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Source: *Southwest Review*, Vol. 84, No. 1 (1999), pp. 82-96
Published by: Southern Methodist University
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/43460483
Accessed: 21-01-2018 17:33 UTC

JEANNE SCHINTO

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Christ! What are patterns for? —Amy Lowell

Is it of no importance what we are to see, day after day, last thing at night and first thing in the morning? —Sacheverell Sitwell, in his introduction to Eric A. Entwisle's *The Book of Wallpaper* (1954)

When John Ruskin was a boy, his parents deprived him of toys. It is said that the only play things he was given were a bunch of keys, a cart, and a ball. He would have to make his own amusements, intellectual ones, and enjoy them alone, since he wasn't allowed playmates, either—not even a pet. Another part of his education was travel. It began for him at age three, in 1822, when he and his parents went to the Lake District and to Scotland. The Ruskin family were not sightseers. They did not meet and greet. Their trips were for the purposes of seeing, sketching, and specimen collecting. They crisscrossed the whole of Great Britain in subsequent years. Then, in 1835, when Ruskin was sixteen, the family spent six months traveling in France, Switzerland, and Italy. According to his biographers, the young man who would become one of the most influential, and controversial, art critics of his age returned home laden with poems, drawings, geological samples, and scientific notes—material enough to occupy him until his next journey.

Maybe your early aesthetic education was more like mine than Ruskin's: lacking in so many ways that it's tempting to consider it no education at all. Yet, I have slowly come to realize that it does possess a validity and vigor of its own. For example, though I grew up in a house without much art on the walls, we did have wallpaper. The patterns weren't extraordinary. No William Morris designs among them; no French panoramas; no hand-painted Chinese export papers. But those wallpaper patterns of my youth were, whether I like it or not, the layer upon which all the other layers rest: the base coat of my personal history of art.

The bedroom I shared with my older sister, Janet, in the early 1950s featured a Cinderella motif. The background of the paper was the color of pancake batter. The various scenes from the fairy tale were stamped out in silhouettes of orange, brown, and pink, showing the stages of Cinderella's progress, from poor trod-upon drudge to lucky princess, repeated around the room. Walt Disney's animated cartoon had not yet been perpetrated upon me. The only version I knew was my mother's, featuring her voice and words. In another version that may be more authentic than either my mother's or Disney's, the ugly stepsisters hack off their toes in an attempt to fit their big feet into the tiny glass slipper. I'm thankful I was spared that grisly image as a child. At night, when everything got drained of color, I was already enough afraid of things—of the fire thorns that scratched at the windows; the headlights that chased the shadows of the Venetian blinds so wildly around the room; the eerie whistling of the tractor-trailers on nearby U.S. Route 1, racing along the bottom edge of Connecticut toward the state line of New York. And on many a night, with eyes wide open, I waited for the safety and comfort of the unchanging pattern of the fairy tale to reappear with the colors of the morning.

The house, in the town of Greenwich, was a two-story Cape-Cod-style clapboard that my father, who was a carpenter, built with help from his brothers and friends. We moved in on July 3rd, 1952, when I was six months old, oblivious; Janet, nearly three. Most other homes around our half-mile circle were one-story, shoebox-shaped tract houses developed by someone cashing in on the crushing post-war housing needs. In all, seventy-five identical homes were built, like a repeating wallpaper pattern—as if men who had been in uniform so long would also want uniform housing.

When my parents were newlyweds, in 1948, they had rented an apartment at 282 Davis Avenue, in Greenwich. It was on the second floor of a beige stucco two-family house with purple wisteria vines that twisted their way around the wooden porch trellises. But the flowers aren't the reason why they chose to live there. Both of them had both grown up on that street; my three living grandparents—Italian immigrants—lived there still, and it was the custom for children to keep close by their kin, their kind, often under the same roof. My unmarried Uncle Pat lived with my mother's mother and father;

my Aunt Meg, her husband, and three children lived upstairs. Two doors away, my father's mother, widowed in 1935, lived with three of her unmarried children—my Aunt Mary, Aunt Anne, and Uncle Dan; her oldest son, my Uncle Tony, and his family lived below them. Greenwich is posh, but not this particular street close to downtown, where the servants who tended the famous back-country estates started settling in the early 1900s.

