



## COVER SHEET

---

**This is the author version of article published as:**

Taylor, Mark (2006) 'Furniture is a kind of dress': interiors as projection of self. In McMinn, Terrance and Stephens, John and Basson, Stephen, Eds. *Proceedings CONTESTED TERRAINS, XXIII Annual Conference of the Society of Architectural Historians*, pages pp. 530-555, Perth.

**Copyright 2006 please consult author**

**Accessed from <http://eprints.qut.edu.au>**

## **'Furniture is a kind of dress': interiors as projection of self**

Mark Taylor

Published in:

Taylor, M., 'Furniture is a kind of dress': interiors as projection of self, Stephens, J. R. (ed.), *CONTESTED TERRAINS, XXIII Annual Conference of the Society of Architectural Historians, Australia and New Zealand*, Fremantle, Western Australia, (2006) pp 530-5.

### **Abstract**

*The nineteenth-century bourgeois interior was one of the few locations available for women's self-expression; an expression that can be read as the conceptual conflation of women and interiors. Women decorated rooms as a reflection of self, individuality and eventually personality. They decorated and ornamented in parallel with their own bodies and clothes, extending one into the other. This paper discusses one early example of this body centred reading of a spatial terrain and proposes that the metaphoric relationship between woman and interior was a philosophical position evident in the writings of the nineteenth-century art critic and suffrage campaigner Mary Haweis. It develops an argument for the interior as both a mirroring of the body and a projection of the domestic body into its environment. This position critiques the notion of the interior as something distinct from the body, and transcends language that exclusively describes women's bodies as portraying the adornment of home.*

In their 1929 volume *The New Interior Decoration* Dorothy Todd and Raymond Mortimer remind us that alongside early technological developments prehistoric humans also mark their walls with paintings. They suggest this need to adorn our shelters was a powerful impulse "second only to the desire to adorn our own bodies." But whereas these early cave markings are described as images of the animals and plants around, Todd and Mortimer associate adornment with personality, concluding that homes are "a projection of ourselves." That is the home is a place where "we see the facets of our character mirrored in the objects with which we have surrounded ourselves."<sup>1</sup> This position emerges from a brief critique of industrialised standardisation, and the standardisation of our pursuits. Mass-production it seems has rendered a sameness of product, extending to self-similarly planned and organised apartments. To rectify this "a man's house thus becomes the last refuge of individuality."<sup>2</sup>

Todd and Mortimer's text indicates two things, firstly that the interior is a projection of ourselves and secondly that it concerns individuality. The question for me is how did such notions emerge and who professed such thoughts.

Current literature on the designed interior tends to differentiate into that which is situated relative to traditional architectural history and theory, and that which places it in a wider debate on patriarchy and the gender division of labour.<sup>3</sup> It is to the latter that this paper is directed, particularly through the engagement and critique of 'separate spheres' ideology, and the recovery of writings and practice by pioneer women decorators and critics. More specifically it is the mid to late nineteenth century and the emergence of women decorators and advice writers that this paper is focussed. During this period many women take on the responsibility for decorating the home, striking out new spatial identities and attitudes to decorative surfaces.<sup>4</sup> To support this some offer advice and record their observations and experiments in magazines, books and novels.<sup>5</sup>

Many of these critics and writers on architectural issues no longer follow the historicising message of traditional architectural accounts; instead they offer decorative advice and narrative descriptions of exemplary houses and fashionable abodes. Advice manuals argue the merits of particular and different approaches to furnishing, colouration and decorative effects. Many are subjective observations more interested in the immediacy of space – its emotive and psychological effects on the body, rather than any rational subscription to transcendent metaphors. Indeed they rarely mention the building exterior or analyse the space through its form or organising principles. By denying the symbolic world of architectural authority, they seek the pre-symbolic realm of the imagination – represented by the ‘fluid’ decorative matrix, where individual fantasies are played out. Generally the only factual architectural accounts are retrospective historical observation, the past as it was once lived through furnishings and ornamentation. Historically such writers have been treated less than favourably. For example Jeremy Cooper writing on the Victorian concern for matters of style and taste comments on “the voluble Mrs Haweis” for being a populist writer, before dismissing her scholarship by quoting her ‘sensuous’ description of Lord Leighton’s Arab Hall interleaved with his information on the artists involved.<sup>6</sup> This tends to imply that Haweis has not identified the artists and Cooper has supplied the relevant information. Such conclusions would be inaccurate as Haweis is capable of meticulous observation of history and identifies many artistic works from Leighton’s painting collection as well as Walter Crane’s frieze. Moreover she is against the rationalised categorising of work in the manner that Cooper implies, sating that “to catalogue the features singly which make up the august whole would be mistaken, as well as needles. We see no flower’s beauty better for dissecting it.”<sup>7</sup> This is her challenge to rational thinking and one that contextualises her writing as having a clearly defined philosophical basis.

