

## Research Article

Kathryn Rachel Ferry\*

# Clutter and the Clash of Middle-class Tastes in the Domestic Interior

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**Abstract:** Interior design offered new members of the Victorian middle-class a means to demonstrate their success. Yet the choices they made in decorating domestic spaces could be harshly judged, in particular by self-proclaimed taste-makers who, though middle class themselves, came from a newly professionalised group of critics, artists and architects. The styles most hated by these arbiters were those designed to express wealth and status, often through new manufacturing techniques that promoted effect over craftsmanship. This article seeks to examine middle-class taste on its own terms and reveals how it evolved under the influence of the Aesthetic or “Art” Movement of the 1870s. Though ideas about what constituted “good” taste were more widely disseminated after this period the Victorian love of clutter continued unabated.

**Keywords:** Victorian, design, homes

Victorian interiors are recognisable by their excess of stuff; the frilled draperies, busy wallpapers and plentiful ornaments that typified the first era of mass-production. The overall clutter of a Victorian drawing room or parlour was the result of numerous purchasing decisions all of which carried some degree of meaning. Rapid industrialisation fuelled conspicuous consumption and the display of household objects was all about demonstrating an individual’s place in the world through his or her ability to consume. The question of whether such consumption was in good or bad taste severely exercised the period’s self-appointed taste-makers who railed against the design standards of factory produced goods and belittled the aspirational purchases made by members of the burgeoning middle class.

Yet, in a significant shift away from the tradition of aristocratic diletantism, the critics themselves were now also largely drawn from the middle classes, working in the professionalised roles of architects, artists, designers and commentators. That their views survive in published form does not make them representative of middle class tastes *per se*. Indeed, that much of the “how to” literature of the later nineteenth century described examples of “bad” taste before offering advice on how to achieve “good” taste, betrays the fact that people climbing the social hierarchy often had different and conflicting priorities. Whereas elite designers worried about finding an appropriate decorative style for the age in which they lived, ordinary middle-class householders sought to express more prosaic concerns, specifically their own comfort and status.

The room illustrated in Figure 1 conforms to our notion of Victorian domestic space as full of clutter, a term defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as “A collected mass...a crowded and confused assemblage.” Readily understood, this description is also a loaded one suggestive of chaos and implying a critical distance between nineteenth-century tastes and our own, where our own are necessarily superior. As Lynne Walker has put it, “for the generations born and bred in the anti-ornamentality of 20<sup>th</sup>-century modernism” rooms like this “can be especially hard going” (Rev. of *The Cosmopolitan Interior: Liberalism and the British Homes 1870-1914*). In recent years the layers of meaning embedded in Victorian middle-class clutter have begun to be unpicked, notably in Deborah Cohen’s *Household God’s* (Yale 2006) which locates changing

\*Corresponding author: Kathryn Rachel Ferry, Independent Historian, East Grinstead, West Sussex, RH19 3LY, UK,  
E-mail: [kathryn@kathrynferry.co.uk](mailto:kathryn@kathrynferry.co.uk)

attitudes to acquisitiveness in the context of a religious movement away from mid-nineteenth century Evangelical moralism towards Incarnationalism and a greater role for self-expression through material things. Meanwhile Judith Neiswander's book, *The Cosmopolitan Interior: Liberalism and the British Home 1870-1914* (Yale 2008) contends that decorating manuals helped spread liberal values through the medium of informed home decoration. Though nineteenth-century critics could be damning in their evaluations of tastefulness they did not reject the collecting of things inherent in clutter, rather it was the make up of the clutter that could be on the one hand distasteful and on the other hand, laudably artistic.



**Figure 1:** A late-Victorian parlour from Stratford-upon-Avon, Warwickshire (Author's collection)

The sin of bad taste has been assigned to the *nouveaux riche* for many centuries but the strength of moral censure was heightened in the Victorian era because movement up the social hierarchy was so fluid. Exponential growth of the middle class was catered to by a booming manufacturing industry making the potential for displays of perceived bad taste much greater than ever before. As a manufacturer himself, the character of Mr John Thornton in Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South* has a parlour he believes befits his status. The book's heroine, Margaret Hale, recounts her first impressions of the expensive clutter that is deemed so precious it must be protected, almost to the point of invisibility:

The walls were pink and gold; the pattern on the carpet represented bunches of flowers on a light ground, but it was carefully covered up in the centre by a linen drugget, glazed and colourless. The window curtains were lace; each chair and sofa had its own particular veil of netting or knitting. Great alabaster groups occupied every flat surface, safe from dust under their glass shades. In the middle of the room . . . [was a] bagged up chandelier . . . The whole room had a painfully spotted, spangled, speckled look about it, which impressed Margaret so unpleasantly that she was hardly conscious of the peculiar cleanliness required to keep everything so white and pure in such an atmosphere . . . (Gaskell 130-31).

