



Designer Sheila Bridges not only makes Harlem her home, but the neighborhood also serves as an inspiration for her array of products. Opening page: Her Harlem Toile patterns include a line of clay-coated wallpapers, seen here in the sepia colorway. Bridges has forged a manufacturing relationship with Wedgwood for a series of plates and bowls and platters, each carrying details from her Harlem Toile.



Telling A New Story

Designer Sheila Bridges reinterprets traditional toile forms to reflect contemporary experiences relevant to her life and everyone’s

WRITTEN BY *Edward McGann*

The French translation of *Toile de Jouy* is “linen cloth,” and traditional toile designs depict scenes of provincial life: stories of farmers and hunters, of shepherds driving sheep, of lovers meeting beneath trees, or of dandily dressed ladies and gentlemen riding in horse-drawn carriages. And when the hot-air balloon was introduced in France in 1783, textiles and wallcoverings with scenes depicting balloons became extremely popular. So, toile is both storytelling and historical documentation.

Disappointed by its narrow themes, but inspired by the narrative possibilities, designer Sheila Bridges embraced toile and made it her own. “I didn’t especially want to look at

the milk maid on my walls the way she’s usually depicted, so I began creating my own scenes.”

Bridges’s Harlem Toile design lampoons some of the stereotypes commonly associated with African Americans in a way she describes as subtle, even celebratory. While not all specifically about Harlem, the celebrated New York City neighborhood, her scenes are informed by culture and by her Philadelphia childhood. “I’ve always loved horses and have ridden since I was a kid. I used to jump rope with my friends in front of my parents’ house, and my brother and dad were basketball fans who played in our driveway, the way you see people in Harlem playing pick-up.”

What began as wallcovering designs expanded to include fabrics, bedding, plates, glassware, umbrellas, and clothing, with Bridges’s creative inspiration derived from architecture and a broad range of art, design, food, culture, and music. “All those things interested my parents, so I had an early exposure and appreciation for them myself.”

Bridges’s photographer father maintained a darkroom at home; standing at his elbow watching his images develop, Bridges learned that creativity takes time and concentration—and that “if you don’t get it right, you start over and do it again.” Bridges adds: “Many people assume that creativity is a gift, but it’s really about hard work. Creativity is a discipline, and like any other skill set you must constantly work at it in order to maintain it and grow.”

A sociology major as an undergraduate at Brown University, Bridges spent a lot of time at the nearby Rhode Island School of Design, where she had her first major exposure to art and design before her study abroad year in Rome. “That time planted a seed in me. And while I didn’t imagine myself as a fine artist, I knew then I wanted to be in the design business.” Next, she studied at New York’s Parsons School of Design, “the traditional way of becoming a designer, versus simply saying you’re one on Instagram!” Her post-college administrative assistant gig at an interior design firm taught her the business of design: how to invoice a client, draft purchase orders, attend auctions, and send correspondence to vendors and clients—a foundation that helped her launch her business.

Bridges describes herself as a classicist with a modern sensibility. “I respect the tenets of classicism in terms of symmetry and scale and proportion. But I love the way color and pattern speak to history, and a layered mix blending vintage and modern, classical and contemporary.” Her approach led to prestigious design commissions for clients like former President Bill Clinton, Sean Combs, Tom Clancy, and Vice President Kamala Harris and her husband, for whom she decorated their official residence.

Bridges was always drawn to toiles because they tell stories, though typically illustrated with bucolic, pastoral, allegorical scenes set in landscapes quite different from her own. “I love history and research, so toile became my perfect artistic medium, allowing me to express my own point of view. I can’t often do that when I’m hired by a client, because the story I’m interpreting for them is about their life, not mine.”

Bridges collaborates with brands that connect authentically to her life. “I wear Chuck Taylors, so

partnering with Converse felt right; I have Sonos speakers in my house, so doing that made sense; I love Wedgwood, which I once collected with my mother.” It’s less common to see toile rendered on something like a skateboard deck, Bridges says with a chuckle, noting her recent designs for such. “But I think of toile as the ‘little black dress,’ a classic that never goes out of style and that I’ve come to view as a neutral. It pairs as easily with a stripe as it does with a plaid, and each time we design with a different collaborator, I get to experiment again with color and scale. I simply love it.”

Bridges, who splits her time between Harlem, New York’s Hudson Valley, and Reykjavik, Iceland, is an inveterate traveler seeing inspiration wherever she goes. “Part of what travel does is show you there’s more than one way to live, more than one significant culture, and that there are happy and interesting people all over the world.” ■



The Harlem Toile patterns, which depict everything from galloping horses to children jumping rope to families laying out picnics, also appear on scented L’or de Seraphine candles and a silk headscarf.



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