



Photo by Edward Clynes

Editor's Letter

I love my job. From a design perspective, I get to experience so many of the most interesting homes and people on earth. And never more so than this issue.

When I was a kid in New York, my mom, a decorator, would tell me stories about going to auctions at Sotheby's and Christie's and seeing Dolly Parton bidding on antiques. That story really added dimension to what I thought I knew about Ms. Parton. You form an opinion about someone because their image is everywhere but have to remember mass media is not nuanced. Fortunately, *The Riv* is.

Let's start with our cover story. When we set out to do this magazine, we always said *The Riv* would be "the secret knock," i.e., the pulling back of the curtain on some of the world's most interesting domiciles. Which is a great slogan and a great sales tool. But what does it really mean?

It means that private people let you behind closed doors, show you their private stash, and open up about how they live and why. This was never more the case than when I paid a visit to Ellen DeGeneres. Had she never told a joke in her life, I believe Ellen would have been as successful a designer as anyone. She kind of already is. Case in point: She bought a storied home from the legendary and wildly successful Montecito designer John Saladino – and improved it!

What I found in researching the Ellen story is that across the board, people revere her design. They also appreciate that she is a design locavore and massive booster of the local economy, putting her money where their mouths are. In a word, Ellen represents. One local broker called her "a one-person historic preservation trust. She takes mediocre houses and buffs them out like no one else." Special thanks to everyone who took the time to talk to me about Ellen (especially Portia and Ellen).

Which is not to say that Ellen is our only epic story. Before Ellen's, I was working on the story "Meg



Flavor Paper's
Brooklyn Toile.

Toile 2.0

Story by Gary Marks

The ubiquitous pattern was popularized by the notorious Marie Antoinette. Three hundred years later, the 2.0 designs feature The Notorious B.I.G.

The fabrication of toile fabric has a long legacy not unlike the lineage of quilting, an art that also tells stories and gets passed from generation to generation – and passed between cultures.

Where toile comes from in the human cortex may have something to do with our sapien desire to detect a pattern, chronicle that pattern, and archive it – to create a history. In fact, the first cave paintings created more than 30,000 years ago look very much like toile. In these renderings, we see an inventory of various beasts and livestock, and these designs weren't even done by humans – they

were done by our Neanderthal forebears. So, toile may actually be in our DNA.

Which explains why since the mid-18th century toile has been everywhere – on bathroom walls, curtains and valances, linens, china, dresses, upholstery, and bedding. It's been on the runway in Paris, sneakers, and even Lil Nas X. Now it's available at J. McLaughlin. Toile is so omnipresent and ubiquitous, sometimes it simply fades quietly into the background. But on closer examination, toile has actually been the 300-year battleground of a quiet and oddly attractive culture war.



Lil Nas X rocks toile.

The history of dying fabric – with any kind of pattern, really – began in India and is many centuries old. But with the founding of the East India Company in 1600, that practice spread to Europe thanks to an industrialist who mechanized toile production: Christophe-Philippe Oberkampf.

Oberkampf opened his factory in 1760 on the road between Versailles and Paris, in the town of Jouy-en-Josas (which is why toile is known formally as “Toile de Jouy”).

Oberkampf’s toile factory had the advantage of being next to the Bièvre, a river that feeds into the Seine, where finished toile could be washed and set out on the banks to dry. More importantly, because it was on the only road between Paris and Versailles, word soon reached the Royal Court, and before long, Marie Antoinette was visiting Oberkampf and buying bolts of his fabric the way a Kardashian might go kray kray for LV. So popular was toile that Oberkampf himself was personally decorated by Napoleon with the Légion d’honneur for his contributions to French culture – even though some of his designs spiritually hailed from India.