My grandparents had come directly to Greenwich from peasant villages in Calabria and Naples, having suffered through droughts, mudslides, even volcanic eruptions. Their journey across an ocean was the last ordeal. They would travel no more. What they craved now was eventless living, sameness, the bliss of boredom. Herbert J. Gans, in *The Urban Villagers* (1962), his important study of Italian-Americans in the West End of Boston, describes a certain personality common to the group: a "routine-seeker." It isn't an exclusively Italian archetype. You may recognize some relative of your own, Italian or otherwise, in the traits of my father's mother, a routine-seeker *exemplaire,* who rarely deviated from her set menu, cooking and serving the same dish on the same day every week; who always visited the same people, and was visited by them—no doubt, other routine-seekers like herself; who always planted the same things in her garden, in the same way; who had a certain routine for cleaning her house daily, weekly, seasonally—for ninety-five years. Novelty and variety were anathema to her. And she might well have enjoyed the predictability of a repeating wallpaper pattern, but I cannot picture her trying to select one from a sample book. This formidable woman, not five feet tall, would have grown impatient in minutes; and with a wave of her hand and a few choice words in a language I never learned, she would have demanded to be driven home—to tend her spaghetti sauce, her Swiss chard, her laundry on the clothesline, one end of which was attached to her kitchen window, the other to a pole near the old chicken coop. As long as she lived, she never permitted her apartment to be anything other than painted and repainted by her sons in the plainest colors of the spectrum: variations on putty and eggshell. Never permitted? Surely it wasn't even an option. Never mentioned. Her children knew her too well.

My parents were fairly content to live on Davis Avenue for the first few years of their marriage; but one summer evening, as the story

goes, while my mother was pregnant with me, their apartment got so hot that the candles on their kitchen table bent to the shape of candy canes, and they made the decision to start looking for a new place to live. The following summer, our family of four moved into the house on the half-acre lot on Morningside Drive, a brand-new street less than a mile away from the old neighborhood, which was certainly still close enough for us to visit the grandparents every Sunday and holiday, yet far enough away so that we might begin to establish patterns of our own without too much overt criticism from the old-country representatives.

The cult of the virgin is a strong one in southern Italian folkways, but I doubt my parents chose the Cinderella motif for that reason. More likely, they were guided by what they found in the sample books—and by their precarious finances. They had received house loans from family members rather than the bank, but there were unforeseen expenses as well. For example, they had sold one of their cars for cash to buy the lot, then the other car was destroyed when a tree fell on it while the lot was being cleared. As a result, the two upstairs rooms of the house remained unfinished for quite a while. One of the rooms, in fact, had an unfinished floor, and if you stepped between the joists—instead of on them, balancing like a tightrope walker—your foot just might punch through the ceiling. Janet and I were told to Keep Out, but the warning only served to make the place more enticing. My parents used the space for storage. I found boxes of canceled checks in there. Was it money? My parents' stash for a rainy day? I hoped so. I also came across the proofs of their wedding photos, including the strange transparent ones with black-and-white reversed—the negatives, of course; but my explanation to myself was that a "Negro" couple on their own wedding day had struck every pose that my parents had, imitating them. Or were this inverted Cinderella and Prince Charming mocking them, perhaps? I put them away, and never asked.

In an all-white working-class neighborhood like ours, pin-perfect order, including a seemingly scissored lawn, was the highest aesthetic value anyone could achieve. A woman who paired her family's socks *before* she hung them on the clothesline was not considered extreme. I wished our household would measure up; but my parents, though

they tried not to be, were often disorganized, and sometimes the only orderly, reliable sequence of events seemed to be on the walls of my bedroom. It was especially vexing when I started school. The house had a way of gobbling up the car keys, my parents' eye glasses, important papers that I needed them to sign for my teacher. We all spent a lot of time looking for things. Sometimes, after supper, I straightened out the utensil drawers in the kitchen or climbed up on the counter to match up the drinking glasses on the cupboard shelves, arranging them by size. Once, I even tried to reorganize the junk drawer, our family's own personal Bermuda Triangle. I couldn't understand why my parents weren't pleased. For days after one of my sprees they grumbled about being unable to find anything—until, that is, everything had gravitated back into its old, familiar jumble. Apparently, there had been a pattern, a sense to it, after all.

