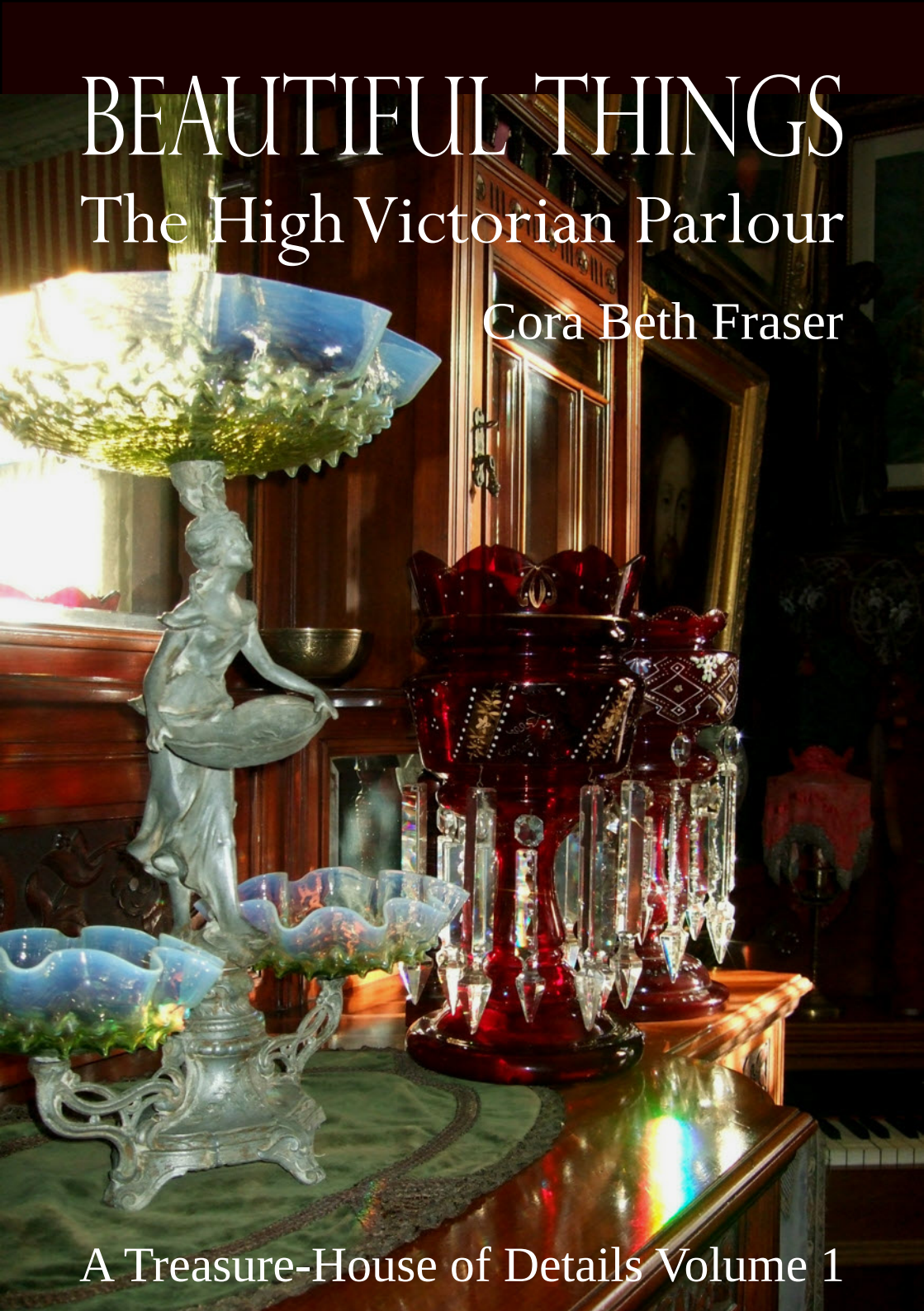
BEAUTIFUL THINGS

The High Victorian Parlour

Cora Beth Fraser



A Treasure-House of Details Volume 1

What is Grand is necessarily obscure to Weak men. That which can be made Explicit to the idiot is not worth my care.

William Blake,1799.

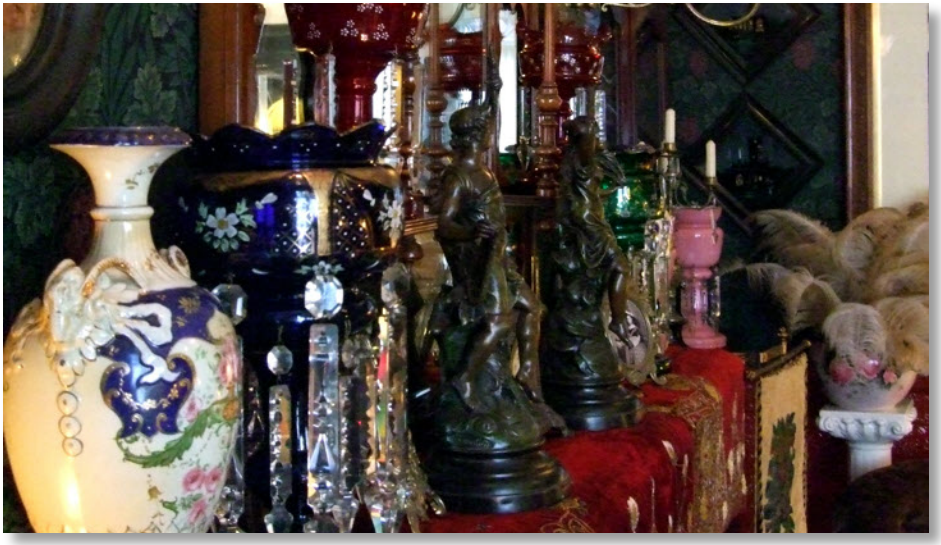
Written by Cora Beth Fraser

Photographs by James A. Fraser

Preface

Fraser House, in looking to the past for interior design inspiration, is following a practice which goes back centuries. Victorian designers were particularly keen to draw ideas from past styles, and even ordinary nineteenth-century householders were often exhorted to visit museums and galleries for ideas to use in their own homes. However, there were problems associated with using museum collections as sources for interior design. In 1877 Charles L. Eastlake wrote, 'Museums and exhibitions of art treasures are useful in familiarising the eye with the appearance of objects which illustrate excellence of ancient skill. But it must be remembered that such objects are usually articles of luxury, which at any period would lie beyond the reach of ordinary means, and which in many instances were applied to some purpose that has long since fallen into disuse. In examining them, we are apt to forget that our forefathers were not all people of unlimited wealth, who could afford jewelled caskets, costly embroidery, richly carved cabinet-work and plate, which would fetch ten times its weight in gold and silver.' Eastlake's caveats still apply to museum displays today; while more effort is now made to focus on social history and everyday life, there is still an inevitable emphasis on the extraordinary and the unobtainable.

Fraser House does not share this bias. Instead of items which have fallen into disuse, the House contains nothing which, to paraphrase William Morris, is not known to be useful or believed to be beautiful. This is because Fraser House is not a museum; it is a comfortable family home, an unassuming (at least from the outside) terraced house in a North-East town, at first glance an unlikely setting for a uniquely functional showcase of historical styles.



Although their High Victorian Parlour is decorated in a style typical of the extravagant late Victorian era it was not created by 'people of unlimited wealth'. Denise and James Fraser began work on Fraser House in the early 1980s on a small budget and with a family to support. In the course of thirty years of visiting junk shops, markets and car boot sales they have redeemed, rescued and revived a collection of antiques more consistent and coherent than any museum collection.

Over the years the Frasers have become a family of artists and historians as much as collectors, due to their belief that the Past needs to be presented in context in order to be understood. The rooms in Fraser House, while all different in style and historical period, have in common this focus on context; each room is a complete environment, a time capsule of authentic objects, furniture and decor.

This book takes a close look at a single room in Fraser House, the High Victorian Parlour. The photographs illustrate the importance of context: objects are not presented in isolation, but are shown as parts of a whole which can only be properly understood in relation to the rest of the room. The High Victorian Parlour was the first concept-room to be developed by the Frasers, and its furnishing and decoration are underpinned by meticulous research and attention to detail.

Henry James described the Victorian novel *Middlemarch* as 'a treasure-house of detail, but it is an indifferent whole', and the same criticism has often been levelled at the Victorian home. In putting together their High Victorian Parlour, the Frasers have created in a very real sense a treasure-house of detail, but the whole is certainly not indifferent – it is comfortable, complex and endlessly fascinating. The aim of this book is both to explain the detail, using insights from Victorian writers and critics, and to appreciate the whole of a room which is a work of art worthy of the most exacting of Victorians.


The High Victorian
Parlour

The High Victorian Parlour: an Introduction

The High Victorian parlour, in the 1880s and 1890s, was an eclectic showcase of artefacts. At its finest, it included examples of the best of British manufacturing, combined with art and treasures from the furthest reaches of the Empire and beyond, as well as skilled work from the talented ladies of the home, who were not only artists, but also took on daunting decorating and upholstery challenges. At its worst, the parlour was a vulgar display of the latest in fashion, regardless of taste. The same is true of almost any period of interior design, of course, but the problem was intensified in the late Victorian period because of the sheer number and range of products available.

The parlour also straddled the border between private and public, between religious and secular life, and between tradition and innovation.

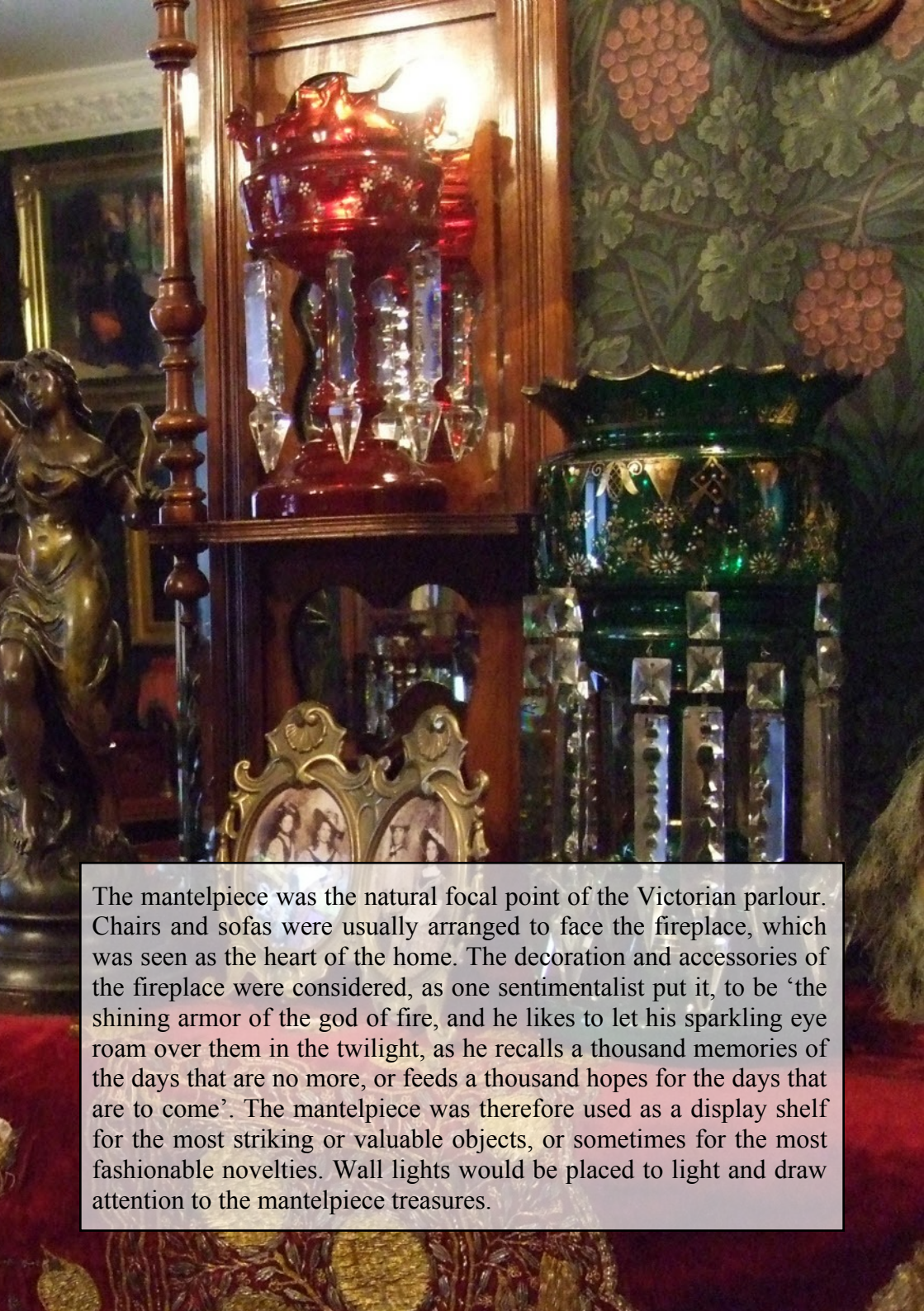
In houses without space for a morning room, the parlour would have been the room into which callers were shown. So although it was the centre of family life, it was also the principal means of displaying the family's affluence, culture, moral worth and skills to a wide circle of acquaintances. Both a private space and a public display, the parlour had to accomplish many things simultaneously, so it was no wonder that it tended to be crowded. The items in it, while they also had to fulfil practical functions for the family, were carefully chosen with an eye to their effect on the visitor.

There is a tension in the Victorian parlour between the religious and the secular. It was expected that Christian values would be reflected in the decor and furnishing of the parlour: religious pictures, mottos, symbols and books were displayed prominently. However, the parlour also incorporated elements which today we might regard as the antithesis of spirituality: a passion for material goods and novelties, an interest in the celebrities of the day, and a strong consciousness of fashion. So while the parlour was arranged to convey messages to the visitor, to the modern viewer those messages can seem rather mixed, and even conflicting.

