

the **Whitworth**

BODIES OF COLOUR
Breaking with stereotypes
in the wallpaper collection
Exhibition Guide



Introduction

Stereotypes are created through the regular repetition of ideas about people. Made in multiples with repetitive designs, wallpapers repeat again and again and again.

Wallpaper is also imitative, taking inspiration from what is popular: the figures in this exhibition come from ancient myths, pop stars, novels, tapestries, toys, film genres, 'exotic' objects, news stories, art and cartoon characters.

Wallpaper is not always a harmless backdrop. Developed within colonialism and industrial capitalism, it has been a ready reflector of and contributor to racist visual histories. Its enormous popularity grew through the 18th to 20th centuries, at the same time as the rapid expansion of the British Empire. The 10,000 or more wallpapers in the collection at the Whitworth span and reflect these three centuries.

This exhibition acknowledges this truth within the Whitworth's collection. It questions how the collection can be used to challenge stereotypes, often still subtly repeated in wallpapers produced today. In recent years the Whitworth has collected wallpapers by artists who pose questions about identity, history and social injustice.

The themes in this guide will take you back and forth between two galleries. The wallpaper table at the centre of the exhibition also offers opportunity for us to sit, discuss and turn old patterns into something new. Please feel free to contribute.

White paper

The wallpapers in this exhibition were designed within Northern Europe and North American contexts. They depict people from across Asian, African and wider American backgrounds; images of the world from a Western point of view.

Though the term 'person of colour' is a popular self-description by people who are not white (different from the derogatory 'coloured') it could be a description of any of us. The whiteness of people in art and design has historically gone unmentioned, apparently not a colour. It is a good place to start looking at how archetypes are different from stereotypes.

The earliest wallpaper displayed here is English (1680-1700) and an example of an archetypal decorative arts figure: the hunter (often found on more expensive wallcoverings such as tapestries). African and Indian hunters appear in the exhibition and are interesting to compare.

Luxurious 19th-century wallpapers by French manufacturers like Dufour or English designers like Walter Crane used classical figures to represent enduring ideals of beauty and power, their skin the marble-white of statues. These gods, caryatids and nudes are widespread across art and design history.

What we grow up with

Sindy, Action Man and cowboys deliver powerful messages about how to be, dress and play.

People of colour are usually absent or uncomfortably portrayed. The Flintstones represent early humans as a 1950s white American family. Mexicans are there to make heroes of cowboys. Baby pirates look like golliwogs. Mel B from the Spice Girls is a rare example of a woman of colour celebrated on a wallpaper.

In the mid-20th century Peter Shuttleworth adapted the fashion for Chinese style (Chinoiserie) wallpapers for a nursery setting, repeating caricatured features from European-made ceramics and children's books. To avoid this today, the faces of the figures on the *Palais Chinois* wallpaper available to buy from Osborne and Little are blank.

Nostalgic design is incredibly popular and often removes the troubling elements of its origins. Cath Kidston's *Cowboys* wallpaper has no 'Indians'. Mickey Mouse merchandise refers back to his long popularity but has lost association with the blackface minstrels that the character was based upon.

Legacies of slavery

Several of the wallpapers in this exhibition are uncomfortable to look at. A few are shocking, particularly Rober Gober's *Hanging Man/Sleeping Man* (1989). The artist used the repetitive nature of wallpaper pattern to startling effect. The alternating vignettes of a black man hanging by a noose and a white man sleeping make a stark point about the harrowing history of racism in America. The sleeping man is a powerful metaphor for enduring blindness to the legacies of slavery.

Uncle Tom's Cabin (1852) by Harriet Beecher Stowe was a best-selling novel that promoted the abolition of slavery in America. The wallpaper was manufactured in Manchester in 1853, probably for customers who wanted to display support for the anti-slavery movement. Despite the fact that slavery was abolished in British colonies in the 1830s, Manchester's textile industry continued to rely heavily on slave-picked cotton from the United States. 'Uncle Tom' has become shorthand for a subservient stereotype.