It's a psychological fact that repetitive patterns of any kind will enthrall a child. Jingles, ditties, jump-rope songs. The Irish jig, Mexican hat dance, American square dancing. I loved them all. On every trip to the library I took out books from a fixed group only, my favorite being Wanda Gág's *Millions of Cats* (1928), with its theme of multiple felines endlessly reproducing themselves. At home I had played the same records over and over. *Frosty the Snowman. The Ballad of Davy Crockett.* One dawn, I woke up early, and tried to plug in my Victrola, so I could hear Davy Crockett yet again.

Davy! Davy Crockett! King of the wild frontier!

I was impressed that Crockett had killed a bear when he was only three. I wasn't all that much older. But I wasn't destined to hear the song that morning: I must have stuck my finger into the outlet, for I got an electric shock, and when I looked at my hand it was black. Or was it purple? (Purple was the color of the bad-tasting medicine my mother put on my thumb to make me stop sucking it.) It doesn't matter. Imagination and memory are forever entangled, and there isn't any sense in disentangling them, at least not for an endeavor like this one.

It was by accident that I began to think seriously about wallpaper designs—those great tone-setters (casinos know this well), those

backdrops against which so many family dramas have been played. It happened because some friends of mine showed me what they jokingly refer to as their wallpaper museum. My husband and I were giving a party with a theme: collecting. Our invitation said: "Bring something you collect. Tell us why." Guests were invited to show and tell. Christine Gebhard and Dan Bloom, a couple I didn't know very well at the time, arrived with an artist's portfolio. Christine put on little white archivist's gloves to remove its contents, and at first I didn't know she was kidding; others had brought items that needed fragile handling. What she pulled from the case was big torn pieces of the wallpaper that she and Dan had removed from the walls of their house here in Andover. This Massachusetts town has colonial roots; it was founded in 1646. But the Gebhard-Bloom house was built in 1956—"Elvis's first gold record year," Christine said to put the house in context. She described it as not exactly a ranch house, although it's all on one floor. A cross between a ranch house and a Bauhaus, it is, as she said, "ranchified." But none of the wallpapers in their collection were even as old as the 1950s. The house's previous owners had done some redecorating of their own. Christine and Dan know this, because, when they removed the paper from the living room, they found written in large rounded script on the wall beneath it, "Wallpapered by Earl & Bob Pomerleau February 1970." They took a picture of it, and that has become part of their wallpaper museum, too.

What Earl and Bob were hired to paste up nearly thirty years ago was a brown-and-gold flocked design meant to resemble cut velvet. In 1730 the walls of the Queen's Drawing Room at Hampton Court Palace was covered with something similar. The house's former owners chose another British-flavored paper for their bedroom, a green-and-white machine-made derivative of that staple of Britain's great-houses, "Scenes of Old China." Featuring birds, bamboo, arched bridges, and flowering trees, it is, as it happens, almost identical to the pattern that Christine and Dan steamed off a room in the two-family where they last lived, in East Arlington, just over the Cambridge line. ("'Scenes of Old China' is my fate," Christine has concluded.) Many of the other designs Christine pulled from her portfolio she might have termed "Frenchified," since they would not seem out of place at Versailles. That is except for the kitchen pattern,

which, paradisiacal and practical by turns, featured pink strawberries, pink daisies, and pink pineapples against a background of gold hound's tooth—all in that miraculous invention of the 1940s, washable vinyl.

