In building conservation there seems to have always been a tendency, perhaps inevitable, to look at the exterior and the form of a building rather than the interior. In Australia very few interiors survive unspoiled. Each generation takes upon itself the responsibility of redecorating. There has been a consequent delay in the conservation of interiors and in the appreciation of what survives and what has gone.

The recent exhibition of Victorian and Edwardian wallpapers by Susie Forge and Phyllis Murphy went a long way to promote an interest in our historical interiors. Held at the Hawthorn Gallery between the 24th September and the 15th of October last year, it was in two parts. One half of the exhibition was devoted to wallpapers used by the Price Family who were interior decorators in Kyneton from 1859. The other half was a miscellany of samples from other sources and a collection of photographs of surviving wallpapers.

The Price wallpapers were limited in that they were an individual’s expression of taste, but this was also their value. Over a very wide range of styles and types the firm’s taste was apparent. Almost all the papers were clear and light and the dark papers were not drab. There was a predictable tendency to more elaborate papers over the years with the development of machine printing. However matched against the circumstance of its date, each paper seemed to offer the client value for money. They were bourgeois but tasteful.

It was good to see such well mounted fresh examples. The colours were not faded and the paper was not yellowed or worn. It was a reminder that surviving wallpapers, in situ, may have changed dramatically over the years.

Most types of wallpapers were represented. There were simulated stone and timber finishes. There was a set of borders and corners for making up frames. There were friezes of various depths, dado borders, dado papers and filling papers. Significant omissions were that of the heavy damask and flock wallpapers but this probably reflected the taste and style of the decorators.
Perhaps the best exhibit was No. 23, the papers used in the dining room of Pastoria (c. 1890), a country mansion near Kyneton. The dado was a semi naturalistic field of flowers, almost buzzing with bees. Its background was gold and the colours of the flowers were very muted. The filling was a regular but free floral. Both the dado border and the border above the skirting read as definite lines with a regular rhythm.

Two things surprised me about this exhibit. Firstly that such elegant papers were used in a dining room rather than a drawing room. Secondly, I was surprised that the dado and borders were printed together and hung vertically. While not the most colourful or inventive these Pastoria papers represent for me the culmination of the Victorian style.

My favourite exhibit was No. 18, a matching paper and wide frieze designed in the Neoclassical style. The main motifs were an oak wreath and a torch, the flames of which were a honeysuckle! The design is probably Canadian or American because of the narrow width of the paper. (Wider friezes became fashionable at the turn of the century when dados were losing favour and, as a consequence, the frieze was emphasised.) The design was somewhere between French Empire and Adam Revival. I was pleased to see such a good example of Neoclassical, a style which was important to the later Victorians and which matured with the Edwardians. The Adam Revival malingered well into the nineteen twenties.

Amongst the other exhibits, the most interesting were probably the sample, and do-it-yourself books, whilst the other papers added variety to the Price collection. The heavily textured, sanitary wallpaper, in particular, was of interest.

The photographs were excellent and I was pleasantly surprised by one depicting the hallway of Wardlow in Parkville, with its very rich, dark papers and double border on the ceiling.

The photographs will serve to illustrate a book, compiled by Susie Forge, on surviving Victorian interiors. Its publication will give this aspect of building conservation a further push.

The Price collection will be exhibited again this year in Melbourne, at Black Rock House; in Sydney at Elizabeth Bay House; and then at the Swan Hill Pioneer Settlement, (Victoria). Let's hope that one day all this material, and more, will be available permanently in a decorative arts museum at Labassa (or Ontario) - a building where the fabulous interiors have survived to rival the exterior.

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