

PRIZED PAPERS

A dealer believes that antique hand-printed wallpaper panels are treasures worthy of framing. And her customers—museums, decorators, and collectors—agree

BY SALLY CLARK



In Carolle Thibaut-Pomerantz's Paris apartment, the goddess Psyche is captured in profile in a large neoclassical scene. The buildings of 19th-century London rise above the Thames River in a splendid six-foot-high panorama depicted in sepia tones. What are these grand art works, so rich in detail, so beautifully composed? Gouaches? Fine prints?

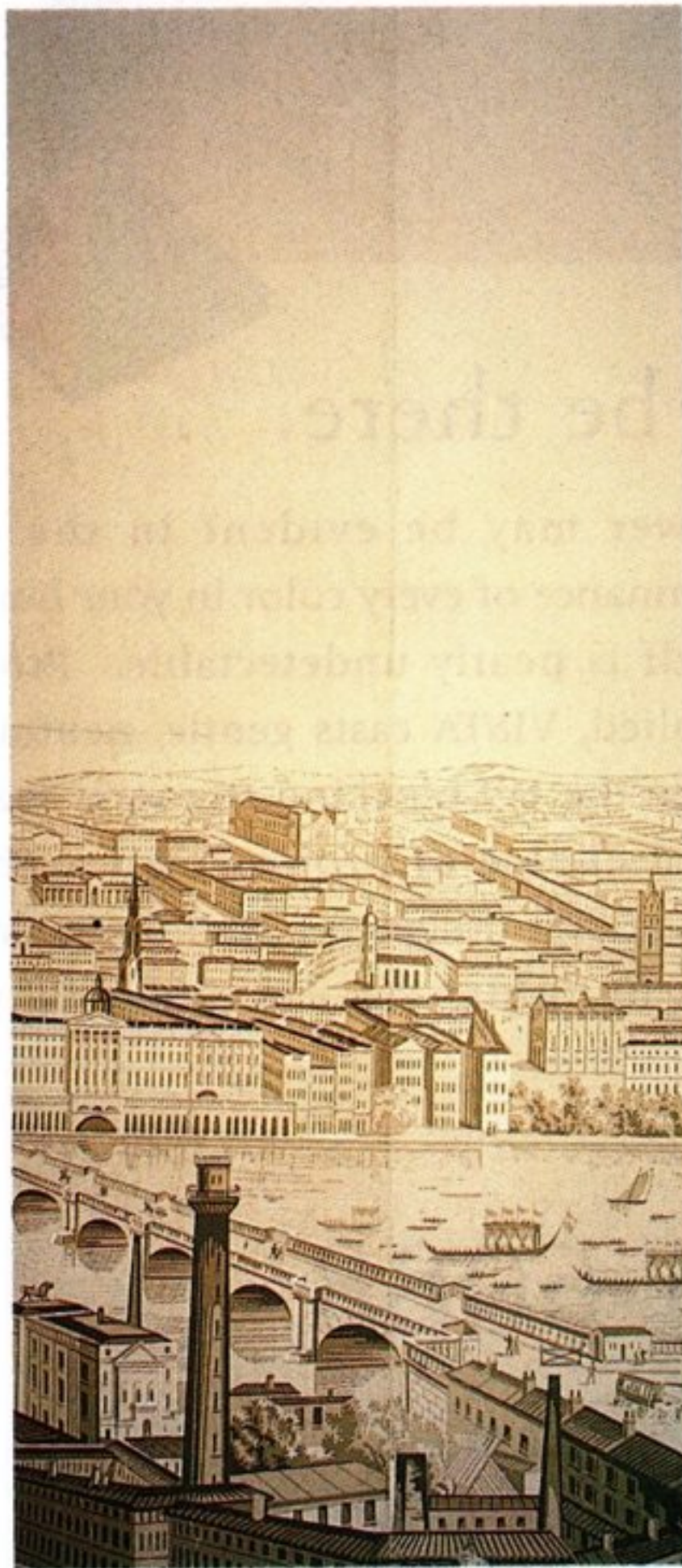
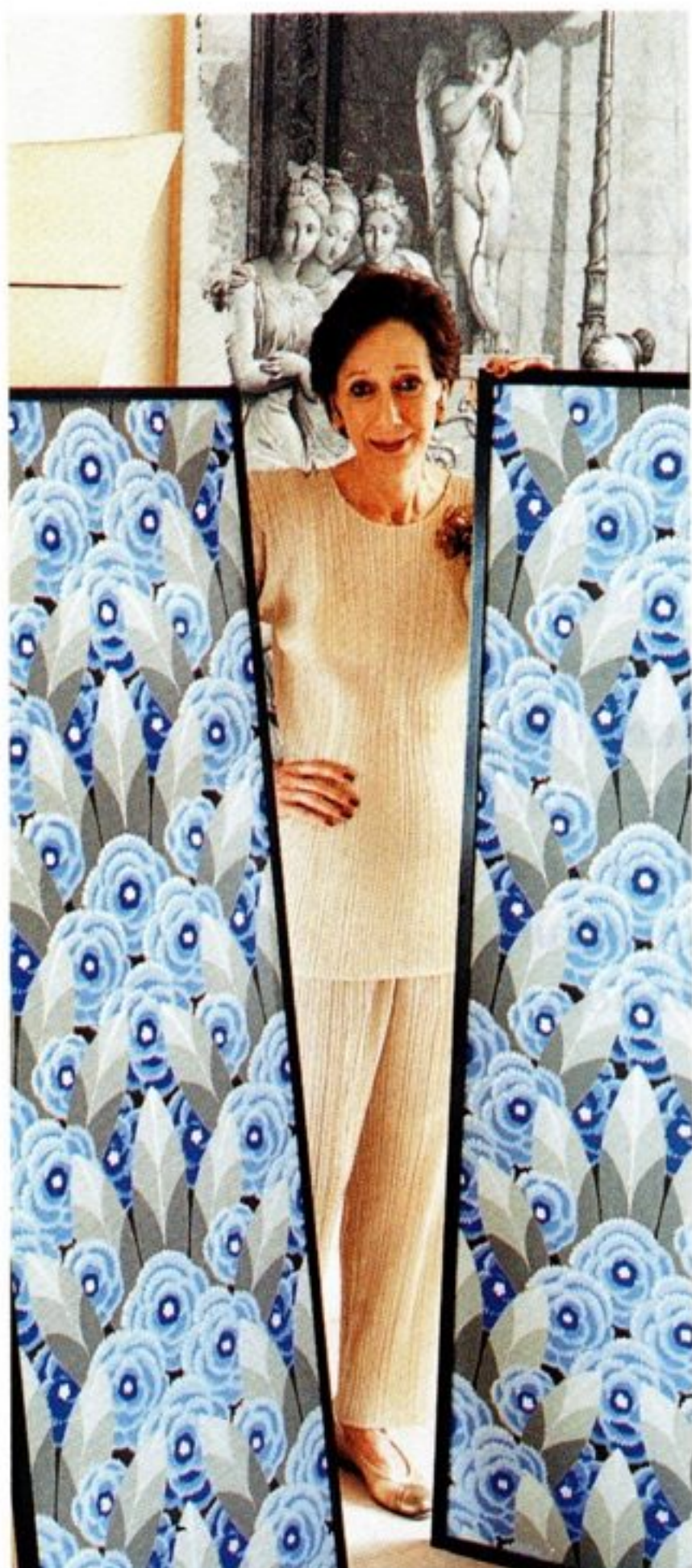
They are French wallpaper. Created over 140 years ago, such panels were hand-printed from woodblocks cut with complex designs and papers handcrafted from linen and cotton. "They are beautiful specimens of art on paper," says Thibaut-Pomerantz, a dealer who divides her time between New York and Paris. By treating antique French wallpapers like gallery-worthy canvases, she entices collectors and decorators to appreciate them as she does—as a lost art form.

