

WALLPAPER CONSERVATION

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Abstract

Wallpaper conservation is a relatively new specialization in paper conservation. Specific adjustments and approaches are required in the conservation process. The author prefers to preserve the wallpaper in situ. This paper examines the problems occurring in wallpaper conservation and the treatments employed.

Keywords

WALLPAPER, WATERDAMAGE, PLASTERCRUMBLING, MECHANICAL DAMAGE, SURFACE GRIME.

Introduction

For the past 10 years, I have been engaged in wallpaper conservation. In this paper, I shall be outlining some of my experiences in the conservation of wallpapers from different periods and some of the problems which I have encountered.

During the last decade in the Netherlands, there has been an increasing interest in historic wallpapers. When monuments undergo conservation, it is increasingly common that wallpapers in the building are also preserved. There is a greater awareness of the importance of saving wallpapers as historical documents.

Instead of replacing old wallpapers, the original wallpaper is now more likely to be conserved and restored.

Approaches to treatment

Wallpaper conservation requires a different approach than paper conservation. The first question to be considered is whether the wallpaper should be removed or not. Whenever possible, we try to conserve the wallpaper in situ. If, from a conservation point of view it is not necessary to remove the wallpaper, it is preferable to leave it in its original context.

Wallpaper is a decorative artifact that belongs to an architectural structure. If one removes it from its original support, it then loses its link with the building. For example, when a wallpaper has been hanging on a wall for more than 200 years and one then removes it, it will be deprived of much of its value, especially of its historical value. Also the wallpaper will most probably be partially damaged in the process. Moreover, it will be difficult to rehang the wallpaper as a whole. One may even have to take more radical measures, such as cutting the wallpaper into smaller pieces. Rehangings may lead to higher costs and this may result in the decision to store the wallpaper. There are some instances where wallpapers which have been put into storage, are unlikely to be rehung again.
(eg. Huis ten Bosch, The Hague, chinese wallpaper)

Preparation of the support for a wallpaper

All the wallpapers we have conserved and restored have been of the same type, that is to say:
- Linen was first stretched onto a wooden frame, which was then secured to the wall.
- Sheets of lining paper were pasted onto this linen. Once the lining paper had dried, the wallpaper was pasted on, possibly with the addition of a border.

Thus, the wallpaper applied to this structure hangs some distance from the wall. This gap allows ventilation between the wall and the paper so that the paper will be less exposed to damp.

Problems inherent to wallpaper conservation in situ

There are some specific problems encountered in wallpaper conservation, which do not occur in paper conservation. Our methods had to be adjusted in order to deal with them:

- * It is only possible to treat the wallpaper from the front. Holes and tears have to be repaired from the front. However, when it is possible to separate the layers, one is then able to slide paper between them; this paper acts as a structural support to the original wallpaper.
- * Wallpaper is only supported on a framework and can be easily dented when pressure is exerted on its surface.
- * Moisture-treatment cannot be used. Water or moisture will transport the dirt from the back to the front of the wallpaper. Adhesives used should thus contain as little moisture as possible. Consequently, it is very difficult to treat water-damaged wallpapers.
- * Wallpaper must be treated vertically. Thus pigments are difficult to fix, as they will slide down the surface of the wallpaper with the fixative used. We still have not found a satisfactory solution to this difficulty.

What kind of damages are to be expected, and what kind of measures can be taken ?

a/ Surface grime

Due to dust and dirt originating from cracks and cleavages in the walls, the surface of the wallpaper can become very grimy. Particularly, the topside of folds have a tendency of accumulating large quantities of dust.

When the wallpaper is in a reasonable condition, and the quality of the paper is sufficiently good, one can then proceed to cleaning it with a special brush- mouthpiece adapted to a vacuum cleaner.

b/ Crumbling plaster

Moisture due to leaks may cause plaster to crumble and fall behind the wallpaper. Accumulation of plaster rubble and dust behind the wallpaper will press against the latter. Sometimes this will cause tears in the wallpaper, through which the accumulated plaster debris can be removed. In other instances, it will be necessary to loosen the lower edge of the wallpaper in order to remove the remains with a long snout-formed appliance adapted to a vacuum-cleaner.

c/ Mechanical damage

Tears and holes can be caused by objects falling onto the wallpaper. Generally the paper around these tears and holes will be very fragile and frayed, and it will not be possible to camouflage the damage entirely even after treatment. In these cases, paper (japan paper, rice paper... according to the individual case) will be used in order to reconstitute the losses. Slight overlapping onto the original is then unavoidable.

When the edges of the tear are only very slightly damaged, the layers of wallpaper can be separated, so that paper can be applied under the original wallpaper in order to consolidate it.

d/ Removal of wallpaper from its wooden structure

It is possible that, for example, due to water-damage or major structural work, the whole linen and wallpaper structure has separated itself from the wooden-structure on which it is normally fixed.

In order to reposition the wallpaper, a strip of linen can be applied to the back of the wallpaper, and with the overlapping part of this strip, it will be possible to "restretch" and refix the loose part of wallpaper to its original wooden structure.

e/ Water and humidity damages

Leaks and humidity can be an important source of damage. In view of the fact that wallpaper cannot be rinsed, it is hardly possible to treat water-damage or even to reduce it by a local moisture treatment. Sometimes, resorting to retouching the damaged areas may be the only solution. The aim of retouching, in this case, will only be to reduce the visually disturbing damaged areas.

The dominant colour around the damaged area is chosen in order to create a visual "bridge" between the retouched area and the surrounding original.

Gouache is used as retouching material, with a preference for lightfast pigments.

Colour-matching is sometimes difficult with this type of water-based paint as, in the drying process, the retouchings have a tendency of becoming darker or lighter depending on the colour used. Often, it will be necessary to recorrect the retouchings.

f/ Climate and light

The composite structure which makes up the various layers of wallpaper will respond differently to variations in temperature and relative humidity, causing contradictory interactions and tensions between the layers.

Natural and artificial light will lead to the fading and the discoloration of the paper.

After conservation of the wallpaper

Once conservation treatment has been carried out, a good follow-up management is required in order to avoid new degradation.

Climate, light and proper housekeeping conditions must be ensured. It will also be necessary to encourage preventive conservation, eg.: furniture should not be placed against the wallpaper and people should not be permitted to touch the papered walls.

Slides will complete this paper in order to illustrate the above-mentioned themes.