

Wallpaper from a golden age

By Michael Clerizo

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Michael Clerizo discovers a French treasure – hanging as a piece of art, not just decoration – that even museums buy



US-born Carolle Thibaut-Pomerantz at her Parisian home: 'I love being bicultural and bilingual'
Magali Delporte

Carolle Thibaut-Pomerantz opens the door to her Paris flat with a few words of enlightenment for a confused caller: "That's not a knocker," she says, pointing to the brass fixture on the outside wall. "It's a bell. You don't lift it, you pull it and a bell rings inside. French people always know what to do outside my door but people from other countries never do."

Thibaut-Pomerantz gets many visitors – from around the world – thanks mainly to her expertise in another expression of French exceptionalism: wallpaper. From the late 18th century to the mid-19th century, there was a "golden age" in this type of décor when, according to Duncan Burton of the Wallpaper History Society, "the French brought to wallpaper the same calibre of excellence in design and production that they brought to porcelain in Sèvres and to tapestry at Gobelins."

The quality of golden age specimens is strikingly obvious inside Thibaut-Pomerantz's apartment. Across one wall stretches a huge panel – 6ft 6in high and 7ft 4in wide – entitled "The Banks of the Bosphorus" and depicting an enchanting Istanbul scene. Domed mosques, minarets and exotic trees compose a distinctly Turkish skyline while turbaned men and veiled women meander in the foreground, river waters sparkling at their feet. Produced by the Dufour Company in 1812, the panel conveys a sense of space and depth and is infused with subtle gradations of colour: greens, yellows, blues, whites and greys.

"This paper panel is mounted on a stretcher and hung on the wall like a painting or a Japanese screen," Thibaut-Pomerantz says. "I do this because I don't believe in treating these panels as wall coverings but as an art form in their own right."

Other walls in the Paris flat are covered with equally dazzling panels.

Thibaut-Pomerantz has turned it into one of the few galleries in the world specialising in *papier peints anciens*. (She's done the same with her Manhattan apartment.) Her customers include The Metropolitan Museum in New York, The Philadelphia Museum of Art, The Art Institute of Chicago and the Musée Des Arts Décoratifs in Paris, as well as interior designers, such as John Saladino, Peter Marino and Jacques Grange, who buy for clients' homes.

Born in the US, Thibaut-Pomerantz describes herself as "part-American and part-French". "I have always lived my life between Paris and New York, two wonderful cities. And I love being bicultural and bilingual."

She came into her career naturally. "I was cradled in the art world because my mother had a very avant garde gallery in New York," she explains. "I really planned to step into her shoes." But after studying art history at New York University and working in different areas of the arts at several museums, "I found my interests evolved away from modern art," she says. In the 1970s she started a salon in New York, gathering collectors to focus on particular themes or styles and to offer pieces for sale. It was a time of growing appreciation for the decorative arts and Thibaut-Pomerantz developed her own business dealing mainly in early 20th-century French furniture and objects. Fifteen years ago she "happened upon" some examples of golden age wallpaper – "a true French speciality" – and realized that she could bring an overlooked element of antique decoration back into modern-day homes.

Initially, she incorporated wallpaper restoration and sales into her existing business but, three years on, when she established a Paris base, she decided to become a specialist. Her offerings now also include wallpapers from the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

A conversation with Thibaut-Pomerantz is an instant education. She credits a single manufacturer, Jean-Baptist Réveillon, with launching the golden age. Abandoning the timid repetitive patterns of his time, he employed artists to design elaborate and lively scenes for his papers. His successors at other companies, such as Dufour, Jules Desfossé, Zuber, Jacquemart et Bénard and Jourdan et Villard proved adept at enlarging the scenes for wallpaper, selling not just to the super-rich but also to the bourgeoisie and keeping abreast of changing tastes while managing a labour-intensive manufacturing process that required a highly skilled workforce. So successful were the manufacturers that wallpaper entered French life in a way not seen in other European countries. During the Napoleonic era, panels commemorated the emperor's victories; a few years later they celebrated the return of the Bourbons.

