

THE CONSERVATION OF A LARGE FRENCH DRAPERY WALLPAPER DECORATION

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The Whitworth Art Gallery, The University of Manchester



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- The Whitworth Art Gallery is housed within a purpose built building within the estate of The University of Manchester, serving both University staff and students, as well as a wider regional, national and international audience.
- All of its collections, which comprise textiles, works of fine art on paper and wallpapers have been designated as being of national importance and the Gallery runs a varied program of exhibitions and events providing unparalleled access to all of its holdings.
- The majority of the collections have been catalogued and are available to the public via the Gallery website, and users are able to research the collections directly through the study rooms.

The wallpaper department



The Whitworth Art Gallery employs the only full-time curator of wallpapers in the UK and in terms of its international significance, its ranks with major collections in France, Germany and the United States. The department has lead the way nationally in the development of systems for storage and exhibition of rolled wallpapers in particular and has published its findings for the benefit of the museum community.

A new acquisition for the Whitworth



Whilst the majority of the wallpaper department's collection is based on British design and production, it also holds significant examples of French wallpapers and in 1998 the opportunity arose to purchase a magnificent drapery decoration manufactured by Dufour et Cie c.1825.

Illustration of the drapery wallpaper in situ



The drapery is a well-known example, typical of the extravagant trompe-l'œil designs which imitated rich satins and brocades, festooned with swags, tassels and other textile trimmings. It is seen in this watercolour illustration c.1830 of an interior in Nice decorating an already heavily ornamented room.

Details of drapery wallpapers



Each drapery panel was intended to join its neighbour, providing a seamless wall of luxurious drapes and would have been printed in colourways to the customer's specification. The detail on the left shows the richness of design; it is particularly interesting to note the shadows and the effect of the drapery apparently hanging in front of a printed 'wallpaper' background. The Whitworth's example, on the right, has appliqued sections of red flocking forming the background to the swags of fabric.

The Whitworth's drapery wallpaper example



The Whitworth's example was probably made with a view to display in a showroom or trade exhibition with the drapery panels divided by red flocked lengths and unified by the vertical borders and horizontal friezes.

Before conservation



Unfortunately the decoration arrived at the Gallery in 1998 in a poor state of repair and since that time it had been stored as purchased rolled around a cardboard tube within a basement store. It is seen here unrolled on the floor, this being one of the few places where it could be viewed in its entirety for documentation and assessment purposes.

Details of damage



- De-lamination of paper, splits and losses
- Deformation of paper surface, cockling and creases

Dismantling the decoration



- Conservation staff work on the basement floor due to the large size of the object.
- Once a treatment proposal had been agreed, the conservation team started work on the floor in the basement of the Gallery. Each section of the decoration had been lined onto separate paper backings and then the whole laid down onto a fabric support. These layers needed to be separated in order to work on individual panels in the paper conservation studio.

Dismantling the decoration



- Using a steamer to release the adhesive and paper layers
- The pigments were tested and found to be stable in water and Industrial Methylated Spirits, and the adhesive holding the layers together was found to be starch paste. A steamer was used to aid the release of the adhesive and the separation of the layers.

Dismantling the decoration



- Easing away the border using local application of water.
- In addition to steam, water was introduced locally using a brush and the border friezes and columns were carefully eased away panel by panel onto a padded roller to await further conservation.

Dismantling the decoration



- In this way the five panels were gradually separated along with the columns, borders and friezes. Each panel and each section of the columns and friezes were carefully numbered to ensure correct re-alignment once conservation was complete. Each panel could now be removed to the paper conservation studio for further treatment.

Removal of backing layers



- A panel with columns still attached was humidified overnight to aid removal of backing paper
- It was evident from the work carried out so far, that the pigment was sensitive to physical manipulation and therefore the amount of manual intervention should be limited. By humidifying each panel overnight moisture could be introduced both gradually and evenly. Wet blotting paper was laid onto the wash table. This was covered with Goretex® fabric which enables moisture to travel in one direction only. The drapery panel was laid face-up on this and covered with Melinex® - a polyester sheet.

Removal of backing layers



- The Fabric backing was peeled away
- Following humidification the paper backing layer was removed mechanically in sections
- It had been possible to peel off the fabric layer prior to humidification. Now with the drapery panel supported face-down on the Melinex, the paper backing layer could be removed mechanically in sections. Excess adhesive was also swabbed off using cotton wool swabs.