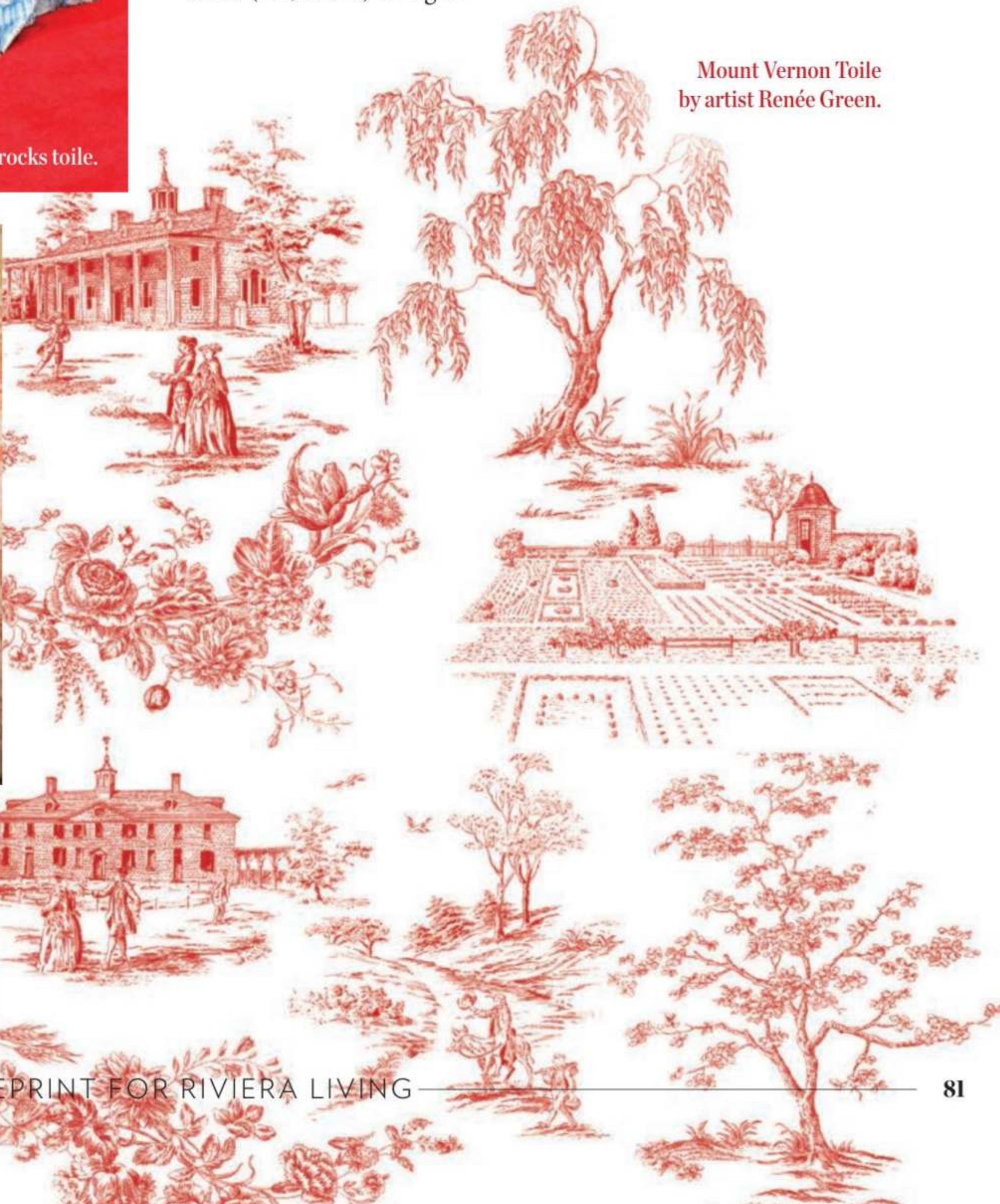
But this was just the beginning of the cultural ... shall we say borrowing? In the United States, where we have always revered Europe except on those rare occasions they fire cannons at us, Ben Franklin sent back toile patterns to his wife from England. Thomas Jefferson brought back examples from his stay in France that are still visible on tours of Monticello. One of America’s most famous toiles is called Mount Vernon Toile. It depicts gentry strolling Washington’s plantation, which appears to harvest itself without the benefit of any labor (i.e., slaves) in sight.

Mount Vernon Toile
by artist Renée Green.