The tension between tradition and innovation can also seem surprising, but it is a legacy of the extraordinary developments of the Victorian period. The Industrial Revolution led to a fascination with manufacturing on a domestic level: new devices and creations were constantly being made available, and it was a mark of status to obtain these before the neighbours. On the other hand, design movements like the Gothic Revival or the Arts and Crafts Movement prioritised traditional craftsmanship and design, encouraging the householder to look back at the English past for inspiration, and to value the handmade and the unique. It was impossible to reconcile the two developments, and most householders did not try, accepting both the machine-made innovations and the hand-crafted nostalgia with equal enthusiasm.

All of these elements combine to make the parlour of the High Victorian period a unique environment in design history, a fascinating conglomeration of influences, styles and materials which requires close study to be appreciated. The world was changing quickly, and the home changed with it, in ways which are not always properly understood today.

The Mantelpiece



The mantelpiece was the natural focal point of the Victorian parlour. Chairs and sofas were usually arranged to face the fireplace, which was seen as the heart of the home. The decoration and accessories of the fireplace were considered, as one sentimentalist put it, to be 'the shining armor of the god of fire, and he likes to let his sparkling eye roam over them in the twilight, as he recalls a thousand memories of the days that are no more, or feeds a thousand hopes for the days that are to come'. The mantelpiece was therefore used as a display shelf for the most striking or valuable objects, or sometimes for the most fashionable novelties. Wall lights would be placed to light and draw attention to the mantelpiece treasures.

The overmantel mirror was designed to reflect the mantel display, doubling it for maximum impact. Victorian overmantel mirrors often consisted of a number of small, bevelled mirrors rather than a single large one; the faceted glass would catch the light from lamps and candles and reflect it. The mirrors also had shelves attached, extending the display potential of the mantelpiece.

A typically High Victorian mantelpiece adornment was the lustre. A decorative glass pillar, often over a foot tall and surmounted by a shaped bowl or flute, it was sometimes liberally painted with gold patterns or flowers, and always hung around with either one or two rows of cut-glass prisms. In the sunlight the prisms, refracting the light, would cast rainbows around the room; in the lamplight the prisms would glitter, bobbing and dancing in every draught. The lustre was a purely decorative example of the glass blower's art; it was never intended to have a practical function.

A double-row lustre in vibrant cobalt blue. The prisms are hung with the flat side facing outward; the facets are visible through the smooth surface of the prism, like a cut diamond.

Lustres, like vases, often came in pairs, to allow for a symmetrical mantel display. They could be placed underneath wall lights to enhance their sparkle.

Green and blue lustres are rare, with red or cranberry glass (above) being far more common. The green glass lustre overleaf is particularly unusual because the upper prisms on both the outer and the inner row are square in shape.

A clock almost invariably took the central position on the mantelpiece. The American critic Clarence Cook, writing in 1877, objected to this practice: 'It is very seldom worth while to look at a clock to know what time it is... In a drawing-room a clock plays a still more ill-mannered part, for what can he do there but tell visitors when to go away, a piece of information the well-bred man is in no need of, and which the ill-bred man never heeds. So that, if a clock must usurp the place of honor on a mantel-piece, it ought to have so good a form, or serve as the pedestal to such a bit of bronze, or such a vase, as to make us forget the burden of time-and-tide in the occasional contemplation of art eternities'.

The French sculptor Émile Bruchon, working between 1880 and 1910, was known for producing twin sculptures like this pair, Apollo and Phoebe, designed for mass production and domestic display.

Another mantel object which, like the lustre, was often produced in pairs was the spelter figurine. Cheaper and lighter than the bronze which they emulated, spelter figurines tended to be copies of French sculpture, and came in pairs with names like ‘Le Commerce et L’Industrie’ and ‘La Nuit et Le Jour’.

Vases were produced in a bewildering array of sizes, shapes and designs, and fashions changed on a yearly basis. Floral vases were popular, and vases with ornate handles and rims: the more eye-catching, the better. Opaque or milk glass vases were a distinctive Victorian fashion. Some were a plain colour, traditionally white, with a pressed glass decoration. Others had graded colour, from dark to light.

The frill around the top of this pressed glass vase, as well as the swags around the body, is typical of Victorian decoration. Ruffled vases like this were often by British makers from the Stourbridge area.

The most popular were the painted vases, usually decorated with flowers. As antiques, these vases can be surprising because their colours do not fade, and because the choice of colours (vibrant pinks, blues and greens) was not typical of the Victorian period, with its love of dark and dramatic shades; furthermore, the vase shapes tended to be simpler and cleaner than most Victorian vases. In a Victorian interior, however, their effect is striking; the bright, almost synthetic colours would stand out dramatically against dark wallpaper, while the painted flowers would echo the decoration of the room.

Turquoise was a particularly fashionable colour; this turquoise glass vase is painted with wildflowers. Similar vases can be seen in Victorian catalogues: many different designs were available, and they could usually be ordered in a choice of colours to suit any decorative scheme.

Vases came in many different styles, shapes and designs, but flowers remained popular throughout the Victorian period, with a particular emphasis on roses and humble English flowers and blossoms like pansies, forget-me-nots and lilacs.

The Cabinet

A large cabinet or mirror-backed sideboard would be found in many Victorian parlours, but the high Victorian style took this to extremes: the cabinet would often be very large or extremely ornate, with numerous shelves and cupboards. Like the overmantel, it had bevelled mirrors which served three functions: to catch the light, to make the room look bigger, and to draw attention to the objects on display.

Here even the cupboard doors are made of panes of bevelled glass, and the cupboards themselves are mirror-backed. The effect is dramatic, and even the simplest object in such a cupboard attracts attention.

The cupboards and drawers of the cabinet had practical functions: early Victorian sideboards tended to have a deep lead-lined cellarette drawer for the storage of wine, and some had hidden drawers built into mouldings, in which to store silverware. By the 1880s, however, the cabinet had come to be primarily decorative, with less hidden storage space and more display sections, and often with a rather fragile structure. These flamboyant but impractical versions fell out of fashion by the mid 1890s, when one commentator remarked, 'Ricketty structures, dubbed "cabinets", the only excuse for whose existence is, as far as we can discover, that they support as many bevelled mirrors as can be crammed into a given space, are, happily, not so common as they were'. In the last few years of the nineteenth century, sturdy and well-crafted cabinets came back into vogue.

This alcove is used to display a tea service, with a white opaque pressed glass sugar bowl and a tea urn. The white of the bowl and the tea set show up effectively in the dark alcove, as does the bright blue beadwork tea-stand upon which they are presented.

The parlour cabinet was a place to display collections of larger items, like vases, lustres or figurines: some had a large central area for particularly impressive items.

This late Victorian epergne has vaseline glass flutes on several levels. Vaseline glass, a type of uranium glass, became popular in the mid-nineteenth century, and was particularly fashionable from the 1880s to the 1920s.


Victorian clutter

The Victorian period, and particularly the late or high Victorian period, is often characterised by the presence of 'clutter'. Later designers seized on the clutter as a means of disparaging Victorian taste and obsession with material goods, although they were far from the first to do so. The Victorians were their own harshest critics, sometimes to a surprising degree; in 1899 a Mr Thomas Burt, MP, opened the Exhibition of Industry and Art at Aberdeen with the rather bleak words, 'We are accustomed to say, and I fear with a good deal of truth, that we live in a very materialistic age', but this sentiment was so generally accepted that it caused no comment. Despite criticisms of Victorian materialism, however, there was a method, even an art, to Victorian clutter. The display of small objects to their best advantage was far from a random process, and required skill and practice.

A large side table, covered with a heavy figured velvet cloth. The objects on the table vary in height and colour, and appeal to the different senses: smell (pot pourri), hearing (gramophone) and sight (lamp). The American writer Clarence Cook, in his influential 1877 book The House Beautiful*, suggested that such objects should be seen as 'educators of certain senses', particularly for children, and remarks 'Our sense are educated more by these slight impressions than we are apt to think; and* bric-à-brac*, so much despised by certain people, and often justly so, may have a use that they themselves might not unwillingly admit'.*

The main function of a side table was to act as a lamp stand: the positioning of lighting was important in the Victorian parlour, particularly before gas mantles were introduced, when most illumination came from portable oil lamps. Those tables were therefore also ideal display spaces for items that would benefit from close proximity to a light source: precious metals and objects made with mother-of-pearl or abalone, which would twinkle in the light from the lamps.

Right: this side table displays a cluster of silver photograph frames holding family portraits. Photograph frames came in a huge range of styles, sizes and materials, but eye-catching and ornate frames were most popular, as were silver frames which were indicators of wealth.

Particularly effective under lamp light were items decorated with gilding or mother-of-pearl. Ebonised papier mâché objects with gold painted decoration and mother-of-pearl were very popular in High Victorian interiors; they were available to many households because they were cheap to produce, and at the same time they gave the impression of opulence. This double-sided vase, however, would have come from the more expensive end of the market; it is exceptional in both quality and design.

Papier mâché items were often found in the parlour in the second half of the nineteenth century. The most famous manufacturers of quality papier mâché items were Jennens and Bettridge, who patented the use of mother-of-pearl in papier mâché decoration, and who held a Royal Appointment. Although the name suggests a French origin, papier mâché was actually developed in Birmingham in the early nineteenth century.

The side table would hold a combination of objects: lamps, books, figurines, statuary, china and photograph frames. The items would be organised carefully, with contrasting sizes, colours and textures drawing attention to artfully arranged kniknacks. The side table would also send a message to visitors about the interests and tastes of the inhabitants of the house, so care would be taken to select items which displayed the qualities that the householder wanted to emphasise.

Right: a small bronze bust of Queen Victoria presides over the sofa table. Statues, photographs and books of Queen Victoria were common, particularly around Jubilee years: an interest in the monarchy was shared by many people, and royal memorabilia was a thriving market.

Perhaps the most distinctively Victorian means of displaying objects was the dome. A glass cover on a turned wooden base, this was a self-contained display case, allowing fragile objects to be arranged carefully. Often the dome contained dried or silk flowers, or even small stuffed animals and birds; sometimes it was simply a way of both showing off and protecting a particularly prized treasure.

This glass dome is used to display a particularly rare object: a gothic chalice, highly ornate and with tiny decorative enamelled panels. It is raised on a plinth of red velvet to give it height, and the dome draws attention to it by setting it apart from the other items on the table, while also protecting it from dust.

Plant stands or jardinières could be found in corners of the Victorian parlour, in the form of tiny mahogany tables, ornate china pedestals or even marble columns with a decorated china or brass bowl on top. They often held aspidistras or other parlour palms, but ostrich or peacock feathers could be used in place of plants or for variation.

Much Victorian clutter was British made; the Midlands, in particular, produced papier mâché, brass and silver objects in great quantities. However, souvenirs from exotic places were also popular, so items from China and India would often be found alongside British Victoriana.

Here Islamic brass jugs and plates, elaborately decorated, share a display space with a British-made Victorian vase.

Figurines and statuary could also be found on side tables and shelves. Parianware, a material which resembled marble but which could be produced cheaply and in bulk, was popular: replicas of famous sculptures could be made from it, and its white colour made it stand out in a dark room.

Above: replicas of the Apollo Belvedere, thought for centuries to be the epitome of aesthetic perfection, were common in homes and public buildings throughout the nineteenth century, despite the disapproval of Romantic critics like William Hazlitt and John Ruskin.

Left: a replica of an 1861 allegorical sculpture entitled 'The Sleep of Sorrow and the Dream of Joy', by Raffaelle Monti, shown in the International Exhibition in London in 1862. A veiled figure of the Dream of Joy hovers above the sleeping figure of Sorrow, in a comment on the contemporary political situation in Italy and the resurgence of cultural unity, when a kingdom was proclaimed on 17 March 1861.

Below: this small marble statue of Venus in a scallop shell, based on an Italian original, is a reference to the classical past which co-existed somewhat uneasily with Victorian Christianity. Classical subjects were less fashionable in the Victorian home than they had been in the eighteenth century, but ancient history, languages and literature were still an integral part of the school and university curriculum, and a classical education remained a mark of status for men, although less so for women.

This bronzed statue of a medieval lady stands on a tiny wall-mounted corner shelf, covered with a deep burgundy beadwork pelmet trimmed with tassels. Shelves like this were usually only big enough for a single item, so they were an effective means of displaying a valued statue or bust, and they solved the problem which corners apparently posed. Clarence Cook comments, 'Everybody must have noticed how corners seem to be, in nine cases out of ten, mistakes; how seldom is it that any good is got out of them... Corners, however, are fond of a bust occasionally, and, as things go, this may be allowed the best thing to do with a bust, seeing how small our rooms are apt to be, and how difficult of solution the pedestal question is.'

Entertainment

Parlour games were popular in Victorian times: old games were recreated and packaged in attractive forms, and new games were invented. Card games like the originally French Bezique could be found in many homes, with special cards in elaborately decorated boxes. Bridge was also a Victorian favourite.

On this table are two parlour games, bezique and bridge, and also a wooden stereoscope. The stereoscope was a means of viewing two side-by-side images as a single 3D picture, and was a popular entertainment, in different forms, throughout the Victorian era.

Stereoscopes were another form of parlour entertainment. The cards dealt with a vast range of subjects, from expeditions through exotic and little-known countries to imaginary tableaux with an edge of political satire. The stereoscope was popular in the Victorian home because it combined innovation with art, and could also be seen as educational.