As the author makes clear, conspicuous consumption also applied to servants whose manual labour was displayed alongside the spotless ornaments. Her message to readers was that this did not represent good taste. It was a value judgement with clear proselytising overtones given that the story was originally serialised in *Household Words* from September 1854 to January 1855.

Though the Great Exhibition three years earlier might have demonstrated Britain's pre-eminence in global manufacturing it had also, according to critics, revealed, to the nation's disgrace, the dismally low standards of design that British people were prepared to accept. Gaskell showed herself on the side of design reformers who sought to raise the aspirations of middle class purchasers above the desire "solely to

ornament, and then to preserve ornament from dirt or destruction” (131). For those who lobbied to put taste on a more informed path there was a strong belief that good design could even be a tool for social reform. In a lecture delivered in 1851 architect and designer Owen Jones argued that the government had a duty to intervene because “a few thousands spent in forming art museums, accessible to all, would save many thousands more from being spent in building gaols” (242).

This was the atmosphere in which John Ruskin reviewed William Holman Hunt’s painting *The Awakening Conscience*. In a letter published in *The Times* on May 25, 1854, Ruskin claimed that every object surrounding the man and his mistress could be read as having a tragic edge. The illicit relationship was damned by the perceived immorality of possessions which were “common, modern, vulgar.” He described “[t]hat furniture so carefully painted, even to the last vein of the rosewood” and asked “– is there nothing to be learnt from the terrible lustre of it, from its fatal newness.” Ruskin could not countenance that such furnishings might be part of a real home because for him *all* newness was “fatal.” His point of view has long been accepted by art historians. Elizabeth Prettejohn refers to the setting as “kitsch” reiterating Ruskin in her description of “[t]he aggressive shine on the rosewood table, chair and piano, the gaudy mirror-frame too elaborate for this small house, the claustrophobic space of an overfurnished room—these should not be mistaken for a neutral depiction of a Victorian interior” (94).

There is little doubt that Hunt contrived his scene for moral effect but would the occupants of a newly-built villa in the suburbs necessarily have read the objects in the same way? The evidence suggests not and therein lay the root of the clash of middle class tastes. What Ruskin and his fellow experts hated most about this kind of furniture was that it was loved by vast swathes of middle class householders; loved *because* of its newness and lustre. This article is therefore a defence of mainstream middle class taste, or at least an attempt to see it on its own terms. Ruskin might not have been able to imagine a reputable family living amidst the clutter of Hunt’s painting but there were many mid-century Victorians who hankered after an elaborately decorated piano or a brightly patterned carpet for their own parlour.

If there was one decorative style that divided opinion most it was the Rococo amalgam known as Old French or *Touts les Louis*. So abhorrent was it to tastemakers that few art historians have troubled to take it seriously. Yet age-old rivalries and even the recent Napoleonic wars could not dampen British ardour for French design, in particular the aristocratic brand of pre-Revolutionary luxury revived by the court of Napoleon III during the 1830s and 40s. Looking back to the Versailles of Louis XIV and XV, this style screamed opulence and glamour conjuring up interiors panelled in gold and white that were filled with sinuously curved furniture. John Claudius Loudon remarked on the importation of authentic pieces “taken from the mansions of the decayed noblesse,” naming Nixon and Son of Great Portland Street, London as specialists in Louis XIV furnishings (1034-5). However, the majority of pieces were reproductions that, thanks to new techniques like deep-buttoned upholstery for chairs and sofas, appeared even richer than their eighteenth-century precedents. By the 1860s, many firms made little else, churning out furniture with bulging curves and C-shaped scrolls that promised immediate impact in the homes of the newly affluent.

