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Grothendieck's dessins d'enfants can be defined as bipartite graphs embedded into oriented compact surfaces and cutting them into simply connected cells. They determine a unique conformal structure on the surface, even as an algebraic curve defined over a number field. Recent joint work with G.A. Jones and M. Streit (to appear in the Proceedings of the LMS) shows that regularity and certain invariance properties under "Wilson operations" – well known in map theory – decode algebraic information about the curves hidden in the combinatorics of dessins. (Received August 24, 2009)