Holding the samples at arm's length, Christine and Dan—who have yet to choose new wall coverings, incidentally—made gentle fun of these wallpaper tastes. But it was clear they recognized them as something valuable. Otherwise, why had they bothered to save them? They even boasted that the Andover Historical Society would like them to donate their oddly enchanting wallpaper museum, and they said someday they will. When they do, many museum-goers may realize, as I did, that they are curators of their own, imaginary, wallpaper museums, ones they unwittingly, for better or worse, carry around in their heads.

Shortly after the collecting party, I went to a rare book-and-ephemera show in a hotel ballroom outside Boston, and noticed an old mail-order wallpaper sample book, circa 1929. I bought it for $25, and learned that the Harold B. Fobes Company of Bangor, Maine once harbored recklessly high aspirations for wallpaper. On the back of one of the nine-by-six sheets is printed this bold claim for self-help through wallpaper and paste: "Here is a paper decidedly not for one who likes to worry or fret. It is, however, the decoration for one who doesn't want to worry, or for the person who is just glad and happy to be alive—or wishes to feel that way." Another says, with enviable confidence: "Impossible to be anything but happy and light of heart with the golden tones and graceful forms of this fine pattern in the same room!" And on the reverse of a third design, the simple, certain assurance: "You'll really feel happier with this pattern beaming on you."

The Fobes wallpapers are virtually all floral, consisting of regularly spaced splotches and spots of unrecognizable species whose muddy colors have bled beyond their borders. They remind me of a prom corsage I once tried unsuccessfully to press between the pages of my diary. Soon enough it got flattened, all right, but it also turned dead-flower brown. Only part of the problem is the aging wood pulp and the cheap printing process Fobes used. Seventy years ago, these repetitions were just as unimaginative as they are today—the equivalent

of wallpaper doggerel. Still, I am intrigued by Fobes's claims for his products; and I like to think about the people who believed them. Wallpaper may not make your dreams come true, but it can be a pretty public pronouncement of what those dreams happen to be. Is anything besides clothing quite so personally revealing? What's worse is that you can't try it on, so to speak, before you commit to a roomful of it. Choosing wallpaper is like choosing a spouse. No matter how long the engagement, you see only a little piece of the whole before you take your vows, then you must live with the rest of it. Of course, it can be removed without too much difficulty, but the act requires an admittance of failure. There are two types of people, I think: those who like their wallpaper once it's in place, and those who despise it and live for the day when it might all be scraped away.

One day, in 1956 or '57, my parents decided to take in a boarder. Renting out rooms, a longstanding custom in immigrant households, may not even have been legal on "modern" Morningside Drive. Nonetheless, the plan was that my father would finally finish one of the upstairs rooms, creating another bedroom, and would install a second bathroom, too. And so back to the sample books he and my mother went, to choose the next wallpaper motif to be introduced into our otherwise plain-painted household, where apparently only children and strangers were privileged to have wallpapered rooms.

Charles Eastlake, in his influential *Hints on Household Taste* (1868), predicted that repeating flower patterns "would always hold a certain kind of charm for the uneducated eye." True to form, my parents chose roses—green-leaved garlands of small pale yellow roses, alternating with small pale pink ones, which made a pattern of horizontal stripes that appeared to raise the low ceiling, my mother pointed out as my father applied it with a paste that smelled of raw dough—flour and water. In antiquity, molasses was sometimes used. So the idea that something "tastes like wallpaper paste" is more plausible than you might think. Real roses, lipstick-red, with thorns as sharp as a cat's claws, grew against a white picket fence in our front yard, where we posed for family pictures. They were not for picking, and I found their untouchable beauty frustrating.

Amy Hale—the pseudonym I will use for our boarder—had no separate entrance. Arriving home from work, she hurried past the living

room, where I lay on the floor, presumably watching TV. In truth, I was lying in wait for her. My parents told me to honor her privacy; but I often hung around her door. She fascinated me not only because she was non-family but because she was divorced. A *divorcée,* my mother whispered to me in a conspiratorial tone, to explain the situation, after I had questioned an envelope addressed to *Mrs.* Amy Hale.

