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The Cosmopolitan Interior: Liberalism and the British Home 1870-1914

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In the introduction to her long-awaited and extremely interesting study of the popular literature of Victorian interior decoration, Judith Neiswander prepares her readers ? and perhaps to a certain extent herself ? for their predicted negative reactions to the décor of the late 19th-century middle class home. Neiswander senses an intractable resistance to the late Victorian room, or at least its image received from faded photographs and drawings, as well as the unforthcoming black and white illustrations in the decorating books themselves. Although the late Victorian domestic interior was consciously artistic, studiedly tasteful and ostensibly ?reformed? from the heavily upholstered, buttoned, overstuffed and veneered furnishings of its mid-Victorian predecessors, to the modern viewer, the English home of the 1870s and 1880s can nevertheless appear chaotic with its array of fussy ?art furniture? and antiques; its muted, often muddy colour schemes; and curtains, cushions, carpets and wallpapers with rich, dense patterns, which continued to proliferate although disciplined, flattened and reduced in scale compared to those of the 1850s and 1860s, but nonetheless very 'Victorian' in covering all surfaces with decoration. Doors and windows also received much decorative attention, while walls were divided (into three separate areas), covered (in contrasting papers) and often crowded (with framed engravings, portraits and paintings, hung from a picture rail). Most striking and characteristic of these interiors, however, was the sheer elaboration of ?things?. Although aware of reforming artists? and architects? pleas for restraint and simplicity, ?things? varying from objects of quality

to aptly placed bric-a-brac were displayed, arranged and mixed in the late Victorian home with unbridled delight, if measured profusion, from the ubiquitous Japanese fan and peacock feathers on overburdened mantelpieces to ceramic collections ?artfully? disposed on china shelves, in niches of cabinets and overmantels, or carefully positioned on spindly ebonised occasional tables. In spite of the revival of interest and appreciation of Victorian design, which emerged in the 1950s and 1960s and took off in the 1970s, and was shared by contemporary home decorators and collectors as well as scholars and curators (1), there is something about these interiors, Neiswander observes, that ?still arouses a faint unease? (p.6), and for the generations born and bred in the anti-ornamentalism of 20th-century modernism, they can be especially hard going. Even interiors of this period designed by William Morris?s firm, Morris & Co., which are normally considered to have countered Victorian excess, often participated in this same preoccupation with rich over-all decoration, detail and pattern.

It is Neiswander's intention, and the book's structuring principle, to explain these interiors ? both the 'real' and imaginary spaces depicted in decorating manuals of the 1870s and 1880s ? as representations of 'cultural liberalism' (p. 7) which informed the educated middle classes and underpinned and animated the production, consumption and meaning of the late Victorian home. While as early as 1977 Mark Girouard combined social and architectural history in his study of the period, *Sweetness and Light: The Queen Anne Movement 1860?1900* (2), Neiswander, an art historian, takes her work in a related but more extended interdisciplinary direction, not only to frame and enrich her interpretation by drawing on intellectual and cultural historians, notably Stefan Collini and Peter Mandler, but to distinguish her assessment of the positive impact of cultural liberalism on the home from social and economic historians, such as David Wayne Thomas,whose views on liberal ideology and culture are antithetical to Neiswander's, and John Benson , who considers, not without reason, the teeming and diverse ornaments in the Victorian home as products of the new consumer society with domestic display in the service of social aspiration and advancement.(3) Recent research covering much the same territory as Neiswander can be found in Deborah Cohen?s astute *Household Gods: The British and Their Possessions, 2006* (*(4), Neiswander is much more interested in finding the ?the spirit behind the Victorian interior?(p. 7), to discern what those involved understood they were doing and what their actions meant to them. How the titular 'cosmopolitan interior' became an emblem of the liberal world view is pursued by Neiswander with an originality of which John Stuart Mill would have approved. She argues that a cluster of liberal concepts ? individuality, cosmopolitanism, scientific rationalism, the progressive role of the elite and the empowerment of women ? were embodied in both the extensive literature of home decoration and in the decoration and arrangement of the late Victorian home. These ideas, which get extensive treatment in Neiswander's book, were invariably articulated and promoted by all writers of decoration books regardless of their actual political loyalties (c.1870?90). Decorating the home was conceived as a serious, high-minded activity, and the ideas provided by the literature had implications for the home's form and gave meaning to decorating itself, which was perceived to benefit the home's occupants and society at large. Unlike successive generations of architectural and design historians since the 1950s who have insisted upon the importance of the ideas of Pugin, Ruskin and Morris, which directly addressed the relationship of art and society, Neiswander cites the more abstract, philosophical writing, moral authority and personal and artistic connections of John Stuart Mill as having had the greatest impact on the ideas behind the middle class late Victorian home. Although this reviewer is sufficiently entrenched not to agree readily with the sidelining of these key figures (elsewhere in the book the importance of theirdesigns is acknowledged), this claim does seem a distinct possibility in terms of numbers of complete interiors transformed. The vast literature of decoration books was generally cheap, and editions, even relatively more expensive ones, were often reprinted, while throughout the period, there was unflagging coverage in popular magazines and in the art press, which featured interiors, their decoration and inhabitants. Undoubtedly, middle class householders who controlled their own decoration far outnumbered private clients of decorating firms or professional architects and designers, who were always more costly and proportionately fewer. However, Neiswander's reading of Mill's '"area of non-interference"' fromPrinciples of Political Economy (1847) as 'a metaphor for the home' (p. 39) seems to strain unnecessarily to locate Mill in domestic space. But the book does show that the late Victorian home was perceived and developed as a place where its inhabitants could experience personal fulfilment away from the pressures of conformity and social anxiety, which troubled Mill. A more convincing connection between Mill's thought, the literature of domestic decoration and the late Victorian home is derived from 'On Individuality, As One of the Elements of Wellbeing', Chapter III ofOn Liberty (1859). Here the development of freedom and choice were portrayed*

