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## DECOR

# Sheila Bridges: Toile de Jouy, Harlem Style

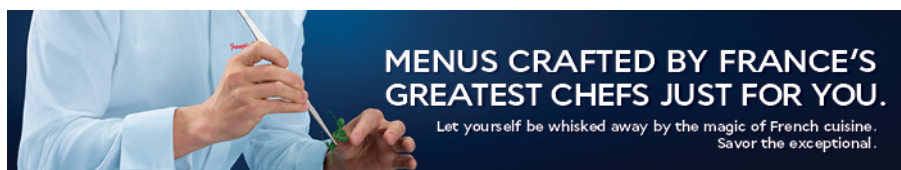
For the last 17 years, this New York City interior designer has been dusting off a French tradition from the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century: toile de Jouy. Say *au revoir* to lily-white shepherdesses, and hello to characters from African American culture. These politically charged motifs have become integrated into the collections of leading museums in the United States – and might even be on your sneakers!

By Clément Thiery / August 23, 2023

tree branch. All these characters are Black, and make up the protagonists of a new kind of toile de Jouy: the Harlem Toile by Sheila Bridges.

In 2006, the African American interior designer was looking for some wallpaper to decorate her New York City apartment. She had a passion for French culture, and wanted to find a textile in a style similar to the one produced between 1760 and 1843 by a manufacturer in Jouy-en-Josas near Versailles. “But I couldn’t find a toile that really resonated with me,” she says. The designer felt no connection to the motifs on traditional toile de Jouy, which were inspired by mythology and a fantasized vision of rural life popular in salons during the Ancien Régime in France.

This absence led to the birth of the Harlem Toile. “When designers don’t find something that they love, they create it!” Instead of shepherdesses, marquises, and flute players, Sheila Bridges created scenes from African American life, such as the double Dutch rope from her childhood. These images are set against backdrops in modern colors such as yellow, orange, apple green, and sky blue. She has also reappropriated popular clichés about Black culture, with one motif depicting a couple enjoying a picnic of watermelon and fried chicken.

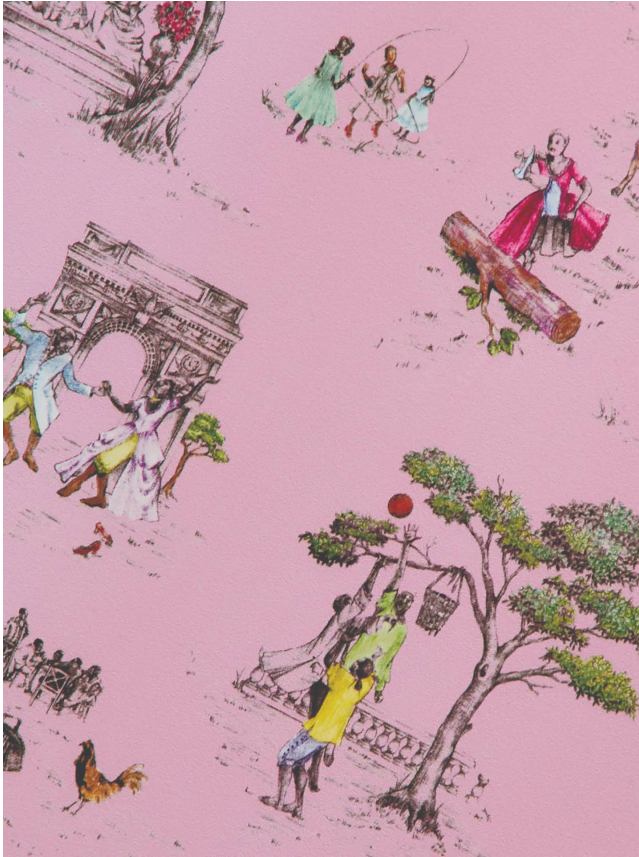


In another section, a young woman runs in front of a group of horses and leaps over a fallen tree trunk as if it were a hurdle in the 100 meters. “It’s supposed to be me,” says the designer, who grew up in Philadelphia. “I love horses. I’ve always ridden and had horses. My grandmother’s family had a farm in Virginia. With this motif, I’m acknowledging the Great Migration – when Blacks moved from the South to go to cities up north – and playing on the stereotype about our athleticism.”