I knew what divorce meant: I watched Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers in *The Gay Divorcee* whenever it was featured on Million Dollar Movie, a TV program broadcast in the New York metropolitan area that, to my delight, showed the same film repeatedly for a week. I loved the repetition; I also loved being able to start watching it from any point and still understand exactly what was going on. We often watched movies in the theater in the same way: arriving in the middle, we would watch through to the end, then stay to see the beginning, up to the point where we had walked in. It was, I realize now, like a roomful of scenic wallpaper—the first panel of the landscape, when joined with the last one in the series, made a continuous picture; a completed narrative.

I never did learn Amy Hale's full story. No Ginger Rogers, she didn't stay long: her life was in flux. And no other boarder replaced her. The experiment was over, but I wasn't sorry: my parents had decided that Janet and I would have the room with the roses next.

We divided it down the middle with an imaginary line. My bed was smack against the wallpaper. I studied the new design, the roses' varying stages of growth, from buds to full-blown to back again. It was much more complicated than Cinderella, and at first, I couldn't figure it out; then, when I finally did discover its beat, its rhythm, I felt a surge of accomplishment and power unlike anything else I would experience until several years later, when I started reading novels.

It wasn't all rosy. Janet and I had begun to fight, and I invariably lost these battles, after which I turned my head to the wall and buried myself in the sweet symmetry. William Morris might have said the wallpaper was to blame for our skirmishes. He believed that well-designed papers were capable of changing the world. He copied the elements of his patterns from nature—leaves, vines, and flowers—but arranged them in intricacies that nature has never known. The

one he named Pimpernel features a repeating pattern of the silvery namesake herb punctuated by sharp spots of blue forget-me-nots—like pushpins holding everything in place; and a viewer could be convinced that he or she was seeing the inner and outer worlds at once: the chaos of fecundity and the order that supposedly lies beneath it.

Morris never was able to test his theory on a wide sampling; since he shunned machine production, along with the rest of the Industrial Revolution of his day (1834–1896), his wallpapers were too expensive for the masses. Today, Morris fragments are framed and hanging behind glass at the Victoria & Albert Museum; and on a trip to London, I bought postcards of three of them in the V&A museum shop, as if they were reproductions of any works of fine art. It's also true that some contemporary American companies have been selling wallpaper based on Morris designs, but single rolls cost $90.

On that same trip to London I watched some paperhangers working in a Bed & Breakfast in Bloomsbury that was undergoing an ambitious renovation, though the owner had neglected to mention this detail when I booked a room over the phone. Other travelers might have complained about the ladders and drop cloths, and the noise (I could hear the workmen talking just outside my door). But to me, already meditating on wallpaper and planning to write about it, the opportunity to see some going up seemed a piece of synchronicity.

The wallpaper chosen for the stairway was yellow-and-white striped and heavy enough to cover all the imperfections in the ancient plaster. The walls of the basement breakfast area had been stripped to reveal a gray fuzzy fundge, but my stay ended before I saw what pattern had been picked for the job of that concealment.

Wallpapering is a little like writing autobiography, I thought: simultaneously disguising and revealing; hiding and embellishing. And the patterns we discern are our own creations, works of imagination, works of art.

It's not quite accurate to say that my parents only wallpapered the rooms of their children and paying guests, because they did rewallpaper the room downstairs after Cinderella was scraped away; but that paper was in an entirely different category from the patterns I have described so far. It was meant to simulate wood—"knotty

pine"—for that room had been rechristened "the den," and required a masculine look.

Trompe l'oeil is an old wallpaper trick, dating from the sixteenth century. Toward the end of the nineteenth century, in England and in France, it was a certifiable trend, with writers on home decoration actively encouraging the use of wallpapers that simulated not only wood grain, but draperies, ribbons, lace, swags, gold braid, marble, leather, tapestry work, buttoned upholstery, plaster work—even rows of book spines. Ruskin, for one, vehemently disapproved; he believed wallpaper should be nothing if not honest. But I doubt if my parents intended to deceive anyone (though one of my father's fellow carpenters, of all people, was fooled). I think that they, in addition to being economical once again, were merely having fun: Dad even painted the radiators to match the "wood," adding "knots" to complete the effect.