Visual evidence for mainstream middle-class taste is hard to come by but photographs of Dr John Heaton’s home in Leeds—latterly the headquarters of the Yorkshire Archaeological Society—offer a rare glimpse into the decorative choices of a self-made man, choices which included a significant amount of Louis-style furniture. Heaton was born in 1817 above his father’s shop in the centre of Leeds. By 1856 he had moved his wife and three children to the fashionable suburb of Headingley where he paid £2,500 for a substantial Georgian villa which he remodelled to reflect his enhanced social standing. The American Ralph Waldo Emerson noticed this trait among British men of Heaton’s class and time: “If he is in the middle condition he spares no expense on his house . . . Within it is wainscoted, carved, curtained, hung with pictures and filled with good furniture. ‘Tis a passion which survives all others to deck and improve” (qtd. in Gunn and Bell 30). That Dr Heaton took pride in the result of his redecoration is clear from the fact that he chose to photograph his completed interiors at a point when photography was itself a new art. Both his Drawing and Dining Rooms featured French furnishings, the style being most pronounced in the latter where, as can be seen in Figure 2, the dining table and fireplace were extraordinarily curvaceous. It is no coincidence that these were the rooms seen by outsiders. Heaton was an important figure in the civic life of Leeds and clearly considered the Louis-style appropriate to the vision of himself he wished to show his visitors.



**Figure 2:** French-style furnishings in the dining room at Claremont, home of Dr John Heaton (Yorkshire Archaeological Society)

Another example of the role French-inspired design played in status display can be found in the 1858 portrait of Henry Lambert held by the Museum of London (illustrated in Ferry 82). Lambert chose to be portrayed in his parlour overlooking the Thames and, though the ships that were the source of his income as a chandler sail past the window behind him, it is the interior decoration that speaks of his success. There are French curves on the three polished wooden chairs, Mr Lambert's arm resting on a particularly sinuous example. Behind him is a marble-topped wooden cabinet with applied scroll decoration and a curved front that the artist captures by a hint of reflected light. Even the hearth rug and fender boast curvaceous designs, the over-mantel mirror and paintings have heavily gilded frames, and from the ceiling hangs a gilded Rococo chandelier. This painting is the counterpoint to Ruskin's analysis of *The Awakening Conscience* where the newness is not "fatal" but vital; vital because it speaks of a man's hard work, of his prosperity and betterment. Whatever their claims to good or bad taste the objects here displayed the moral message of Samuel Smiles' best-selling book *Self-help* (1859).

The problem was that designs chosen to represent the worldly success of those ascending the social ladder were considered over-ornamented fakes by reformers wishing to raise national levels of taste. By mid-century two competing schools of thought had emerged on how to remedy the defects of British product design. That espoused by the men behind the Great Exhibition, especially indefatigable civil servant Henry Cole, architect Owen Jones and painter Richard Redgrave, sought to work *with* manufacturers and educate the public in what they deemed to be the infallible principles of correct taste. The other, taking its lead from architect A. W. N. Pugin's philosophy of Truth to Materials, rejected industrialisation in favour of virtuous craftsmanship. This was the path pursued by John Ruskin that echoed across the century to William Morris and provided the inspiration for the Arts and Crafts Movement.

Both schools reserved a special hatred for what Cohen has called "domestic possessions tarted up to look like finer goods" (17). The pretence of pine grained to look like mahogany or walls painted to mimic marble were obvious and despised examples but in criticising mass-produced articles in general leading figures were also judging purchasers who, like the goods they bought, were pretending to be something they were not. Even as architects and designers ostensibly sought to raise the quality of home furnishings there remained an underlying message that middle-class suburbanites should know their place and stop trying to get above themselves with gilded and grained decoration.

That Louis-style furnishings were based on aristocratic models made them particularly offensive in this respect. Charles Locke Eastlake declared in his *Hints on Household Taste* that the style was "bad and vicious



in principle.” He berated “the extravagance of *contour*” in furniture copied from the Louis Quatorze period, which was considered elegant “simply because there was not a straight line in . . . [its] composition.” He provided an economic argument against the process known as “shaping,” which was used to add French curves to articles including sideboards, cabinet legs, drawing room tables, sofas, chairs and the shelves of marble washstands: “It always involves additional expense in manufacture, and therefore by avoiding “shaped” articles of furniture, the public will not only discourage a bad style of art, but may also save their pockets” (Eastlake 56).

