

# parodi on paperhanging

## The sun never sets on British confusion

by Jim Parodi

I have this recurring nightmare. It involves getting a shipment of British pulp wallpaper exactly 12 times the amount I ordered. In the dream, I'm crushed under the weight of a pallet of Britpulp, when I only ordered enough to do a half-tile bath.

I thought that this occasional nocturnal distress was under control until a recent real-life incident triggered another bout of night terrors. In my dream, a British man with a cockney accent looking like Dee Snider of Twisted Sister—only with worse teeth—pulls the lever of a silo bin, and I am pummeled with roll after roll of unwanted pulp wallpaper.

What is Britpulp, you ask? It is a bulky, pulpy, non-vinyl paper that would look familiar to old-timers, because it's very reminiscent of the stuff they were hanging in the U.S. for most of the 20th century before vinyls took over. These pulps call for that quaint old concoction favored by the old hangers—pure wheat paste. Really old coots would look at the stuff and ask, "What did you pay for this, sonny? Fifty cents a roll?" If you told them \$50 a roll, they would surely laugh and say, "Sure you did...and I'm Ty Cobb."

The real-life incident was the case of the unfortunate Mrs. Melleridge. I told her decorator that the bathroom needed 10 metric single rolls. Despite the fact that my estimate form clearly indicates that what I call a metric double is a roll 20.5 inches wide by 11 yards, and despite that there's a large asterisk which spells out that there are a number of British wallpaper companies who call that metric double roll a "single roll bolt," the decorator simply placed an order for 10 single rolls and wound up

with 20 North American singles. When I got to the job a few weeks later, the 30-day time period for returns was up. Mrs. Melleridge now has a \$250 16-year supply of really thick Christmas wrapping paper in her garage.

Don't you find this single vs. double nonsense with the Britpulp to be odd? Isn't it strange that despite the fact that these Britpulp suppliers—Sanderson, Osborn & Little, Hinson, Zoffany, Cole & Son to name but a few—have been purveying their wares on American shores for years now, they still refuse to get with the program and adopt the local custom of calling these rolls metric

many years. Then in the 1980s, Europeans started importing their rolls measuring 20.5 inches by 11 yards (52 cm by 10 meters in metric units), and this new competing double was roughly 57 square feet.

At this juncture, a decision had to be made by the distributors: Should they call the newcomer roll a "single bolt" as they did in Europe, or should they take advantage of customer confusion and call it a "double" to sell it at lower price, making it appear a better buy next to the American double? Many were putting their money on the fact that SF unit pricing didn't exist, and odds were good that no one was going to figure out the SF price. That's because American math test scores were already on the decline by the 1980s, and few Americans could figure out the unit price—even with the new pocket calculators that were all the rage—because many didn't even know what the term meant.

In 1983, a distributor rep at a Wallpaper Association convention disagreed with this marketing ploy and suggested that by calling the new import roll a "single," manufacturers could then charge much more for this new "single" compared with the exist-

ing American single. According to him, sales would only dip for a couple of years, a decade at most, as the confusion in the marketplace abated. Legend has it that the distributor was taken into the men's room and roughed up a little.

And so the new "cheaper" metric double was born, weighing in at 20.5/11. Over the years everybody got on board with this decision to call the newcomer a metric double. (It should be noted that paperhangers never complained in earnest about the new metric dou-

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Illustration by Kevin Belford

doubles? Every American manufacturer calls the global-sized 20.5-inch-by-11-yard roll a metric double. But it's not just us...the Canadians, Germans, French, Koreans, and ironically, most of the other British importers of vinyls who export to the U.S. also call this roll a metric double for their American operations.

A brief history of the metric roll in the U.S.:

Once upon a time, there was an American double that measured 27 inches by 32 feet. It was a 72-square-foot double, and existed for

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ble. By treating the Eurodouble and Ameridouble as equivalent, they were able to charge the same price while hanging 25 percent less material.)

But the Britpulp folks never made the slightest effort to fall in line with this American terminology. Why didn't they hop on the gravy train? I contacted a few of these companies to find out if

there is some secret reason that makes this practice of confusing the American buying public—and sometimes burning the American buying public, like Mrs. Mel-leridge—good business sense. After about 20 phone calls and an equal number of e-mails to these manufacturers, I got a bunch of responses that ran the gamut. Company A said, "We live with this everyday. Not only is it a problem for the installer, but it flows

through the entire order process, affecting the consumer, installer, designer, supplier, and manufacturer." Company B said, "It used to be a problem, but it's not a problem anymore." Company C said, "Problem? What problem?"

Several reps I spoke with were quite taken aback by the subject. One VP who asked not to be quoted basically told me that if the order takers can't read the square footage tables in their sample books, they shouldn't be selling the stuff. Bingo, Mr. VP. Yes, it could be true that as children, when many future decorators brought their report cards home to Mom and Dad, the row of Ds in the math box had been artfully smudged with ketchup. That's because studies show that people who have heightened right brain functions like artistic and decorating skills many times are lacking in the left brain-oriented number processing skills. Of course this veep seemed to be lacking in both the right brain "insight" convolutions and the left brain "reasoning" nodes, which rendered him blind to the concept that integrated systems work better when everything is standardized in the marketplace.

