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On the wall

Great new looks in today's wallpapers

by Deborah Abrams Kaplan

If there's one interior design tool that just might surprise homeowners, it's wallpaper. No, not the avocado green covering of ages past, peeling at the seams or stubbornly stuck to the wall. Wallpaper is ushering in a new era with bold designs, bright colors and even novel elements like sand, beading and scratch-and-sniff collections. "We are in a hot, hot moment for wallpaper," says Benjamin Dhong, owner of Benjamin Dhong Interior Design. "What I love is that it gives you visual interest and warmth that a regular coat of paint can't offer.

Papering selective rooms or accent walls is a great way to make a design statement. Designer Jo Ann Hartley of Hershon Hartley Design recommends thinking of wallpaper as an actual piece of art on the wall. "It's not inexpensive, and it can really transform your room like an amazing piece of art," she says.

While home sales may be dropping, wallpaper sales are up 15 percent each of the past two years at Donghia's San Francisco showroom, according to Donghia manager Kim Ahlum. In large part, this increase is because designers are showing their clients the new, exciting wallpapers. Clients are typically reluctant to consider wallpaper, and they're certainly not asking for it, says Hartley. "They don't know what's out there," adding that her firm uses wallpaper in all styles of homes, from transitional to contemporary. She shows wallpaper to a third of her clients, most of whom then use it.



TRENDS

Wallpaper is making a splash these days because of the innovative designs. "We'll take a traditional floral pattern and blow it up and infuse it with modern or trendy colors. It really changes the way it looks," says Kathleen Navarra of Navarra Design. "The trend right now is very patterned wallpaper." Creators are also adding objects to the paper. One of the designers' favorites is the Maya Romanoff Beadazzled line, which features tiny glass beads over beautifully colored paper, the beads reflecting that hue.

Manufacturing techniques have improved since the days of the traditional vinyl coverings. Now there's a wider range of styles, such as textured wallpaper with a hand-painted look that's actually machine-made. Ahlum says some of the Donghia papers go through several different screenings, resulting in five shadowed layering effects. Some papers also use precious metals, making them more durable and resistant to outside elements.

Other trends include handmade grasscloth or faux bois, imitation wood designs. "It looks like old, aged wood that's bleached and lined, but it's brand new and totally believable," says Dhong. A lot of wallpapers now touch on organic themes like plants, trees or flowers, but yet these papers are still contemporary for modern interiors.

The range is not only in style but in price. "You can get really dynamic and amazing features with wallpaper and it can be relatively inexpensive or quite high end," says Hartley. Expect to pay around \$84 a yard for the Beadazzled paper. Wallpapers are often quoted per roll, but orders usually come in sets of two, costing \$40 to \$75 for the basic designs, rising past \$240 a roll. And to make it more confusing, European rolls are 11 yards long, while American ones only stretch five yards.

WHERE TO PAPER

Almost no designer recommends papering every room. A prime candidate is the powder room, because the small space provides the maximum impact. Here a strong pattern isn't disruptive. In a large room, the owner has to make an investment in that pattern and may tire of it, according to Dhong. If using wallpaper in a larger room, try a subtle pattern or solid color. Also consider who lives in the house. With pets or young kids around, wallpapering only above a wainscot prolongs the effect. Dhong says that some cats love scratching grasscloth reaching the baseboards.



Another factor is how easy it is to clean. "Traditionally wallpaper was paper, but now they're doing everything from bamboo, which is a natural fiber that's paperbacked, to silk wallpapers," says Navarra. "They give fantastic texture, but it's something you cannot clean."

Silk might best be used in a home office or above wainscoting in a dining room. "Typically for a dining room or living room any type of paper would work - it's more about the look," says Navarra. "Be careful of direct light, because the wallpaper could fade."

Wallpapering in the kitchen is more difficult, but not impossible. ""There are amazing wallpapers that are commercial, used for restaurants or hospitality," Hartley says. "If you want to install it in the kitchen, adjacent to cooking or eating, it should be able to withstand grime, dirt and food - one that you can wipe down or scrub."

LOOK ONLINE

Home Depot and Lowe's carry wallpaper, but the higher end coverings are found through designers and online. "Your average end client is going through a designer to reach us," says Donghia's Ahlum. "The designers are pretty knowledgeable in California. They're directing the client on what to purchase or what not to purchase. It's worth it in the end to go through that."