

## These bespoke, hand-crafted wall coverings keep traditional skills alive

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It's why the [founder of home decor and lifestyle brand Lala Curio](#) feels it is imperative to keep training new generations of artisans, like those who hand-paint and embroider her dreamy Chinoiserie wallpaper using a centuries-old gongbi (meticulous detail) technique.



**Right:**  
Lala Curio founder  
Laura Cheung  
Wolf with the  
Feuillage wall  
covering that is  
also the name of  
the new collection

**Far right:**  
Palm Paradis,  
from Lala  
Curio's Feuillage  
collection

# WELL-DRESSED ROOMS

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If not for traditional skills passed down through the ages, says couture-wallpaper doyenne Laura Cheung Wolf, one of architecture's greatest medieval achievements might never have been rebuilt.

It's why the founder of home decor and lifestyle brand Lala Curio feels it is imperative to keep training new generations of artisans, like those who hand-paint and embroider her dreamy Chinoiserie wallpaper using a centuries-old *gongbi* (meticulous detail) technique.

"That 800-year-old crafts can be revived in a five-year time frame is thanks in part to modern innovation, but also because these crafts – ancient woodworking techniques, hand-painted murals and restoration of stained-glass windows – have been passed down through generations," she says, returning to her Notre-Dame reference. "Europe has put so much energy in fostering these old crafts that when the skill is needed, it's right there."

The act of harnessing ancient knowledge for contemporary design and architecture is gaining traction as consumers seek connection to heritage and craftsmanship. Hand-painted Chinoiserie wall coverings

inspired by traditional Chinese art and culture grace grand homes, royal palaces and luxury hotels across the Western world, extending to contemporary spin-offs. The secret sauce of these and other unique wall products, Cheung says, is their authenticity.

Splitting her time between homes in Hong Kong and Washington, in the United States, Cheung was back in town ahead of the May 1 opening of the Lala Curio flagship showroom at The Peninsula Hong Kong.

This year marks 11 years since the debut of her first Lala Curio in Wan Chai's Star Street Precinct, but it's been three years since her brand has had a physical shopfront here. (Not that Cheung hasn't been busy, rolling out Lala Curio globally with distributors in Britain, the Middle East, Thailand and the US.)

"Overwhelmed with machine-made products in the 21st century, we've travelled back in time to embrace 18th century craft, preserving and reinventing for future generations," says Cheung, who employs 20 full-time masters in the fine art of *gongbi* painting at the company's atelier in Suzhou, west of Shanghai. (Hand-embroidery by artisans trained in couture fashion is done at the Lala Curio atelier in Mumbai, India.)

"Our wallpaper collections include 18th century Chinoiserie-inspired panoramas with a whimsical flair, stories around flora and fauna, pagodas, birds and butterflies, exotic forests with rich foliage and delicate cherry blossoms, magnolias and wisteria," says Cheung. "We also have a collection of contemporary designs of geometries, abstract patterns and textures."

Lala Curio artists lay out a sketch of the design to scale on the wallpaper with a fine pencil, then layer on a paint similar to gouache one brushstroke at a time.

"The artisans spend thousands of hours on a room installation, with no repetition, painting rolls usually one metre wide and 2.5 metres long," says Cheung. "The workload depends on the intricacy required in the commission, since everything we do is bespoke. Typical lead times for a full room are generally four to six months."

Traditionally, silk backed by rice paper has been the base material for the wallpaper but at design event Paris Déco Off this January, Cheung debuted a new Feuillage (foliage) collection, bringing to life the lush biodiversity of Japan's Yakushima island, on backgrounds of suede, velvet, seagrass, wood veneer and cork.

"For me, the hand-painted craft I want to share shouldn't be limited to silk in the traditional way," she says. "I always try to push boundaries and do something visually exciting."

Also showcasing couture wallpaper in Hong Kong, at his L's Where shop in Central, is designer and Studio 1618 founder Alfred Lam, in a collaboration with Fromental.

Describing the British brand as "the Hermès of wallpaper", Lam says demand is strong from casinos, restaurants and luxury homes. "Top-end Hong Kong designers use them a lot," he says. "Everything is bespoke, one of a kind. It's more like a piece of art."

Taking inspiration from the nature themes of traditional Chinese painting, Fromental's handmade silk Chinoiserie wallcoverings are crafted in Wuxi, in southern Jiangsu province, although, according to Fromental co-founder Tim Butcher, the embroidery is



Abbotsford,  
by de Gournay



done in Suzhou using fine, unspun silk floss, dyed by hand in small batches to number thousands of shades.

“At Fromental, we believe the natural world provides a unique and inspiring blueprint for beauty,” says Butcher. “We love how the beauty of a golden pheasant or a cherry blossom tree transcends taste and fashion, and this is something we aspire to in all of our work.”

Altfeld is another Hong Kong company that offers handmade wallpaper, by US brands Assemblage and Maya Romanoff.

“Having artisans working with their hands to create unique and individual materials, displaying the maker’s quirks and movement, ensures a truly custom product,” says Amanda Clark, Altfeld Group’s managing director. “These exquisite, handworked, three-dimensional wall finishes really do elevate above the high-street brands.”

Innovating with a modern take on traditional materials, Assemblage wallcoverings are made with a base of marble-dust plaster and adorned with resin, gold and silver leaf and micaceous powders.