Eastlake’s appeal to the middle-class purse fundamentally misunderstood the lure of the French style. The perceived expense was key to its attraction. The air of richness surrounding the lady reading at an Old French table in Figure 3 was exactly what middle class householders sought to achieve by choosing it. Taken from a stereoview this image was contrived in a studio using furniture that may well have featured papier mache, a material being newly-exploited at mid-century to make curves even more affordable. Stereoviews reflected middle class life back to the middle classes and neither the faked-up scenario nor the faked-up furnishings troubled viewers.



**Figure 3:** Image from a mid-nineteenth-century stereoview (Author’s collection)

As early as 1833 John Claudius Loudon cautioned his readers that the Louis-style was “unsuitable for persons in moderate circumstances, yet, could we indulge in it, we would display [it] in one room, as we would all the other distinctive styles in so many different apartments” (1035). The one-room-one-style approach to what we might call “themed” decoration was hardly likely to assuage critics but it did find favour with middle class householders throughout the century. In her 1896 book *Suburban Residences and How to Circumvent Them*, Mrs J. E. Panton opined the “jumble of styles made by having an eastern-looking hall, an Old English dining room, a Queen Anne drawing room, and Moorish landing” (qtd. in Lambourne 24). Design professionals generally favoured one style above the rest and promoted it as the height of good taste. Of course, with different designers advocating different styles at the same time it was hard for the fashion-conscious to keep up. Abandoning themselves to the dilemma of choice by choosing a bit of everything was a well-tried solution for those with sufficient money to pursue it.

Historical styles proved popular because, whereas Louis-style furnishings signified wealth and success, a conspicuous nod to the past provided a comforting sense of ballast to those who had worked their way up from the lower classes. In their turn the Tudor, Elizabethan and Jacobean Revivals proved highly adaptable in creating that all-important allusion to antiquity. There were contradictions aplenty in the marketing of items like a Jacobean umbrella stand or in the furnishing of an Elizabethan Library in a Georgian villa like that belonging to Dr Heaton (Figure 4). Yet such paradoxes of design were certainly not new and the middle classes were only following the path already well-trodden by generations of wealthy country house owners. As was often the case in accusations of bad taste, it was the fact that middle class householders were able to ape their traditional “betters” and, moreover, thought that they had the right to do so, that offended some commentators. The modern fascination with provenance was all but irrelevant, and totally absent from the workshops of London’s Wardour Street where old furniture imported from Northern Europe was sawn up and re-made into contemporary, often more elaborate, pieces. And, in the same way that technological improvements allowed mass-production of Old French furniture, the strap-work, spiral-turning and bobbin-turning characteristic of Elizabethan ornament proved well suited to mechanised production techniques. The appropriate bits were merely added on to pre-existing forms of furniture.