(Photo: The Jon B. Lovelace Collection of California Photographs in Carol M. Highsmith’s America Project, Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division)



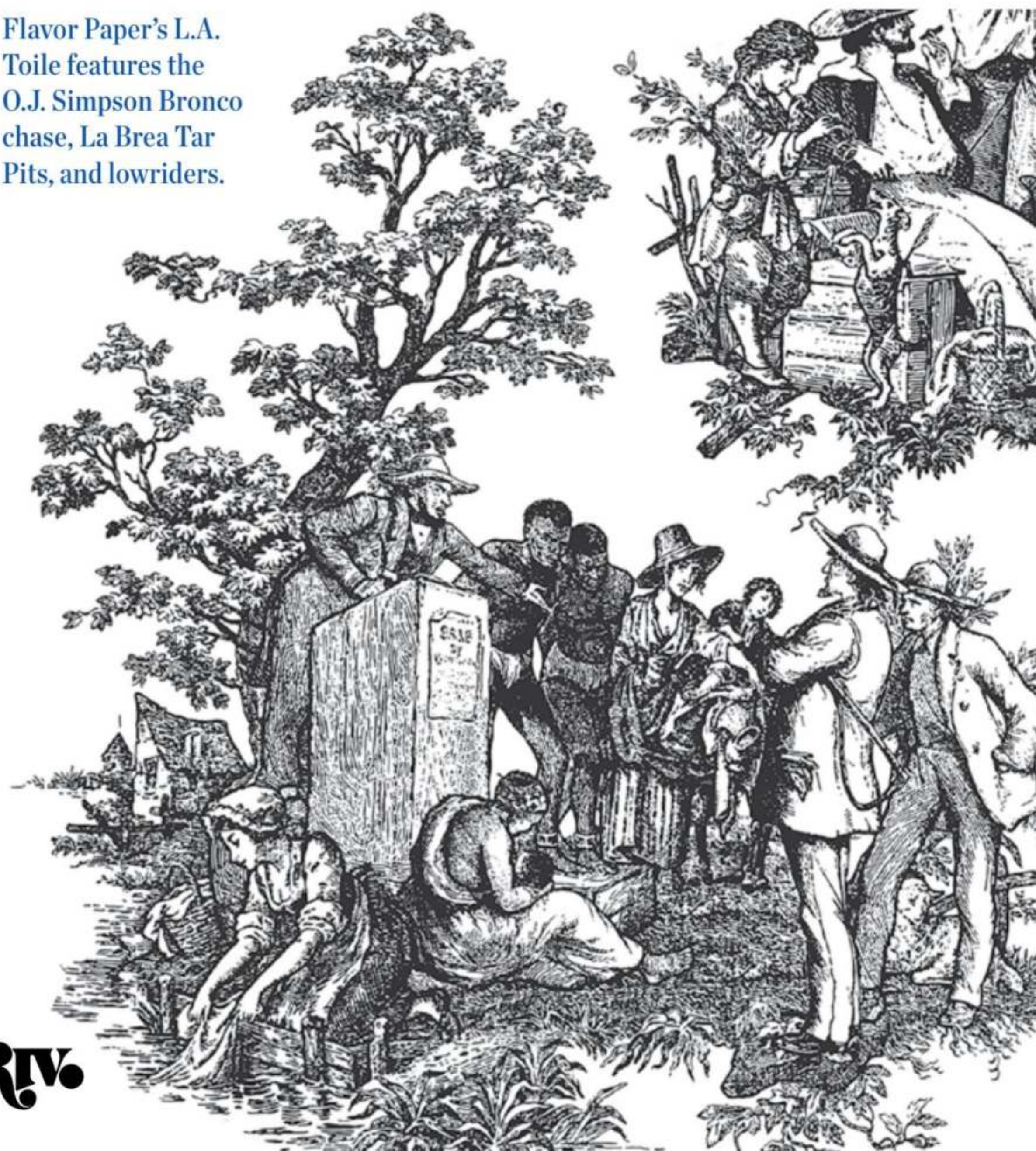
Petroglyphs at Chumash Painted Cave
State Historic Park in Santa Barbara.





F. Schumacher & Co. has always been tradition-based as well as forward-thinking with its offerings. Toussaint Toile (left) and Toile de Femmes (right). www.fschumacher.com





for his “French Toile...Negro Toil,” which is touted on his website as “part of an expanding collection centered around the whitewashed past of rebranded Southern plantations.” The pattern depicts the five repeating scenes from the “vicious cycle” of slavery: acquisition, sale, discipline, domestication and revolt, and finally, freedom.