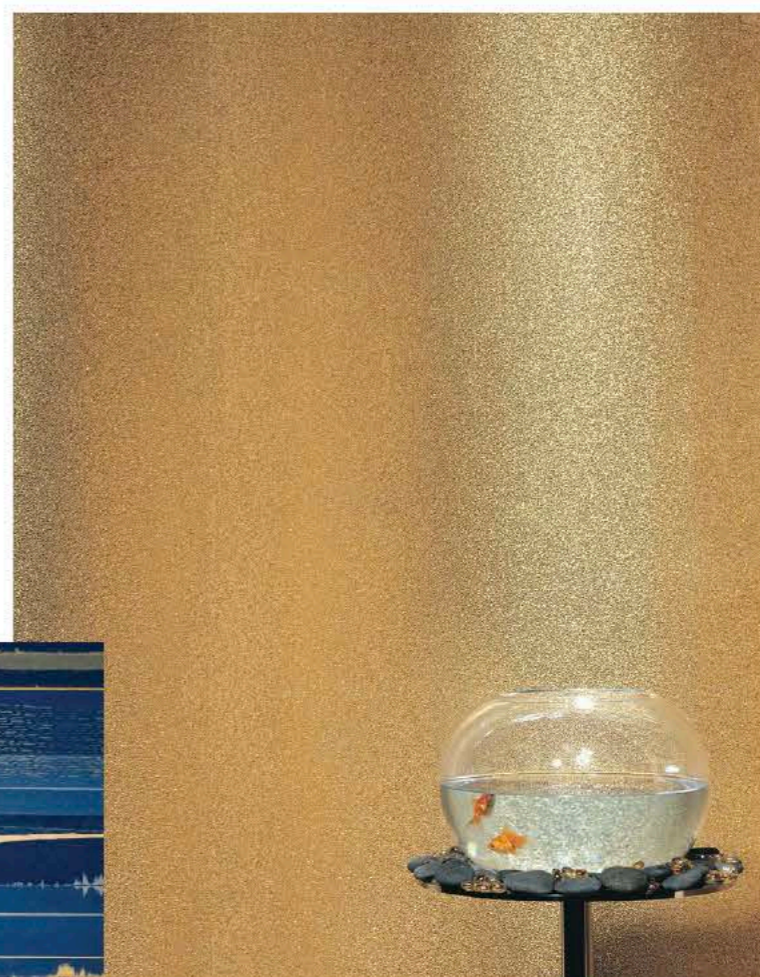
“Inspired by the textures and beauty of old Venetian plaster work catching rays of light from the moving waters of the canals, Assemblage artists play with texture and reflection in rhythmic and exquisite layers,” says Clark. “Painted on a base paper composed of two layers of cellulose [wood or plant pulp] with a layer of glass fibres in between, their works are durable enough to last on walls for years, and easy to work with for an installer.”

Maya Romanoff uses materials such as mother-of-pearl, gold leaf and sea shells, “so you can have a whole wall of glistening, pearlescent reflecting lustre”, Clark continues.

“The brand has also invented a way to apply tiny glass beads to papers – called Beadazzled – so the whole surface reflects light in the most amazing way.”

Three of Maya Romanoff’s collections – Flexi Mother

Beadazzled, by  
Maya Romanoff



Lamina Indigo,  
by Assemblage



Basho Leaf,  
by Assemblage

of Pearl, Mother of Pearl Aphrodite and Ajiro Fanfare – are in the permanent collection of the Musée des Arts Décoratifs in Paris.

Apart from its celebrated Chinoiserie designs, high-end British brand de Gournay offers Japanese and Korean collections, and works that explore historical themes. Hand-painted wallpapers and hand-embroidered fabrics that pay homage to the avant-garde visionary French couturier Paul Poiret (1879-1944) were presented in January at Paris Déco Off.

Also showcased was de Gournay's Dunand collection, interpreting the artistic achievements of art deco designer Jean Dunand (1877-1942) in dramatic geometric shapes, painted and gilded by hand, on deep, rich gold silk.

Claud Cecil Gurney, who founded de Gournay in 1984, regards these creations as “works of art installed on someone's wall”, rather than wallpaper.

De Gournay also works with ateliers in Wuxi, as well as in Yangon, Myanmar, and has a studio in Kolkata, India, specialising in hand-embroidery.

The various skills of its 300 to 400 artists include *gongbi* for the Chinoiserie collection, with the addition of a two-brush technique for the gradients of colour.

“De Gournay is continuing the long tradition of Chinese hand-painted wallpaper, which originated over 300 years ago in China and flourished in Europe,” says Gurney. “Using the same methods, standards and quality from centuries ago, I founded de Gournay to celebrate luxury Chinese craftsmanship and to bring it to the world.”

The work is laborious: it can take 150 hours for six artisans to paint a single panel (91.5cm x 2.5 metres) by hand, with prices ranging from US\$750 to US\$2,700. And there is increasing competition from companies producing cheaper, machine-printed papers – something Gurney is adamant de Gournay would never do.

“Lots of people who compete with us do more and more printing,” he says. “We are very specific that everything we do is hand-painted.

“It's a complex subject whether a print can ever be as nice.”

Even so, investing in a de Gournay original requires a hefty financial commitment. What if you move house – does the new owner inherit what's on the walls?

Not necessarily, Gurney says.

He explains that 18th century artists would stretch a canvas across a wall on batons, and put the wallpaper on that, so it could be taken down and reused, or sold. Authentic panels from this era have fetched hundreds of thousands of dollars at auction houses such as Christie's and Sotheby's, he says.

“Our wallpapers are backed in a fine layer of painting silk, which allows for them to be de-installed with relative ease. We can remove a piece, send it back to the atelier to reback it, then touch up the edges, and adapt it for a new space if needed.

“Or it could be cut up and made into smaller scenes and framed as wall-hung artwork [...] the possibilities are endless.” ■

PHOTOS: COURTESY DE GOURNAY (ABBOTSFORD); COURTESY MAYA ROMANOFF (BEADAZZLED); COURTESY ASSEMBLAGE (LAMINA INDIGO, BASHO LEAF)