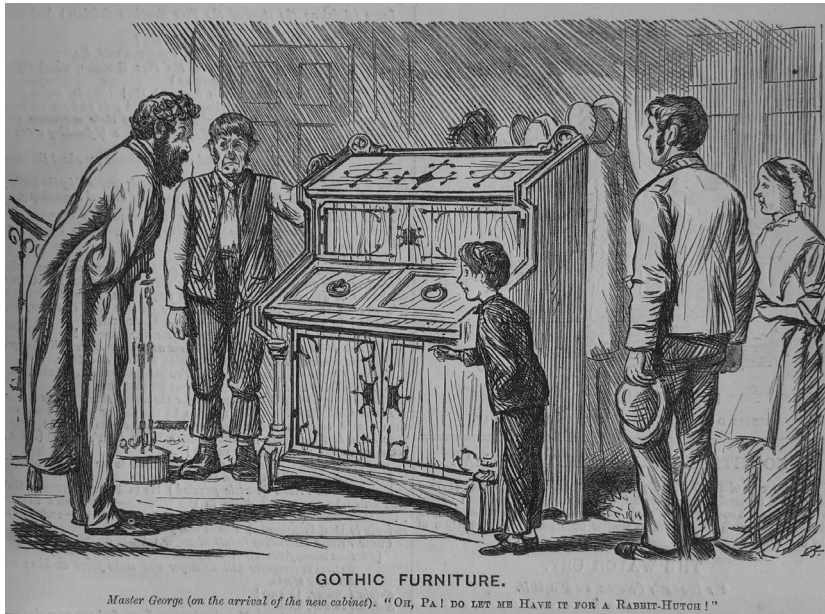


**Figure 4:** Elizabethan Library at Claremont (Yorkshire Archaeological Society)

The Gothic Revival proved harder to accommodate in ordinary homes. Its effect upon architects and designers was profound, inspiring many of the best-known names of the period yet, neither in its early Puginian phase nor its later High Victorian variant, did it garner truly widespread appeal. What the elite found to value in its pre-industrial simplicity the middle classes rejected because of it. There were exceptions: at mid-century when fitted or “close” carpeting was at its most popular, heraldic motifs and *fleur-de-lis* patterns could give a pleasing hint of chivalric romance whilst a spikey Gothic chair might be acceptable in the hall where the accent was on display rather than comfort. In *Hints on Household Taste* Charles Locke Eastlake sought to promote his favourite Gothic values to a wider audience, illustrating examples of furniture that followed the Puginian doctrine of honest construction. This was to become a hallmark of Arts and Crafts design. The fact that its perceived proto-modernity made Arts and Crafts the most acceptable of all Victorian styles to a twentieth century audience does not, however, mean that it was automatically accepted by the majority of Victorians themselves.

In his own designs Eastlake used pegged joints instead of glue, turned hinges into large decorative features and swore off stains and polishes, making the strength and craftsmanship of each piece demonstrable. Such solidity was in very direct contrast to the mass-market preference for flimsy curves and

its worthiness was against it. In a *Punch* cartoon published on November 18 1865 a middle-class man takes delivery of the sort of Gothic sideboard promoted by Eastlake only to have his son request it for housing his pet rabbits (Figure 5). Despite such mockery Eastlake's book proved popular with newly-wed couples. In America it gave rise to an identifiable Eastlake Style yet in the British mainstream his Gothic furniture proved to be just one more option among an already crowded field of decorative choices.



**Figure 5:** *Punch* cartoon lampooning Eastlake-style furniture (November 18, 1865, 195. Courtesy Mr I. Slocombe).

Perhaps what Eastlake's book best revealed was the increasing desire for advice among middle class householders. In 1876 new design influences coalesced with new religious ideas when Macmillan published the first in its series of *Art at Home* books. These pioneering manuals, aimed at a mass-market, were the brainchild of Anglican curate Reverend W. J. Loftie. As Cohen has shown, his mission to make the pursuit of good taste a religious duty also coincided with the point at which furnishing stores expanded into vast emporia, the one no doubt assisting the other. Despite the proliferation of print media there was no dedicated interiors magazine until the end of the century, however, questions of house decoration were an important feature of numerous periodicals. *Hints on Household Taste* had its genesis in a series of articles written for *The Queen* and *London Review*. In the 1880s "lady decorators," most notably Mary Eliza Haweis and Jane Ellen Panton, established their reputations as intermediaries between elite designers and the purchasing public through magazine articles in, respectively, *Lady's Pictorial* and *The Queen*, before going on to publish best-selling books.

That the target audience for such books was predominantly female meant women authors had an important role to play. If Elizabeth Gaskell had used her fiction to help impart the message at mid-century then the columns and books of women like Haweis and Panton gave real-life advice, disseminating key elements of Aesthetic Movement design to the occupants of suburban villas. True Aesthetes who lived by the credo of Art for Art's Sake were few in number but the appeal of creating an Artistic home proved immensely popular, not least because small touches could provide an immediate update. By introducing blue and white china, sunflowers or peacock feathers, ordinary people could follow the lead of celebrity artists, a successful sub-group of the middle class, whose homes came to represent the apogee of good taste in the last quarter of the century.

Aesthetic interiors took the display of clutter to a new level. As the number of consumers participating in the practice of home decoration increased so too did the quantity of goods available for them to purchase. Artistic choices were no less influenced by the quest for novelty yet they had the virtue of being promoted by avant-garde designers like E. W. Godwin, William Burges, Thomas Jeykll and Christopher Dresser. This

was particularly true of the cult of Japan and the parallel fashion for blue and white Chinese porcelain, both of which resulted from the opening up of Oriental trade routes which had been closed to Westerners for centuries.

