



february inspiration... wallpaper-not your ordinary wallflower

Last summer I spent time working on my family tree. I decided to take a dive into the six large plastic containers of family photos I inherited from my mother. My mother was obviously NOT a photo album kinda' girl, considering that in addition to the six army locker sized containers of loose photos, I found only three photo albums, one which happened to be my parents wedding album and that one really doesn't count. Digging through haystacks of family photos and looking at the faces of so many strangers, I was totally overwhelmed. It was a feeling like floating out to sea without a lifesaver in sight. Blub...Blub...Blub...



During this deep dive into my family's old photos, I stumbled across a picture of my paternal grandparents that was taken sometime during the 1940's. They are standing in their dining room and by the look on my grandfather's face, I am wondering if it's a reaction to my grandmother's bold choice of wallpapers. He doesn't look too sure. I vividly remember their dining room, but have no recollection of that particular wallpaper. Obviously, by the time I arrived on the scene it had changed, but knowing my grandparents, it now seems like such a *daring* choice...so au courant, the large scale of the flowers, the bold color combination of russet, grey and white. When I discovered the photo I thought, "Hey, my grandmother...now there was a woman who wasn't afraid of taking a design leap! No itsy bitsy print wallpaper for her".

I may not remember my grandparent's dining room decked out in magnolia leaves, but I do remember my mother's living room. Around the time I was five or six years old, my mother had our living room walls papered in a wallpaper with a dark hunter green ground and a diamond trellis of small (but not too small) vines of variegated ivy that interlaced up and down the walls.

After all these years, it is still a vision that is vivid in my mind. It became the background for my sisters and me skipping and twirling to American Bandstand in front of the TV, opening our Christmas gifts, and quietly doing our homework stretched out on the floor. It is engraved in my mind and actually is the one thing I can actually say that I remember of that living room long ago.

As a designer, I am a great believer of wallcoverings and the *joie de vivre* they can add to a room. A large scale print climbing the walls of a stair hall can make a dramatic statement in a space that is often difficult to create interest. A small scale print used as a backdrop for artwork in a large room can also be used in a small room to add comfort and coziness.



Not to be defined by its' name, not all wallpapers cover *walls*. Applied on unadorned ceilings, the correct pattern choice can create dimension and add the illusion of additional height in a room with low ceilings. Conversely, if used in rooms with cathedral height ceilings, it can visually lower the ceiling height to a more comfortable scale. All in all, whether on walls or on ceilings, wallpaper is a good thing in a designers bag of tricks.

Thinking about the power of wallpapers to enliven or to transform, I can't resist mentioning the rumor and speculation that *wallpaper* was the demise of Napoleon. Thought to have died from stomach cancer while exiled on the island of St. Helena, it was later discovered in 1840 after his body was exhumed, that his remains were curiously well preserved - a symptom of arsenic poisoning. In the 20th century, tests were conducted on his hair and it was found that he had extremely high levels of arsenic in his body. Even though high arsenic levels were not uncommon in the 19th century, questions surrounding his death still exist. The green dye used to print the wallcovering in his bedroom was called Scheele Green. It was a very popular wall color in Britain in the 1850's until it was connected to a few suspicious deaths. After tests were conducted, it was discovered that a six inch square of paint or wallcovering dyed in Scheele green had enough arsenic to poison two people. Could the copper arsinite in the green dye have reacted with the humidity of the tropics and released enough toxic arsenic vapors to lead to Napoleon's demise? Or could the British army overseeing his exile deliberately poison their prisoner? I guess we will never know for sure, but the possibility of wallpaper bringing down a military giant is something interesting to ponder.



Wallpaper - not your ordinary wallflower...caveat emptor!

Debra

President

Debra Blair Design
dblair@blairdesignnyc.com
917-717-5020