Patience was a popular game at all levels of society, from working-class households up to Prince Albert himself, who was an enthusiastic player. There were many different variants, and not all were games of skill or luck. Fortune-Telling Patience was described by Mary Whitmore-Jones in 1895: ‘This is a game for three or more players, and is a favourite with young ladies, as being supposed to afford them a glimpse of their future destiny. The four aces are laid in the middle of the board, their significations being: hearts, loved; diamonds, courted; clubs, married; and spades, single blessedness... If you finish off all your cards on one of the ace packets, it shows what your fate will be; but if your cards work off on your neighbours' packets, the oracle is veiled, and your fortune remains untold’.

Musical entertainment, too, was valued. The harmonium, or parlour organ, became popular in the second half of the nineteenth century. It had several advantages over a piano, which was not a practical option for most households: it was much lighter than a piano, so it was easier to transport and therefore cheaper to obtain, and it was not as easily damaged. It also held its tune, regardless of environment and temperature. Compact versions were made with keyboards smaller than the standard piano keyboard, so that the harmonium could fit into a small space. The harmonium was a relatively cheap, compact and easily maintained musical instrument, and because it was designed for a domestic setting, it was produced in a range of styles to match any decor, so it was both functional and attractive.

This harmonium is a particularly compact example. Tucked away in a corner, it matches the furniture elsewhere in the parlour in colour and finish. It is backed by a bevelled and painted mirror panel which echoes the painted mirrors on the walls. The music stand is inlaid with a design of flowers and foliage, with a recess behind it for music books, and there are shelves for lamps or candlesticks to cast light upon the keyboard. The pedals are upholstered with panels of carpet, and were designed to be mouse-proof. Mouse-proof bellows, made in the 1880s and 90s, were units which sealed against their wooden frame to prevent mice from creeping in.

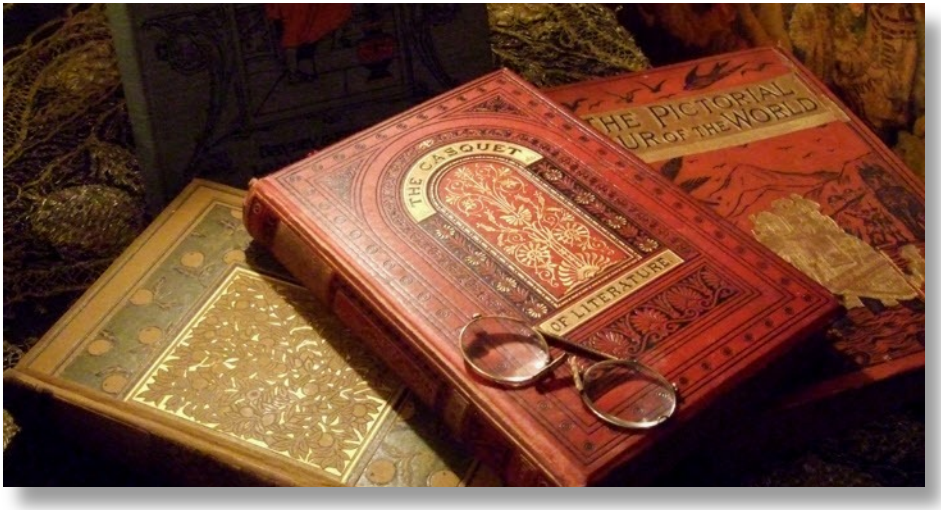
The harmonium was a response to objections to the bulk of drawing room pianos: '"bow-legged megatheriums," as somebody has hit them off, the ugliest pieces of furniture which we of this generation, fertile in ugliness, have as yet succeeded in inventing', according to Clarence Cook.

At the very end of the Victorian period a gramophone might be found in affluent homes. The UK Gramophone Company, the parent organisation of the famous HMV label, was founded in 1897, in response to the popularity of gramophones in the United States, and gramophones quickly became a household item across Britain. The phonograph, which played cylinders rather than discs, was also popular, but the disc ultimately won the competition due to its lower manufacturing costs.


ALL STYLES AND PRICES
CRAMOPHONES & RECORDS
KEPT IN STOCK
280 & 282, ASHTON OLD ROAD,
OPENSHAW,
MANCHESTER.

Books, of course, were both a form of entertainment and a decorative feature. Fine bindings were developed through the Victorian period; instead of being accessible only to the wealthy, beautiful books became available to everybody. The move away from expensive leather to cheap and mass produced cloth boards allowed books to be manufactured for the ordinary household, and the gilding and embossing of those cloth boards elevated them to an art form. By the high Victorian period, books were an important component of any side table display. In style their covers generally reflected the themes of the parlour; dark colours predominated, relieved by patches of gold and often decorated with flowers, either natural or stylised.

Books chosen for display could cover a range of genres. The novel, which a hundred years earlier had been a scandalous new form of writing, was elevated by the Victorians to a means of moral improvement for the young; with titles like 'Praise and Principle; or, For What Shall We Live?' and '•The Hope of the Katzekopfs; or The Sorrows of Selfishness. A Fairy Tale', these novels and collections of stories were seen as 'improving' works, and their display therefore indicated something about the virtue of the household.



Here a cloth-bound book of songs is displayed, together with a travel book containing engravings of exotic lands, and two volumes of 'The Casquet of Literature', a selection of extracts from 'the works of the most admired authors' of the day. All four books are notable for their decoration; although all are different, a significant level of ornament and gilding is common to all.

Poetry books were also popular, and often displayed to indicate awareness of current fashions. Alfred Tennyson, the longest serving poet laureate, was especially fashionable, and his poetry collections could be found in parlours around Britain, including that of Queen Victoria, after the publication of his hugely successful *In Memoriam* in 1850. Tennyson prided himself on being the 'people's poet', producing *Enoch Arden* in 1864 which was aimed at a mass audience; more than 40,000 copies of this volume sold immediately, and in the first year of its publication Tennyson made over £8,000 from it, equal to the income of Britain's richest men.

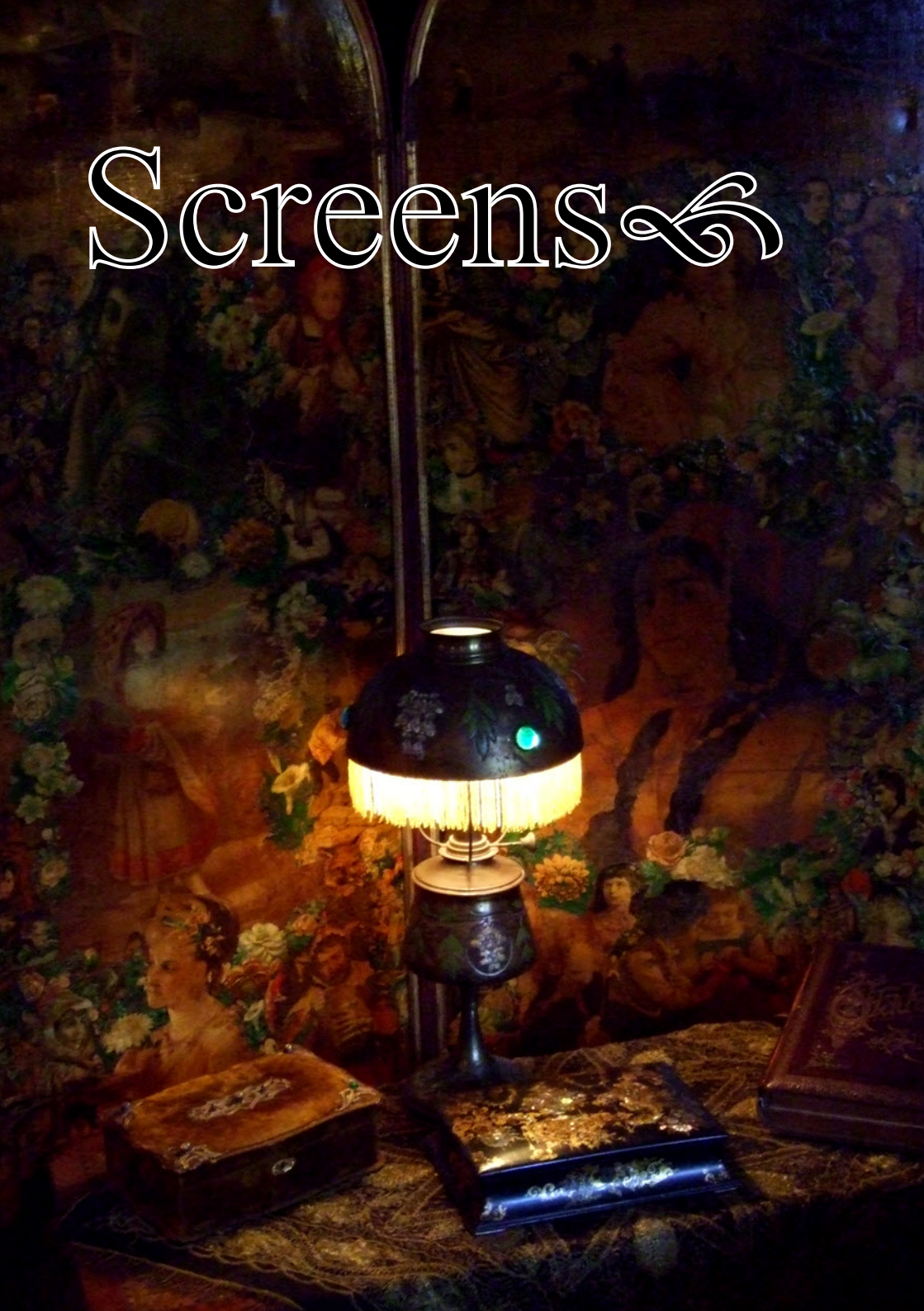

THE LATEST PORTRAIT OF THE QUEEN


GLADSTONE THE LIBERATOR.
CHAMPION OF OPPRESSED NATIONALITIES
GREECE
ITALY
BULGARIA
TRANSVAAL
EGYPT
THE BALLOT
EDUCATION FOR ALL
DISESTABLISHES THE IRISH CHURCH
Mr GLADSTONE'S LIFE-WORK.

This extraordinary 'Gladstone Album' in tooled and gilded leather, is an album containing pictures of scenes from the life of Gladstone, with spaces for family photographs (see previous page). It is also a wind-up music box, with the mechanism concealed in the back portion of the book.

It was said with some truth that the three most famous Victorians, in their own time, were Tennyson, Gladstone and Queen Victoria. Tennyson and Gladstone were considered to represent the best of Britishness, going on state visits to other countries together, and Gladstone was the one who finally convinced Tennyson to accept a peerage, although the poet responded with some reluctance, 'For my own part, I shall regret my simple name all my life'. It was not unusual to see Tennyson, Gladstone and Queen Victoria all represented in an ordinary Victorian home in some way, through photographs, books or statues, or even in embroidery.

Screens



Victorian decor incorporated a bewildering array of different types and styles of screen, performing a range of functions within the parlour.

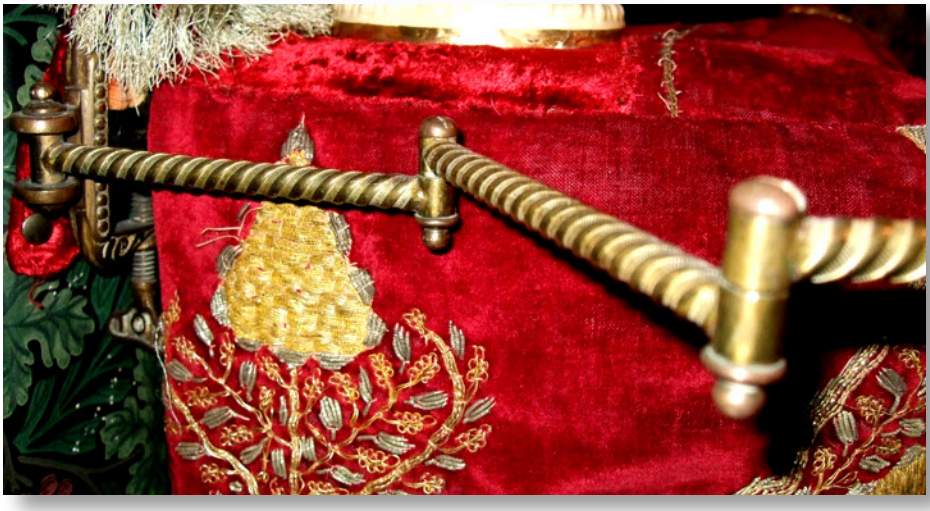
Dora de Blaquiere wrote in *The Girls' Own Paper* of 1880, 'The bright flames of the winter fire become, during the summer months, changed into the melancholy blackness of the vacant and useless grate, which, from containing in the winter the source of heat and light, is in the summer the eyesore and vexation of the beauty-loving members of the family.' So the purpose of the fire screen was to replace the unsightly fire grate with another decorative element: its two-fold function was to conceal and to adorn the room. As such, the fire screen tended to be highly elaborate: with a carved or turned frame, it often held a panel of embroidery, beadwork or tapestry, or even a painting.

The fire screen was intended to be moved out of the way when the fire was lit; however, there were other types of screen which were meant to be in use when the fire was blazing. The mantle screen, attached to the mantelpiece with an articulated arm, was designed so that it could be moved around and angled to shield a person from the worst effects of the fire's heat. The hanging panel of fabric, in the shape of a shield or banner, was usually trimmed with braid, fringes and tassels.

Above: a Berlin woolwork panel, mounted in an ornate mahogany hanging frame, conceals the fire grate. A fire screen such as this was the perfect way of displaying needlework since, unlike items such as foot stools, chair backs and cushions, it was presented as a flat surface, and could be framed to display it to advantage.

Previous page: this is a fire screen of exceptional quality and detail. A glazed panel of superb silk embroidery, making lavish use of gold thread, is mounted in a heavy mahogany and brass frame, with glass side panels which slide out to make a three-panelled screen.