Founded in 2003, Flavor Paper is another design house that has been on the cutting edge of toile’s new iteration. Flavor Paper’s Brooklyn Toile was designed by Beastie Boys’s Mike Diamond, and while it may, at first glance, look like traditional French toile, its portrayal of modern-day Brooklyn streets is anything but. The Notorious B.I.G., Hasidic Jews, a graffiti-laden subway car, the Cyclone roller coaster from Coney Island, pigeons, and fire hydrants are all gathered in its pattern of Brooklyn neighborhoods.



Sheila Bridges: Toile’s Past, Present, and Future

Perhaps the most prominent purveyor of toile 2.0 is the notable designer Sheila Bridges, who recently completed the redo of the vice president’s residence in our nation’s capital. Bridges grew up in Ben Franklin’s hometown, Philadelphia (where, at one point, she saw Green’s “Commemorative Toile” at the Philadelphia Museum of Art). She attended Brown and the Parsons School of Design, then studied decorative arts at Polimoda in Florence, Italy. She moved to Harlem in 1986 to practice interior design and opened her own firm, Sheila Bridges Design, Inc. shortly thereafter.

Harlem Toile x Converse collaboration.

When Bridges designed her own home in 2005, the inspiration that would truly catapult her career crystalized. She was well familiar with the sanitized history portrayed in patterns like George Washington’s Mount Vernon Toile and wanted something that told her own more authentic story for her home. “I love French walls, but you know,



those scenes in many of them, as beautiful as they are, just do not resonate,” she explains. Thus, Bridges created Harlem Toile. It reflects the images and culture of her neighborhood in Harlem, past and present, where she has lived now for more than 30 years. There are Black girls jumping double Dutch on the sidewalk, a ball gown-clad woman doing another’s hair, people riding horses, a couple in 18th-century dress dancing beneath an historic arch to tunes played from a boombox (in Spike Lee’s *Do the Right Thing*). An image of men playing hoops is taken from an historic photo of Wilt Chamberlain versus Kareem Abdul-Jabbar but transposed to men playing in period garb and shooting into a straw basket hanging from a tree. Harlem Toile is joyous. Call it Black Jouy, if you will.

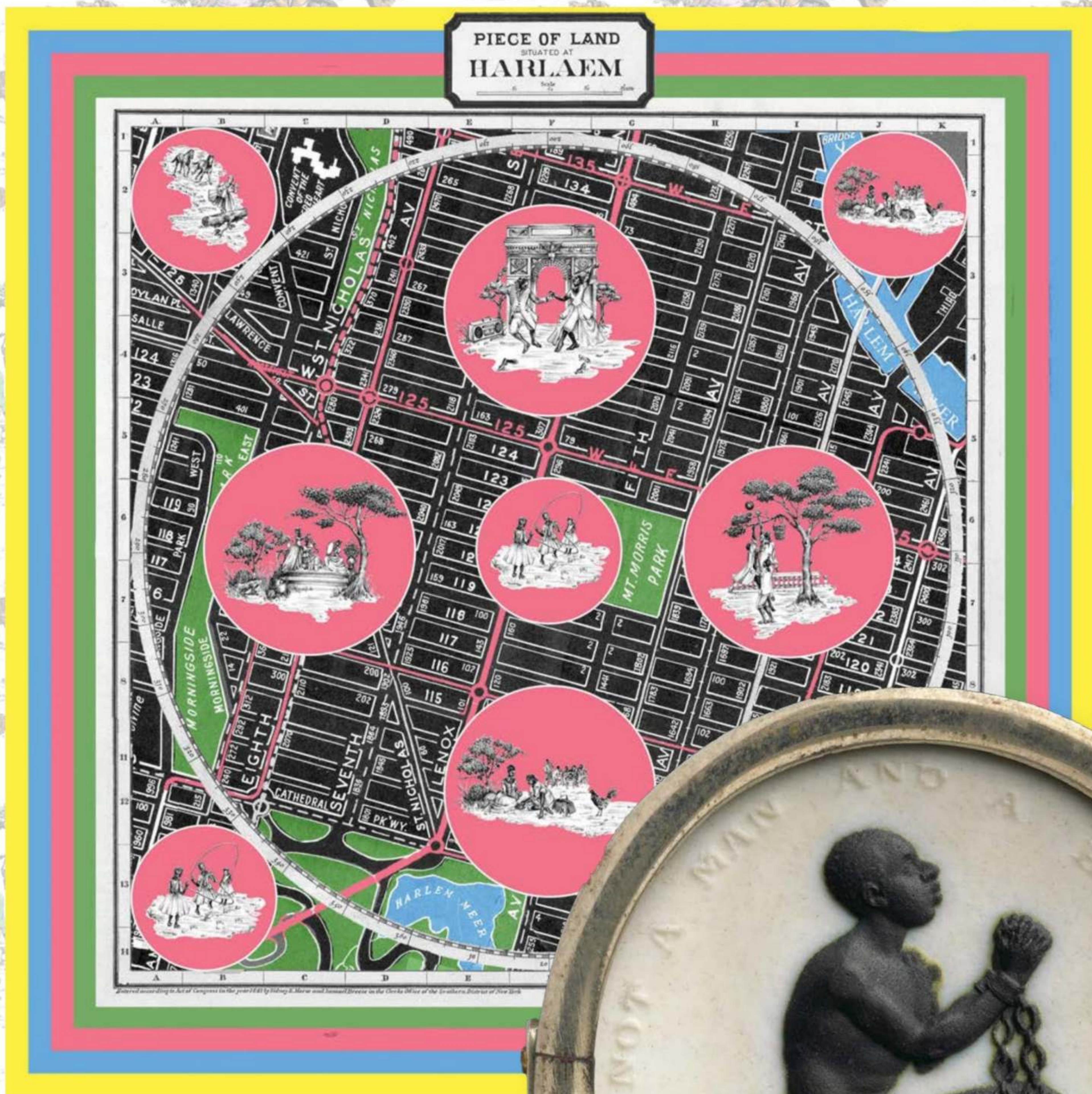
Bridges originally designed Harlem Toile only for herself and had no intention of selling it. But when the person printing it told her that he had never seen anything quite like it, she thought twice. And when it was published in *The New York*