## A Toile in Line with the Times

Sheila Bridges has brought toile de Jouy into the 21<sup>st</sup> century by making it more inclusive while playing on its original themes. The fabric company founded by Christophe-Philippe Oberkampf (a German-born dyer who became the first mayor of Jouy-en-Josas and lent his name to a street and a subway station in the 11<sup>th</sup> *arrondissement* of Paris) told stories and reflected current affairs of the time. Hundreds of sketches were produced by painter Jean-Baptiste Huet before being printed onto the fabric using a wide stencil and a technique called flatbed printing.

Egypt, and the arrival of French explorers in Florida in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, drawn during the American war of Independence.



© Sheila Bridges

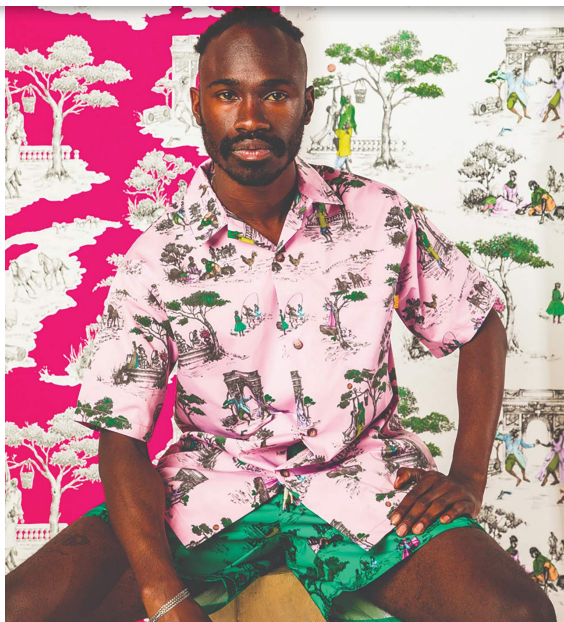


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“Each vignette is a historical record,” says Sheila Bridges. “That’s how I look at toile and why I think it’s such a powerful medium.” Recognized as a testament of our own era, her creations have been included in [the National Museum of African American History and Culture](#) in Washington D.C., the Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum in New York City, the Brooklyn Museum, and the Philadelphia Museum of Art. In 2015, the designer also exhibited her work in France at [the Musée de la Toile de Jouy](#). As part of the show, the American Harlem Toile was displayed alongside a Hermès scarf and a dress designed by Jean-Paul Gaultier.

Toile de Jouy still has a few surprises up its sleeve. “It’s a timeless classic, and it goes with everything,” says Sheila Bridges. “I have a lot of fun with it!” Her latest collaborations speak for themselves, including Converse sneakers, Mark Ingram dresses, L’or de Seraphine candles, a Sonos speaker, a set of plates, cups, and a teapot with Wedgwood, a porcelain manufacturer founded by a British abolitionist in 1759, and a series of shirts and shorts with Nordstrom. With the streetwear brand Union Los Angeles, she has also designed [a limited-edition set of skateboards](#), all profits of which will go to the California skate park where Tyre Nichols used to go until he was killed by police last January.

## [A Parisian at Heart](#)

In September, Sheila Bridges will be unveiling a new collaborative project with French brand Le Creuset – another step towards a country she loves so much. As a child, the future designer listened to stories told by her father, a U.S. Air Force captain stationed in Dijon during the 1950s. She studied French in high school, then at

as [Blanchetti](#) and [de Gournay](#) on Rue des Saints-Pères, and [Michele Aragon](#) on Rue Jacob. She also attended the [Black Portraiture\[s\]](#) conference at the Musée du Quai Branly, organized in partnership with Harvard and NYU, and watched French tennis player Gaël Monfils compete at Roland-Garros. Sheila Bridges will be back in the French capital in January for her quasi-annual trip to the [Paris Déco Off](#) and [Maison & Objet](#) fairs.

The designer, who decorated Bill Clinton's New York offices in 2001 and has just completed Vice President Kamala Harris' residence in Washington D.C., describes herself as a "visual narrator." Each motif on her toile tells a story. In this way, she is similar to African American artists such as [Kehinde Wiley](#), [Kara Walker](#), and [Kadir Nelson](#), who drew inspiration from *Liberty Leading the People* by Delacroix to pay tribute to Black Lives Matter protestors in 2020. Each of them has put their own twist on the classics of Western art to celebrate communities forgotten by history.

"It's time to change the iconography," says Sheila Bridges. "People have always seen toile de Jouy in one particular way – without any Black people in it. Why is that?" She adds: "There has always been a very impactful relationship between France and Harlem, as many African Americans moved to Paris after both wars. Paris and Harlem have a mutually respectful and beneficial relationship. So it made sense for me, living in Harlem, to play on a French theme."

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