A woolwork and beadwork banner screen, unusual in that it is the woolwork background which is colourful, while the beadwork is limited to shades of grey, white and black. The banner is mounted on a brass pole which is attached to the mantelpiece with a brass arm and clamp, both decorated with a twisted rope design.



This screen is a traditional composition of coloured beaded flowers on a plain background. The fringes and tassels are long and striped, and the panel is backed in silk; the brass pole is mounted on an arm decorated with gothic fretwork designs and cast finials. Although this screen does not match the red mantle screen with grisaille beadwork on the other side of the fireplace, this was not unusual; while soft furnishings were expected to coexist harmoniously, they did not usually match, particularly when they were meant to showcase a variety of skills.

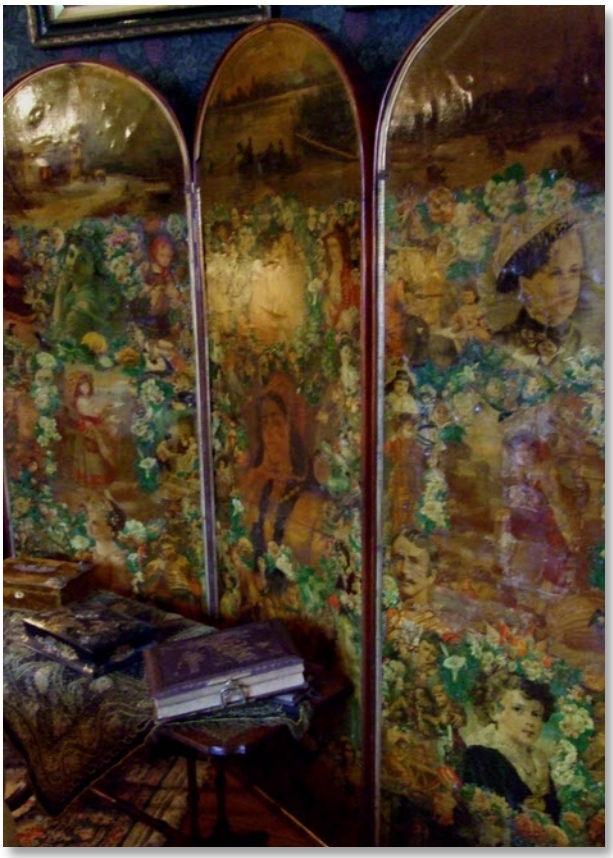
Pole screens and face screens were also intended to shield the face from the heat of the fire. The pole screen was usually adjustable: a panel of fabric, wood or papier mache could be moved up and down on the pole, so that it could be positioned for optimum effect.

This is not a commonplace pole screen, in any respect. The screen panel is made of papier mache, which is quite unusual: papier mache was more commonly used for the smaller hand-held face screens. The panel is roughly circular in shape, but with scalloped edges reminiscent of gothic architecture; it would be more usual to have a square or shield-shaped panel. The painting on the screen, rather than a typical floral subject, is of a supplicant in a cathedral. Perhaps the most extraordinary element, however, is the cut-out detail of the two cathedral windows, backed with textured glass and coloured foil which gives the impression of stained glass.

The face screen was the ultimate in movable protection from the heat of the fire: hand-held, it could be moved around by the bearer. Face-screens, however, were more decorative than practical, since unlike other screens they did not leave the hands free.

On the left, above, is a little tambour-work face screen, a basic embroidered and fringed silk panel. On the right is a banner-shaped beadwork face screen which is a miniature version of the larger mantle screens, complete with horizontal brass pole and finials. Face screens, because of their size, provided an opportunity for the craftswoman to demonstrate her most delicate work.

Fire screens tended to be small and movable, but draught screens were much more bulky and could dominate a room. Most draught screens were decoupaged - covered with scraps, either randomly or following a theme, then varnished – and the best were framed in mahogany and brass. These screens were produced as hinged panels which could be angled to line a particularly draughty corner.



This six-foot high screen is a good example of the art of decoupage. Decorating a screen of this size was not easy, and required taste and practice, as well as considerable planning. Here the top of each panel is covered by a single river scene, and the small scraps below it are broken up by larger pictures and portraits, so that the general effect is not too chaotic. The brass and mahogany banding frames the panels and presents them as separate but related works of art.

Madame Coralie de Lorraine, in her advice to householders from 1880, states emphatically, 'Be it known to you that no modern drawing, sitting or morning-room is considered furnished without, at least, one screen, and really no piece of furniture has a greater *raison d'etre*; it can be moved about to preserve from draughts, it makes a cosy corner on cold days when the room seems too large to be pleasant'.

Textiles

Victorian textiles owed much to the Industrial Revolution; new methods of manufacture created new fabrics and made traditional fabrics cheaper and easier to obtain. As a result, on a domestic level the use of textiles was notable for its variation; it was no longer popular to have matching suites of furniture or co-ordinated draperies. Instead householders enjoyed contrast in colour and texture, so the High Victorian Parlour became an eclectic showcase of cushions, curtains and individually upholstered furniture.

Particularly popular were velvets, in many different weights and styles, and gold thread, as well as fringes, braids and tassels.

High Victorian textiles were heavily influenced by three leading designers of the 1850s, 60s and 70s: Pugin, Jones and Morris. The designers were responsible for movements and theories of design, but they also set fashion, and those fashions were followed in the domestic sphere, although often in an inconsistent manner.

This extraordinary table valance is almost a parody of the fashion for Puginesque design in the home, with its use of gothic architectural features and heraldic designs featuring birds, plants and animals. The main design is executed in Berlin woolwork, with the striking reds and blues that were so typical of Victorian gothic interiors, and the faux tassels too are woolwork, but the background to the tassels is composed of white beadwork that sparkles in the light. It is a quirky but well designed and beautifully produced piece of work. The use of beadwork as a background is an amusing touch, since beadwork was almost always used for the pattern rather than the background.

Augustus Pugin, although an architect by profession, integrated textiles into his all-encompassing designs for interiors, and his influence on later designers was considerable. Pugin advocated geometric arrangements of plant-forms, rather than the scattered bunches of flowers typical of the 1840s, and his gothic interpretation of textile designs became very fashionable. His designs tended to be based on the ogee, a typically gothic type of pointed arch, with frequent use of pomegranate and pineapple motifs.

The influence of the gothic extended beyond architectural forms, to the combination of plush velvets and elaborately worked metal or gold thread. Moving away from Pugin's focus on tradition and function, these textiles and objects borrowed the grandeur and vivid colours of the gothic for purely decorative purposes. It was a fashionable look, and one which householders wanted to achieve in their homes; and it was far easier and cheaper to acquire the look through textiles than through costly gothic light fittings or wallpaper.

Owen Jones, one of the most influential architects and designers of the nineteenth century, advocated a return to ancient designs and motifs, both western and eastern. His illustrated 1856 book, *The Grammar of Ornament*, became an indispensible guide for the designer, and reflected the nineteenth century passion for all things oriental which had spread from the Brighton Royal Pavilion, at the beginning of the century, to homes around the country. Indian, Japanese and Moorish designs and fabrics all found a place in the British home, becoming an important element of domestic fashion.

This black and gold Indian table cloth (above) is typical of the eastern textiles in vogue in the late nineteenth century. Some were imported in bulk; others were brought back from India as personal souvenirs.

Right: the decorative metalwork on this sewing box is adorned by faux opal cabuchons. The combination of deep gold velvet and gilt metal is a striking one, and the form of the metal ornaments is inspired by the sharp points and curves of the Victorian gothic fashion.

Left: this woven oriental fabric, decorated with Chinese figures and buildings, uses a lot of metallic thread, but because it is woven, the effect is much smoother and softer than fabrics embroidered with gold thread. Large square cloths like this could be used as table cloths, throws, bedspreads or (as here) door curtains.

Below: heavy Indian embroidery with lavish use of metallic thread decorates this rich red velvet mantelpiece pelmet. While versions of Indian designs were printed on fabrics in Britain, imported Indian work remained popular.

This remarkable example of what was called fancy-work in the early Victorian era, but came to be known as 'art needlework' in the later nineteenth century, is executed in the Arts and Crafts style, with interweaving birds and foliage and the recurring pomegranate motif common to both Pugin and Morris. The lavish use of gold thread is borrowed from gothic textiles and the popular oriental embroideries, but here it is used to outline and highlight a much more organic and English design. The glazed mahogany fire screen provides an excellent means of display.

William Morris, perhaps the most famous designer of the Victorian age, is known as a pioneer of the Arts and Crafts Movement; however, his influence stretched beyond this one movement. Morris stressed the role of the craftsman, encouraging people to move away from mass-produced material of poor quality and return to the craftsmanship of days gone by. This emphasis on the art of the craftsman raised the profile of Victorian home crafts; the ladies of the house had created their own textiles throughout the Victorian age, as evidence of their accomplishments and industry, but Morris' principles gave credit and status to work which had previously been taken for granted. Morris also raised the profile of textiles, by suggesting that the householder should pay as much attention to fabric as to wallcoverings.

Pugin, Jones and Morris, amongst others, introduced new elements to the design of textiles in the Victorian period, and their reforms and theories of design were highly influential. On a domestic level, however, there remained a fondness for simple floral designs, and these designs were very much in evidence in the crafts of the time. Cushions and furniture covers continued to be decorated with posies of pansies and roses throughout the nineteenth century.

Berlin woolwork came to Britain in the 1830s, when a Mr. Wilks of Regent Street imported large numbers of patterns and materials from the continent, and by the end of the century it was the most popular form of needlework, used for everything from pictures to carpets because it was hard-wearing and practical as well as decorative.

Queen Victoria's third daughter Princess Helena, who married Prince Christian of Schleswig-Holstein, founded The Royal School of Needlework in 1872. This was an attempt to re-establish needlework as a respectable form of employment and a prestigious craft, in the wake of the upheavals of the Industrial Revolution. While machine textiles were still in evidence, needlework of all kinds became fashionable again in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, and this fashion was very visible in the home.

Needlework was an important element of domestic life for women of the rapidly growing middle classes who no longer needed every member of the family to work for a living; it was a mark of social status that the ladies of the family did not need to take on paying work, but it was considered proper to give the impression of industry and diligence, and needlework was seen as an appropriate occupation for ladies of all ages. Designs and patterns were featured in monthly periodicals, so fashions and styles changed with great rapidity. Although the sheer range and volume of hand-worked and embroidered goods suggests that many Victorian ladies were accomplished needlewomen, there were shortcuts available for those ladies who weren't: at the end of the nineteenth century *The House* periodical comments, 'Few women will purchase any piece of traced needlework unless all the more difficult details are already done, so that they have only the background, or at most, a few simple fillings, to put in'.

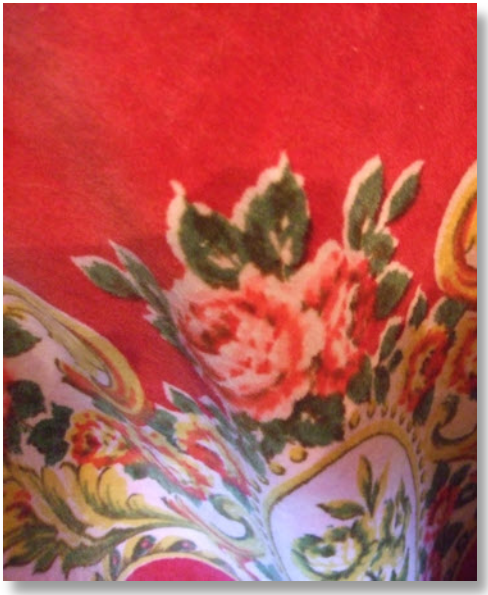
Needlework, while enhancing the home and demonstrating a lady's accomplishments, also had a social function, both at home and abroad, by providing a safe topic of conversation and a shared interest. In an 1899 article on the difficulty of tackling challenging needlework in social situations, the improbably named Madame Tambour remarks, 'In continental hotels, too, especially when the weather is unkind, many people execute pieces of work that would never be carried out were they in their own homes, and they find such employment convenient also in suggesting a topic of conversation among the comparative strangers into whose company they are thrown in drawing-room or hall'.

Needlework came to be viewed not just as a practical application for idle hands or a facilitator of social interaction, but also as an art form in itself. The famous artist and illustrator Walter Crane was persuaded to inaugurate the technical evening classes at the Royal School of Art Needlework in 1899, and was reported as saying that 'in that remarkable English revival of decorative design and handicraft which had taken place during the last twenty-five years the art and craft of the needle held a distinctive and distinguished position. The movement, he said, might, in fact, be compared with the rise of the pre-Raphaelite school of painting'. Certainly needlework at the end of the nineteenth century enjoyed a much higher status than it had at the beginning of the century.

Left: fragile or easily damaged needlework and beadwork pieces, like this beadwork panel of a spray of wildflowers, were sometimes set into ornate wooden frames and covered with glass. They could then be used as tea trays or teapot stands, when mounted on tiny ceramic or wooden feet, or with the addition of miniature brass castors they could be turned into moveable serving trays for the dining or tea table (below).

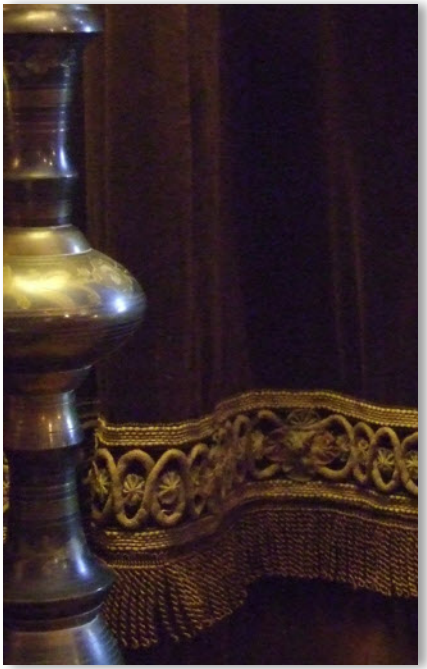
Above: a porcelain-footed beadwork tray used as a tea tray, holding a selection of objects including a small brass and copper spirit kettle. Charles Eastlake's views on Victorian metal tea-making equipment is universally dismissive: 'Among familiar objects of household use, I do not know a more contemptible instance of perverted taste than the ordinary tea or coffee-urn of an English breakfast-table'.