That wasn't the end of their wallpapering history, or of mine. In 1964, at the start of my teenage years, big changes occurred upstairs. My father announced that he was finally going to finish the attic, so that Janet and I would each have our own bedrooms. Dad further noted that which of us would be entitled to the new one had already been decided; the prize would go to the daughter who helped him the most on this latest home-improvement project.

I was enticed by this challenge. I worked for hours at his side: holding the itchy pink fiberglass insulation in place while he stapled it; fetching tools from the basement; assisting with the installation of the paneling. It was not quite real paneling—it was light-weight, with fake seams—but it was more real than what was downstairs in my former bedroom.

The project took several months, during which time my sister, preoccupied by her boyfriends, didn't help my father even once. I seemed a shoo-in for the reward. Yet, when the room was completed, my mother rudely surprised us all by claiming it for Janet, who deserved it solely by virtue of being first-born: that was Mom's idea of fairness, and it would be the law. Thirty-five years later, Dad told me he still felt bad about the breach. As for me, though I realized I should have been hurt, I couldn't muster any impressive indignation: I had actually enjoyed helping him. Besides, as a consolation I would be allowed to redecorate the old room.

I turned the pages of sample books, quickly realizing that the task

of pattern selection was no pleasure. I couldn't picture a roomful of a particular design just by looking at a square of it. How similar this was to another activity, which I loathed: trying to choose material for a dress—my mother often made our clothes. I needed a bigger imagination, or more faith. In myself.

I have since read that difficulty in choosing wallpaper from books is a common problem. Even those who choose with confidence are often disappointed, because, as a rule, patterns that look best on the page often look least well on the wall. But if I had known that then, I don't think it would have helped. With headache pounding, I made a final pick—a pattern of long-stemmed, bright orange poppies, in a diagonal scheme—fully aware that poppies were only a little less timid than the roses I was giving up.

That changes in wallpaper design are capable of reflecting societal transformations is widely believed (which is, I suppose, the opposite of Morris' radical idea—that wallpaper would cause those changes). I tend to believe it, too, though certainly not because of what I chose, but because, coincidentally, the day my father and I were finishing up the papering job was also the day that Malcolm X was shot.

Sunday, February 21, 1965. A radio bulletin delivered us the news as we worked.

"Uh-oh," my father said.

This frightened me. What did he mean by Uh-oh? That we would soon be seeing race riots in our own placid Greenwich streets? I don't know if I asked him my question aloud or if he replied. I do remember that he told me to go down to the kitchen, reheat the coffee in the percolator, and bring him a cup. Downstairs, nervously, unwisely, I used a paper napkin for a pot holder, which promptly caught fire. I threw it into the sink and ran the faucet, hard; then I brought the scalding cup upstairs, where I continued to listen to radio reports. He kept on wallpapering.

Perhaps the most famous line in wallpaper lore is Oscar Wilde's purported death-bed ultimatum, uttered in 1900 in a Paris hotel room: "My wallpaper is killing me—one of us will have to go." I had suffered measles and chicken pox with Cinderella; mumps with the roses; in 1968, I was sick again, with mononucleosis, and had to stay in bed, this time surrounded by the poppies.

In *The Papered Wall: History, Pattern, Technique* (1994), edited by Lesley Hoskins, there is a photograph of the scattered remains of the wallpaper pattern on the ceiling of a sixteenth-century German nun's cell in Wienhausen, Lower Saxony. Undoubtedly, it was used for religious meditation. Incorporating elements of knot-garden design, it is maze-like—a puzzle to be solved—and its mirror images, of flowers and leaves, are as mesmerizing as Escher's. My poppies, however, did not inspire. The code, too simple, was too easily cracked, and I counted the years when I could be rid of it, off to college, out of the house.

