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Historic Wallpaper Digitally Remastered: Early Twentieth-Century Block-Printed English Wallpaper in the Yin Yu Tang House at the Peabody Essex Museum

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In 1926 English wallpaper was imported to decorate a room in the c. 1800 Yin Yu Tang house in Anhui province, China, for the wedding of a Huang family member. Following the Cultural Revolution and Four Modernizations, the Yin Yu Tang house was found unused by a Peabody Essex Museum curator who arranged for the building to be dismantled, shipped to Salem, and reassembled by expert craftsmen. Messier was contracted to deal with all the paper artifacts for the Yin Yu Tang house. Among other projects, including the creation of forty digital surrogates that would remain permanently on room display, digitally recreating 350 square feet of historic wallpaper was one of the more complex projects. Vitale went to Boston, captured several images of the wallpaper using the highest resolution digital camera and lens available in 2002. The best pattern repeat unit on existing wallpaper was selected, digitally photographed, and digitally restored. The repeat unit was duplicated into ten-foot long panels and printed using Epson Ultrachrome pigmented inks on Hahnemuhle Structure 150 paper using the Epson 9600 inkjet printer at 1440 dpi. Messier, Diane Tafilowski, and Lauren Varga mounted the recreated wallpaper using Lascaux 498-20X on new masonry walls in the reconstructed home, in a new wing of the Peabody Essex Museum. The digital surrogate on masonry was blended with the original on the wood batten walls, beams, and ceiling using localized abrasion, pastels, and pigmented tile grout.

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