The older Mickey Mouse wallpaper was produced at the same time as the cartoon *Mickey's Mellerdrummer* (1933) where Mickey 'blacks up' and acts out *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

Till China and Africa meet

The personification of Africa (a design known as Cleopatra) and *The Young Queen Victoria* were both produced in France in the mid-19th century. Both are symbols of female power, yet Cleopatra's hair, skin and attire take typical creative license with the Egyptian ruler.

France also led the production of scenic decorations, an extreme luxury requiring hundreds of printing blocks to produce vibrantly-coloured examples like the Indian tiger hunting scene (1815, the complete set consists of 25 panels). It is displayed alongside the *Indian Gods* wallpaper (c.1880), cheaply produced for the international market for use in religious festivals.

'The Orient' has long been associated with frivolity and playful disorder in design, in opposition to the order of strict classical proportions. The fashion for Chinoiserie (things made to look Chinese) has endured for centuries in the decorative arts. There are numerous clumsily-drawn, generic Chinese figures in the collection; the large man and woman were hand-painted, indicating the expense often associated with the 'exotic'.

In *Arabian Nights* (2003) the artist Francesco Simeti inserts media images of Afghan refugees into a 1789 decorative scene by Jean-Baptiste Réveillon.

Women on the wall

Gender stereotyping is deeply entwined with the way in which ethnicity is pictured.

The French artist Niki de Saint Phalle created numerous Nana figures, often sculptures, including a 1972 wallpaper. Here Nana is joyous, black and voluptuous (she is brown skinned in another colourway in the collection). The character is often interpreted as an expression of rebellion from the cult of female beauty; the wallpaper brings skin colour into this equation.

The French artist Zineb Sedira subverts patterns associated with traditional Islamic domestic design. By inserting images of herself, her daughter, mother and grandmother into *Une Génération de Femmes* (1997) she inserts her identity as a Western woman into her Algerian heritage. The title means 'a generation of women', the title and wallpaper pattern both playing on the reproductive power of women and the repetitive generation of cultural attitudes.

Devotional Wallpaper (2008) by the artist Sonia Boyce breaks with the usual patterns of wallpaper design by not picturing her subjects. Like Sedira she uses words to memorialise particular women of colour in her wallpapers. Boyce's Devotional Series names black female musicians in recognition of their talent.

The wallpaper table

The table at the heart of Bodies of Colour offers a place to discuss how we can change the way cultural differences are repeated across wallpaper patterns.

A traditional 'print room' wallpaper pattern has been laser etched into the surface of the table. Virgil Marti's *Bullies* (1992) takes inspiration from the same kind of pattern, using lurid shades of 1970s flocking to shame his high school persecutors using their yearbook portraits.

Thirty 'framed' sections within the pattern have been cut out. Through the year of the exhibition pieces will be etched with new portraits, figures, names, words and poems and slotted back into the table surface. This will create many new wallpaper patterns.

You are welcome to take a rubbing from the table. You can also leave a picture or some words in the book (which may then be etched into the table).

The Whitworth values and expects mutual respect. Please be considerate of others in what you leave behind to look at and read.

#WhitworthBodiesofColour

Links and books

Within the University of Manchester the Ahmed Iqbal Ullah Race Relations Resource Centre is an open access library specialising in the study of race, migration and diversity.

www.racearchive.manchester.ac.uk

Walt Disney's *Mickey's Mellerdrummer* (1933), where Mickey Mouse and his friends act out Uncle Tom's Cabin can be viewed here:

www.criticalcommons.org/Members/sammondn/clips/mickeys-mellerdrummer-1/view

Gill Saunders, Christine Woods, Dominique Heyse-Moore and Trevor Keeble, *Walls Are Talking: Wallpaper, Art and Culture* (Manchester: The Whitworth, The University of Manchester, 2010)

Eric Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1944). The full text is accessible online at:

www.archive.org/details/capitalismandsla033027mbp

The Wallpaper History Society:

www.wallpaperhistorysociety.org.uk



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