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Changing the face of toile

By Liz Seymour
The Washington Post

It doesn't get any more traditional than toile. First lavished on bedding and draperies in 18th-century France on the brink of revolution, the printed fabric is known for pastoral scenes of shepherds and shepherdesses on swings, with milk pails and courting on a garden bench. Always and invariably, they are white.

Flash forward to a 21st-century update: couples dancing with a boom box nearby, girls doing double-Dutch jump-rope and a trio playing basketball. And, for once, they are black.

The fresh take comes from Harlem designer Sheila Bridges, who is possibly best known for designing the New York offices of Bill Clinton. She also has been voted America's best designer in 2001 by Time magazine, written a book ("Furnishing Forward: A Practical Guide to Furnishing for a Lifetime," Bulfinch Press, \$24.95) and hosted a show on the Fine Living cable channel and is starting a new Internet venture.

The designer, 42, grew up in Philadelphia, graduated from Brown University and the Parsons School of Design and opened her own firm, Sheila Bridges Design, in 1994. Her toile-patterned bed linens are available at www.groovyq.com and wallpaper at www.studioprintworks.com.

We e-mailed her with questions about her new line, her famous clients and what she sees ahead. Here are some excerpts:

Q: Why did you design your own toile? Do you see this as a tongue-in-cheek comment on design currents in this country — about ethnic traditions influencing the mainstream?

A: I've always loved toile wallpapers and fabrics but could never find a toile that I wanted to use in my own home, so I decided that it was time to design my own. Harlem Toile de Jouy (my toile) was designed to tell a somewhat satirical story about African-American life as seen through the sometimes distorted lens of the media.

I have the wallpaper in the yellow color on the walls of my work studio in upstate New York (the perfect pastoral setting for toile, of course), where it makes a huge impact above black paneling.

Q: You are probably most famous for designing Bill Clinton's offices in Harlem after he left the White House. What was he like as a client?



HELAYNE SEIDMAN / THE WASHINGTON POST
Designer Sheila Bridges in her Harlem home. She's known for designing former President Clinton's Harlem offices. Now she has designed an African-American version of traditional toile.

A: Clinton was a great client, and his style sensibility was definitely more contemporary than I had expected. He chose colors that were fairly muted, mostly greens and beiges against deeper wood tones. One thing that was great about working with the former president was his overall clarity and his ability to make a quick and firm decision about what he liked and disliked.

Q: What do you think about the state of decorating/design these days? What do you think is fresh and vibrant, and what have you seen too much of?

A: I've seen way too many all-white kitchens, with white cabinets, white counters and white tiles. Clean, yes, but also a bit uninspired. I would really love to see people take more risks with color in their homes in general, but more specifically in their kitchens.

Q: Could you describe elements of your own style?

A: I would say that it is pretty classically driven but with many twists and turns that are a lot more modern. I'm a bit all over the map when it comes to my love of furniture — I am equally attracted to that cowhide Eames chair as I am to that neoclassical English sideboard. I enjoy mixing different styles and periods of furniture as well as combining different fabric textures and patterns.

Q: When I think of your style, I always think of Roman shades, usually in a stripe.

A: I have never been a big fan of overly elaborate window treatments. I prefer window treatments that are straightforward and simple, which is why I often use Roman shades or draperies. I love using stripes in my window treatments because they make windows look bigger. Stripes often create opportunities to tie the colors of the room together more cohesively.

Q: What are some of your upcoming projects?

A: I'm really excited about launching my new online venture, www.thenestmaker.com, which aims to be the ultimate insider's guide to design and decoration. Similar to the DailyCandy, www.thenestmaker.com will be a free newsletter to Internet users that will highlight notable trends, products and resources that design-conscious consumers will appreciate.

It's my opportunity to give loyal subscribers my thoughts, recommendations and advice about furniture, products, services and events in the ever-changing world of design.

In the same way that my TV show and books gave viewers and readers practical and informative design advice, I want the Nestmaker to become a trusted resource for anyone interested in the design marketplace.