

A literary connection on the nursery wall

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It goes on wet over a slippery layer of wheat paste, yet it can transform a room and even dictate the moods of its inhabitants. Sold in thousands of different colors, designs and motifs, wallpapers often reflect the function of the room in which they are installed.

A machine-printed kitchen wallpaper from the 1930s, for example—one of more than 10,000 historic wallcoverings in the collections of the Smithsonian's Cooper-Hewitt, National Design Museum in New York City—displays a repeating pattern of dinnerware set neatly on a tablecloth. A 1930s bathroom wallpaper from the same collection, titled "Lagoon," is a pattern of ocean waves and fish.

Yet in one area of the home, wallpapers have traditionally sought to educate, instill a love of reading and entertain. "From

their beginnings in the 1870s, wallpapers for children's rooms have been strongly influenced by literature," Greg Herringshaw, curator of wallcoverings at the Cooper-Hewitt, explains. For well over a century, in fact, illustrations from dozens of well-loved children's books—from classics to comics—have adorned the bedrooms of youngsters on wallpapers selected by their parents.

This literary connection, which has inspired wallpapers printed with characters as wide-ranging as Cinderella, Popeye and Winnie the Pooh, will be the focus of a new exhibition at the Cooper-Hewitt beginning in May 2008. Co-curated by Herringshaw and Cooper-Hewitt Librarian Stephen Van Dyk, vintage children's wallpapers will be displayed alongside the books that inspired them—all drawn from the Cooper-Hewitt's collection of wallcoverings and its extensive library.



Dick Tracy wallpaper design from the 1950s, by Niagara Wallpaper Co., left, and a design by illustrator Walter Crane depicting a scene from the nursery rhyme "The House That Jack Built," right,

Robinson Crusoe

One of the earliest known children's wallpapers, printed in the 1870s, features illustrations from Daniel Defoe's classic novel *Robinson Crusoe*. This single-color paper is a series of intaglio-printed illustrations of scenes from Crusoe's adventures, complete with printed captions.

A second early children's wallpaper is based on John Bunyan's classic 1678 allegorical novel *The Pilgrim's Progress*. Printed in England in the 1870s, this wallpaper features somber monochrome illustrations of the book's hero, young Christian, making his way from the City of Destruction to the Celestial City.

"Both of these books have strong themes of moral discipline and adventure," Herringshaw points out. "These wallpapers—meant to have an instructional effect on a child—reflect what society regarded as appropriate for children in the 1870s."

Changing attitudes

But as the 20th century approached, society's attitude about the value and nature of childhood was changing rapidly. Public schools, child welfare agencies, child labor laws and the rise of pediatrics as a medical speciality all helped make the world more hospitable for children. "People suddenly awakened to the fact that, if children were to read books, the books must also be visually entertaining," Herringshaw says. Rudimentary single-color illustrations in children's books blossomed into colorful unrestrained fancy. "A whole slew of children's illustrators were coming into their own as artists in their own right at this time," Van Dyk observes. "Walter Crane, Randolph Caldecott, Beatrix Potter, Kate Greenaway—they really took children's illustrations to a high artistic level. They were not just illustrating, but extending illustration to an artform." As a result, wallpaper designers, too, became more willing to engage children in fun and fantasy.

Mother Goose

Children's fairy tales were a favorite subject of these illustrators, and fairy tales have remained a favorite subject for children's wallpapers ever since. "This is probably my favorite piece in the exhibition," Herringshaw says, pointing to a wallpaper square from 1886 featuring an elaborate Walter Crane illustration from the Mother Goose nursery rhyme "The House That Jack Built."

"Mostly, I like the playful nature of this paper's design," Herringshaw adds. "Its elements are flat with no sense of depth. Every inch

of the surface is covered with a design of some sort. There's a lot going on, but it is still light and delicately balanced. Your eyes just keep moving over the surface, but they don't get overwhelmed."

An 1897 copy of *Mother Hubbard, Her Picture Book*, illustrated by Crane, will accompany the Crane wallpaper in the exhibition.

Interactive paper

With their inception in the mid-19th century, the rising popularity of interactive children's books—such as pop-up, cut-out and coloring books—inspired interactive children's wallpaper as well.

Printed in 1907, a paper called "Kindergarten Cut-Outs" began a "long-running trend of interactive wallpapers," Herringshaw explains. Sold in 5-foot panels, it was covered in colorful animal shapes and could be installed as a frieze or hung as individual panels, or the shapes

could be cut out and pasted on a wall. "The cut-out animals also could be pinned to a fabric wallcovering, allowing them to function as toys, as well as decoration," Herringshaw says.

With the emergence of newspaper comic strips at the end of the 19th century and comic books early in the 20th century, comic-strip characters also were soon covering the walls of children's rooms. Papers featuring Mickey Mouse, Popeye and Max & Moritz are all part of the exhibition.

This comic-strip trend is extended today through television. "Most modern children's wallpapers seem to be based on cartoon TV shows," Herringshaw says, "such as Sponge Bob, Dora the Explorer and the superheroes." Herringshaw says these new papers are not traditional wallpapers at all, but mostly borders, accents and stickers, "something that is much easier to change as a child grows up."

Children's wallpaper has come a long way since the 1870s, but overall, their aim has remained to entertain with a positive impact.

A 1950s Dick Tracy wallpaper from the Cooper-Hewitt exhibition, for example, features portraits from illustrator Chester Gould's comic strip of characters that one would want a child to emulate—Tracy, Junior, Sam Catchem, Chief Pat Patton and Sparkle Plenty. Bad guys Breathless Mahoney, Flattop Jones, Pruneface and Tracy's other enemies are nowhere in sight. ❖

"*Children's Wallpaper and Literature*" will be on view at the Cooper-Hewitt, National Design Museum in the Ground-Floor Gallery, beginning in May 2008.



This wallpaper frieze illustrates Chapter 8, "Christopher Robin Leads an Expedition to the North Pole," from *Winnie the Pooh*, by A.A. Milne. It is an adaptation of an original 1926 illustration by E.H. Shephard.