In tracing this gendered history of the interior Beverly Gordon argues that the nineteenth-century bourgeois interior was one of the few locations available for women’s self-expression; an expression that has been categorised as the conceptual conflation of women and interiors. She suggests that body and interior space were interchangeable citing several examples that affirm women as an important ornamental factor in decorating a room.<sup>8</sup> Gordon notes that remnants of this conflatory metaphor still abound, and is particularly evident in women’s magazines that focus on home and fashion. Of the earlier examples she cites Charles Warner’s *Home Decoration* (1911) which moves beyond the impact of a female character on a room to become an extension of it; “Have we not often remarked of a house or a room that it looks ‘just like her.’” Another example from Emily Burbank’s *Woman as Decoration* (1920) suggests that “woman was an important factor in the decorating scheme of any setting,” such that she was an actual piece of it.<sup>9</sup> These examples mark an interesting shift observed by Gordon as the transference of a simile ‘woman and interior were alike’ into a synonym, ‘woman was the home.’

This subtle shift contributed to the understanding of decorated rooms as a reflection of self, individuality and eventually personality. Many upper and middle class women decorated and ornamented in parallel with their own bodies and clothes, extending one into the other. Metaphoric relationships between married women and the attention given to the imprint of female character on a room were realised as an extension of self/woman. This position was also encouraged by the suffragette and feminist writer Francis Power Cobbe who notes that: the more womanly a woman is, the more she is sure to throw her personality over the home, and transform it... into a sort of outermost garment of her soul.<sup>10</sup>

Augustus John's sister Gwen conveyed to Rodin the notion that contents and arrangement might be the expression of an individual personality, "my room is so delicious after a whole day outside, it seems to me that I am not myself except in my room."<sup>11</sup>

Their link between adornment and personality epitomises a conflation between interior artefact and the body where one is an extension of the other, suggesting that decoration has a different relationship to architecture than the ornamenting of structure. The method was to use language that exclusively described women's bodies to portray the adornment of home. Hence fabrics and trimmings, lace and bows are transposed from the 'decorated' female body onto the interior; the interior is another outfit, another projection of self. The implication of Gordon's observations on domestic ornamentation suggests that woman's inhabiting body is projected out and moulded onto the returning surface now re-described as an enclosing and enveloping volume.

During the late eighteenth century Mary Eliza Haweis is acknowledged as an authority on interior decoration at a time when most of the established writers and practitioners of architecture and decoration are male. She writes and publishes all her work during the 30 years of marriage to charismatic writer and preacher Rev Hugh Reginald Haweis with whom she has four children, one of whom dies in infancy. Her parents the fashionable painter Thomas Musgrove Joy (1812-1866) and Eliza Rohde Joy, née Spratt are somewhat distant and unemotional with each other and their two children, a characteristic that impacts on Haweis own familial relationships. Notably her distant and hostile relationship with her own mother was often transferred onto her children, particularly Hugolin Haweis, but not onto her succession of male friends including the historian John Richard Green, the Semitic scholar Emmanuel Oscar Deutsch, and the Himalayan explorer Colonel Godwin-Austen of K2 fame.