As a young newly-wed Mary Eliza Haweis described the pleasure of shopping for household things with her husband. On 8 October 1869, she confessed to her diary that:

For all our poverty . . . we do have the occasional odd shilling and sixpence to devote to extravagance. Today we went to Baker Street Bazaar and invested 3/- in some odd bits of Chinese porcelain. One saucer smashed just as it was tied up for us. So the man gave me another for it besides the bits broken no good to him! I have mended them all the same and it is just as good as ever. Now I call that enjoyment! (Howe 91)

Her excited words could be those of any middle-class woman except that the things she chose were only just becoming fashionable. As the daughter of a painter with artistic friends Mrs Haweis was already showing her suitability to become a future design writer. The thrill of acquisition, however, was universal. Antique Japanese and Chinese porcelain was very expensive but a healthy export market and British copies meant that pieces soon became available for every budget. British potters, who had been familiar with willow pattern plates since the eighteenth-century fashion for Chinoiserie, once again looked to the Far East for their inspiration with Japanese-inspired designs featuring asymmetrical arrangements of blossoms, fans, birds and fish produced by high-end firms like Royal Worcester and Minton, being copied in their turn for the lower middle-class pocket.

By the mid-1870s the blue and white trend was ripe for the satirical treatment of *Punch* artist George du Maurier who presented readers with a series of cartoons depicting the habits of “Chinamanics.” In an example from May 2 1874 a man and his wife are depicted in front of two shelves crammed with large decorative plates, vases and bowls. Under the heading “The Passion for Old China” the husband says to his wife “I think you might *let me* nurse that teapot a little now, Margery! You’ve had it to yourself all the *morning*, you know!” Here was one artist poking fun at the artistic pretensions of others, but without the moral heavy-handedness that might have been present at mid-century. Indeed, du Maurier’s fellow *Punch* cartoonist Linley Sambourne was, from 1874, fitting out his newly-built house at 18 Stafford Terrace, Kensington according to all the latest Aesthetic fashions, complete with the china-laden furniture and dado rails which can still be seen today. If Sambourne saw himself in his colleague’s “Chinamania” characterisation it clearly did not trouble him, perhaps because being the butt of a joke about fashion at least means that one is considered fashionable. Judgements about good or bad taste were fine and necessarily shifting. In light of this the preservation of Sambourne’s interiors becomes the more remarkable, for it is evident that no subsequent decorative fashion tempted either Linley or his wife Marion to undertake major alterations.

The Sambournes were lucky enough to own their home, a fact which put them in the minority; some 90 percent of homes were rented in the nineteenth century. This leasehold culture allowed people to move as their fortunes changed and since there were few restrictions on the redecoration of rented properties, a move could provide the opportunity to embrace new fashions. Purchases of expensive items like furniture, however, tended to be made at the point of setting up the marital home and choices made then had to last. This helps explain the congruity of 18 Stafford Terrace. It was also the reason that much of the contemporary advice literature was directed towards young couples.

In the Introduction to her best-selling book *From Kitchen to Garrett*, Mrs Panton explained how “[in] the following chapters I propose to give young housekeepers just launching their bark on the troubled seas of domesticity, the benefit of the experience . . . of some eighteen or twenty years.” She was clear about who needed her help and why:

As very rich people can place themselves unreservedly in the hands of a professional decorator . . . I shall begin by supposing the model couple who wish to choose a house and furnish it are not rich . . . But neither are they very poor: they are young, happy and have taste, and are rather disheartened at finding out what a very little way their money seems able to go. They have looked longingly at Persian and Turkey carpets, at beautifully designed paper and exquisite hangings, and have come home from a long day’s investigation of shop-windows that has almost made Edwin forswear matrimony altogether, and that has plunged Angelina into an abyss of despair that . . . brings a sad look into her mother’s eyes, who



seems to see the first shadow ‘of the prison-house’ close in around her child, and yet is powerless to help her escape, because, poor dear soul, she has no means of doing so herself; being as she is the victim of the old *regime* flock papers and moreen curtains and heavy mahogany . . . (Panton 1).

There is a consciousness here, in the reference to the mother-of-the-bride, that taste is generational. We are meant to appreciate that the move towards Aesthetic interiors is a step-up, recognising that the taste of the mid-century generation it has replaced was “bad.”

The same sense of moving onwards and upwards is apparent in the 1890 *Memorials* of Lady Mount-Temple proving that the sin of bad taste was not restricted to the middle classes:

You remember our dear little house in Curzon Street; when we furnished it, nothing would please me but watered paper on the walls, garlands of roses tied with blue bows, glazed chintzes with bunches of roses, so natural they looked, I thought, as if they had just been gathered (between you and me, I still think it was very pretty), and most lovely ornaments we had in perfect harmony, gilt pelicans or swans as candlesticks, Minton’s imitation of Sèvres, and gilt bows everywhere (qtd. in Lambourne 18-19).