But a funny thing happened during those weeks in bed. Though I hated my wallpaper, I loved my illness. No rest cure this, I read and wrote, and returned to the world a stronger person because of it—strong enough to convince my parents to let me redecorate my room once again. "One or two great inventors of pattern and ornament could help to reintegrate our age and time," the British connoisseur and travel writer Sacheverell Sitwell wrote in 1954. Fourteen years later, these sages were still nowhere to be found, and after the poppies were peeled away, I helped my father paint the walls white.

I have lived with other wallpapers since then, but none has found a place in my wallpaper museum. My exposures to them were too brief, or else lacked intensity; or else the lack was in me: I failed to study them the way I studied the wallpapers of my youth. Nor have I ever chosen another paper besides the poppies, or ever put up wallpaper anywhere I have lived since moving out of my parents' house. I have, in fact, taken off quite a lot of wallpaper at my subsequent addresses.

Interestingly, my sister became a wallpaper queen. She seems (at least to me) to be wallpapering and rewallpapering rooms constantly. She has the confidence to choose—and puts it up herself, too. She, who didn't learn from my father how to paper a wall, is apparently unbothered by the Abbott and Costello routine that we saw on TV together as kids, in which Costello rolls it out on the floor and the roll follows him; so he rolls it back the other way: Sisyphus in overalls.

I notice wallpaper choices everywhere now, even in places I shouldn't—for example, in Jasper Johns's crosshatch paintings of the 1970s: *Scent, Corpse and Mirror, Between the Clock and the Bed,*

any of which could work as kitchen or bathroom papers. Likewise, his number- and alphabet-paintings from the 1950s—*White Numbers, Numbers in Color, Gray Alphabets*—might do nicely as nursery papers. Their building-block imagery has, in fact, been called "primer-like."

The wallpaper featured on the book jacket of John Updike's memoirs, *Self-Consciousness* (1989), caught my eye only a few weeks ago, though it has been in my possession for nearly a decade. The paper is an old-fashioned rose pattern, not unlike the rose-patterned paper I once knew so well. It is seen in a photo of a wall on which hangs a small framed photographic portrait—the author as a boy. Since the jacket's flyleaf said that the photo-of-the-photo was taken by the author himself, I wrote him to ask if there was a story behind that wallpaper choice. This is his reply:

> The wallpaper seen on the cover of *Self-Consciousness* covered the walls of my parents' bedroom in their farmhouse in Pennsylvania. It was a choice of my mother, who redecorated the place, bit by bit, after we moved in in 1945. By the time I took the photograph of myself as a boy on the wall, my father had died and my mother had moved into what had been her parents' bedroom and this room become the guest room—mostly my room when I visited. I rather sneakily took the photo with my Nikon while my mother was dozing; for the jacket of my memoirs I wanted not just the childhood picture of me but the shadows and background where it sentimentally hung, in a real space, at a moment in time. I'm afraid I can't tell you anything about the paper except that it was of local provenance, circa 1945–48, and I always liked it—a small pattern for a small, low-ceilinged room.

In Germany, I have read, there is a whole museum devoted to "real" wallpaper; I may visit it someday. In the meantime, I find it beside the point. I prefer imaginary wallpaper museums, where our most ephemeral of arts is proved not to be ephemeral at all; and where the background becomes the foreground, if we choose it to be; where memories are only good ones, and the rest is merely history—somebody else's, not ours and unimportant for that reason.

In "Notes of a Painter," Matisse wrote this often quoted line, "What I dream of is an art of balance, of purity and serenity, devoid of

troubling or depressing subject matter, an art which could be for every mental worker, for the businessman as well as the man of letters, for example, a soothing, calming influence on the mind, something like a good armchair which provides relaxation from physical fatigue." Is that one reason why he incorporated wallpaper motifs into paintings like *Harmony in Red,* in which the red paper with blue flowers and benign serpentine vines seems to become the tablecloth, or vice versa?

Of course, every pattern, or idea, too rigidly applied can get the better of us.

Friend of my friend Larry, in Japan, at a restaurant (even before they had sat down and sampled the food): "Oh, it's not going to be good."

Larry: "How do you know?"

Friend: "Because the pictures have all been hung at the same height."