Mary Eliza Haweis  
(BC 1903/2 "Scraps 1" Album ca 1870-1890 30 x 25 cm  
Haweis Family Fonds, University of British Columbia, Box 36)

Like many untrained 'amateur' women, early writings (1872-1880) appear in magazines and journals such as *Queen*, *Saint Paul's* and *The Art Journal*. While much of this writing centres on clothes and home furnishing, particularly the decorative strategies necessary for creating a home of good taste, both are backed by meticulous research at the British Museum and South Kensington Museum (later renamed the Victoria and Albert). Hence many articles look back to the past in order to discuss the proliferation of objects and artefacts emanating from industrialised production. Haweis's intention is to establish some sound canons of taste in the minor arts which she presented with vivacity, and piquancy in *The Art of Beauty* (1878) and the *Art of Decoration* (1881). Both offer advice and guidance on decorating the home and body whilst promoting her position on aesthetics and beauty. Within a short time she is immensely popular and considered an authority on dress and decoration. Her arguments against the restrictive attire many women conformed to, was backed by an avocation for individuality, experimenting with her own clothes and house interiors.<sup>12</sup>

Mary Haweis and her husband were prolific travellers, visiting many places in Europe to conduct research in museums, galleries and fashionable houses. On other occasions she accompanies her husband on his tours of America, occasionally giving speeches, writing articles and making sketches. Although she personally prefers not to give public speeches her admiration for women writers and lecturers engaged her in many emancipatory causes, brought new friendships. She is often called upon to give comment on the changing status of women and the family, and is engaged in a manuscript on the history of women when she dies. Several of her papers and addresses on women's politics and franchise are later edited by Hugh Reginald Haweis into a volume titled *Words to Women*. This collection is interspersed with biographic commentary that includes reminiscences about their life and travels, providing detail lists of speaking engagements, friends, and societies attended.

Other important works from her 10 books are *Chaucer for Children* (1877) and *Chaucer for Schools* (1881) both of which are well received and reprinted through several editions, the latter reaching its 7th printing in 1935. Towards the end of her short life (1848-1898) she publishes the novel *A Flame of Fire* (1897) to vindicate the plight of womanhood. Although supported by Sarah Grand its themes were probably mistimed and not radical enough for the 'new woman' and the book falls into obscurity. She died on 24 November 1898, and after cremation was buried at Broughton Monchelsea, Kent.

Haweis's thoughts and opinions are given in her own book publications and numerous magazine and journal articles. Although not the first woman writer on the subject she offers a voice that moves beyond practical advice in house decorating and furnishing, to a critique of the cultural confusion brought about by industrial products and their indiscriminate consumer collecting.<sup>13</sup> Advanced in an amateur philosophical manner and influenced by romantic poets, painters, writers and architects her opinions on taste and individuation are a reaction to the blind followers of fashion. These include people who dress or decorate in the fashionable manner despite crippling effects on the body, or 'unsuitable' body shape, and those that decorate a room following the style of the day – however unsuited the room shape or lighting. But it is her attempts to articulate the relationship between self and environment that is of concern to this paper.

In her *Art of Decoration* (1881) Haweis opens a discussion on beauty, dress and decoration not as a performance manual but as an informative 'philosophy' for

creating individuality in the home. This volume is an assemblage of several previously published essays organised into three sections. It contains several issues already touched upon in *The Art of Beauty* (1878) and *The Art of Dress* (1879), and transcends many historical and didactic forms of advice writing. As with many books of the period the lack of a clearly laid out exegesis tends to mask any worth, as is her status – ‘amateur’ woman writer needing to earn an income. Under this guise her diverse outpourings might signify either a scattergun approach to publishing, or that she sees connections between all sides of a social and political issue, such that her apparent vacillations are simply proof of open-mindedness and tolerance. As an outspoken critic her arguments are often backed by her own scholarly methodology which Colin Cunningham defines as “authoritative statements made and supported by historical justification.”<sup>14</sup> But without any seemingly coherent theories or formulations on the interior her work on beauty, dress and decoration is little referenced by academics. However there are a number of thoughts held as fragments and ‘unconnected’ moments that reveal a deeper concern for the interior and its relation to society. Many of which are returned to throughout her life. Of her publications *The Art of Beauty* is widely reviewed at the time and is seen as an exceptional and badly needed account of aesthetic beauty in the decorative arts. Part of its appeal was in raising issues on romantic beauty and ordinary existence; both being pertinent to upper and middle class nineteenth-century society.