as necessary for individual fulfilment and, more generally, for the sustained progress of society and the improvement of humanity. Amongst the progressive middle classes, individuality became in practice the lived experience of 'personal expression, originality, and cultivation' (p.185) which was played out in the material culture of the late Victorian home, through the worthy, but nonetheless enjoyable, selection, arrangement and decoration of their domestic surroundings, as Neiswander demonstrates.

Neiswander's chapter on the empowerment of women is in many ways the most important for current debates about the nature of the home and most comfortably situated within the long liberal tradition. Informed by liberal ideas about equality and personal freedom most importantly from Mill'sThe Subjection of Women (1869), the literature on decoration represented and helped constitute a new understanding of women, their nature, capacity and scope. Successful women authors of books on decoration, such as Agnes and Rhoda Garrett, Mary Eliza Haweis and Jane Ellen Panton(5), demonstrated in their practice as writers and 'lady decorators' based in the home, that women could form professional but respectable new identities fostered in the home which took them into public space and facilitated paid employment and personal independence. Thus, the strict distinctions of public and private spheres, challenged by Amanda Vickery, again do not accommodate the interactive relationship of the Victorian home, women's experience and the wider world. Lees-Maffei, Ferry, Crawford and Cohen have taken up the analysis of key women authors and decorators, most often those associated with the 'At Home' series, published by Macmillan in the 1870s and 1880s(6), which Neiswander identified over two decades ago in her University of London thesis and develops for a broader audience inThe Cosmopolitan Interior. Neiswander's material is implicitly related to current academic debates about the home as a site of production and consumption, but it is left to Lees-Maffei to suggest that the 19th-century home did not shift from production to consumption as has been envisaged since Alice Clark's path breaking study. In fact, Neiswander's material provides good evidence for taking up Lees-Maffei's project of rethinking the Victorian home as a site of productionand consumption especially as they intersect with gender.