This description suggests a very feminine decorative scheme, one which apparently made the Pre-Raphaelite painter and poet Dante Gabriel Rossetti so uncomfortable that he suggested she should burn it all and start again.

Their taste duly rebuked, Lady Mount-Temple and her husband went to the firm of Morris & Co. when their staircase needed renovation. This should not be taken to imply that the space received an Arts and Crafts makeover. At this stage the shift in decorative sensibility was almost certainly one from the bright colours and floral excesses of mid-century to the duller palate of Aesthetic greens and flat patterns representing conventionalised natural forms that made William Morris a leader of Artistic taste from the 1870s. Far from being an immediate success the redecoration at Curzon Street offended her ladyship’s nearest and dearest:

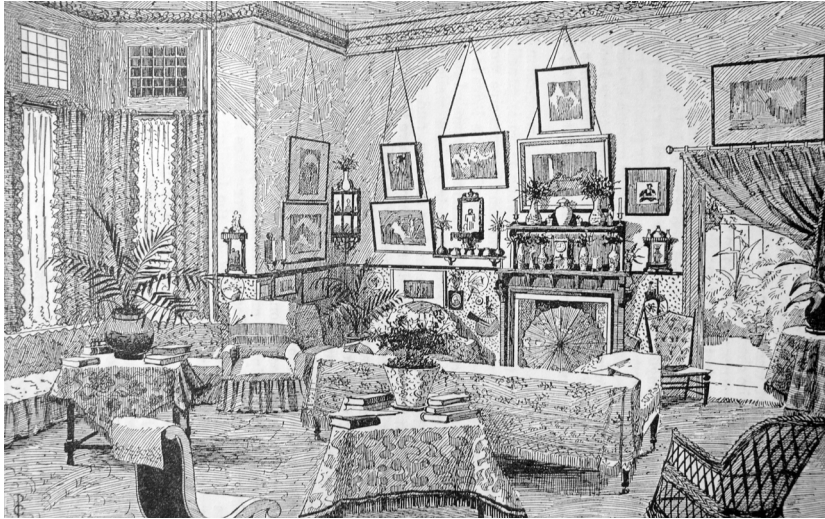
A Morris paper was hung on the walls, and a lovely bit of glass by Burne-Jones filled the staircase window. Now our taste was attacked on the other side, and all our candid relations and friends intimated that they thought we had made our little house hideous!

Somehow, we got to like it more and more, and now I think nearly all people confess that they owe a deep debt to the Morris & Co firm, for having saved them from trampling roses under foot, and sitting on shepherdesses, or birds and butterflies, from vulgar ornaments and other atrocities in taste, and for having made their homes homely and beautiful (qtd. in Lambourne 18-19).

From being unsure about having her taste “improved,” Lady Mount-Temple grew to be grateful, even if she did confess to a lingering fondness for roses. Her mention of the debt owed to William Morris demonstrates the profundity of his influence though it was always an unresolvable paradox that his socialist intent of providing good design for everyone could not be met through hand crafted wares only accessible to the wealthy elite.

For the majority of people who could not afford genuine designer products Mrs Panton, and others like her, provided tips on budget options to achieve an artistic effect. When it first entered the market place the appellation of “Art” to products like wallpaper, fabric and pottery designated the input of a designer name. Ultimately it became a mere label, yet the diffusion of elite ideas to a wider audience was a democratising one, meaning that the Aesthetic Movement entered millions of homes via small and affordable articles. On that October day in 1869, when Mrs Haweis bought her first pieces of blue and white china, her husband gave her a gift of a fan, price one shilling. Japanese fans became fashionable after their use as props in the paintings of leading Aesthetes like James McNeill Whistler and Albert Moore. The London department store of Liberty’s was a Mecca for the real thing but as demand grew, reaching a peak in 1885, fans of lesser quantity were being imported in huge numbers to satisfy the European market. Mrs Panton included an illustration of her own “Drawing-room at Gable-end, Shortlands” in *From Kitchen to Garrett* where below the dado rail fans can be seen decorating the wall (Figure 6). She favoured them at this level, along with other “odds and ends,” because it “give[s] an original air to the room, and also insures favourite photographs, fans or pretty hanging baskets with flowers in . . . [are] close to one’s chair, or near one’s eyes, should we wish to look at

them” (78). She might also have added that they would be within the sight of afternoon callers apt to judge their host’s taste. Demand for fans to line suburban mantles and dados was such that in 1891 the combined number of folding and rigid fans arriving from Japan was 15, 724,048. Even if this only represents a shift in fashion on the level of knick-knacks and ornaments, Aesthetic tastes clearly had an impact.



