

'Our new paper hangings': Situating wallpaper in the eighteenth-century home

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Wallpaper has often been seen as on the boundaries of study of the eighteenth-century domestic space. This paper questions the way in which it has been seen as part of 'another story', rather than an integral part of eighteenth-century schemes. Literally on the boundary between architecture and interior decoration, between fittings and moveable goods it has been seen as ephemeral and the background to displays of works of art. The paper begins by outlining the work of early historians of the material such as Margaret Jourdain who established a model of study based on style, technique and provenance as a result of the burgeoning interest in eighteenth-century decorative arts and furniture during the early years of the twentieth century. Dealers and decorators also played a role, since Chinese wallpapers in particular used a hanging method which meant that they could be removed from the wall and re-sold.

This paper argues, however, that in the eighteenth-century English wallpaper was viewed as a new material which provided fashionability and display, one whose aesthetic values also sought to undermine the place of other decorative materials and align itself with concepts of gentility. Evidence from the rhetoric of tradesmen and consumers will be analysed to show how the new material was characterised, in particular by the process of imitation through comparison with textiles, prints and imported Chinese paper.

The paper also outlines the areas of study which wallpaper can be used to interrogate now, drawing on my recent work bringing together letters and accounts of decoration with surviving fragments of wallpaper and the sites where it hung. In contrast to an earlier focus on aristocratic consumption I argue that wallpaper can also be used to shed light on other aspects of the eighteenth-century domestic space, on the consumption of the material by men as well as women, on its hanging in London houses as well as in the country house, and on its use up and down the social scale. Examples of extant schemes hung in the hall, bedchamber and parlour will be used to interrogate these themes and argue that its spread through the domestic space means it is a key material by which to interrogate tensions in the domestic space between tradesmen, architects and consumers.

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