How far the prescriptive material of advice books should be, or was, taken into account in practice remains somewhat open. Although Neiswander works around it skilfully, archival sources related to women writers of advice books and 'lady decorators' are scanty. However, the thorny issue of readers' responses has not been investigated in diaries, letters or memoirs, nor have the correspondence columns of women's magazines been thoroughly mined. The vital issue of the audience for the advice books presented here is highly contested by other research, although none has the depth or scope of Neiswander in the literature of domestic decoration. Cohen has proposed that the domestic advice books were primarily addressed to a male readership with decisions on house decoration mutually agreed, but the final word went to men; while in her consideration of the Garretts'Suggestions for House Decoration,the literary theorist, Emma Ferry, has argued imaginatively that although ostensibly written for male readers, the feminist Garretts subverted the genre to offer a critique of male taste and power. For Neiswander, there is an ascending arc from male to female in the 19th century, from early male dominance of home decoration before 1870 through increasing female autonomy (c.1870?99) to a dominant position, even to male exclusion, around 1900, which Hermann Muthesius recorded(7), and the advice book writer, Jane Ellen Panton, enthusiastically portrayed. Indeed, the balance of power within the middle-class Victorian home can arguably be traced through the gender of the person in charge of its decoration to whom the literature of home decoration was addressed. The feminised late Victorian home, familiar from Penny Sparke's account in As Long as It's Pink: The Sexual Politics of Taste(8), brought new opportunities for women's autonomy and control which became a large factor in the 'flight from domesticity', which developed as a preferred option for some late Victorian men, as John Tosh has shown inA Man's Place.(9) Like gender, class is equally contested in current critical and historical writing. Until Jane Panton wrote for lower middle-class readers in 1887(10), Neiswander portrays intended readers as affluent and upper-middle class, in contrast to Ferry who interprets the Garretts' readers of 'modest means' in the 1870s as lower-middle-class, and Cohen prefers the less economically specific, but perhaps more accurate 'enlightened middle classes'.

Paradoxically, the modern English home (c.1870?1900) was ideally both foreign and preferably old. English antiques were considered better made, as well as a better investment, than new furniture, and the flood of imported goods that became available in the wake of Liberal free trade, were, as Neiswander deftly shows, feverishly admired and ardently incorporated into English homes, but little understood by either the

authors of the decoration manuals or those who avidly included them in their eclectic decorative schemes. Much excellent information can be garnered about the enthusiasm for foreign goods for domestic decoration, as well as warnings of the detrimental consequences of the rush for foreign goods that affected not only their quality but distorted their distant producers? ideas about its worth and their own. Neiswander, however, is not tempted to pursue explicitly and fully the connections between material culture and empire as they swirled through the Victorian home and its decoration, in spite of the links between liberalism and empire, proposed by Uday Singh Mehta inLiberalism and Empire: A Study of Nineteenth-Century British Liberal Thought (11).This neglect is sadly normative in studies about design history, and, as Berringer and Flynn point out, ironic 'since the circulation of goods and the increase of trade was a primary underlying motivation for imperial expansion'.(12) Although passing mention is made of women's craft classes and study in the collections at the Victoria & Albert Museum (then South Kensington Museum), not developed ist he cross-fertilization of the late Victorian home and the V&A, which in Berringer's phrase 'enshrined ? Victorian imperialism'(13) in terms of the acquisition, display and enthusiasm for 'objects from 'exotic' countries where Britain had colonial or proto-colonial interests. This is perhaps surprising in the light of Neiswander's own background working in museums and her insightful characterisation of the careful selection and display of objects by late Victorian householders as 'domestic curatorship' (p. 46).

