

Urns and Parrots

Dessus de portes in *papier peint* between eighteenth and nineteenth century

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Received: 24/06/2020

Accepted for Publication: 01/07/2020

Published: 10/07/2020

Abstract

With their lively depiction of flowers and birds or scenes from antiquity, overdoor panels in papier peint constitute a specific element of middle class interior decoration which is little studied. This paper aims to highlight the use of some of these panels in hand blocked wallpaper at the end of the eighteenth century and at the beginning of the nineteenth century. This review of the main French Manufactures and designers sheds some light on this little known aspect of Western art and design.

Keywords: Papier Peint, Manufacture Hartmann et Cie, Joseph-Laurent Malaine, overdoors

Deviating from my usual research on ancient philosophy and aesthetics, I would like to focus here on a seemingly minor subject, that is panels of papier peint intended for a specific element of interior architecture. These little known and little studied exemplars are nevertheless a vivid testimony to the interest in interior decoration of the period. The use of wallpaper as a substitute for the more costly fabric as wall covering became popular in the mid eighteenth century, starting in England and spreading all over Europe and Northern America.¹ Although sometimes dismissed as a cheap imitation of more sophisticated materials, wallpaper appealed to the rising middle class but became fashionable even among the aristocracy. The French production of papier peint quickly became dominant in the market for the finesse of the execution of the impression à la planche and the gaiety of colours. The different designs were soon cleverly devised to imitate (and compete with) not only fabric and tapestries but also with painted decoration, while the panoramiques of the first half of the nineteenth century constituted a new genre altogether. Hand painted Chinese export papers had always retained their status of luxury items as they were not produced mechanically.

Among the examples of the production of papier peint at the end of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth are some exquisite panels which were manufactured by the Manufacture Hartmann Risler et Cie.² In one of these, the n. 287 in the Musée de Papier Peint in Rixheim, produced in around 1795, a vase, in a vaguely antiquarian style with bronze sphynxes and other classical ornaments, is filled with irises, tulips, roses, jasmine, anemones and other flowers, some of which spill onto a marble socle. The lively effect of the panel is heightened by the presence

¹See S. Parissien, *Adam Style*, London: Phaidon Press 1992, pp.165-175; C. Thibaut-Pomerrantz, *Papiers peints. Inspirations et tendances*, Paris: Flammarion, 2009.

²Initially established as Nicholas Dolfus et Cie in 1790, the manufacture became Hartmann, Risler et Cie in 1795. It was eventually bought in 1802 by Zuber et Cie, which is still active.

of a small blue bird and especially of a colorful parrot, which introduces an exotic flair into the scene. The composition is expertly devised, with elements placed on diagonals filling the corners but without rigid symmetry. The complex hand-blocked impression was made with more than 20 colours. The overall effect, against a solid green background, is enchanting.

How were panels like this used? The clue is in the perspective of the vase, which is represented as if seen slightly from below, suggesting that the panel was intended to be hung high on the wall. These panels were in fact placed above the doors of a room, hence their perspective. Such overdoors, or *dessus de portes*, were intended to be used together with other paper elements to contribute to an overall, coherent design scheme. The inventiveness of the designers made sure that the decorative schemes could be adapted to different sizes and shapes of room, thanks to the use of plain backgrounds which could be cut according to the dimensions needed. Borders would then be added to create the finished panels, which would be inserted into the different elements of the rooms. The process of decorating an entire room was therefore quick, the material relatively cheap, and the constant introduction of new fashions inevitable, with the result that some fine examples have not survived, superseded by subsequent trends.

A charming example of the use of wallpaper in the last quarter of the eighteenth century can be seen in a relatively well preserved French room with its existing *papier peint* intact, which is currently for sale on the antiques market. Here the wall panels are of a paper in the style popularised by Jean-Baptiste Réveillon, with bouquets of flowers, birds and fountains connected by garlands while the *dado* is decorated with a flower frieze in matching colours, with a predominance of red, on an off-white background. The ensemble is linked by a floral border which frames the wall panels. Here actually the overdoor panels appear to be handpainted rather than in hand-blocked paper. This could be due to the lack of matching paper overdoors, and the painting seems to be rather naive, especially comparing the painted border of these overdoors to the *papier peint* border of the wall panels. Despite this, the room is a good example of how overdoors were used in combination with other wallpaper elements.

Going back to the urn with flowers in the overdoor panel by Hartmann Risler et Cie, its design reflects that of Gobelintapestries of the third quarter of the eighteenth century, such as the series with ovals by Francois Boucher, which was much admired and used for some of the most lavish interiors, notably by Robert Adam in the United Kingdom in the Tapestry Rooms at Osterley Park, Croome Court, Newby Hall, Moor Park and Weston Park. The set of Gobelintapestries was designed around Boucher's *medaillons* depicting the loves of the gods as allegories of the four elements, with an inventive damask-like surround strewn with flowers and birds designed by Maurice Jacques. The overall design was cleverly devised by the architect Jacques-Germain Soufflot to be used in the same way as wallpaper and easily adapted to different sizes of room, with elements for chimney breasts, for narrow panels, *dado* and indeed overdoors with urns filled with flowers³. The rooms were therefore transformed into dreamy and luxurious garden pavillions.⁴