Removal of columns and flock



- Following humidification the sections of flock attached to the front and the columns were lifted off revealing the pigment ground beneath.
- The worst instances of surface deformation occurred within the flocked areas and so in order to improve the overall appearance, the sections of flocked paper applied to the front of each panel needed to be lifted off revealing the pigment ground beneath.

Preparation for relining

- Once all the drapery panels had been separated from their backing layers, the next stage in the conservation process could begin. Each panel was sprayed on the back with a fine mist of water to aid relaxation and then pasted evenly with wheat-starch paste.



Relining the panels

- Japanese paper was relaxed in the same manner and smoothed down onto the back of the pasted drapery panel.



Relining the panels



- Any excess moisture was carefully blotted from the front surface prior to attaching the drapery panel to a drying board; it was essential for the panel to dry slowly and evenly to avoid splitting.

Relined panels



- A drapery panel together with sections of frieze were relined onto Japanese paper and left for several days to dry on the drying board.

Preparing supports



- Support boards made of honeycomb Tycore® were cut to size, covered with a thicker layer of Japanese paper and sealed along the edges with paper tape.
- Each relined drapery panel was cut off the drying board and the Japanese backing paper trimmed to fit the new support. Careful calculations were made to ensure that each drapery panel and the columns and friezes would align correctly once re-configured.

Applying panels to supports



- Each prepared supports was pasted up with wheat-starch paste and the drapery panels laid down onto them.
- They were smoothed flat on the front through a Melinex® sheet. All five panels were treated in this way.

Re-adhering the flock sections



- The appliqué pieces of flock were pasted up on the back and re-positioned onto the front of the re-lined drapery panels.
- Many of these sections had previously been badly cockled - now they lay flat.

Completing work to the sections



- Once all the sections of flocking had been re-applied, each panel on its new support was left to dry. The lengths of re-lined columns and friezes were trimmed and all the pieces carefully documented.

Re-aligning all the sections



- Finally the results of the conservation process could be seen. The five panels and all the loose sections of columns and friezes were re-aligned and measurements checked. The conservation was undertaken by three paper conservators and this part of the project had taken four weeks to complete.

Re-aligning all the sections



- The panels were moved onto the floor of the exhibition gallery and laid down onto a prepared surface on the floor. They were aligned in the correct order and then turned over to receive the wooden support frame.

Aligning the wooden frame



- A timber supporting frame had been designed and made by in-house Gallery technicians. The wooden frame was carefully lowered onto the back of the 5 supported panels.

Aligning the wooden frame



- Once the timber frame had been accurately aligned, sections of timber were adhered with wood glue to the back of the panels and joined to the frame with mirror plates.

Attaching the columns and friezes



- The whole structure was turned over and raised up above the floor on trestles. Working in sections from the centre the columns and friezes were re-adhered to the panels on the frame.

Attaching the columns and friezes



- The joints between the panels were pasted and straddled with a layer of Japanese paper followed by 1 ply acid-free card.
- The columns were adhered by pasting the joints between the panels with wheat starch paste and applying isolating layers of Japanese paper and thin acid-free card which bridged each adjoining panel. This could be removed and would enable dismantling of the whole structure if necessary in the future.

Attaching the columns and friezes



- The sections of columns and friezes were applied and smoothed down.
- Small areas of loss were retouched with watercolour pigments.

Completed drapery decoration



- Following the conservation process, the completed French drapery wallpaper decoration was ready to hang on the wall of the exhibition Gallery. All aspects of the work were fully documented, the materials of conservation quality and all methods used reversible.

On show in the current exhibition

Featuring Walls



www.manchester.ac.uk/whitworth

The French drapery wallpaper decoration is on show in the Whitworth Art Gallery's current exhibition, *Featuring Walls*. This is the inaugural exhibition in our new dedicated Wallpaper Gallery and highlights some of the Gallery's most visually stunning and inventive decorations from the collection of historic and modern wallpapers.

I would like to thank all those who made the wallpaper project possible:

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Richard Farleigh and Dionysia Christoforou, Paper Conservators

Paul Smith and Danny Sheehan, Gallery Technicians