The weight of evidence in the book falls on the 1870s and 1880s with the 1890s portrayed as a period of transition in which the literature on decoration took up different, competing positions representing contested ideas and values, such as egalitarianism and the elite, simplicity and luxury, and rural and urban allegiances, which split the progressive consensus about the idea of the home and its appearance. Significantly in Neiswander's evaluation, the literature on decoration and the ideas it promoted in the final years before the First World War provided a disagreeable contrast to those fostered by the liberal 'spirit'. The home was refashioned as '"a nation in miniature"' (chapter 6), which was part of a search for national identity as well as its symbol, asserting 'Englishness' and the traditional English way of life in a backward looking safe haven. Emerging from the 19th century, a cultural 'shift in national consciousness' (p. 148) had occurred, strongly registered in the home, which responded to the cumulative effects of social and economic change, including the heightened consciousness of class divisions, and the growth of Socialism and the power of labour, and the increasing the sense of decline in industrial and commercial power. Neiswander perhaps overdraws her conclusion that later writers on interiors 'redefined nationalism into something more aggressively symbolic, more coercive, and more embedded in theories of race than the earlier authors had imagined' (epilogue, p. 179), since 'theories of race', or indeed 'race' itself are not defined, and late 19th-century 'nationalism' is not characterised in the text. By 1900, however, qualities of the liberal 1870s and 1880s, such as individuality and self-expression, were considered not only manifestations of materialism, vulgarity and unbecoming spectacle but were thought to be indicative of a larger cultural crisis, a weakening of national character and identity. For the home, the solutions proposed by a range of mainly male authors, designers and architects such as Shaw Sparrow, Selwyn Image and Reginald Blomfield (not the female writers of the 1870s and 1880s) included the banishment of foreign influences and a return to English-made furnishings and fittings for the home in native styles ? Elizabethan, Georgian, Arts and Crafts ? to promote national identity and thus revitalise the country by nurturing the reticent English temperament in culturally appropriate surroundings, unsullied by cheap, badly designed furniture from Germany, or more abhorrent still, the decadent contortions of French Art Nouveau. In the end what Neiswander's book offers architectural and design history is the beginning of a new perspective on the English home c.1900, which does not the duck the heavily freighted issues of 'nationalism' and nationalistic sentiment in favour of another yet another version of the rural idyll. Although at times overdrawn and over-generalised, as a case study of material culture tied to the big ideas of the 19th and early 20th centuries,The Cosmopolitan Interior is a far more historical study than most architectural and design historians have previously dared to write.

Notes

1. *Interiors and more broadly the domestic and the everyday have recently moved to the top of the scholarly agenda in design history and related disciplines with, for example, key research, conferences and publications produced by the Modern Interiors Research Centre at Kingston University and the AHRB Centre for the Study of the Domestic Interior which was based at the Royal College of Art in collaboration with the Victoria and Albert Museum and the Bedford Centre for the*

*History of Women at Royal Holloway College, London.*Back to (1)
2. *Mark Girouard,Sweetness and Light: The Queen Anne Movement 1860?1900 (Oxford, 1977).*Back to (2)
3. *David Wayne Thomas,Cultivating Victorians: Liberal Culture and the Aesthetic (Philadelphia, 2004); and John Benson,The Rise of Consumer Society in Britain, 1880?1980 (London, 1994).*Back to (3)
4. *Girouard, op. cit.; Nikolaus Pevsner, ?Art Furniture?,Studies in Art, Architecture and Design (2 vols., New York, NY, 1968), v. 2, 118?31; and Elizabeth Aslin,The Aesthetic Movement (London, 1969).*Back to (4)
5. *Agnes and Rhoda Garrett,Suggestions for House Decoration in Painting Woodwork and Furniture (London, 1876). Panton and especially Haweis were very prolific, see for example Mary Eliza Haweis,The Art of Decoration (London, 1881); and Jane Ellen Panton,Homes of Taste (London, 1890).*Back to (5)
6. *Grace Lees-Maffei ?Editorial and introduction?, Special Issue,Domestic Design Advice, Journal of Design History, 16, 1, 2003; Emma Ferry [on A. & R. Garrett] in ibid, 15?33; Elizabeth Crawford, Enterprising Women: The Garretts and Their Circle (London, 2002); and Cohen, op. cit.*Back to (6)
7. *Cited by Neiswander, H. Muthesius,The English House (1904).*Back to (7)
8. *Penny Sparke, As Long as It's Pink: The Sexual Politics of Taste (London and San Francisco, CA, 1995).*Back to (8)
9. *John Tosh,A Man's Place: Masculinity and the Middle-Class Home in Victorian England (2nd ed., London and New Haven, CT, 2007).*Back to (9)
10. *Jane Ellen Panton,From Kitchen to Garrett (London, 1887). Neiswander notes an egalitarian strain in some writers, as well as a few who took the opposite view.*Back to (10)
11. *Uday Singh Mehta,Liberalism and Empire: A Study of Nineteenth-Century British Liberal Thought (Chicago and London, 1999), not cited by Neiswander.*Back to (11)
12. *Colonialism and the Object: Empire, Material Culture and the Museum, ed. Tim Berringer and Tom Flynn (London, 1998), p.3; not cited by Neiswander.*Back to (12)
13. *Tim Barringer, 'The South Kensington museum and the colonial project', in Barringer and Flynn, ibid, p.11.*Back to (13)

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