

The Poetic Home: Designing the 19th-Century Domestic Interior.

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The Poetic Home: Designing the 19th-Century Domestic Interior is a significant addition to the study of the domestic interior, which examines and illustrates the design and decoration of the domestic living rooms inhabited by the wealthier classes in Britain, central and north-western Europe and America from the 1800s to the 1890s. With an emphasis upon the later part of the period, it highlights the rich profusion of primary source materials – text and illustrations – that were produced in unprecedented quantities in the last quarter of the nineteenth century – and upon which this beautifully illustrated scholarly work is based. Acknowledging recent multi-disciplinary concerns with both the consumption of the interior and the concept of ‘interiority’, this study foregrounds the role of art and design and shifts ‘the emphasis back to production and intent’ (p.11). In so doing, it offers a thoughtful discussion based upon a detailed analysis of imagery and text that is both mindful of the original envisaged readers and set firmly within the context of the tumultuous changes that occurred throughout the west in the nineteenth century. Stressing the production of the domestic interior as a whole, this text acknowledges the difficulties of assessing how rooms were really used, while positioning itself alongside other seminal texts including Mario Praz’s *An Illustrated History of Interior Decoration* (Thames & Hudson, 1964), Peter Thornton’s *Authentic Décor: The Domestic Interior 1620-1820* (Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1984), Charlotte Gere’s *Nineteenth Century Decoration; The Art of the Interior* (Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1989) or more recently *Imagined Interiors: Representing the domestic Interior since the Renaissance* (V&A, 2006), edited by Jeremy Aynsley and Charlotte Grant, with which this study shares a concern with representations of the interior. However, this book offers a far more imaginative approach to the subject than a broad chronological or typological survey. Explicitly rejecting the usual progression of 19th century styles, *The Poetic Home* stresses the themes of décor and ‘comfort’ and examines how homes were supposed to look and also how they were intended to make their inhabitants *feel* through the interiors that designers created and writers advised upon; that is ‘the poeticization of the interior’ (p. 29)

So what constitutes a poetic home? The first chapter, ‘A Poetic Everyday Home?’ is devoted to a careful explanation of the term. Defining ‘poetry’ as a subjective ‘quality of beauty and intensity of emotion’ (p.28) and the ‘poetic effect’ as ‘the way certain styles of décor are used to conjure up other cultural worlds and how a room’s appearance may

influence the mood of its occupants' (p.27), it considers the traditional hierarchy of the Arts and argues that the poetic interior was one that had acquired art. The means through which 'art in the home' was achieved is examined in the following two chapters: first through a new range of specialist texts written about the interior, and secondly, through the work undertaken by an ever-expanding range of specialised and competing trades [figure 1].

The second chapter considers the wealth of new discourses about 'art in the home' generated in this period, which were formed through changing styles in illustration; through the development of shops and Exhibitions; and, through a wide range of publications including the trade journals, patterns books and technical manuals which are the main focus of this section. Advice literature, that 'flood of new texts' (p.42) published as both magazine articles and illustrated volumes, is presented as central to the development of design and décor of the domestic interior in the last quarter of the century. This chapter considers significant examples of the genre written by leading European, British and American designers and critics who contributed to the debate, and whose original texts are listed in the 'Select Bibliography' and detailed among the wealth of 'Notes' which offer an invaluable contribution to the study of the interior in themselves. Notable female authors on the home are also referred to, while the debates surrounding 'womanly activities'; links between the female body and home furnishings; and the role of the woman of the house are discussed in a section titled: 'Women and interior décor'. This is a theme mentioned throughout the book, notably in the next chapter 'The Unified Interior'. This third chapter examines 'how décor was made and what it looked like' and focuses upon the 'look of the room as a whole' (p. 65). A lengthy section that begins with the competing materials used by specialist trades in the creation of the interior, it highlights those which imitated and could be substituted for others. This emphasis upon materiality, the 'intrinsic textural effects of the materials' (p.138), is *the* major concern and methodological innovation of this valuable study. Furniture, objects, their display and upkeep also feature in this chapter, where they are discussed as means of achieving unity. Here, excluding the role of both paintings and flower arrangements in unifying interior schemes, the focus is once more the mass-produced objects and technical development of the trades and manufactures including metal, glass and ceramics. The chapter then turns to explore the significance of colour in the nineteenth century interior, setting this discussion within the context of developments in colour science (chemical, theoretical and psychological) and the colour industry which made advances in the manufacture of vivid pigments, dyestuffs and colouring agents applied to wallpapers, textiles and mixed as house paint. . This über-chapter then shifts direction to consider the ways in which the unity of the interior was

