

A multi-channel approach to Chinese wallpaper

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The idea to produce a catalogue of the Chinese wallpapers in the historic houses of the National Trust arose quite recently, but it has already developed so quickly and in so many different directions that it is quite difficult to reconstruct its origins. I think I must have mentioned to Andrew Bush, our paper conservation adviser, that I was doing research into 'orientalism', or the influence of Asia on western decorative arts and interiors, and he probably responded by saying that he had quite a lot of records on the physical condition of the Chinese wallpapers in our care and the work done at various times to conserve them. Whatever the exact beginnings, we soon decided to work together to produce some kind of catalogue, in order to celebrate these beautiful objects and to bring together the information about them in an accessible format.

The production, use and significance of Chinese wallpapers has, as yet, been relatively

little researched, and there are still many gaps in our understanding of them. One of the reasons for this is that they cross the boundaries between fine and decorative art and Asian and European style. They are exquisitely detailed paintings which were used as 'mere' wall decoration; a symbol of wealth and taste but secondary to the furniture and paintings placed over them. They were made using Chinese materials, techniques and motifs, but were intended specifically for use in western interiors. Their imagery was largely incomprehensible to the western audience, and yet they were highly coveted and very expensive. The confusing and yet rich hybridity of Chinese wallpapers exposes the limits of traditional art-historical interpretations, and suggests the need for a more flexible approach that includes art history, conservation, social history and economic history, and one that is aware of both the western and the east-Asian artistic traditions.

Early-modern globalisation

Claire Forbes in the publishing department at Heelis immediately saw the point of a catalogue of Chinese wallpapers in Trust houses, and she found some funds to produce a small catalogue in a joint online and printed format, as part of the well-established series of guides to specific Trust collections (www.nationaltrust.org.uk/article-1356394365384/). The aims of the catalogue are to describe what we have in the way of Chinese wallpapers, to put these wallpapers in the historical context of the particular country houses they find themselves in, to compare them to examples elsewhere, and to make them better known and thereby to stimulate research into Chinese wallpaper generally.

Another stimulating paradox of Chinese wallpapers is that these 'frivolous' decorative objects are the physical expression of the trade and cultural exchange between Britain



Detail of the wallpaper in the State Bedroom at Erddig. The original Chinese symbolic meaning of an egret with hibiscus flowers, 'may you enjoy wealth and glory all your life', would not have been recognised when the wallpaper was hung at Erddig in the 1770s. © National Trust Images/John Hammond



Detail of wallpaper in the Chinese Bedroom at Blickling Hall. Conservation work revealed that the sky is European and was probably added when the wallpaper was hung in the early 1760s, presumably to add to its height. © National Trust

and China, which, by then, were part of a growing global network of trading channels. Indeed, one of the audiences we want to reach is the Chinese one, and to that effect we are planning to commission a Mandarin translation of our catalogue. We hope that this will be a two-way exchange: that we can show the Chinese how their heritage was admired and used in a western context, and that we can benefit from hitherto untapped Chinese expertise, knowledge and source material.

Internal and external expertise

The Trust holds important information about the Chinese wallpapers in its care. Andrew came up with a number of condition and conservation reports in his files which describe what the wallpapers were made of, how they were hung, what treatment they were given and what additions or inscriptions they were found to have. These reports were compiled by the freelance conservators who have been commissioned at various times and are testament to the expertise that has been building up in this area over the last few decades, but it has not been widely disseminated.

I had previously been in contact with the members of the East India Company at Home (EICAH) project, whose blog is at <http://blogs.ucl.ac.uk/eicah/home/>, an academic research project mapping the effect of the East India Company on British material culture. Dr Kate Smith of the EICAH spotted my National Trust collections blog (<http://nttreasurehunt.wordpress.com/>) and we had an interesting discussion about the pros and cons of social media. When it became apparent that another member of the EICAH team, Dr Helen Clifford, was researching the role of the East India Company in the importation of Chinese wallpaper, it seemed to make sense to invite her to be a co-author of our catalogue. Apart from supplying useful details from her

research, Helen also kept us on our toes academically and strengthened the rigour of our analysis.

In-crowd sourcing

Around this core team, a wider advisory group now began to accumulate, partly through personal and professional contacts, partly through networking at conferences and other events, and also through online social media. This larger constellation included academics (such as PhD candidate Anna Wu and Open University lecturer Dr Clare Taylor), curators and historic interiors consultants (such as Melissa Gallimore and Allyson McDermott), conservators (such as Mark Sandiford) and present-day Chinese wallpaper producers (Tim Butcher and Lizzie Deshayes of Fromental). Sarah Staniforth, the Trust's Museums and Collections Director, introduced us to a group of Dutch conservators and historic interiors consultants who are currently working on the Chinese wallpapers at Oud Amelisweerd, a historic country house near Utrecht which was built in 1770.

Initially we simply communicated via email, but one member of the group, historic interiors consultant Jonathan Gration, suggested using a private LinkedIn, which we are now experimenting with. In effect we have created a virtual equivalent of the late seventeenth-century coffee house, where like-minded people could get together and exchange news and ideas (see my article about this phenomenon in **Views** 48). In a way what we are doing is similar to the social media phenomenon of 'crowd sourcing', where a large group of people contribute data, ideas or money to a particular project. The difference is that in our case the group is fairly small and limited to people with an interest in and knowledge of Chinese wallpaper, so perhaps this should be dubbed 'in-crowd sourcing'.

International collaboration

At the same time we have not forgotten more traditional channels of knowledge and expertise. We asked the Trust's curators if they had any knowledge of Chinese wallpapers in the places they advise on, and we have incorporated their feedback into the catalogue. Through the curators we also received some invaluable information from several volunteer archivists who have been transcribing and cataloguing donor family archives. Mike Renow-Clarke, Conservation Information Manager, is creating a map of the British Isles to show the geographical spread of Chinese wallpapers (in both Trust and non-Trust houses). The map shows a pattern that mirrors the distribution of country houses generally, and proves that these fragile exotic imports reached almost all the corners of Britain and Ireland, from Norfolk to western Ireland and from Cornwall to the Scottish Highlands. In addition, David Bullock, Head of Nature Conservation, is advising us on the identification of the flora and fauna depicted. Traditionally Chinese wallpapers were thought to be very realistic, but David's input is making clear that there was a considerable degree of stylisation and 'artistic licence'.

The catalogue which will be the result of all this activity will, in turn, feed back into our online collections database, our guidebooks and the documentation used by our room guides. To build on the momentum this has generated, we hope to organise a conference about Chinese wallpapers to discuss our research and to learn more from an international expert audience. It is a wonderful paradox that something so physically and metaphorically 'marginal' as Chinese wallpaper can act as the catalyst for international collaboration and outreach.

Reference

de Bruijn, Emile 'From coffee house to blog', **Views**, Issue 48 (National Trust, Autumn 2011), pp.74–6.