Right: a printed velvet table cloth with an elaborate floral design imitating typical needlework patterns.



Left: a machine woven runner, using the traditional materials of cotton velvet and metallic thread in imitation of hand-worked designs.

Not all of the textiles in the Victorian home were made by hand; machine-woven tablecloths and runners were widely and cheaply available from shops and catalogues, and would be seen in most homes. Many such cloths were highly decorative, with innovative designs and shapes. The textile industry, however, remained a controversial one throughout the nineteenth century, due to concerns about the conditions of the workers; in 1833, P. Gaskell reported in *The Manufacturing Population of England*, 'an uglier set of men and women, of boys and girls, taking them in the mass, it would be impossible to congregate in a smaller compass. Their complexion is sallow and pallid--with a peculiar flatness of feature, caused by the want of a proper quantity of adipose substance to cushion out the cheeks. Their stature low--the average height of four hundred men, measured at different times, and different places, being five feet six inches. Their limbs slender, and playing badly and ungracefully...'. Reforms were instituted, but conditions remained difficult and dangerous in the textile factories and mills.



Trims, braids and fringes of all kinds were available from haberdashery departments, and would be used not only to edge cloths and curtains, but to add extra layers of decoration. Trimming curtains was seen as an indispensable skill; 'Any lady who can trim her own hat can trust herself to lay bands of harmonious colour across the ground-work of her curtains'. Machine-woven and shop-bought fabrics could be trimmed at home to make them unique. French *passementerie*, more elaborate than the English trims, added a touch of class to home-made items, and it was a mark of status to have it imported from Paris.

Lace was used extensively in Victorian design, and particularly in traditionally 'feminine' rooms like the parlour and the bedrooms. Windows sometimes had several layers of lace curtains, functioning both to preserve the privacy of the occupants and to block out the undesirable sights of streets and back yards. Although functional and decorative, lace curtains were difficult to maintain. In March 1899 *The House* periodical addressed recent developments: 'Hitherto the starched enormities, with their inartistic designs, which hung before our windows, appeared to have come to stay, and the lover of the beautiful could find no recommendation in them, except the one virtue of rapidly perishing under the hand of the laundry maid. Rents and tears were always to be seen in hangings of this class if they had been in use for any time whatever, and these gaps increased the ugliness of the patterns which were figured on the curtains.

'Among the firms who saw the evil, and set themselves to remedy it, the most successful was, perhaps, the Lock-Stitch Curtain Company, who sent their workmen to study in the museums, and soon put on the market the most delightful reproductions of Honiton lace, Brussels lace, Swiss embroidery, and magnificent adaptations of old French, old English, and old Italian embroidery'.

Above and left: a top layer of lace, dyed a soft brown colour, is draped around this pleated silk lampshade and pinned up to fall in soft folds at the corners.

While curtains and panels represented the main use of lace around the home, lace could also be used to trim everything from table cloths to lamp shades. This lace could be bought in a variety of different colours, or dyed at home to suit the individual project. Such trims, however, were particularly fragile and impractical. Eastlake remarks, 'the lace trimmings and edgings used for "antimacassars" and simple articles of household use are often open to objection on account of the flimsiness and extravagance of their design'. Lace-trimmed items, particularly those trimmed with white lace, were primarily found in bedrooms, but coloured or 'old' lace in judicious amounts could often be seen in the parlour.

Pictures

Photographs and prints

The Victorian passion for photography was reflected throughout the home, where a profusion of photographs could be found both in ornamental standing frames and mounted on walls. Many of these photographs were studio portraits of individuals or family groups; they were often printed in sepia.

While family portraits were popular, other photographs could also be found in the Victorian parlour. Photographs of famous individuals could be purchased in decorative frames: the royal family was a popular subject, and celebrities of the day.

A small oval frame of dark oak holds a miniature chrystoleum of a Victorian lady. In the March 1883 issue of Cassell's Family Magazine the author of a series of articles entitled 'Remunerative Employments for Gentlewomen' explained 'Chrystoleum is an art which is just now very much in fashion. By the help of a certain process, photographs are transferred from the paper on which they were taken on to glass; the exact delineation of face and form is removed from the one to the other; the artist then paints the picture, and the effect produced is that of a portrait painted on ivory.'

This image is a scene from a production of 'The Tempest', starring Basil Gill, who would soon become famous as an early film actor, and Nora Kerin, a young actress who toured Australia and New Zealand in 1903 with 'Mr George Musgrove's English Shakespearean Company'. In 1902 Kerin had played Esther in the spectacular Drury Lane production of 'Ben Hur', which rather daringly featured live horses galloping towards the audience.

Monochrome prints were also available; prints or etchings of famous paintings made the art of the day accessible to the householder. Subjects from the Bible or from classical myth were common, made popular by painters like Lord Frederic Leighton and Herbert Schmalz.

This enormous print has been professionally mounted and framed in carved mahogany. It is big enough to form the main feature of any wall. It is a signed, limited edition print of the 1891 New Testament painting 'Return from Calgary', one of the most popular works by the PreRaphaelite painter Herbert Gustave Schmalz., who changed his name after the First World War to John Wilson Carmichael. Schmalz/Carmichael grew up only a few miles from where this print is currently displayed. The critic George Moore wrote: 'That Mr Schmalz's picture is capable of exercising a profound effect on the uneducated mind there can be no doubt. While I was there, a lady walked with stately tread into the next room, and seeing there nothing more exciting than rural scenes drawn in water-colour, exclaimed, "Trees, mere trees! what are trees after having had one's soul elevated?"'

The frames were often composed of several layers. The outer layer would usually be of ornate gilded gesso; the innermost layer would be velvet, of a rich red, green or gold colour. The photographs themselves might be relatively small; it was the frame that dominated and drew the eye.

Below: 'Mariana' by J.E. Millais. When this painting was first exhibited, it was accompanied by these lines from Tennyson's 1830 'Mariana': **She only said, 'My life is dreary,/ He cometh not,' she said;/ She said, 'I am aweary, aweary,/ I would that I were dead!'.** ***The rejected and yearning heroine is the subject of many popular paintings of the day; the Lady of Shallott is perhaps the most famous, but only one of many.***

Pre-Raphaelite paintings were popular in high Victorian domestic interiors, particularly paintings (overleaf:'Mariamne Leaving the Judgement Seat of Herod' by J.W. Waterhouse, 1887) which had religious subjects or themes.

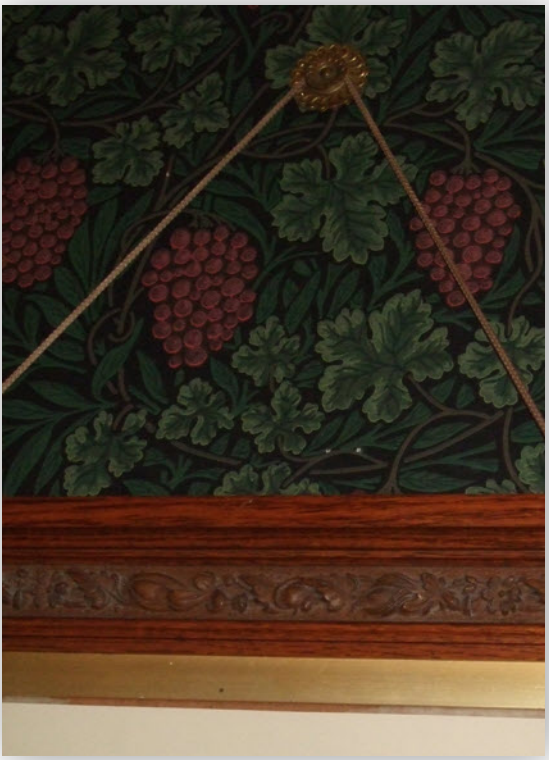
Religious or moral pictures were also common, and could be accompanied by a written motto or verse of a hymn to reinforce the message. The Victorian theologian Horace Bushnell wrote 'The house, having a domestic Spirit of grace dwelling in it, should become the church of childhood, the table and hearth a holy rite'; the home was seen as a sacred environment and the spiritual centre of the family, and Christian imagery on the walls reflected that role.

This coloured print, entitled 'The Christian Captive' is a typical image of Victorian Christian romanticism; the pale and vulnerable Christian girl is menaced by the sinister figure of a dark-skinned and turbaned Infidel.

Oil paintings were occasionally found in the parlour, but not commonly. Charles Eastlake commented, 'Oil-paintings should, if possible, be kept in a room by themselves. The force of their colour is always greater than that which can be attained by other "vehicles", and will therefore, in juxtaposition with water-colour drawings, make the latter look poor and feeble in effect. It is an old English custom to hang family portraits in the dining-room, and it seems a reasonable custom.' Oil paintings therefore tended to be found only in parlours with particularly dramatic or striking decor.

Pictures could be hung either from a picture rail on chains or from ornamental wall-mounted hooks in the absence of a picture rail. The choice of whether or not to have a picture rail tended to be based on the design of the wall treatment: if a dado rail was present, a picture rail would not be used in ordinary houses, because it would compress the usable wall space and make the room appear smaller. The drawback of picture hooks, of course, was that they left holes in what was often expensive wallpaper.

In picture hanging and arrangement, as in every other area of interior design, the Victorians had fashions and rules. The influential critic Charles Eastlake stated austerely, 'To see pictures with anything like comfort or attention, they should be disposed in one row only, and that opposite the eye', advice which was rarely followed by the householder; London's preserved Linley Sambourne House had more than 90 framed pictures on the walls of the drawing room alone.



Here a decorative brass picture hook holds a framed print. Eastlake did not approve of this method of picture hanging, commenting, 'A framed picture, however small, should never be suspended from one *nail... The triangular space enclosed by a picture-cord stretched between three points must always be inharmonious with the horizontal and vertical lines of a room'.*

Entitled 'Love's Guiding star', this sentimental engraving of a lady and her child with a guardian angel, all dressed in flowing draperies, was typical of the sort of image found in 'improving' periodicals, which emphasised piety and family obligations.

These high Victorian prints show angelic visitations to elegantly dressed ladies and cherubic children. The lightness of the subjects contrasts with the huge and heavy gilded frames.

While some prints were reproductions of the great paintings of the day, others had a much more domestic feel, with themes such as idealised peasant life or guardian angels. Childhood, too, was a popular subject, reflecting the concept, developed first in the nineteenth century, of childhood as a separate state of innocence and vulnerability. These prints were at least partly responsible for the Victorian reputation for excessive sentimentality; they were produced in volume for periodicals, and were even used as images in advertisements. They were, however, often produced by accomplished and famous artists, and were decorative and pleasant in their subject matter; as such they were a firm favourite with householders, and a common sight in the parlour.

Polished wood and gesso, in layers of dark green and gold, make up these dramatic frames. The inner border is a slip of gilded wood, angled so that it catches the light, as an eye-catching alternative to the common velvet border.

Glass and mirrors

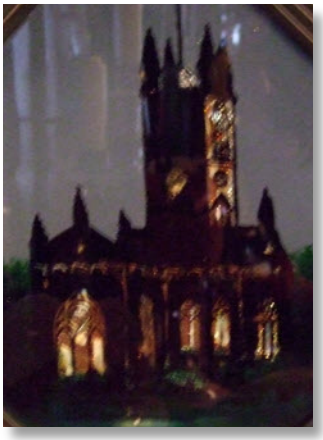
Painted glass was a distinctively Victorian type of wall decoration. In form, it ranged from painted mirrors to decorated opaque glass panels, usually in elaborate frames. These were sometimes commercially produced, but some were decorated by the ladies of the house, who would buy pre-framed mirrors for painting and kits for painting on glass.

This mirror is mounted in a particularly elaborate frame, with two different bands of moulded and painted gesso separated by a band of moss-green velvet. Gesso, meaning 'chalk', was a mixture which had been used for decoration since the time of the ancient Egyptians, but it was the development of moulds in the nineteenth century which allowed for mass production. The frame is bordered with a lacquered band of green faux tortoiseshell; the contrasting textures and materials combine to give a striking effect.

Painting on glass demanded a very different technique from the usual watercolours painted by Victorian ladies. Thick layers of oil paint were applied with broad brush strokes to a sheet of coloured or white glass or to the surface of a bevelled mirror, to build up an image which was bold in both colour and texture.

This pair of paintings is in many ways representative of Victorian glass paintings: they often came in pairs, and usually took flowers or the natural world as their subject. It was also common for them to be painted on white or milk glass panels, with a narrow gilded frame. However, there are some unusual features here. The panels are not white glass; they are transparent glass with a white backing. Furthermore, the murky background colour is reverse-painted. The combination of reverse painting and the bold flowers gives a feeling of depth which is unusual in Victorian glass flower paintings.

Right: these pictures are typical subjects for reverse painting on glass: the churches have windows backed with silver and gold foil as well as mother-of-pearl to give the impression of stained glass and to catch the light. Diagonal frames were sometimes used, both for reverse paintings and for painted mirrors, to give an unusual look to a basic wooden or gesso construction.



Another popular form of painting on glass was reverse painting, which had a very different effect from the thick raised paint of the glass paintings. Reverse painting was an old technique, going back to thirteenth century Italy. However, it was not until the Victorian period that the technique developed into a home craft. In America, Godey's *Ladies Magazine* offered a complete 'Antique Painting on Glass' kit for $5, including mezzotint engravings and painting equipment. Reverse painting became particularly popular in America, where it was used not only in pictures but in lamps and vases too.

