

## Design



Tribune photo by Arne Cusack

Designer Maya Romanoff, right, examines wallcovering with assistant Bob Christopher. "Fabrics and wallcoverings," Romanoff says, "should all look like they've been there for some time."

# Walls that go shimmer in the light

By Dylan Landis

**T**he designer's studio is far uptown, where the elevated train rumbles, the sidewalks need repair and a hulking dog named Reggie guards the gate.

Clients never come here. Designer Maya Romanoff likes the quiet. He works at a metal desk, ignores scuffed floors and uses cardboard cartons for shelves. Hundreds of rolls of paper jut out of the cartons.

Only when Romanoff unfurls the paper can a visitor forget the ordinariness of this place. The rolls spill out in glazed gold and burnished bronze. One is smoky; another is a pale, veined lavender. All look thinly iced and baked.

"When I started," he said, "the only wallpapers available were birds and flowers. The market was kind of dead."

But it is hard to call this wallpaper when the stuff shimmers like fine silk and is made by hand, or when the cost, after a designer's mark-up, approaches \$30 a yard. The proper word, if you are a designer or talking to one, is wallcovering.

Romanoff is a tall, reedy man of 44 who once studied to be an anthropologist and who has been dyeing wallcoverings for about seven years. He started on rough, brown paper that felt like grocery bags. Now he dyes handmade paper from Japan.

One of his current lines, Kyoto Dreams, has the scratchy gleam of an ice rink after skating. A line called Cheery Papers has speckles, like brown eggs.

"Fabrics and wallcoverings," he said, "should all look like they've been there for some time."

In New York City, Jack Lenor Larson, perhaps the nation's premier textile designer, says of Romanoff's wallcoverings: "They have an organic quality, a sensuality of texture. They are useable and attractive and unusual. The patterns tend to be in the material, instead of sitting on top of it."

Romanoff had made his name as a textile designer long before he turned to paper. A sofa he covered is permanently displayed at the Philadelphia Museum of Art. He dyes mostly leather, velvet and silk, none of it inexpensive: a North Shore art collector, who wanted Romanoff silk on his walls and Mayachrome, the designer's dyed leather, on his bar stools and chairs, paid \$35,000 to get them.

But most Chicagoans recall Romanoff for the 600 yards of dyed canvas streamers that he hung in 1982 from the Cultural Center of the Chicago Public Library.

This fascination with dye started in 1969—around the time he adopted the name Maya, shedding a given name he won't reveal. He was watching the crowd at the Woodstock, N.Y., festival when a rock 'n' roller walked by in a tie-dyed T-shirt.

Romanoff stared. He had been

out of the country for some time: first a year at the London School of Economics ["a dead end"], then a long ramble through North Africa, and finally eight months in Paris where he painted and, when money got tight, dubbed foreign films into English.

"Six lines in one morning would support me for a week," he said. "I specialized in Western accents."

But until Woodstock, he had nei-

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—Maya Romanoff

ther seen a tie-dyed T-shirt nor thought about working with dye.

"Every now and then a veil lifts," Romanoff said, "and you see into the future. That's what I had been looking for. That was my medium."

Curiously, Romanoff lives in an Edgewater apartment that he describes as having no television, no wallcoverings, no upholstered furniture, and little to show that the occupant has won a string of national design awards. Once, when editors of a major design publication asked to look at his home, Romanoff blanched and said it was being painted.

"I spend all my time working," he said. "If it's slightly uncomfortable, I work more."

The first wallcoverings Romanoff produced were on machine-made paper, although by the time he finished texturing, dyeing and lacquering, "it might as well have been handmade." That sufficed until he met Haruko Miyoshi, whom he later married, and whose family had been making paper in Japan for 14 generations.

Now he gets his paper from a small factory in Kyoto, Japan.

There, the sheets of paper form in mesh-bottomed trays that are sunk into tubs of water and wood pulp and then lifted out to drain.

"It's automated," Romanoff said. "But if it's automated where it becomes a tool that assists you, then it's still handmade. That's the way they do it, and that's the way we do it."

The dry sheets are joined into rolls, bonded onto a strong backing, and shipped to a 7,000 square foot loft on West Race Street, several miles west of the Loop.

Clients don't come here, either. This is where the dye goes on. Mixing dye is exacting work, like chemistry, and the employees who work on Race Street all have passed tests in arithmetic and manual dexterity.

The patterns are painted on first, with colored, dye-resistant chemicals called resists.

Then the dye goes on, covering everything but the resist.

Finally, some of the dye may be chemically stripped off, releasing its component colors in swirls.

When the paper dries, it gets a first coat of lacquer or glaze and cooks in a 30-foot long oven, for up to an hour at 400 degrees. Sometimes five or six coatings go on, each baked like the finish of a new car.

New Impressions '86, Romanoff's current collection, is on display at the Designer's Choice showroom in the Merchandise Mart.

"The wallcovering trade is completely conservative," said Larson, who has written a book called "The Dyer's Art." "There's not so much innovation in printed or ornamented wallcoverings. And that's exactly what Maya's doing."