

Design

History on Paper



BY MITCHELL OWENS

Some people find a bargain at the auction houses. Carolle Thibaut-Pomerantz, on the other hand, found dozens of them—and, in the process, a novel new career.

"It was by chance, as the important things in life so often are," says Thibaut-Pomerantz, a pocket-size Paris- and New York-based American with a sleek auburn bob that brushes her cheekbones. On trips to Drouot, the eminent French auctioneer, she says, "I kept seeing 18th- and 19th-century hand-blocked wallpapers, which were terribly intriguing. I mean, what were they doing there? Even more intriguing than that was the fact that nobody in the room except me seemed even slightly interested in them."

Fascinated by the designs—many of them depicting archaic myths or paradisiacal landscapes—and the brilliant, vege-

table-based pigments, she bought some. A frieze here, a dado there, a partial roll every so often, until her business card—once devoted to "Arts Décoratifs"—had gained an extra line: "Papiers Peints Anciens." The petite dealer, who often mounts the precious papers on canvas and frames them like paintings, will display her wares from September 13 to 29 at the Biennale Internationale des Antiquaires in Paris.

"It's an important page in the history of the decorative arts, and there's so much research still to be done," says Thibaut-Pomerantz, who sells her predominantly French antique papers to museums, decorators and private clients. She's seen them displayed in museum shows, installed on dining room walls and framed over the fireplace in living rooms; all of these applications please her. The dealer is determined to elevate a material now considered somewhat down-market and disposable into what it was in its heyday: fine art.

In the 18th and 19th centuries, leading artists like Malaine, a French royal painter, created wallpaper designs that combined sophisticated visuals with an appreciation for what Thibaut-Pomerantz calls "audacious, daring, confrontational colors." Not long ago, she sold the Metropolitan Museum of Art an abstract Charles X-period panel that seems an uncanny precursor to the art nouveau style. Printed in 1830 at an unknown French manufactory, the panel is colored in greens and yellows with an iridescent



overlay. "Each color was applied with a separate block, by hand," she says. "It was horrifyingly complicated to produce. No wonder machines eventually took over." (Machine-made papers came into wide use in the 1880s.)

Such laborious production techniques have led Thibaut-Pomerantz to declare antique wallpaper "limited-edition fine art." And considering its rarity, it is surprisingly affordable. Her stock ranges in price from \$500 to \$3,000 for a good-size fragment to \$5,000 to \$50,000 for entire panels.

In the sitting room of her own apartment, on the Left Bank, hangs a row of large late-19th-century samples of *faux-bois*

work. Also in her collection is an especially dazzling masterpiece of *trompe l'oeil*: a panel mimicking a kilim hanging from gilded cloak pins and ropes.

"Something like that gives originality and presence to a room," Thibaut-Pomerantz says. "God knows, it's difficult enough today to be original."

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Fine art: That's what Carolle Thibaut-Pomerantz (top left) calls the antique wallpapers she sells. Among her favorites are a rare 1700s floral from Reveillon (left) and the early 1800s "Monuments of Paris" (above).