“That my design work has created an opportunity for me to express myself from a different cultural lens and to have that embraced so enthusiastically is inspiring.” – Sheila Bridges



The designer Sheila Bridges (above) bedecked in several of her Harlem Toile collaborations.



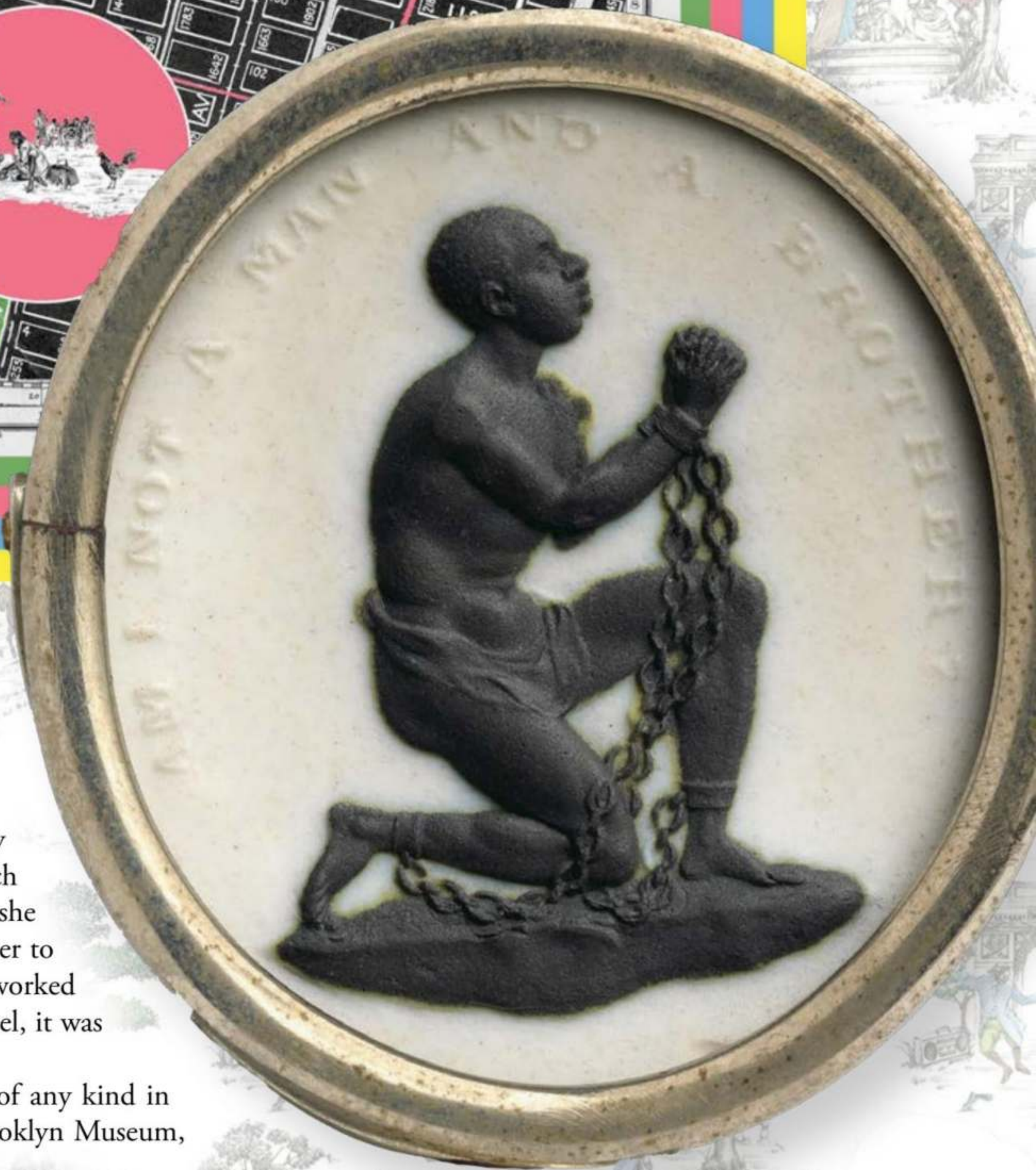


Sheila Bridges's Harlem Toile de Jouy square silk scarf.

Times in 2007, it became, well, an enormous hit. In fact, the images from Harlem Toile de Jouy have become iconic. Some of them look as though they might even have inspired the costume designers of the period television show *Bridgerton*.

Veronica Chambers, a *New York Times* reporter, recently wrote an account of her own love of Harlem Toile, in which she is pictured seated in front of the design on her wall as she also wears it on her skirt. She originally bought it as wallpaper to serve as her Zoom background during the pandemic, as she worked remotely from her bedroom. "Every time I looked at the panel, it was a reminder that my ancestors had my back," she writes.

Harlem Toile is now one of the most successful patterns of any kind in modern history. It is in the permanent collection in the Brooklyn Museum,



the Cooper Hewitt Design Museum (at the Smithsonian), the Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington, D.C., and it was included in an exhibit at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. It appears on Converse sneakers and Sonos speakers and on custom shades you can buy at The Shade Store. “Not bad for a hardworking Black girl from Philadelphia,” Bridges jokes.

