on the walls was almost totally missing. The chimney décor had also disappeared [Figure 4]. The ceiling was covered with a Chinese-patterned « toile de Jouy » held by bamboo sticks, creating the illusion of a tent [Fig. 5].

Several fragments of wallpapers were still on the wall: a fake wood wallpaper with a border (ca. 1860) which had been roll printed with oils colours was still attached to the timber panelled substrate of the wall. Over it were Chinese wallpaper fragments covered with ‘toile de Jouy’ fragments.

Was there any wallpaper under the canopy of « toile » on the ceiling? The positive answer suggested that the vandals couldn’t manage to take off the ceiling decoration because of the great height of the walls. They only stripped accessible spots [Fig. 6].

Figure 6: Vue of the Chinese paper on the ceiling

Chinese wallpapers, discovered by Europeans in the 16th century, were exported by the members of the India Company like spices, silks and china. Chinese wallpaper production was mainly aimed at answering the European demand. The massive 18th century importation of Chinese wallpapers indicates the passion for these designs. Rare were the houses that didn’t get their own. However, their high prices show that they were a luxury.

The Issou Chinese wallpaper is based on the ‘tree of life’ design with flowers and birds hand painted on a cream-colored background. According to specialists, this design dates to the early 19th century and may be some of the last production from Chinese workshops.

Scientific analysis using an electronic microscope revealed that the paper was three layers composed of mulberry and bamboo fibres. X-Ray Fluorescence indicated the presence of pigments such as green
copper and arsenic (emerald green) which are inherently unstable and which can cause discoloration and acidity in adverse conditions.

This type of precious paper (like the new ‘paysages’) was often mounted on taut canvas in a manner comparable to the way paintings are placed on wood frames. This system, borrowed from the way in which fabric wall coverings were installed, was looser and allowed for easier removal when the decor was to be changed. The Chinese wallpaper in the boudoir was mounted according to this system. The combination of Manila fibres canvas and blue dark paper for lining is typical of the 19th century Chinese technique for mounting paper [Fig.7].

Figure 7: Different layers of paper and textile

In the style of panoramic wallpapers, each panel of the Chinese paper is of great length in order to be able to fit most interiors. The boudoir wallpaper was apparently too long for the wall because of the panelling at the bottom of the wall. It had not been cut, and the top was mounted to the ceiling. We surmise that the « toile de Jouy » had been put over the wall paper to change the setting without changing the Chinese style. It surely brought a new freshness to the room, since, as we’ve been told, the furniture in the room was Chinese.

In 1903 when the château was purchased by the Chaperon family, it was barely redecorated. We only have a few pictures of the inside of the castle in the year 1880 and few later modifications are visible in the building interior.
The Chinese wallpaper was torn in various places. This seems to have been a reason for covering it. Rough repairs made with brown Manila paper envelopes are clearly visible and allow us to date the intervention. Indeed, a stamp cancelled in 1926 can be seen in one of the repairs [Fig. 8].

The value of the Chinese decor must have been a reason why it was kept on the paper on the wall instead of being removed.

Since 1926, the « toile de Jouy » has played an important role in protecting the wallpaper from the effects of light and soot as it was indeed covered with dust and bleached and blackened from chimney smoke.

Removal and project for the presentation of the decor

The dilapidated state of the château didn’t permit keeping the decoration in-situ, so the removal of the toile and the wallpaper was inevitable.

The fake bamboo sticks had been weakened by insects and humidity. They were removed in the most delicate way in so that they could be preserved and restored by a conservator specializing in wood. Then, the ‘toile de Jouy’ fabric was carefully removed. Like the ‘toile de Jouy’, four triangle shaped pieces of wallpaper had been fixed with metal pins to form a tent. A textile conservator will treat the « toile de Jouy ».

When working on historic interiors, the issue of the removal is quite common. When there is to be an in-situ reconstruction, using specific criteria, it must be decided which layer is to be kept. What happens to the layers that have been removed? Most of the time, the upper layers are not kept in their entirety. Only a fragment of each layer is kept as evidence. Ethically, it is not acceptable to eliminate several layers of history in order to keep one.
The décor of the boudoir will not be presented in its original context. This is the only alternative to its complete destruction and allows for a multitude of choices in terms of presentation. The two layers will be shown separately, thus displaying two historical ways in which the room was decorated.

We strongly believe that the ‘toile’ and the wallpaper should be installed on the ceiling of two rooms so that viewers will understand their original presentation. Each should be placed on a structure that can be moved allowing them to be lent for shows. The château’s orangerie would be a favourable place for such an exhibition and it would keep the decorations on their original site.

Conclusion

Wallpapers superimposed upon each other in old houses teach us a lot about the history of the house and the tastes and influences of each region and time. To destroy more recent layers in order to present an older layer would be against the principles of conservation.

When interior decoration can no longer be kept in-situ-- as in the case of the château d’Issou-- the careful removal of the different layers will allow the study of the history of the building’s interior. The Chinese boudoir revealed two superimposed decors of great quality. It seemed appropriate to exhibit them separately. Working with wood and textile conservators, we were able to keep all of the elements and to exhibit them as two distinct ceilings thus showing the different stages of decoration history within one room.

Endnotes:

« 9 août 1753 – la garniture en papier des Indes très-beau de trente-sept châssis composant la garde-robe du Roy dans lesquels : Trois feuilles à vases et à fleurs à 2 l. : 108 l.- Quatre à figures à 24 l. : 96 l. – Neuf plus petites formant lambris à 12 l. : 108 l. – Dix-huit à pagodes en travers à 1 l. 10 s. : 27 l. – Vingt à fleurs à 2 l. : 40 l. – Les toiles, clous, façons et raccordage desdits papiers, 160 l. ».
« 16 novembre 1754 – quatre panneaux en papier des Indes, très beaux, 266 livres ».

All photographs are courtesy of Jean-Baptiste Martin.

Jean-Baptiste Martin is a private paper conservator specializes in wallpaper conservation. He has been trained at the Sorbonne University and the aim of his Master thesis project was ‘Wallpaper conservation and reconstruction in historic interiors’. Jean-Baptiste has taken experience with wallpaper specialist as Allyson McDermott in England and John Krill at the Winterthur Museum in United States. Since 1998, his research is focused on wallpaper conservation in historic interiors, studying original materials and techniques for historic reconstruction. He is interested in several Europeans projects and working as well with a wallpaper block-printer François-Xavier Richard in Tours, France. Short (Jean-Baptiste MARTIN, 21 av. André Maginot, F-37100 Tours, France, jbmartin.papierpeint@gmail.com)