

COSMOPOLITAN CHRONICLE

True tales from the annals of history, archaeology, construction, and restoration of the Casa de Bandini and Cosmopolitan Hotel.
Old Town San Diego State Historic Park

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If the Walls Could Talk.

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Part of the process of the restoration of the Cosmopolitan Hotel is the curation of the artifacts found. These could be the ones dug up during archaeological investigations or parts of the building that are recovered and saved as samples of the different construction periods the building underwent through the years. A curator is the specialist that oversees the care, research, documentation and proper packaging and storage of collections.

Archaeological project leader Niloufar Minovi recently recovered two pieces of wallpaper from room 104-B, which is located on the side facing Calhoun Street. The wallpaper was peeling off a three foot reveal. The reveal is the area on the sides of an opening. The whitewash over the wall paper was peeling off and it was possible to see a faint pattern of green flowers and leaves. A black dusty layer was also noticed in between the whitewash and the floral pattern.

Minovi explained that the wallpaper was on a layer of very smooth mud plaster over adobe blocks. There are fragments of red fired brick in this mud plaster. Testing these brick fragments may give us a relative date range for the wallpaper.

The wallpaper is very brittle, the floral design is almost gone, the original colors are gone with the exception of some faint light green and it's very difficult to make out the pattern. A professional curator will have to do the final curation and stabilization. In the meantime, we archaeologists are committed to giving "first aid" to the artifacts, to protect them and avoid further damage. In our role of "first responders", we dusted the wallpaper with a soft brush, photographed it, and stored it in between acid free tissue paper, acid free cardboard, and inside an archival plastic box to keep it away from light and moisture.

Although the floral pattern was faded a similar pattern was found that dates between the 1840s and 1880s. (The photo at the end of this article was enhanced to show the floral pattern.)

In the early 1700s wallpaper was used in public buildings, and by 1760 it was starting to be used by wealthy families. By the 1820s its use was more common

and more families could afford to paper their walls. While the earlier wallpaper was made with hand-carved wooden blocks, later on these were replaced with a wooden cylinder which was rolled over a continuous sheet of paper. By the 1890s the use of wallpaper declined because it was hard to clean, and considered unsanitary, and some manufacturers developed waterproof wallpapers. Wood pulp was the main component of machine-made wallpaper in the 1850s, which made it brittle and brown.

It is hard to know exactly what happened in this doorway. What was that black dusty layer? Was it mold seeping through the adobe bricks? Could this be the reason why the wallpaper was whitewashed over? The archaeologist's task is to listen to what the walls have to say.