Thibaut-Pomerantz once found, and spent two years restoring, a scene of Napoleon's triumph at Austerlitz. Manufactured by Jourdan et Villard in 1814, it was a true *panoramique*, comprised of 30 joined-together panels, each about 6ft 6in high and extending for a combined length of 43ft. The serried ranks of French, Austrian and Russian troupes pummel one another on a field where all vegetation has been trampled into the ground and only a few ravaged, lonely trees remain. Well-observed details include a white horse rearing up as its rider, a moustachioed Cossack, wields a sabre.

By 1815 Louis XVIII was on the French throne so the wallpaper company of Jacquemart et Bénard produced a limited edition *panoramique* entitled "Stag Hunt at the Chateau de Compiègne", in which all the riders were appropriately attired in Bourbon blue. One section called "The Quarry" measuring 7ft 5in high and 8ft 5in wide features the climactic moment. In the centre is a clearing by a rushing river where hounds swarm over the unfortunate stag. Other members of the pack swim across the river to reach their prey. Hunt masters lift horns to their lips to announce the kill as riders rush out of the woods. Off to one side a peasant woman and two children applaud. The scene's designers were fastidious about proportions and perspective, framing the action between receding rows of trees with the chateau a faint outline in the distance; autumnal sunlight plays on the trees in an entirely natural way.

All of this pre-dated the advent of mechanical printing presses and wallpaper rolls. Each scene was first carved into blocks of wood, which were inked and pressed on to a flat piece of paper. Every shade of colour required a different block, so, for example, the different oranges and greens of the foliage in "The Quarry" required up to seven blocks for each clump of leaves.

Thibaut-Pomerantz estimates that 3,000 blocks would have been used for the complete printing of the "Stag Hunt" – four panels with a combined width of 34ft 8in. Hanging these panoramas is no less of a feat; it means assembling 3,000 sheets of paper on a wall, like a vertical puzzle. Restoration is a delicate and lengthy process consisting of gradually building up and eliminating gaps in the paper or slowly cleaning tiny accretions of dirt. Occasionally, faded colour is restored to vibrancy by adding colour with a small brush, a practice called "in-painting".

Examples of the "Stag Hunt" are now in the permanent collections of London's Victoria and Albert Museum and Paris's Musée de la Chasse (Hunt Museum). The one Thibaut-Pomerantz has on offer was part of the personal collection of Jean Zuber, founder of the eponymous wallpaper company. "The Quarry" is priced at \$55,000; the complete panorama at \$175,000. So what sort of person wants such a scene in their home? "They are daring people who appreciate the quality of the printing, the rarity of the panels and their originality," she says. "They are the sort of people who are willing to ignore the latest trends in interior design if they see something they like."

They may also be after decorative impact. "The panels open up a space because they are landscapes with the illusion of depth. Put one in a small room and it will immediately give you the impression that the room is far bigger. Put one in a dark or narrow room like a hallway and it immediately gives you the illusion of air and light."

Ask Thibaut-Pomerantz where she finds her wallpaper and she tells stories of driving through rural France, exploring castles and chateaux across Europe and spending hours in attics, lofts and storage rooms just about everywhere. During much of the golden age, the geo-political situation reduced commerce between the UK and France but the US proved a ready market. One panel in her inventory was in Illinois until recently.

Another of her panels is among the most famous in the history of French wallpaper: "Le Jardin d'Armide". Armide is a wily woman from French romantic legends who kept knight Renaud from his duty by mesmerizing him with her beautiful garden. Printed in 1855 by the manufacturer Jules Desfossé, the scene is a *tour de force* of the printers' art. In the foreground, a misty light plays on an abundance of pink, white, red and blue flowers. At the centre is a marble statue and behind it lurks the mysterious garden. "Le Jardin d'Armide" is in the collections of the Philadelphia Museum of Art and Le Musée Des Arts Décoratifs. Homeowners can have it for \$85,000.

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