In *The Art of Beauty* and later *The Art of Decoration* Haweis uses ‘dress’ to forge a connection between interior spaces, women and the body. She argues for the right to dress the body, not from convention, but through individuation, in an environment that is both a projection of the body, and a carefully constructed setting for the presentation of beauty’s worth. Working from an appraisal of the natural inoffensiveness of the naked body, she concludes that it is “so beautiful that it is a pity it can be so little seen...”<sup>15</sup> Later she romanticises how the:

Greeks were proud of their beautiful bodies, as we are of a beautiful face, and a bare leg was no more to them than a bare arm is to us; and the sexes mingled in free and honest companionship, clad in only a thin stola, children being devoid even of that.<sup>16</sup>

From which she proclaims everyone should “Do your best with the body; and next do your best with its covering.”<sup>17</sup>

As her position on dress develops it is no longer simply protection from the cold but “We expect it to be a work of Art.”<sup>18</sup> The act of self adornment has been elevated beyond mere pragmatism to an artistic endeavour. Moreover it must be fitting, concluding that “no dress can be beautiful that is not appropriate, and appropriateness consists chiefly in graceful expression and useful purpose.”<sup>19</sup> One premise being that “dress is the second self, a dumb self yet a most eloquent expositor of the person”<sup>20</sup> and “bears the same relation to the body as speech does to the brain; therefore dress may be called the speech of the body”.<sup>21</sup>

So dress becomes the first outward projection, wall ornamentation is another evidenced by the idea that people do not adapt to their walls but that “their walls are to be adapted to them.”<sup>22</sup> That is, rooms are decorated as an outward projection of self and are returned, in a form of doubling, by “carefully decorating our rooms as a background to our figures.”<sup>23</sup> Understood as a mirroring of the body, or a projection of the domestic body into its environment, surroundings become an extension of self. She states:

There is no doubt that people look different in different rooms. A pale person in a pale room is obliterated, whereas in a deep or richly coloured

room, the paleness might become enhanced and beautiful... [some people] look vulgar in one place and refined in another – so great is the effect of surroundings on the appearance.<sup>24</sup>

Although not clearly articulated, and initially ridiculed in the press for supposedly suggesting that “ladies should dress up to their rooms, or re-decorate them to suit every new dress,” Haweis amends this by observing that rooms are a background to human activity in which artistically arranged colours and hues should be carefully thought out to avoid juxtapositions with faces and complexions.<sup>25</sup>

In the *Art of Decoration* she takes these ideas further announcing that “furniture is a kind of dress, dress is a kind of furniture, which both mirror the mind of the owner, and the temper of the age.”<sup>26</sup> Conceptually she links body and mind, the former providing physical identification the latter individual efforts. Rooms must be dressed from the body by a mind that is not blindly following fashion. This general argument is conceptually distinct to practice a century earlier which according to Robin Evans is when “furniture occupies the room and then the figures inhabit the furniture.”<sup>27</sup> The privileging of inanimate forms as spatial and material ordering devices is expressed by others. Writer Edgar Allen Poe in *Philosophy of Furniture* remarks that “The soul of the apartment is the carpet... From it are deduced not only the hues but the forms of all objects incumbent.”<sup>28</sup>

Some of Haweis argument appears to be taken from Thomas Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus: the Life and Opinions of Herr Teufelsdröckh* (originally published in 1831) in which the clothes metaphor applies to every area of human life at length and with great humour and ingenuity. His wide discussion of our relation to clothes concludes with the proposition that:

the first purpose of Clothes, as our Professor [Teufelsdröckh] imagines, was not warmth and decency, but ornament... [and] the first spiritual want of a barbarous man is Decoration.<sup>29</sup>

The need to decorate, whether through tattooing or painting, provides distinctiveness, but even this requires tempering as Carlyle saw the relationship between clothes and society tested by ornament,

Clothes gave us individuality, distinctions, social polity; clothes have made Men of us; they are threatening to make Clothes-screens of us.<sup>30</sup>

Although commenting on various peoples' attire Carlyle manages to avoid the misogynistic sentiments of later critics by recognising clothing as an artificial device necessary to a naked animal.