This reverse painting is notable for its improvements on the classic design of the country church. The traditional abalone-decorated church, while a focal point, does not dominate the painting: it is balanced by some finely painted trees and a sail boat on the lake. Perhaps the most striking thing about the painting is the vivid blue of the sky and the lake in the background. While the church and other details are painted onto the front of the panel of glass, the background is painted onto the back, giving an almost three-dimensional impression of depth.

The Victorian technique was simple, but it required skill and practice. After the glass was coated with turpentine a paper print, pre-soaked in water, was placed on the glass with the print side down. It was gently smoothed with a wet cloth until only the picture's outline remained. When dry, it was painted by hand. Then extra features could be added; strategically placed segments of mother-of-pearl or abalone shell were popular because they glittered in the light, and were used as windows in buildings or as highlights in a design.

Gold and silver foil was used in reverse paintings, as a readily available alternative to mother-of-pearl; it was used with such enthusiasm, in fact, that reverse paintings of the Victorian period are sometimes dismissed as 'tinsel paintings'. Charles Eastlake, too, disapproved of this fashion, remarking, 'The characteristic beauty of... painted windows can never be even suggested by bits of coloured paper gummed to the surface of glass'. Eastlake's *Hints* were highly influential in a number of areas, particularly in the manufacture of furniture, but in the area of ladies' home crafts his comments seemed to carry less weight, and glass paintings remained popular.

Left: a tiny frame of faux tortoiseshell holds a small arrangement of pressed flowers. The use of pressed flowers or dried grasses in pictures was very popular; in the winter, when fresh flowers were unavailable, these pictures were seen as bringing a touch of summer into the parlour. Dora Hope, in The Girl's Own Paper*, urged young ladies to '"make hay while the sun shines"... and use our opportunities in the summer for providing against the dark days to come', going on to propose 'a few suggestions how they may make their houses pretty all the year round, if they will only make good use of their country walks'.*

Right: this bevelled oval mirror is not painted, but it is impressively decorated, in an unusual manner. The frame is covered in moss-green velvet, and on top of the velvet are applied wooden fruits, carved in a style inspired by the seventeenth century royal Master Carver Grinling Gibbons, interspersed with leather flowers and leaves. Ornamental leather-work of this sort was another ladies' craft despised by Eastlake, who comments acidly, 'Pieces of leather cut into the shapes of leaves and flowers, glued together and varnished, represent at best but a wretched parody of the carver's art... Such work as this may be the rage for a few seasons, but sooner or later must fall, as it deserves to fall, into universal contempt'.

Furniture

Chairs and sofas

The Victorian period later became known, and mocked, for its over-stuffed furniture; the novelist Edith Wharton, in her 1897 book *The Decoration of Houses*, comments bitingly, 'The modern upholsterer pads and puffs his seats as though they were to form the furniture of a lunatic's cell; and then, having expanded them to such dimensions that they cannot be moved without effort, perches their dropsical bodies on four little casters'.

The impression of opulence, through luxurious and deep-buttoned fabrics, was an important element of Victorian style, and was a reaction to earlier and more streamlined fashions in furnishings. Fringes, braiding and beading were all used to embellish chairs and sofas.

Buttoned chesterfield-style sofas were popular, as was the drop-arm sofa, which allowed the householder to have either a sofa or a chaise longue, depending on the needs of the family and guests. The drop-arm had a ratchet mechanism which worked by pressing a spot or pushing a lever.

Left: this Chesterfield style sofa is deep buttoned on the back and the seat. The Victorian sofa rarely had fitted cushions; instead the seat would be sprung and padded with horsehair, which made it both resilient and comfortable. Here the three-seater sofa is upholstered in a deep pink velvet, edged with braid which draws attention to the classic shape.

Today the Victorians have a reputation for objecting to furniture legs on the grounds of modesty. This is a misinterpretation, based on Captain Marryat's 1839 book *A Diary in America* in which he makes a satirical exaggerated comment on American prudishness. Furniture legs were sometimes covered up, but the purpose was to hide the fact that they were made out of cheap pine. Well turned mahogany legs were rarely covered.

Left: this gold velvet drop-arm sofa is a small two-seater when the arm is up, but dropping the arm allows space for more people to sit, or enables one person to lounge in comfort.

Foot stools

The foot stool, like the fire screen, was a way for the ladies of the house to demonstrate their talents on a small scale. The frames could be purchased and upholstered by the householder in a range of different materials, styles and techniques. As a result, foot stools, while following broad fashions, were highly individual, and it is unusual to find any two exactly the same.

This small foot stool is covered in tightly stitched Berlin woolwork. The frame is oak and decorated with a marquetry band, and the little bun feet are made of porcelain.

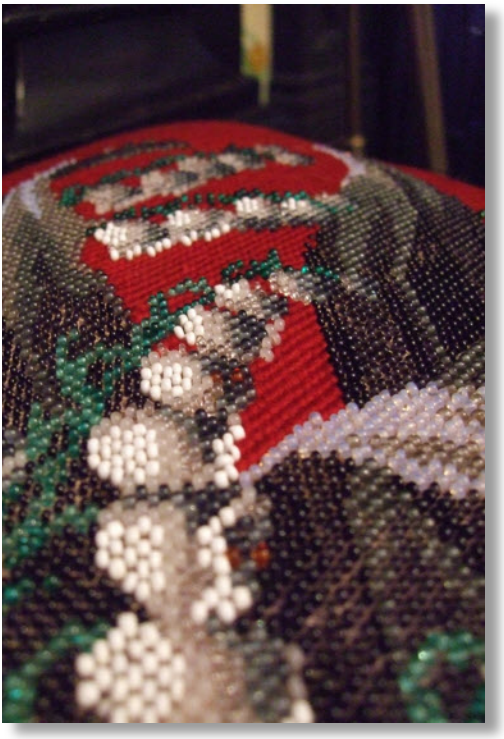
Above: fender stools were long and narrow, but in other respects similar to ordinary foot stools. This fender stool is upholstered with a panel of woolwork and beaded flowers, edged with braid.

***Below:t**his pair of beadwork foot stools provides an example of one of the most startling elements of Victorian beadwork: the use of the colour blue. The extraordinary blue of the beads, similar in colour to the oriental cloisonne dishes popular at the time, was so striking that it became the most frequently used colour, deployed as a background for designs on stools, screens, trays and tea cosies.*

This foot stool has a woolwork top and mahogany ball and claw feet. The pattern, of pink roses on a black background, uses many shades of pink and green, so the effect is both subtle and bold at the same time, demonstrating the versatility of woolwork.

Berlin woolwork was a popular technique. Patterns for tapestries were sold or could be drawn, and the stitching was a simple variant of the cross stitch, using wool rather than expensive embroidery thread, so it was a handicraft accessible to everyone. It was also practical for foot stools, because the tightly stitched wool provided a hard-wearing cover. Designs could be striking, making full use of the range of vivid wool colours available.

Beadwork, too, was often exhibited on footstools, although beadwork had more constraints than woolwork. One was that the colours available were more limited, so designs tended to utilise dramatic contrasts (black/white, blue/red) rather than subtler palettes. Another constraint was the fragile nature of beadwork; while a whole panel could cover a small foot stool designed to be primarily ornamental, for bigger stools a combination of beadwork and woolwork would be used, to make the covering sturdy enough to be functional. Isabella Beeton, in her 1870 *Beeton's Book of Needlework*, considered the use of beads also to be Berlin Work; the combination of beads and wool was a popular and effective one.



The combination of woolwork and beadwork on this large foot stool gives a mixture of style and practicality. The red background is Berlin woolwork, covering the areas most prone to damage, and the beadwork design is concentrated in the centre. The design is picked out in shades of black, white and grey, with occasional splashes of green to keep it from being monochrome. The frame is of highly ornamental cast iron, which makes the stool extremely sturdy.

Other furniture

While the display cabinet and its contents formed a dramatic set-piece in the parlour, closed cabinets and bookcases were also found there, especially in alcoves. Cabinets with solid doors were particularly useful, because they gave the householder somewhere discreet to hide work materials and anything else not intended for public view; Clarence Cook accompanies his illustration of a large Chinese double cabinet with the explanation: 'It will hold a great deal, and a piece of furniture modeled on it would be found most convenient in any house where there are books of prints, or old china, or curios, or anything of which it is not desired to make a display'. The doors also provided a large space for decoration. Some cabinets were painted or decorated by the ladies of the house, but more affluent households might purchase decorated cabinets from department stores or catalogues.

Overleaf: the very fact that this substantial Chinese cabinet does not look out of place in the High Victorian Parlour illustrates how wide-ranging and eclectic Victorian influences were. The use of gold and mother-of-pearl, while typically Chinese, also matches the gilding and mother-of-pearl used so lavishly in the British items displayed throughout the parlour.

Right: carved wooden cabinets, pot cupboards, sideboards and chiffoniers tended to be made out of mahogany or rosewood, for most of the Victorian period, but towards the end of the nineteenth century ebonised wood and English oak were starting to become more fashionable.

Because there tended to be so many side tables in the Victorian parlour, for the display of objects, lamps and plants, the tables themselves needed to present some variety. Some were foreign and exotic; Indian brass or octagonal tables were common, as were oriental or oriental-inspired tables, and coffee tables 'à la Turque' were popular in both Britain and America. Such items were imported in great numbers, and were hugely popular throughout most of the nineteenth century.

Above: a traditional Indian carved table decorated with mother-of-pearl inlay and Arabic script.

Left: an unusual little octagonal table of slate, decorated with Persian scenes. Tables such as these were light and easy to move around, which made them very useful, and they were small enough to fit in spaces too limited for other items of furniture.

Left: with two fold-out leaves, this small leather-topped side table can be changed into a long sofa table whenever additional table space is required.

Below: a twisted mahogany plant stand fits neatly into a tiny space to support a lamp.

Metamorphic, extendable or folding furniture was a common sight in the Victorian home, and particularly in the parlour. Tea tables would fold out into card tables, occasional tables would have drop leaves so that they could be changed into sofa tables, a small wine table would open to reveal a sewing box, a decorative set of steps could be folded up to make an extra chair, and so on. Partly this could be attributed to the dual purpose of the parlour, as a family room and as a public entertaining space: the furniture had to be flexible both in form and function, to accommodate changing requirements. However, the Victorian love of novelty also played a part; a piece of furniture that could change shape or function was something different and therefore desirable.

Periodicals dedicated to decorating, like The House *(above), as well as home decoration and furnishing articles in general periodicals like* The Queen, London Review *and* Scribner's Monthly*, provided the householder with rules about furniture, dictating what sort of furniture should go in each room and how it should be arranged, often with illustrations. It was fashionable in these articles to lament the decline of modern taste, throughout the second half of the nineteenth century. In 1897, however,* The House *took a cautious stance against such pessimism: 'There are, unfortunately, few furnishing showrooms which do not contain many things more suitable for fuel than for any other purpose; but, on the other hand, we respectfully decline to join the ranks of those modern* nil admirari *who, when they discuss the existing condition of things as they appear in our English homes, clasp their hands in an agonised manner, cast down their eyes, and cry Ichabod! Ichabod!'*


Lighting

Candle light and oil lamps were the main sources of domestic illumination early in the Victorian period, before gas came to most homes. Chandeliers and wall sconces for candles would have been fitted, but most ordinary events after sunset – dining, playing cards and reading - took place using portable light sources such as candlesticks, candelabra and oil lamps, and by the light of the fire. Although gas and eventually electricity grew in popularity throughout the Victorian era, photographs of interiors taken by architectural photographer H. Bedford Lemere between 1890 and 1910 indicate that even as late as the 1890s fashionable hotels and homes were still being lit by candlelight and oil lamps. The candles usually had shades, some with frills and tassels; the popularity of such shades persisted, despite the fact that they were a proven fire hazard.

A fragile and beautiful pair of Victorian candle shades, which hang down from metal rings in delicate folds of coloured lace and tiny beads.

Oil lamps had existed in some form for centuries, but their design improved dramatically during the nineteenth century. One of the most significant lighting-related improvements of the Victorian period was the introduction of paraffin, also called 'kerosene' or 'coal oil'. Patented in 1850, the price of the new fuel fell considerably following the discovery of oil in Pennsylvania. Because paraffin was much lighter than the thick and viscous colza fuel (whale or rapeseed oil) used formerly, the lamp reservoir could be placed below the flame, and this led to many new designs being introduced. One of the most popular and successful types of paraffin lamp was the Duplex burner, introduced in 1865, which had two wicks side by side and a clear glass chimney with air drawn from below. The shades often used around the chimney provided an opportunity for decoration, and a variety of shapes and decorative designs were used. Shades were sometimes made of opaque or frosted glass, to diffuse the light from the lamp. Oil lamp shades, once simple globes, became more and more elaborate as time went on, so that High Victorian lamp shades were the height of elaborate glass manufacture.

Shades were almost always made of glass, but fonts or reservoirs were made of a range of materials. Brass was common, but there were also ceramic and glass fonts, in different colours and styles. Glass fonts were useful because the level of oil was visible, but they were fragile and breakable; metal fonts were more sturdy, but they retained heat. Ceramic fonts were versatile in a decorative sense, because they could be decorated to match their shades. Tall lamps in a pillar style with glass or ceramic fonts were popular in the parlour, but they were easy to knock over. More practical were the shorter lamps with cast iron bases, but these were considered less aesthetically pleasing.

The paraffin oil lamp remained the dominant form of domestic lighting throughout the Victorian period because, unlike electricity and gas, it did not require homes to be adapted for it, so the oil lamp was available to all sections of society, including the poorest.