The popularity of Harlem Toile has led to numerous collaborations with many famous design houses. None has made her prouder than her recent collaboration with Wedgwood, which launched a Harlem Toile line of china last year. “Josiah Wedgwood was very active in the anti-slavery movement in Britain,” she explains. “He’s somebody who used his talent, his money, and his privilege to do something, to spread the word about slavery.”

She continues, “He had these anti-slavery Wedgwood medallions made to spread the word about slavery, and he gave one to Ben Franklin when he came to Philadelphia. That’s part of the reason I got interested in them as a partner.” The Wedgwood launch was their most successful U.S. launch in history.

The Riv asked Bridges: “With all of your successful collabs, you just finished working on the residence for the highest office a female politician has attained in this country. One of the original abolitionists, Josiah Wedgwood, did his famous anti-slavery medallions, and here you are, a few hundred years later, with your own line of Wedgwood that celebrates and includes your heritage. How does that make you feel?”

Bridges’s reply: “It’s really humbling. The idea that my own creative legacy transcends time and history. (That) my design work has created an opportunity for me to express myself from a different cultural lens and to have that embraced so enthusiastically is inspiring.”

Josiah Wedgwood was an abolitionist who made these anti-slavery medallions (left) and gave them to people like Ben Franklin.

Hundreds of years later, Sheila Bridges has her own line of Wedgwood.