Haweis' use of clothing is not metaphoric but her identification of thin fabrics having the double condition of both hiding and revealing the body is pertinent to contemporary thinking and was articulated by the British philosopher Gerald Heard in *Narcissus: An Anatomy of Clothes* (1924). Heard crystallised the body's relationship to its surroundings by proposing that we should expect evolution to “cease in the body itself and to pass out into the body's environs.”<sup>31</sup> In this way he attempts to frame a philosophy of clothes and the clothed body, in relation to architecture. The logic being that we are tool-using animals and evolution is no longer happening in the body but around us, and because the environment is a less resisting medium, it is happening at a faster rate. It is a projected evolution radiating outward through weapons, dress, architecture and the city. The text traces a chronological history of the interrelationship of clothes and architecture from Stone Age 'man' in his cave through to contemporary civilisation's confrontation with the machine. In the former period Heard notes that ancient

'man' when driven by cold into caves found the rock resistant to shaping but open to surface marking and "house decoration was already within power."<sup>32</sup> These decorative surface markings as outward projections of body adornment are conceptually similar to the nineteenth century domestic interior bearing the imprint of the inhabitant.

More recently Lee Wright observes in her paper 'Objectifying Gender: the Stiletto Heel', that clothes have an ordering relationship to the body such that, "clothes were meant to be an extension of the female figure and emphasise it rather than distract from it."<sup>33</sup> Hence the projection of clothes into the environs as an ordering device leaves traces of the inhabiting body. As an intentional action they concern the registering of presence and identification, and when situated in a Benjaminian context derived from relationships to human activity, are regarded as temporal traces.<sup>34</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Dorothy Todd and Raymond Mortimer, *The New Interior Decoration: An Introduction to its Principles, and International Survey of its Methods*, New York, Scribner's, 1929, p. 1. Between 1922 and 1926 Dorothy Todd was the editor of British *Vogue*, to which the literary and art critic Raymond Mortimer was a contributing writer.

<sup>2</sup> Todd and Mortimer, *New Interior Decoration*, p. 2.

<sup>3</sup> See for example: Stephen Pile, *A History of Interior Decoration*; Mario Praz, *An Illustrated History of Interior Decoration from Pompeii to Art Nouveau*, trans. William Weaver, London, Thames and Hudson, 1964; and Peter Thornton, *Authentic Décor: The Domestic Interior, 1620 – 1920*, New York Viking, 1984. Judy Attfield and Pat Kirkham (eds.), *A View From The Interior: Women And Design*. London, Women's Press, 1995; Inga Bryden and Janet Floyd (eds.), *Domestic Space: Reading the Nineteenth-Century Interior*, Manchester, Manchester University Press 1999 and Brenda Martin and Penny Sparke, (eds.), *Women's Places: Architecture and Design 1860-1960*, New York, NY, Routledge, 2003.

<sup>4</sup> See for example; Janet Wolff, 'The Culture of Separate Spheres' in Seed and Wolff (eds.), *The Culture of Capital: Art, Power, and the Nineteenth-Century Middle Class*, Manchester, UK, Manchester University Press, 1988, Penny Sparke, *As Long as it's Pink: The Sexual Politics of Taste*, London, Pandora, 1995; and Mark Girouard, *Sweetness and Light: The Queen Anne Movement 1860-1900*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1977.

<sup>5</sup> See for example: Lady Barker, *The Bedroom and the Boudoir*, London, Macmillan, 1878; Rhoda and Agnes Garrett, *Suggestions for House Decoration in Painting, Woodwork and Furniture*, London, Macmillan and Co, 1876; and Lucy Orin Smith, *The Drawing Room*, London, Macmillan, 1878.