**Figure 6:** ‘Drawing-room at Gable-end, Shortlands’ (Panton, 79. Author’s collection).

Demonstrating the extent of this change in mainstream middle-class homes is usually impossible but photographs of Dr Heaton’s drawing room in Headingley allow an extremely rare opportunity to analyse the “before” of an Old French room (Figure 7), with the “after” of an Aesthetic interior (Figure 8). The transformation cannot be considered wholly typical because it benefited from the input of Dr Heaton’s brother-in-law, J. Aldam Heaton, a London designer who was friends with Rossetti and worked for architects including Richard Norman Shaw. However, in its additions and subtractions; in the things that had to stay because they represented big financial investments and those that had to go because they simply would not fit with the new style, it does help illuminate the broader decorative priorities of middle class householders.



**Figure 7:** The drawing room at Claremont, late 1850s (Yorkshire Archaeological Society)



**Figure 8:** The same drawing room two decades later (Yorkshire Archaeological Society)

The expensive Louis-style fireplace is the focal point for both rooms yet so much has changed around it in the Aesthetic scheme that the impact of its carved white marble curves is considerably lessened. The ornate gilded over-mantel mirror has been replaced by a smaller, rectangular-framed mirror: the floral hearth rug which sat upon a fitted floral carpet has been dispensed with in favour of an Oriental rug on plain flooring. Though both rooms contain a lot of furniture, its earlier arrangement feels more formal, even sparser, than is the case in the room of thirty years later. The walls of the Aesthetic room are papered with a large, dark pattern that is topped by a frieze of conventionalised flowers; the ceiling is also decorated, possibly with stencils. Ferns are used as living ornaments to soften the scheme, there are fans hung on either side of the fireplace and by the chaise longue is a Turkish table inlaid with mother-of-pearl, a must-have at this date. Whereas the large chandelier from the mid-century room has gone, plenty of French curves remain in the tables and chairs. Furniture represented one of the biggest investments a couple made when setting up home and one that could not be readily repeated, even by someone as comfortably off as Dr Heaton. This was where fabric and drapery came into its own. In Heaton's Aesthetic drawing room the deep-buttoned chair has been re-upholstered and the chaise longue covered in cushions. The clutter increased but did it contribute to making a more tasteful space?

As Lady Mount-Temple's example suggests, judgements about good taste were as dependent upon the beholder as upon any advice followed by the proud householder. There was, and remains, such subjectivity in the definition of what constitutes good and bad taste that historical analysis might be deemed pointless were it not for the huge significance ascribed to it by mid-late nineteenth-century commentators. The Ruskinian critique of middle class taste informed the Arts and Crafts Movement which in its turn informed the historiography of Victorian design, privileging elite tastes above the everyday, especially the popular and populist fashion for French furnishings. Take up of Aesthetic-inspired decoration, even if only to the extent of buying a Japanese fan, helped to reduce the gap between top designers and the middle-class mainstream and the strident moral dimension in criticisms of perceived "bad" taste did diminish as the century progressed. Nevertheless ordinary householders could still be accused of trying too hard, as seen in the cartoon at Figure 9, published in *Punch* on October 20, 1894.

This was the case because clutter and status remained inextricably linked. As Matthew Sweet has put it, "[a]ffluent Victorians knew they were affluent Victorians by casting an eye over the volume of material objects with which they shared their homes. Poor Victorians knew they were poor because they didn't own these collections of things" (127). Elite designers underestimated such basic considerations in their

indictment of factory-produced goods or the continuing love of curves and gilding. As for ordinary middle-class householders, they wished to follow designers only as much as they wanted to seem fashionable to their friends and keep a comfortable home. In the often under-used drawing room or parlour, these two considerations might part company, display prevailing above comfort. Every home was different but even if standards of taste were at issue, the acceptability of clutter was not.



**Figure 9:** *Punch* pokes fun at the suburbanites who tried to copy the Aesthetic 'Liberty' style on a budget (October 20, 1894. Courtesy Mr I. Slocombe).

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