On a slightly humbler scale, appropriate for the middle class market, the ingenuity of the designers was applied to paper sets too. The *papier peint* panels could be adapted, sometimes cutting out elements and pasting them on different backgrounds, as in the example of a room in the *maison forte* of Vernay à Saint-Galmier. Here, in the cabinet, as pointed out by Catherine Guillot⁵, the upper part of the *boiserie* in the original seventeenth century decoration contained portraits, which have been replaced with *découpage* panels at the end of the eighteenth century. The panels have a plain blue painted background on which cut-outs of handblocked paper have been pasted. One panel shows a classical vase which corresponds to a well-known example, designed by Joseph-Laurent Malaine for Manufacture Hartmann, Riesler et Cie (n. 257 of the Musée de Papier Peint in Rixheim),

³See W. Rieder, "The Croome Court Tapestry room," in *Period Rooms in the Metropolitan Museum of Arts*, New York: Metropolitan Museum of Arts 1996, 157-167]

⁴J. Musson, *Robert Adam*, New York: Rizzoli 2017, 90-1

⁵C. Guillot, "Un décor exceptionnel du dernier tiers du XVII^e siècle découvert à Saint-Galmier dans la Loire: premiers jalons," in *In Situ. Revue des Patrimoines* 35 (2018), 1-37.

where the vase is actually filled with flowers. The design was available also without flowers, as in Vernay. The other *découpage* panels were made with pasted figures taken from *papiers peints* by the little known Manufacture Monchablon, which produced a series à l'antique from archeological sources. In the cabinet at Vernay, the Monchablon panels have been cut so that the more complex scenes of the *Aldobrandini Nuptials and of Les mariages samnites*⁶ have been adapted to the size of the panels. The use of elements from different manufactures, cut out so that they could be applied to the same coloured background for the sake of decorative uniformity, is a testament to the versatility of the *papier peint* at the end of the century. The fashionable figures in the manner of classical paintings, with their strong, simplified outlines, were the perfect subject for this kind of decorative treatment.

The design of the overdoor panel by Hartmann Risler et Cie with a vase of flowers, bird and parrot was devised expressly as an overdoor, while other examples of the same manufacturer show a less distinguishable perspective, possibly in order to allow the panels to be used in a variety of ways. Some panels were devised with a perspective which suggests a view slightly from above, so that they are intended to be used on the wall at eye level. Examples of this are the “Athénienne à fleurs” (n. 394 in Rixheim, 1797) of the Musée du Papier Peint in Rixheim and the panel with the grand urn filled with flowers identical to the empty urn in Vernay.

Among other panels designed by Joseph-Laurent Malaine, who was the artistic director for Hartmann Risler et Cie, is a pair of overdoors (n. 508 and 509 in Rixheim), again with birds and parrots and flowers, with a frontal perspective, probably intended for dining rooms because of the fruit and game. Other panels, with *corbeilles* of flowers, although likely to be intended as overdoors, could be cut out and used in a variety of ways. Sometimes two different compositions could be integrated in the same *papier peint* panel by the Manufacture itself, as in the model n. 437 of the Musée de Rixheim, which is a combination of n. 432 and 433 and is the pendant of n. 436. Other, exquisite examples are the *corbeille* with an elaborate plinth of the overdoor panel n. 288 in Rixheim, with its pendant n. 287, and the cup with bronze decoration n. 121 and its pendant n. 120. Often landscapes were the subject of overdoor panels.

The fashion for decoration inspired by the excavations in Pompeii and Herculaneum, ignited by the publication of the *Antichità di Ercolano Esposte* between 1757 and 1792, led to the production of various sets of overdoors by different manufacturers, all with a similar design characterized by classical scenes with figures against a solid background, as in the Monchablon panels at Vernay. Alongside the *dessus de portes* by Monchablon, those by Manufacture Boissier stand out for their dynamic allegories of the four elements against a dark background, while classical scenes by Legrand père et fils include the titillating depiction of the painter Zeuxis selecting different models for a painting of Helen of Troy (n. 1066. pendant of n. 1065 with Diogenes and Alexander the Great).

After Hartmann Risler et Cie became J. Zuber et Cie in 1802, other overdoors with singularly expressive figure à l'antique against a dark, Pompeian background were printed (n. 631 and 632 in Rixheim). Panels with urns and *corbeilles* filled with flowers were still printed too, however the overdoors followed the latest Empire style trend, with elegant *grisailles* of antique scenes or landscapes. Another distinctive design by Hartmann Risler et Cie is a series of *dessus de porte* with ancient Egyptian, Greek and Roman objects, all rendered as if in bronze or dark stone (n. 473, 474, 475, 476 in Rixheim).

The adaptability of the overdoor panels together with their lively colors and delectable scenes made them popular. Although it is understandable that one might now want to enjoy them from a closer point of view, it is important that their original use is recognized and appreciated. With flowers in pots, parrots and fruit, *antique objects* and moral tales, and with their distinctive narrative content which set them apart from the rest of the wall decoration, these panels provided a focal point for that portion of a room above doors, which to modern eyes seems negligible but which was treated as a salient element of the structure of a domestic space, from grand palaces to more modest, bourgeois interiors. The charm of these depictions remains unaltered.

⁶A moral tale by Jean François Marmontel popularised by the opéra comique by André Grétry, with text by Barnabé Farmain de Rosoi.