<sup>6</sup> Jeremy Cooper, *Victorian and Edwardian Furniture and Interiors: From Gothic Revival to Art Nouveau*, London, Thames and Hudson, 1987 p10.

<sup>7</sup> Mary Eliza Haweis, *Beautiful Houses: Being a Description of Certain Well-Known Artistic Houses*, London, Sampson Low, 1882.

<sup>8</sup> Beverly Gordon, *Woman's Domestic Body: the Conceptual Conflation of Women and Interiors in the Industrial Age*, *Winterthur Portfolio*, v31, no4, 1996, pp. 281–301.

<sup>9</sup> Both cited in Gordon, *Woman's Domestic Body*, p. 282.

<sup>10</sup> Frances Power Cobbe, *The Final Cause of Woman*, in Josephine Butler, (ed.), *Woman's Work and Woman's Culture*, London, 1869, p. 10.

<sup>11</sup> Quoted in; Joseph Focarino (ed.), *An Album of Nineteenth-Century Interiors: Watercolours from Two Private Collections*, Frick Collection, New York, 1992 p. 20.

---

<sup>12</sup> See Mark Taylor, Coloured Houses: Transgressing the Limits of the Domestic Realm, in Harriet Edquest and Hélène Frichot, (eds.), *LIMITS, Proceedings from the 21<sup>st</sup> Annual Conference of the Society of Architectural Historians Australia and New Zealand*, Melbourne, RMIT University (2004), pp 461–466.

<sup>13</sup> See; Colin Cunningham, Hints on Household Taste and The Art of Decoration: Authors, Their Audiences and Gender in Interior Design, in Joan Bellamy, Anne Lawrence and Gill Perry (eds.), *Women, Scholarship and Criticism: Gender and Knowledge c.1790-1900*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2000.

<sup>14</sup> Cunningham, Hints on Household Taste, p.164.

<sup>15</sup> Mrs H. R. Haweis, *The Art of Beauty*, London, Chatto and Windus, 1878, p. 23.

<sup>16</sup> Haweis, *Art of Beauty*, p. 26.

<sup>17</sup> Haweis, *Art of Beauty*, p. 201.

<sup>18</sup> Haweis, *Art of Beauty*, p. 12.

<sup>19</sup> Haweis, *Art of Beauty*, p. 11.

<sup>20</sup> Haweis, *Art of Beauty*, p. 11.

<sup>21</sup> Haweis, *Art of Beauty*, p. 17.

<sup>22</sup> Mrs H. R. Haweis, *The Art of Decoration*, London, Chatto and Windus, 1881, p. 23.

<sup>23</sup> Haweis, *Art of Beauty*, p. 194.

<sup>24</sup> Haweis, *Art of Beauty*, p. 205.

<sup>25</sup> Haweis, *Art of Decoration*, p. 22.

<sup>26</sup> Haweis, *Art of Decoration*, p. 17.

<sup>27</sup> Robin Evans, *Translations from Drawing to Building and Other Essays*, London, Architectural Association, 1997, p. 219.

<sup>28</sup> Edgar Allen Poe, *Philosophy of Furniture*, ReadBook On Line.net, 18 August 2006  
<http://www.readbookonline.net/readOnline/518/>

<sup>29</sup> Thomas Carlyle, *Sartor Resartus: the Life and Opinions of Herr Teufelsdröckh*. London, Black, 1897, p. 81. [reprint of 1831 edition]

<sup>30</sup> Carlyle, *Sartor Resartus*, p. 83.

<sup>31</sup> Gerald Heard, *Narcissus: An Anatomy of Clothes*, London, Kegan Paul Trench Trubner, 1924, p. 20.

<sup>32</sup> Heard, *Narcissus*, p. 42.

<sup>33</sup> Lee Wright, Objectifying Gender: the Stiletto Heel, in Judy Attfield and Pat Kirkham, (eds.), *A View from The Interior: Women and Design*. London, Women's Press, 1995 p. 9.

<sup>34</sup> See Walter Benjamin, Louis Philippe, or the Interior, in *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism*, London, NLB, 1973. [reprint of 1937 essay]