An authority in this field, Thibaut-Pomerantz first encountered antique French wallpapers a decade ago, when she happened on a specialized sale at Drouot, Paris's famed auction house. "I was mesmerized," she recalls.

She bought several panels and began tracking down other examples. She has discovered antique papers glued to 19th-century room screens and stuck to the walls of ancient Paris town houses. On several occasions, she has found never-used gems that had been forgotten in closets or storage rooms. She even lucked into some superb examples that had hung for generations in an old New England house. "Thomas Jefferson was one of the first Americans who appreciated handblocked French papers," she says.

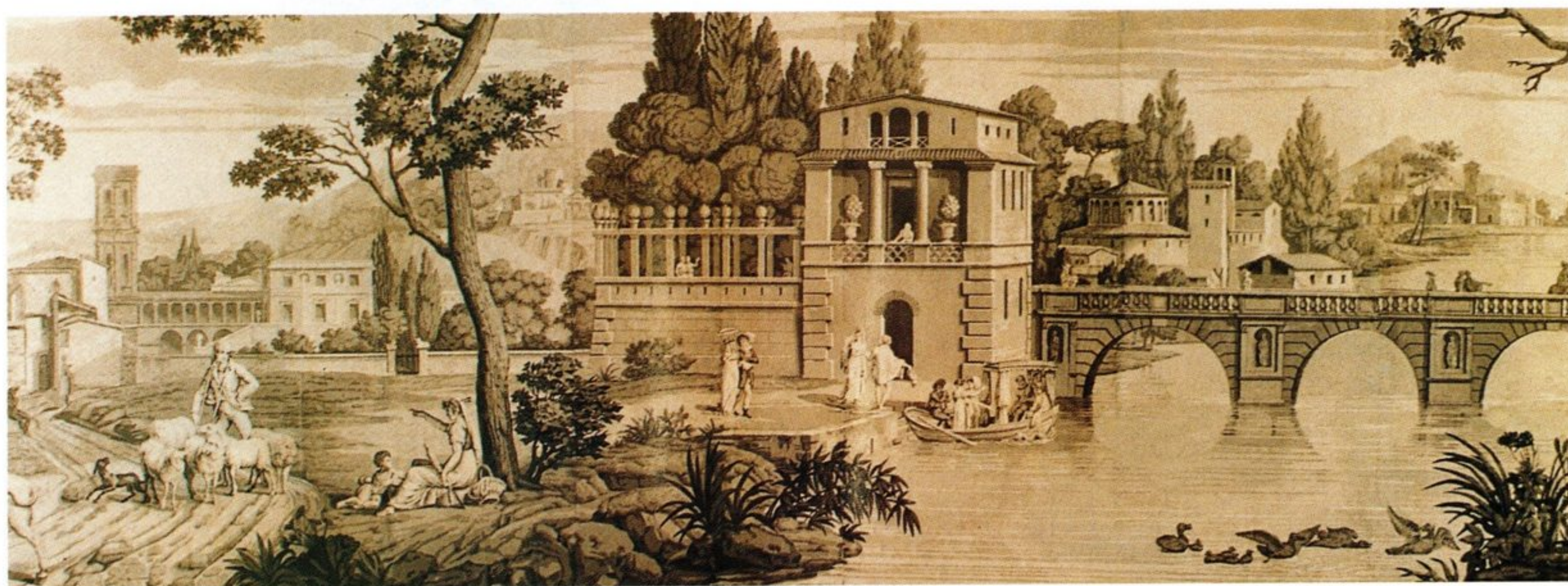
In the late 18th century, French wallpapers were highly prized in Europe and America. Unlike the English wallpaper printers, who produced fairly simple repeated designs, the French creators of *papiers peints* (or painted papers) conceived of wallpaper as a total decor, intended to transform a room into a *trompe l'oeil* fantasy, according to Thibaut-Pomerantz. Designs were inspired by mythological tales and naturalists' studies of exotic flowers and birds that travelers were bringing back from Asia and the Americas. Papers imitated marble, elaborate architectural carvings, and draped fabric. Often papers were printed in sections that a skillful paper hanger could piece together. (Rolls of paper were unknown until the 1850s.)

In her stock of antique wallpapers she has magnificent examples by the most famous makers, including four rare, never-hung 1788 panels of arabesques by Jean-Baptiste Réveillon and an 1816 first edition panel from *Les Amours de Psyche*, a wallpaper masterpiece by Joseph Dufour. Such rarities are usually >



Wallpaper as art, clockwise from above left: Franco-American dealer Carolle Thibaut-Pomerantz flanked by a pair of Art Deco panels. *Psyche Showing Her Jewels to Her Sisters*, from *Les Amours de Psyche*, an 1816 grisaille series by Joseph Dufour. Views of London, a never-hung 1853 wallpaper panel.