Above left: an integrated reservoir and base, made out of thin brass with a stamped design. Above right: a sturdy cast iron base with a hand-painted porcelain reservoir. Cast iron bases like this were considered inelegant, but they were the safest form of support.

This oil lamp illustrates many characteristic features of the High Victorian oil lamp. Its shape is tall and elegant, mounted on a finely cast brass column instead of the bulbous base common to earlier lamps. The font is highly decorative, composed of turquoise ceramic with raised and painted flowers and details picked out in gold. The shade is made of 'melon' shaped, frosted and etched glass, with the chimney protruding from the top.

Clipped to the chimney is a Veritas mica smoke consumer, as shown in the Veritas catalogue (part number P1118). Smoke consumers or mica screens within shades were recommended both for oil lamps and for gas fittings: they did not eliminate the blackening caused by soot, but they made it less concentrated and noticeable.

These shades, while different in shape and pattern, share some common features. One is the graded colour, changing from an opaque white at the bottom to a vibrant green or yellow at the top edge. Another is the style; all three shades are frosted to diffuse the light, and this makes the patterns stand out when the lamp is lit. Another common feature is the type of design; in all three, flowers grow on sinuous stalks from the base of the shade. The influence of early Art Nouveau, which was growing in popularity through the 1890s, can be seen in the patterns; in Pan *magazine of 1894 an early Art Nouveau work was described as having 'sudden violent curves generated by the crack of a whip', and such 'whiplash' curves are in evidence here, particularly in the shade above.*

Not all oil lamp shades were made of glass. Some, like this one above, were flamboyant confections of pale silk and lace, in soft colours to maximise the light. Silk lampshades were neither practical nor hard-wearing; on oil lamps they only lasted for ten or fifteen years at the most before they began to disintegrate. They were not appreciated by everyone, on both aesthetic and practical grounds: in the early 1890s Aymer Vallance commented in the Art Journal*, 'Unhappily it is the fashion to use elaborate shades of silk or lace and ribbons, or of crimped paper ruched like a lady's skirt. Such things savour too much of Parisian millinery, and moreover are liable, if left for any length of time unwatched, to become scorched and catch fire'. The comparison with millinery was an apt one; milliners, already skilled in working with silk on wire frames, were among the first to make silk shades, as were funeral parlours, with their experience of lining coffins.*

This lamp is made in the French style, with base, font and shade formed of the same material and decorated with the same design. Here the shade is made of metal, and only the cabuchons and beads are made of glass, so they glitter when the lamp is lit. As such, it is an interesting example of middle class lighting. The working classes, who might only own a few lamps, would try to maximise the available light, usually choosing to use clear shades or no shades at all. In middle class homes, however, there would be so many lamps that the illumination could be dimmed by shades and diffusers to produce a light that was soothing and easy on the eye. Therefore dark or metal shades became an indicator of status and wealth.

Standard or floor lamps were developed in the mid-nineteenth century for domestic use. The first standard lamps were oil lamps, and they were usually of sturdy brass or cast iron construction, sometimes with a telescopic pole to vary the height. Gas naturally could not be used in the standard lamp, so homes which had gas laid on would retain their oil standard lamps. A little later in the century, electricity made standard lamps fashionable again, and the electric versions were much more versatile: their bases did not need to be quite so wide and bulky for stability, and their shades could be made of more delicate materials which would not be safe on an oil lamp. Standard lamps consequently became far more elaborate and imaginative after the domestic arrival of electric light.

This fragile mottled and hand-stitched early celluloid lampshade, with its long fringes, was one of the 'new' shades made possible by electricity. The globular brass stand was probably imported from India, along with thousands of other objects made for the British market.

Gas and Electricity

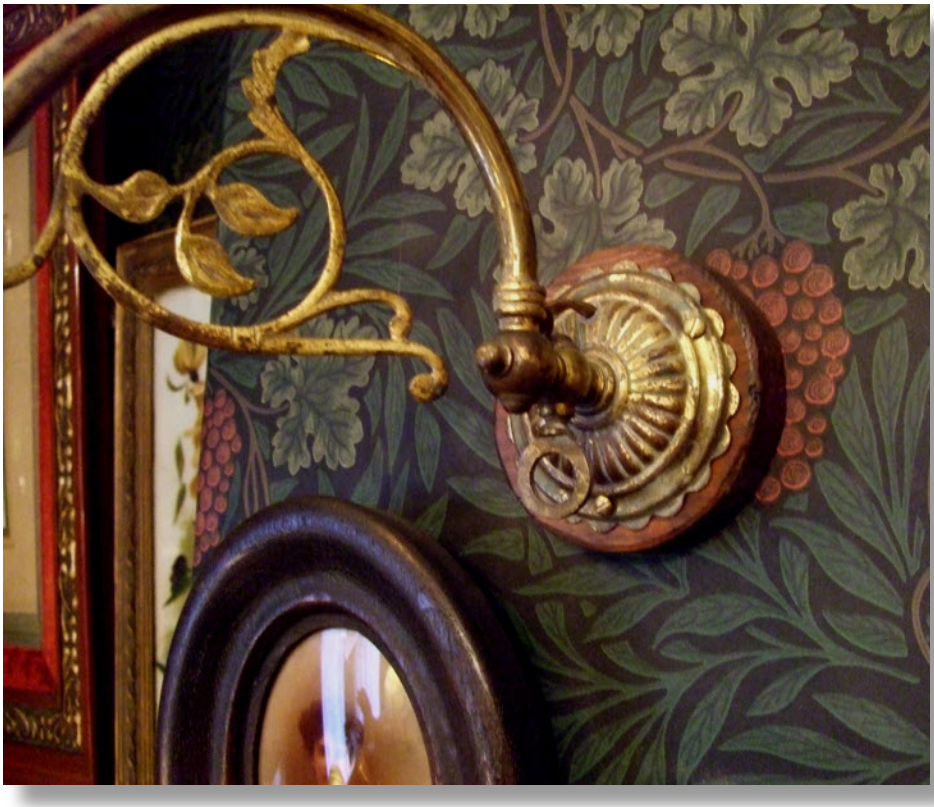
Throughout the late Victorian period, gas was perceived as middle class lighting. From the 1860s onward gas supplies were often built into newly built houses which were purchased by the middle classes, and gas companies optimistically laid gas lines in streets inhabited by middle class families, in the hope that sooner or later they would choose to have their houses converted. In the last third of the nineteenth century, many did; for those who could afford the conversion, gas became a desirable convenience. For the poor, gas took longer to become available, although by the end of the nineteenth century the gas companies were turning their attention towards the working family.

Gas was never popular with the upper classes; many mansions and stately homes never converted to gas at all, or if they did, it was only in the servants' halls. Gas was messy and could destroy valuable and fragile furnishings; but beyond the practical considerations, its enthusiastic adoption by the wealthy middle classes gained for it the reputation of being 'vulgar'.

The vulgarity of gas was reinforced by the fittings which were made available. Oil lamps had developed over centuries, and had been slowly refined in both function and style; gas, however, had developed rapidly into a thriving industry at the height of a manufacturing boom, and gas fittings reflected that. In style, they were almost universally condemned by critics. Mrs Loftie, in *The Dining Room*, 1878, remarked, 'Nothing can compete with the gaselier in tawdry deformity. Bronze and ormolu constructions of leaves and chains, dogs' heads and mermaids, scrolls and flowers, basket work and pebble knobs, Brummagen gone hopelessly mad and poisoning us besides'. This catalogue of criticisms lumps together all of the tasteless elements of the gaselier under the disparaging term 'Brummagen', coined to describe the often low-quality brass products produced in vast quantities in Birmingham. According to the critics, the middle classes accepted this tawdry Brummagen with blind enthusiasm.

Gas lighting was also unpopular among the upper classes because of the quality of the illumination, which was considered to be too bright for living areas. Some creative ways were found to deal with the problem, although none gained widespread popularity. In 1822 the Prince Regent, at his Brighton Pavilion, illuminated rooms through the use of external gas lamps which shone through the stained glass windows; however, this was not a solution that was open to the ordinary householder.

One of the reasons why gas became associated with vulgarity was its use in public places: theatres and pubs were particularly quick to adopt gas, and the well-lit local pub became very attractive at night to working class men who were still limited to a couple of oil lamps at home. Indeed, this became such a common perception that the Electrical Development Association later used it as a selling point in its promotional literature, with the slogan, 'Everything electrical will make a house a home./ Leaving restless husbands little wish at night to roam'. Gas lamps also transformed the streets at night. These uses of gas led to it being seen as a public amenity, and one which might therefore not be suitable for use in the best houses.



The simple floral form of this bracket is much cleaner in form than many of the ornate gas brackets of the time, and imitates the curved vines of the Morris & Co. wallpaper. This fitting has undergone a later conversion to electricity, although it retains its original gas tap.

This grand central chandelier was originally a gas lamp, as can be seen from the rigid central pole hollowed to take the gas supply. Like many expensive gas fittings, however, it was converted to electricity in the late nineteenth century.

By the last two decades of the nineteenth century, electric lighting was beginning to be used in a domestic context: however, the provision of electricity was patchy and expensive, as well as being confined to selected urban areas, and there were other objections to its use. One was its safety; before fuses came to be commonly used, accidents and fires were common. At Hatfield House, which was converted to electricity very early, 'a party of guests entering the Long Gallery found the carved panelling near the ceiling bursting into flames under the contact of an overheated wire ... and with well directed volleys of sofa cushions, rendered the summoning of a fire engine unnecessary'. In its early days, electric lighting was not seen to be any safer than gas, and it was some time before this perception was universally changed.

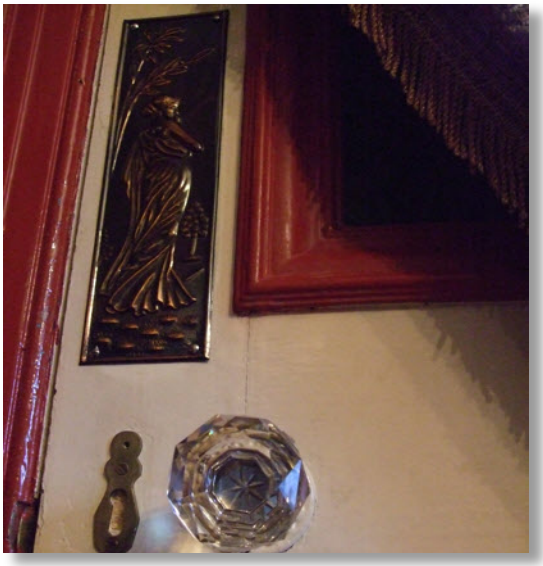
Another objection, as with gas, was to the quality of the light, which was seen as harsh and damaging to the eyes. It was also unflattering. Mrs J. E. Gordon said of the early electric light, 'No one over the age of eighteen should be asked to sit beneath such a light! Light like sympathy should be unobtrusive to be pleasant, and soft reflected rays fall more kindly than direct light on tired eyes and on the faces and figures of those who have passed the "half-way house of life"'. In a similar vein, Lady Jebb noted in 1879, 'On Wednesday we are all asked to see the Museum lit up for the Conversazione with electrical light. Mrs Brownlow asked me yesterday what she should wear. I told her if we consulted our best interests, we should wrap our faces up in some kind of head covering and look out on the world with one eye. Nothing more frightfully unbecoming than the glare of electricity having ever been discovered'. The upper class ladies, it would seem, were united against electric light.

While electricity was becoming a popular domestic convenience in cities by the late 1880s, it took some time to iron out all of the wrinkles, to produce the domestic electricity supply that we take for granted today. One problem was that many private households opted for inadequate but cheaper installations, and the resulting light did nothing to improve the reputation of electricity. In January of 1900 *The Times* reported, 'of all the lights in use, the electric light is the most irritating and depressing when the supply is insufficient... Electric light with insufficient voltage acquires an abominable orange tinge, which may be warranted to give the most tastefully decorated drawing room the aspect of a dungeon'. Both gas and electricity had a shaky start in the Victorian era; while the developments of the time were extraordinary, on a domestic level they brought with them problems, upheaval and no small degree of reluctance.

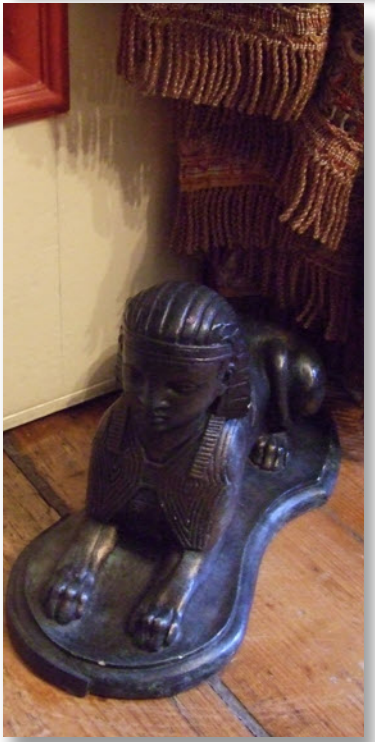
Decor and Fittings

The decoration of rooms was a matter for intense and enthusiastic debate in Victorian Britain. Due to the work of leading designers and architects on innovative wallpaper designs, wallpaper became extremely popular as a decorative wall treatment, with showrooms opening around the country, and the ways in which the new papers and paints should be used and combined were the subject of much (and often conflicting) advice and criticism. In all matters relating to the decoration, fixtures and fittings of the parlour from the 1860s onwards, Charles Eastlake was regarded in Britain as the authority, following many of the same principles as the Arts and Crafts Movement was simultaneously promoting, but presenting them to the ordinary householder in serialised 'hints' which were easily understood and followed.