understood and expressed 'in both pictures and words' (p.140) and highlights the development of a formal and poetic language that could be used to describe the interior. The subtle nuances evident in the different languages in which these texts were published – English, French and German – offer a thought-provoking discussion.

The fourth chapter, titled 'Atmosphere', moves 'from considering the domestic interior as an artistic "artefact" to an investigation of what its inhabitant feel or do within it' (p. 155) or rather what contemporary designers, critics and illustrators argued they should feel or behave. Focussing upon nineteenth century discourses surrounding 'home', this chapter explores the interior as a space for personal privacy and (nuclear) family life; the gender-specific nature of particular rooms; the concept and development of home as a refuge; and, the literature and imagery that created the idyll of domesticity. The discussion then turns to the ways in which poeticization was achieved through the creation of an atmosphere or mood (*stimmung*) of comfort and restfulness. Also considered here are the psychological effects of light and shadow which includes a fascinating discussion of the changing meanings of 'darkness' within the domestic interior.

The following chapter examines 'Character', offering a detailed discussion of 'Styles' in the creation of the poetic home. Having made the distinction between 'Revival' and 'Eclectic' and touching briefly upon Renaissance, Rococo, Oriental and the Romantic version of Gothic Revival, this chapter considers less well-known national and vernacular revival styles. It is here that this study makes its most significant contribution to the history of the domestic interior of the nineteenth century. Drawing upon a wealth of primary material published in Britain Europe and the USA, the emphasis is upon the development and meanings of the 'old' and vernacular styles in the west: Olde English in its grand, humble and more elegant Queen Anne Revival forms [figure 2]; southern German *Altdeutsch*; *style flamande* of the Low Countries; northern Germany's Old Alpine style; the 18th century Louis styles in France; Polish *Zakopane* and the Old Nordic folk styles of Scandinavia. These regional styles, which were promoted through a range of illustrated books, objects and interiors displayed at the World Fairs and Trade Exhibitions and the emergence of the museum 'period room', are considered within their wider socio-political context as many newly independent or unified countries were using the 'old' to create a 'new' national identity. Including a fascinating section on the role of the open fireplace within the domestic interior, the chapter stresses how these references to past cultures and 'olden' times contributed to the creation of a poetic interior. Finally, the concluding chapter considers the 'Disparate Legacy' of the poetic home. Here the discussion focuses upon the role of the (real) user and their

possessions, the agency of the designer, and the declining interest in 'the home' in favour of Modernist concerns with 'housing'.

This book demonstrates both a breadth and depth of scholarship that explains 'the way in which the design of a room was visualised and discussed in the 19th century [that] still informs our understanding of the domestic interior today', (p. 10): significantly it also *adds* to that understanding. It will undoubtedly become a classic text; both as a history of the shaping and making of the domestic interior *and* within the history of its interpretation.

Figure 1:

All the trades, crowding in on the client

From Henry Harvard's *L'Art dans la Maison* (Paris: Rouveyre, 1884, 241), reproduced in *The Poetic Interior* p. 66

Figure 2:

The 1870s saw a new fascination with the English 18th Century and with 'Queen Anne' in particular as in this children's book

From J. G. Sowerby and Thomas Crane, *At Home* London: M. Ward, 1881, reproduced in *The Poetic Interior*, p. 246

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