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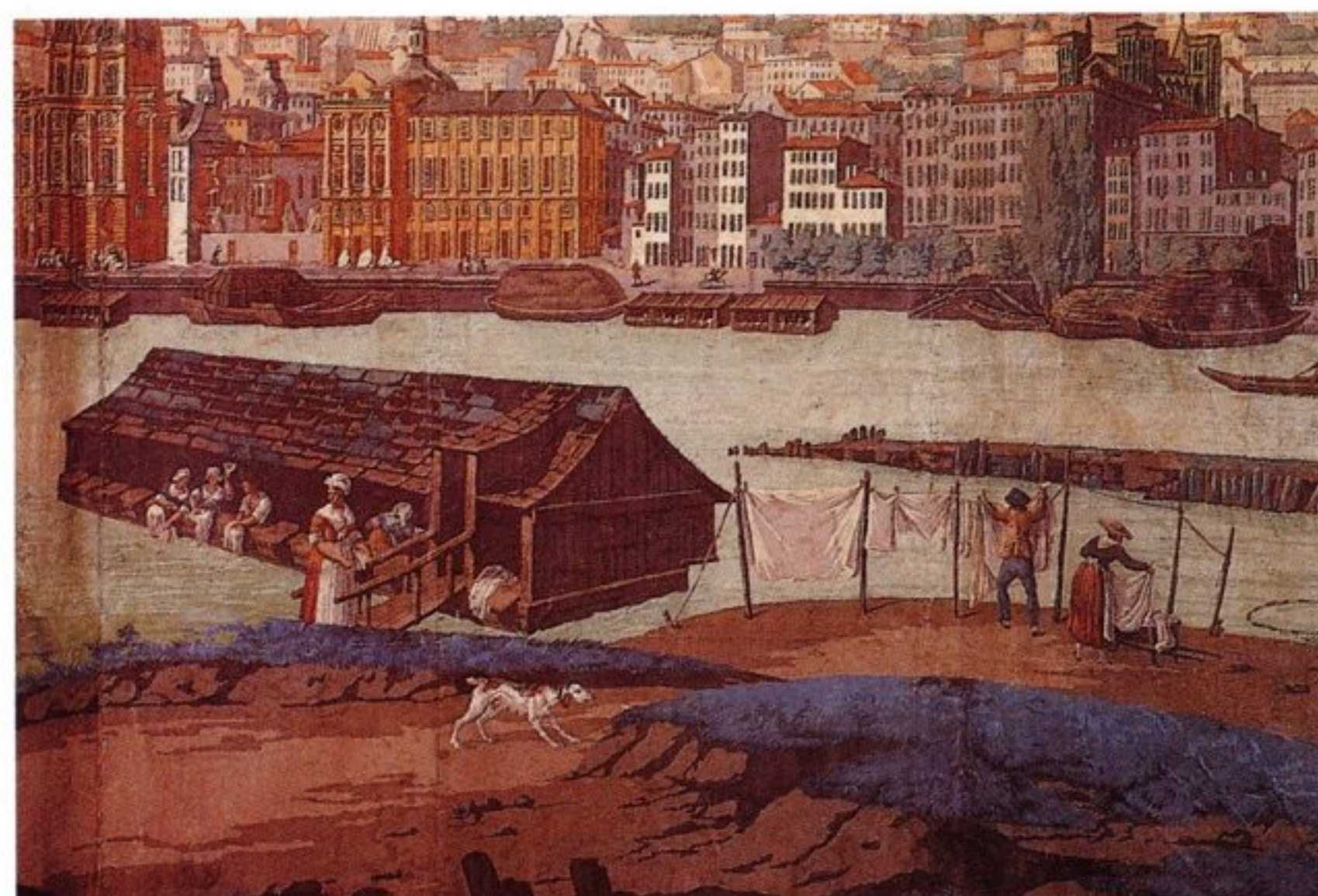
destined for the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Paris's Musée des Arts Décoratifs, and the Cooper-Hewitt, all clients of Thibaut-Pomerantz.

Other clients, including decorators and collectors, purchase the papers to live with, and she encourages buyers to display them, as she does, like fine art. "I like to show the very large panels mounted on stretchers like modern paintings," she says. "They should not be under glass." She does use glass and wood or metal frames for fragments that were once part of larger friezes. "I treat them like old master prints by matting and framing them."

While museum-caliber scenics may cost as much as six figures, smaller handblocked designs, like a 20-by-20-inch trompe l'oeil swag, start at \$1,500. The only dealer who specializes in these handblocked masterpieces, Thibaut-Pomerantz is an appraiser and a member of France's prestigious national association of antiques dealers. She meets with clients by appointment in Paris and Manhattan, or at the posh alternate-year Biennale Internationale des Antiquaires (the next one takes place in Paris in September 2000).

Now Thibaut-Pomerantz is aiming for greater visibility in the United States. She will be showing off her paper treasures in New York at the International Fine Art and Antique Dealers Show from October 15 through October 21. And fine examples of her latest passion, French Art Deco wallpapers from the 1920s, will be on display in the booth she will be setting up at New York's International Twentieth Century Arts Fair, a new show opening November 25. Energized by explosive geometric and stylized designs, the hand-printed jazz-era wallpapers are truly dazzling. ■

Carolle Thibaut-Pomerantz can be reached in Paris at 33-1-45-04-54-68 and in New York at 212-759-6048.



French papiers peints made it possible to see the world and journey back in time without venturing from home. From top: Views of Italy, an 1820s design by Joseph Dufour; genre scenes on a 19th-century paper; frieze with arabesques inspired by ancient wall paintings at Herculaneum.