Doors were an important element of the decorative scheme of any room, and there were many different treatments for them. Fashions changed, but one constant was the popularity of the finger plate. Usually brass, but sometimes copper, oak or porcelain, these plates evolved in the Victorian period from simple, unadorned features to works of art. They were sometimes decorated with a geometric design, but could also be embossed with pictures of flowers, fruit or figures. Eastlake regards the finger plate with approval, particularly when it, 'without being Gothic or ecclesiastical in appearance, is treated after an artistic fashion'.



This embossed brass finger plate is decorated with a picture of a lady dressed in classical draperies. It is a typical plate of the 1870s or 80s; many later finger plates were much larger, also extending horizontally to form a back plate for the door handle, and including a key hole. Here the door handle is of faceted glass and brass, while the escutcheon is a simple brass one.



Door curtains could be hung from a brass portiere pole, a rod mounted on the door itself in an ingenious manner. When the door opened the rod would pivot, and lifted slightly to raise the door curtain off the floor and prevent it from being dragged under the door. Door curtains in chilly houses would be made of heavy brocades or velvets, and were very effective draught excluders.

Left: this miniature Sphinx door stop, made of cast iron with a bronze coating, demonstrates the continuing popularity of all things Egyptian. The principles governing Egyptian art were much admired by Victorian critics. Owen Jones, in a paper read before the Royal Society of British Architects in 1856, stated, 'Egyptian art, although the oldest, is, in all that is requisite to constitute a true style of art, the most perfect'.

Windows would usually be topped by a pelmet or lambrequin to hide curtain poles and rings. The pelmet would be made of stiffened fabric, cut and shaped, which would be trimmed with fringes and tassels. The Victorian pelmet was attached to a rigid wooden frame, sometimes referred to as a 'cornice', which was built around the top of the window. Clarence Cook in *The House Beautiful*, criticised this practice at length, concluding, 'Here the housekeeper cuts in with: "But then, sir, the room looks so bare without 'cornices.' And, how are we to support our lambrequins without their aid?" Well, I will be down upon lambrequins presently, and give them a gentle piece of my mind: but first let us see whether it is inevitable that the room should "look bare" without the cornices. That it does look bare, as a rule, I will admit, but that is the fault of the room.' Cook advocated a switch to the simple curtain pole, but believed that a wholesale reform in decor would be necessary to support the change.

These stained and painted heraldic designs are not typical of ordinary Victorian domestic glass. Heraldic windows were popularised by the Arts and Crafts Movement, which looked back to early English crafts for inspiration, late in the nineteenth century.

Stained glass windows were common in Victorian homes, particularly in fan lights and vestibule doors. In a time when streets were dimly lit, buildings were blackened by smoke and (particularly in London) fog and smog were frequent and sometimes hazardous, a stained glass entryway was a striking and welcome feature. The glow of stained glass was seen as a highly desirable addition to any room, and as a result the stained glass business became a very profitable one, with factories and studios opening around Britain in the mid-nineteenth century. Domestic stained glass, in most homes, followed the popular Victorian theme of nature: roundels painted with birds and flowers usually formed the centrepiece of a painted or coloured glass panel, and matching sets of door panels, side panels and fanlights were available for vestibules.

In keeping with the emphasis placed on British history and traditional design by movements like the Gothic Revival and the Arts and Crafts movement, these window panels offer the coats of arms of the races (Saxons, Danes, Britaines, Romans) from whom the British nation descended.

Unlike most later stained glass, Victorian stained glass was a combination of techniques: plain shapes of coloured glass were combined with hand-painted panels, or with designs fired into the glass.

Wall decoration in the late Victorian period was a curious mixture of the flamboyant and the practical. It was a golden age of wallpaper: new designs and fashions were being continually developed, and new techniques for printing wallpaper made it available to the ordinary householder. Elaborate papers were used on the top or the central part of the wall; these tended to be dark, because the smoke from the fires and lamps could dull light patterns very quickly. Eastlake notes approvingly in 1878 that 'good and well-designed papers may now be had at a very reasonable price', but adds, 'Of course, many wretched specimens continue to be displayed... The British public are, as a body, utterly incapable of distinguishing good from bad design'.

Printed wallpaper, however, remained a significant expense for most ordinary households, so it was not usual to apply it to a whole wall. Instead, the wall was usually divided by a dado rail, below which was panelling or a raised paper. The dado was also called a chair rail; its purpose was to provide a hard-wearing surface at chair level, so that the furniture would not mark the more expensive patterned paper.

A dado was not always used; an alternative was to apply a low picture rail, and to wallpaper below it to the skirting board. This style of decoration was more popular in rooms like the bedroom, in which there would be fewer items of furniture pushed against the walls, and therefore less risk of a 'grazing-line', as Eastlake puts it. However, in the parlour this was considered not only impractical but also unattractive: Eastlake states firmly that 'The most dreary method of decorating the wall of a sitting-room is to cover it all over with an unrelieved pattern of monotonous design'.

Skirting boards in the Victorian home were very deep, to match the usually lofty ceilings. The proportion of the wall was important, and a deep skirting board (covering at least a quarter, possibly a third, of the wall between the floor and the dado rail) was key to achieving the correct proportions.

Here the Morris & Co. 'Vine' pattern, a particularly dark and practical paper, is matched with a geometric anaglypta below the dado. This has been painted with red gloss paint that is hard-wearing and easily cleaned.

Cornice mouldings of acanthus leaves were common, so common, in fact, that Eastlake refers to them as 'the inevitable acanthus-leaf, as if in the whole range of vegetable life this was the only kind of foliage worth imitating'.

Cornice mouldings would be found in almost every Victorian parlour; they were usually put in when the houses were built, and their presence was taken for granted. In the absence of a picture rail, they dealt with the awkward join between wallpaper and ceiling, as well as bringing a touch of grandeur to even the most ordinary terraced house. Cornices were usually made of plaster, and were moulded with leaves, flowers, fruit and sometimes swags and bows. In large properties and stately homes the details of the cornice were sometimes picked out in different paint colours, but in most British domestic parlours this was avoided. White was the colour of choice, for the cornice and the ceiling, because it could easily be repainted with whitewash on a regular basis, whenever the ceiling became soot-stained. As a result, Victorian cornice mouldings which survive today are usually covered in layers of paint so thick that much of their detail is obscured.

It is often thought that the ceiling rose was originally designed to protect the ceiling from the heat and charring from candle chandeliers and later oil and gas fittings, so that only the rose had to be repainted, rather than the whole ceiling; however, if this was the original purpose it soon became irrelevant, when ceiling roses became so elaborate that they were actually more of a challenge to paint than the ceiling itself. At times the ceiling rose was criticised for being too extravagant. Clarence Cook remarks, 'Our ceilings have been getting into bad ways of late, though rather mending than otherwise from what they were five years or so ago. Then the plasterers had it all their own way, and a pretty mess they made of it. They evidently thought "there was nothing like plaster."'. The parlour would have the most impressive rose in the house; bedrooms and attic rooms would rarely have a ceiling rose. The rose would be aligned with the centre of the chimney breast, even when that was not the centre of the room. Some parlours would have decorative plasterwork right across the ceiling, in geometric patterns, but the cornice and ceiling rose was by far the most common combination.

Pine floorboards, varnished to give a rich colour. The varnish also provides a hard-wearing surface which is easy to clean.

Pine floorboards, stained and varnished and strewn with rugs, were considered the correct choice for a parlour floor. Other floor treatments were available, and were used elsewhere in the house: linoleum and fitted carpets began to be used in Britain in the 1850s, and encaustic tile floors would be found in hallways and vestibules. The parlour, however, was not considered to be an appropriate area for these coverings. Eastlake comments, in typically caustic fashion, 'No one wants a carpet in the nooks and corners of a room; and it is pleasant to feel that there, at all events, the floor can assert its independence'. The main consideration was one of hygiene: *The House* periodical states that 'carpets made to entirely fit a room may be looked upon as mere dirt-traps', and advocates the treatment of floorboards with 'boiled linseed oil, then giving it a coat of beeswax and turpentine, or it may be treated with shellac', in order to make the floor dirt-resistant and easy to clean. A single large rug could be used to cover the majority of the floor; if so, the visible edges of the floorboards could be painted or stained a dark colour, but the floor covered by the rug was often left unpainted for the sake of economy or convenience.

Two different styles of bell pull. Below is an ornate Green Man design in bronze, typical of the 1850s and 60s; above is a later copper and brass bell pull, with a stylised pomegranate design inspired by the Arts and Crafts movement.

Late Victorian houses were often wired for bells: a bell pull in the parlour would activate a flag in the bell box in the servants' quarters. While the bell boxes tended to be utilitarian, the bell pulls themselves were often elaborately decorated. They were made of a range of materials, but the most common were brass, copper, wood and ceramic.

The fireplace in the parlour tended to be large and grand. A dining room fireplace might be made of oak or mahogany, but in the parlour marble or marble-effect fireplaces were far more common. Not all households could afford marble, but cheaper slate versions painted and veined to resemble marble were readily available. This became a controversial practice, as Clarence Cook explained in 1877: 'the manufacturers became at last so intoxicated with their success in the business as to overshoot the mark and produce a reaction. Now, as we know, marbleized slate, if found at all in good houses, is thrust out of sight into rooms little used; but its main employment is in cheap houses made to sell and to tickle the buyer's eye, or in "flats," where these stunning mantel-pieces are supposed to make the rash gazer, while he wipes his eye, forget to remark the cracked and blistered plaster, the gaping wood-work, and the wind that whistles through the door and window-frames'.

Early in the Victorian period fireplaces were left exposed, so that their architectural details could be appreciated. As time went on, however, this was considered too dull and plain for a parlour, and mantle pelmets, screens, curtains and other forms of decoration became common.

Tile panels, consisting of six-inch tiles and sometimes smaller spacer-tiles, would cover the gap between the insert and the fireplace, and matching tiles could also be used to tile the hearth. A vast range of fireplace tiles was produced in the nineteenth century, many by leading designers of the day. Tiles commonly had designs of flowers and fruit on them, but in the latter half of the nineteenth century more imaginative designs could sometimes be seen, with Minton Hollins producing a series of Arthurian tiles, scenes from Shakespeare and even fairy tales.

This sculpted fireplace has variegated black and green marble pillars attached to a glossy black slate background. Many slate fireplaces had 'marbled' panels, imitating fireplaces like this one, but imitations went out of fashion towards the end of the nineteenth century when 'faux' effects began to be seen (following the criticisms of Eastlake, Cook and others on both sides of the Atlantic) as the epitome of bad taste. Painted slate, however, did have some advantages over marble, in that it could be tailored to a colour scheme; real marble fireplaces were available in only a limited range of colours, some of which (particularly the white and pink ones) were not suited to the usual decorative schemes of the parlour.

Fenders in the late Victorian period were much simpler than the elaborate fenders of the early nineteenth century. As Eastlake memorably explains, they 'fully answer the purpose for which (as its very name signifies) a *fender* is intended, namely, to protect dresses, &c., from the chance of becoming ignited by close contact with the fire - an accident, unfortunately, of too frequent occurrence while the dangerous and ungraceful crinoline was in fashion'. With the decline of the crinoline in the 1860s, fenders no longer needed to be quite so robust.

Eastlake's views on fenders, both in their composition and in their care, are most specific: '"Berlin black" is the best sort of lacquer for stoves and fenders, if in summer-time they are required to look fresh and new. "Blacklead" is a modern abomination'. The varnish known as Berlin black dried with an almost dead surface, while blacklead, which became very popular, had a shine to it which Eastlake seems to have found especially offensive.

Eastlake also objected to Victorian decorative fire irons: 'it is a positive fact that in some houses each drawing-room fireplace has two pokers - a humble one for actual use, and the other, of burnished steel, kept simply to look at! It is needless to say, that while such absurd practices as these continue, we can hardly hope for a healthy and vigorous development of what may be called household art. If fire-irons are used at all, they should be made of a material which justifies their real purpose.'

The corners and details of this simple cast iron fender are moulded in brass, but decoration is kept to a minimum., and the main body of the fender is coated in a matte black.

Conclusion

Clarence Cook stated in his popular and successful book of 1877, 'Now, the improvement of public taste, if that be not too presumptuous an aim, is one of the principal objects of this book of mine, and it seems to me I can do something toward this end by showing beautiful things, even if they are, not seldom, out of reach'. While public taste has undergone many a change in the century and a half since Cook's crusade, the inspirational effect of beautiful things remains a constant, driving us to visit museums and galleries, to enjoy stately homes, and to collect antiques for our own homes. The purpose of this book has been simply to record and share the beautiful things of the High Victorian Parlour.

A detail of the elegant Art Nouveau/Deco living room of Fraser House.

However, just as the Victorian objects and furniture of the Parlour need to be seen in the context of the whole room in order to be properly appreciated, so the Parlour itself needs to be seen in the context of Fraser House as a whole. Each room in the house is devoted to a different era or concept, ranging in time from the medieval to the futuristic, and in space from the Arab East to the Italian Lakes. Collections of antiques and art are augmented by murals, stained glass windows and unique decorative schemes.

Above: a dramatic ecclesiastical corner, with chapel furniture, fittings and objects.

Right: the Storybook Room, a bedroom showcasing childhood treasures of the past, contains a stunning Victorian-inspired dolls' house.

In his nineteenth-century survey of changing domestic taste, Charles Eastlake criticised houses which embraced a range of styles: 'In the early part of the present century a fashionable conceit prevailed of fitting up separate apartments in large mansions each after a style of its own. Thus we had Gothic halls, Elizabethan chambers, Louis Quatorze drawing-rooms, &c., &c., all under one roof'. He roundly condemned this eclecticism as 'practical evidence that a healthy and genuine taste was altogether wanting'. However, Eastlake's plea for decorative consistency failed to recognise the value of interior variation as a widening of taste, and an exploration of style through the ages. Fraser House rejects the idea of a single, homogenous style, in favour of celebrating the best of domestic interior design throughout British history.