Design Notebook

Ada Louise Huxtable

Two histories of American interior taste.

THERE are two kinds of books about interiors: those about the latest look and how to be the first on your block to have it, and the more serious publications that claim to be critical or documentary in nature, ranging from treatises on taste to histories of interior furnishings and design.

The kind of detachment needed to write history or criticism seems to elude those who deal with domestic interiors; what is produced, almost invariably, are polemics of status and style. In no other field of design is the good taste of one generation so manifestly destined to become the bad taste of another generation, nor do selective or subjective judgments dissemble as scholarship in quite such shameless fashion.

There is something in almost all of us that rejects colors and finishes like puce and high varnish; furnishings relentlessly lined up against the walls or catty-cornered and fringed; tables smack in the center of rooms that hold winged, clutching, naked marble couples. The arty clutter of pottery and shawls advocated by 19th century esthetic reformers, the dark and somber rooms of turn-of-the-century tycoons, are among the casualties of fashion, once adored and now despised.

It takes more character and restraint than that possessed by the average historic house curator to resist the urge to upgrade modest possessions into "museum quality" collections, or to rearrange the furniture to look better to 20th century eyes. In other words, how it was supposed to be often isn't how it really was at all. The experts tend to cheat a little here and there. The admirers of things past, consciously or not, often edit that past to their taste.

Two recently published books show us, in very different ways, how it was, rather than how it might have been. One is a work of careful, scholarly research and the other is a product of popular "shelter" journalism. Together, they give real insights into how America lived, or dreamed of living, over the years.

The classic in the field still is, and probably always will be, "Photographs of New York Interiors at the Turn of the Century" from the Byron Collection at the Museum of the City of New York (Dover Publications, $5). Nothing equals the domestic voyeurism of these photographs of turn-of-the-century New York homes, warts and all.

"A Documentary History of American Interiors from the Colonial Era to 1915," by Edgar de N. Mayhew and Minor Myers Jr. (Charles Scribner's Sons, $45), is a fascinating, painstakingly detailed account of styles in American domestic interiors, using original documents, paintings, drawings, prints, books, catalogues and publications as sources.

The furniture, fabrics, accessories, colors, materials and preferences of American households are traced from the 17th- and 18th-century Queen Anne, Chippendale, Federal and Empire styles, through the multiple revivals and rampant eclecticism of the 19th century, to the beginning of World War I. This conscientious detective work is a first-rate and most welcome addition to the literature of style and taste.

The second volume, "Twentieth Century Decorating, Architecture and Gardens, 80 Years of Ideas and Pleasure from House and Garden" (Holt, Rinehart and Winston, $29.95 now, $34.95 after Dec. 31), takes up chronologically just about where the other book leaves off. Edited by Mary Jane Pool, with text editing and chapter introductions by Caroline Seebohm, this is a potpourri of reprints from House and Garden, arranged by decades and covering the period from the founding of the magazine in 1901 through the 1970's.

There is no clear vision of history in this volume, but the selection has been made with a perceptive eye and rewarding hindsight. The articles reveal much about their times. Both text and photographs have been reproduced from the original format, reprinted as they first appeared. This probably accounts for the poor quality of the pictures, since the photographs must be long-since gone or difficult to find.

But the flavor of each entry is intact and in context, and it is this faithfulness to the original, rather than the sleekly upbeat prose of the editors' wrap-up, that makes the documentation valuable.

If there is a theme common to both books it is simply that one must never underestimate the importance of style and the tyranny of taste. According to the authors of "A Documentary History of American Interiors," even George Washington was not immune. Writing to a Bristol, England, merchant in 1758 to order something called "work'd Ruffles," he stipulated that "if they should be out of fashion send some as are not." Ordering articles of china in the same year, he specified, "Pray let them be neat and fashionable or send none."

Mrs. Benjamin Franklin wrote to her absent husband in 1765, "Your timepiece stands in one corner, which is, I am told, all wrong." And he, in turn, sending her 56 yards of cotton from London for bed and window curtains and chair seat covers, printed from the newly invented copper plates, remarked of his selection, "this was my fancy" although he had been told "I did wrong not to buy both of the same color." Fashion and taste at the time indicated that curtains and seats should match. That probably left Mrs. Franklin with a lot of yardage she could not use.

From the 17th century, when walls were largely bare, to the 19th century's penchant for massed, gilded picture frames from floor to ceiling, changes in domestic styles kept tastemakers busy. If there was a single precept as the century wore on, it was everything to excess.

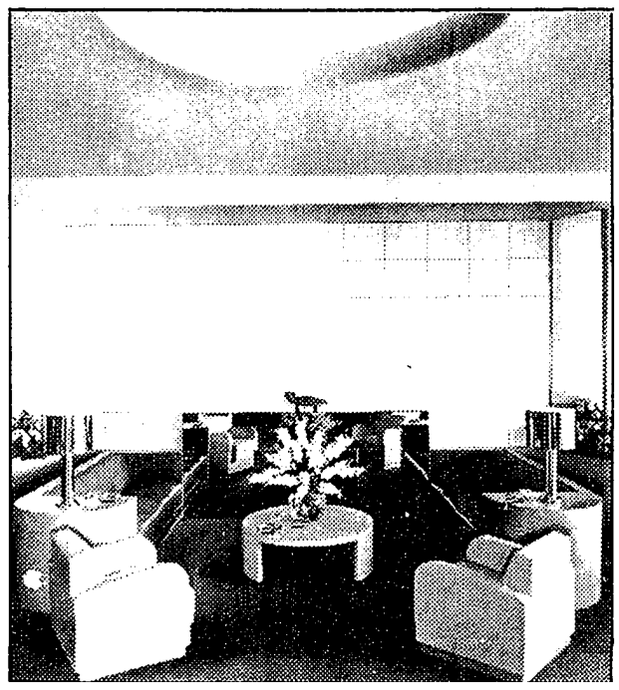
By the beginning of the 20th century — we are reminded by the decorator Billy Baldwin in an introductory essay to the House and Garden collection — the prized possessions of the 18th century were dismissed as "used furniture" that had no place in fashionable homes.

It took a strong-willed Elsie de Wolfe to reduce the clutter and make "antiques" respectable, after which collecting became a 20th-century obsession reinforced by Colonial Williamsburg and Henry du Pont's Winterthur Museum. She also put chintz on everything.

If 19th-century taste is revealed as eclectic to the point of hysteria, the 20th century can only be characterized as schizophrenic. The pages of House and Garden reveal that designers and decorators have been divided equally between a love of the old and a dream of the new. The latter was subdivided, in turn, between the Parisian cabinet makers' lush Art Moderne and the austerities of the German Bauhaus.

But *au fond*, as the fashionable would say, it comes down to a universal dream of living as well and with as much style as one can. The impulses are the same, whether the taste is for salmon taffeta and alabaster marquetry, Syrie Maugham's all-white rooms, or Donald Deskey's unforgettable Executive Lounge for the 1939 New York World's Fair.

His modernistic furniture was of pale, pickled rift oak, set in front of a wall of blond rawhide squares with gold moldings above a gold mirror fireplace, flanked by indirectly lighted, curved recesses filled with white hydrangeas. Ah, for a world of mirrors and marabou! It is the sense of self and setting that counts.



Walter Dorwin Teague placed the center table in the seating area of the Ford Executive Lounge, above, at the 1939 World's Fair. In the 1899 Ernest Thompson Seton studio, left, the center wicker table stands alone.

Above: from "Photographs of New York Interiors," Joseph Byron, Dover; right: from "20th Century Decorating, Architecture, Gardening," House and Garden; Holt, Rinehart and Winston