Paperhangers have traditionally complained that there is no standardized roll size, and this fact can make estimating dicey. Rolls come in a variety of widths and lengths. Making a change to standardize the actual rolls would cause a great deal of retooling expense for manufacturers. But this isn't about that. The irony is that the Britpulp and the U.S. market are talking about the same 20.5 by 11 roll—but they're not on the same page as to what to call it.

I've spoken with paperhangers about this subject, and a surprising number think that it's not an oversight by these importers. Some believe that it's an intentional scam. Many I spoke with just assume that the reason for this headstrong practice of selling British units in the U.S. is simply to push twice as much material out the door (as in the business school equation:  $2 \times \text{material} = 2 \times \$$ ). Then, once the material is out the door and the Visa

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Have them also evaluate the condition of the structural steel and the shop-coat primer. If the steel is not ready for topcoating, have them go on record. Submit this letter to the owner's representative or the general contractor and ask that the surface be brought up to the requirements of the spec before you proceed. This may not make you the most popular subcontractor on the jobsite, but you definitely should not be the one to bear the burden. You did not fabricate the steel, nor clean it. Nor did you apply the shop-coat primer. Time is of the essence, and don't let people bully you into a compromise unless you can afford the consequences.

**Q** I know that paint applied by brush and roller can look so different than paint that is spray-applied, but sometimes it looks as if it were a different color, even though it came from the same can. Why?

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card has been debited, you simply close the returns window after placing a permanent "Out to Lunch" sign on the bars after 30 days.

Here in America we drive on the right side of the road. We used to drive on the wrong side until the American Revolution, but then we thumbed our noses at the British as we veered over to the correct side of the street. I know the British are still upset by this, but even Jaguar and Land Rover understand the importance of selling cars here with the steering wheel on the correct side of the dashboard. I don't hear anyone from Jaguar saying (in a Charles Laughton voice), "What a bother! Perhaps we should keelhaul the lot of them until they learn to buy cars with the steering wheel on the right-hand side. Let them taste the lash—they'll learn." I don't even hear British export manager, Clifford Whiffington, saying something like, "Yes. We *did* ship 12,000 of those right-hand-drive Jags to the States last year. I guess it might have been a problem then,

**A** There are a few things that affect the appearance of paint, among them color, texture, and sheen. We can rule out color, since it came from the same can. But can we? No, actually. The same paint may develop different shades of the same color depending upon the shear that is put on the paint by the application tool. Shear is the pressure or force that causes the paint to be spread out onto the surface.

You can determine this by taking a little paint and applying it with little effort to a surface. Then take your finger and rub an area of the applied paint vigorously and allow the two areas to dry. The rubbed area may look darker. Sometimes this can be eliminated or minimized by agitating or shaking the paint for a longer period to disperse the colorant better.

Sometimes it can't be eliminated. It's called color float. If you cut in with a brush and roll the rest of the surface, the appearance *should* look uniform. But that's not always the case. Some paints "pic-

but not anymore." That's because if Mr. Whiffington did say something like that he'd probably now be working at the U.K. equivalent of Quikie Lube, where I guess it wouldn't be a problem for *him* anymore.

As mentioned in previous columns, the American wallpaper scene is free and wide open to the individualists. I am not asking that any government standards be imposed to enforce a standardized roll term. I just implore the Britpulp interests to reconsider their stance and change their ways as an act of good will. One simple gesture like this could undo years of British import offenses like faulty automotive electrical systems, exclamations like "Super!", and *The Weakest Link's* Anne Robinson. *mc*

When not offering penetrating commentary on all aspects of the wall-covering industry, Jim Parodi is a second-generation paperhanger based in Cornwall-on-Hudson, NY. An NGPP member since 1987, Parodi is a member of The Bergen County Mastercraftsman Paint and Paper Association in the suburbs of New York City.

ture frame." In other words, the brushed area looks like a frame around the rolled area. Well-formulated products should not do this, since this is a standard application practice in the industry.

Texture is another problem. Each method of application produces a different texture. The smoothest application should be by spray, and it should be free of tailing and spitting. By being careful with each tool, the texture difference can be masked or eliminated. If the paint is applied at too thick a film, the texture difference will be accentuated. This is a case of less being better. Sometimes slightly thinning the paint will also minimize the difference, especially if you're touching up a sprayed area with a brush or roller.

Sheen comes into play with some paints, with each application tool producing a different sheen. This will especially show when you touch up an area with a different tool. This usually isn't visible when you look head-on at the surface, or perpendicular to it. But if you look at the surface at an angle, there may be a sheen difference or a spot showing. This too can be minimized with thinning the paint and using the same method of application for touch-up as for the original application.

Sometimes it's all of the above coming together to produce the problem. Some paints are notorious for having these as inherent properties. This is not an indication of a "cheap" paint or of a product of inferior quality; it just is. And as we've heard, it all depends on what your definition of "is," is, doesn't it? *mc*

Now semi-retired, PDCA Technical Standards Advisor Zig Riders worked in various capacities at The Sherwin-Williams Co. for 39 years, both in architectural and industrial/maintenance coatings. You can contact Zig at [zigriders@centurytel.net](mailto:zigriders@centurytel.net).

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