



A section from *Les Rives du Bosphore*, which required more than 2,000 woodblocks to achieve the infinite details of design (note the netful of splashing fish in the bottom-right corner) and richness of its colours

THE LONG VIEW

First produced by a French manufacturer in 1804, block-printed panoramic wallpapers depicting exotic and historical landscapes gave their owners a window on the world. Looking ahead to this year's exhibits at Masterpiece London, Sophie Barling invites you to the banks of the Bosphorus ▷



‘THEY’RE DREAM-INDUCING. They were designed to inspire people to travel, to stimulate the imagination.’ It’s not often anyone can attribute wanderlust to wallpaper. Or any kind of lust, come to that. Gloom, perhaps, when the decoration in question is offensive to the eye – think of poor Oscar Wilde on his deathbed. But Franco-American dealer Carolle Thibaut-Pomerantz isn’t referring to floral repeats, stripes or even chinoiserie patterns. Her subject is no ordinary form of wallpaper, but *papiers peints panoramiques*, or antique block-printed panoramics.

The use of the French term for this form of decoration is no mere ploy to lend it a grandeur that English couldn’t manage; as Carolle explains, ‘the panoramic scenic was a form of décor created by the French alone.’ The history of the wallpaper industry can, like a few other things, be boiled down to an Anglo-French tussle. In England the medium first gained popularity in the 16th century when trade with Europe fell after Henry VIII’s split with Rome. Unable to import tapestries from Flanders or leather from Cordoba to line their walls, even the aristocracy turned to block-printed paper to imitate what they were missing. British manufacturers dominated the market until the end of the 18th century, when the Frenchman Jean-Baptiste Réveillon started hiring highly skilled artists – some well known – to design his papers, thus overtaking his rivals across the Channel. Once Réveillon had set new standards for scale, techniques and ambition, it wasn’t a large leap from there to the elaborate panoramics introduced a few decades later by French manufacturers such as Joseph Dufour and Jean Zuber.

The first of these was made c1804 by Dufour, and depicted scenes from the voyages of Captain Cook in the exotic landscape of the South Pacific. ‘There would have been perhaps 150 editions of this *panoramique* printed at the time,’ says Carolle. ‘These earliest limited editions are the finest for the quality of their cloth papers, engravings and pigments. They’re therefore the best from a collector’s point of view.’ It was the *Sauvages de la Mer Pacifique* that set Dufour on the way to becoming the leading French maker of scenic wallpaper during the Empire and Restoration periods, exporting mainly to England and America.

In 1812 or thereabouts the firm produced the panoramic featured on these pages. *Les Rives du Bosphore* is an idyllic representation of Constantinople made at a time when Orientalism was ▷



Top: the two extant panels of this wallpaper, each measuring 2.25m in width, are here presented in continuity, recreating the way the eye scans a natural landscape. The panels can also be hung as separate tableaux. Above: some of the joins in the cloth paper are clearly visible in this section, in which fishermen net their catch

THE LONG VIEW



Top: designs could be based on sketches made by travelling artists. This view of Constantinople will have accurate elements, but buildings were often arranged according to fancy and scenes carry a European interpretation. Above: the papers have been cleaned to regain their original palette, but they retain the patina of time

gathering pace in the West. Created using more than 2,000 hand-carved woodblocks printed on joined sheets of paper, the panoramic would have taken over a year to complete, which explains why there was only ever a limited number made. This exclusivity, together with their quality, made French panoramics luxury items, hung not only in the homes of the well-off bourgeoisie but also in large English country houses and the salons of Swedish castles.

Carolle plans to bring two contiguous panels from *Les Rives du Bosphore* to Masterpiece London at the end of June. While the panoramic would originally have incorporated further panels, it's now rare to find a complete antique scenic wallpaper; the fact that they were composed of different panels gave them a flexibility that meant the papers could easily be split up. And it's an adaptability that still appeals: 'The panels can be hung side by side as a continuous landscape, or separately as two tableaux,' explains Carolle. 'These *panoramiques* were always made to be interrupted – by the furniture of a dining or reception room, or even by being spread across more than one room. Each panel is a composition in its own right.'

So, wallpaper as fine art? Not an exclusively modern concept, according to Carolle. 'At the Paris Exposition Universelle in 1855, Jules Desfosse, the most important manufacturer under the Second Empire, presented his designs as works to compete with paintings.' The spatial effect of these papers, however, inevitably shifts them back into the realm of interior decoration. 'They're different from paintings,' agrees Carolle. 'They have a depth and a perspective that creates an illusion of space in a room. Even in a tiny area, the panels introduce light, opening a window into an imaginary landscape.'

Along with the decorative intent went a didactic one – a tradition in wall decoration that goes back at least as far as ancient Rome. Depending on the subject matter the different schemes devised by manufacturers would have given young viewers lessons in geography, literature or history. French children would have become very familiar, one suspects, with the different scenes depicted in *The Battle of Austerlitz* – another of those Anglo-French tussles, this time against Britain's allies – after which a victorious Napoleon could rest on his laurels. Until Waterloo, of course ■

Carolle Thibaut-Pomerantz (0033 1 45 50 33 01; ctpdecorativearts.com) is exhibiting at Masterpiece London, Royal Hospital Chelsea, London SW3 (020 7499 7470; masterpiecefair.com), 30 June-5 July