A HISTORY OF DESIGNED INTERIORS



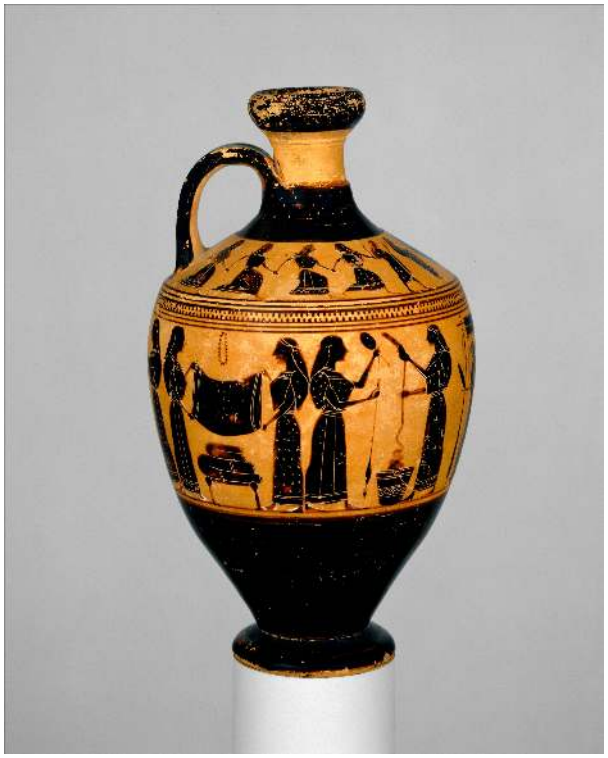
Michelle Ray
City College of San Francisco

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A History of Designed Interiors

Edited by Michelle Ray

City College of San Francisco



Terracotta lekythos (oil flask), attributed to the Amasis Painter, ca. 550-530 BCE, (public domain, Metropolitan Museum of Art)

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Licensing

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Preface

Background and potential of this textbook

This textbook was created as part of a sabbatical project and specifically as a resource for INTD 138 - Global History of Interior Design, a course in the Interior Design degree and certificate programs offered at City College of San Francisco. My motivation to create this textbook was overarchingly singular – to assign an accessible textbook to students – yet multifold: to offer technological and economical accessibility leveraging the potential of OER (Open Educational Resource) format and simultaneously social and cultural accessibility with critical content.

The decision to give attention to any historical event and specific circumstances around it is a reflection of the historian's present cultural values. Seeing as it is designed as a resource for a semester-length course, the content of this textbook certainly is not comprehensive to the monumental topic of designed interiors. Instead, it follows somewhat of a case-study approach with a selection of topical chapters and subchapters that cover a breadth of geography, time and programmatic use that is interconnected and has clear consequence in the interiors local to a San Francisco, California context as well as relevant to interiors that are professionally designed in the San Francisco Bay Area (though they might be located elsewhere). As such, our timeline of history goes back much further than the mere beginnings of the interior design discipline and professionalization beginning in the 19th century and cannot stop at the geographical edges of the San Francisco Bay. Furthermore, the lack of comprehensiveness in the content is not meant to limit students but to inspire humility in scholarship, cultivating self-awareness in design and research choices as well as skills in critical analysis that will equip them to exercise future inquiries into interior design of the past and present.

It must be noted that the selection of content has operated within the OER-related canon: English-language content within the public domain or with open licensing (such as Creative Commons). Thus, interior design scholars outside the San Francisco Bay Area may also find great relevance in the contents of this textbook, particularly those in the English-language Anglo world. Anyone who has suggestions of other OER resources to include or replace content are very welcome to contact me to support an improved, revised edition of this textbook. I intend that this first edition is a starting point and to leverage the relative ease of revisions of the OER platform.

Textbook content and chronology

Interior design choices are a reflection of cultural values that lay on a spectrum of aesthetic and functional considerations and are meant to support programmatic intention. Resource availability and symbolic cultural values drive material technology, begetting consistency and recurring motifs across multiple artistic mediums. Every design choice draws on cultural memory, whether consciously or unconsciously. Contact between distinct cultures affects each culture's design through some degree on the spectrum of appropriation or rejection as well as on a spectrum of integration or hierarchical separation.

Part 1: Origins of Interior Design broadly elaborates on the relationship between cultural values and interior design choices, defining key terms elemental to discussion throughout the textbook. Part 1 concludes with *Chapter 1.3: Classical Origins of Western Domiciles*, landing on one concrete example of historic interiors (ancient Roman housing) with which students can more intimately relate to contemporary domestic architecture they are familiar with.

Subsequent chapters introduce students to comparative studies of objects and elements of interior design through historic examples. Chapters are paired and grouped to encourage insight by juxtaposition,[1] fitting the format of a course with biweekly meetings. Gradually, students build skills to synthesize the examination with the analyses of entire interior spaces. Later in the book, just as later in chronological history, we critically examine the evolution of designating a person (or persons) to the role of designing interiors, ultimately resulting in today's profession and integrating this perspective into our studies. While the chapters are sequential, the content is not necessarily linear and students will find ties forwards and backwards as well as to what they engaged with in earlier chapters.

Part 2: Material Culture in Pottery and Textiles elaborates on the concept of material culture introduced in Part 1 with specific examples of the material technologies of pottery and textiles. *Chapter 2.1: Ancient Greek Pottery* (c. 400 BCE) and *Chapter 2.2: Ancient Andean Art* (c. 100 BCE - 600 CE) provide a selection for discussive comparison of material technologies within a cultural material context.

Part 3: Ritual Symbolism in Figural Architectural Ornamentation expands the study of material culture to focus on the specific motif of (human) figural representation in art as well as artistic forms of architectural ornamentation (stonework and bronze sculpture). *Chapter 3.1: Devotional Art from the Indian Subcontinent* introduces symbolic meaning in visual art for Buddhist and Hindu ritual practices that can be historically traced to the Indian subcontinent. A ritual focus is continued for comparison, though with an additional political emphasis in *Chapter 3.2: Artworks of the Benin Kingdom.* Note that Part 3 is centered on comparable cultural significance (ritual), artistic medium (architectural ornamentation), and subject motif (figural representation), not on chronological temporality; Buddhist and Hindu example objects date as far back as the 2nd

century CE, examples from the Benin Kingdom date back as far as the 16th century, and present-day examples are also examined.

Part 4: Wood Constructions of Northern Climates is unified with a focus on the material technology of wood construction as well as architectural interiors and furniture. Furniture for storage and seating is introduced along with program, spatial organization and aesthetics of entire rooms for comparison. Students are given the opportunity to continue to cultivate an analysis of material culture considering material technologies as well as symbolic representation and abstraction. Similar to the cultures presented in Part 2, *Chapter 4.1: Pacific Northwest Coast* (c.1400-1900 CE) and *Chapter 4.2: Furniture in the European Middle Ages* (c. 1200-1600 CE) are roughly contemporaneous with each other and along similar latitudes and comparable climates (though still very geographically distant and with little contact), offering rich comparison.

Parts 5 and 6 present cultures contemporaneous with each other and – as this historic time period is more broadly characterized by increased global exchange across the Eurasian continent – with significant contact between one another, allowing an examination of intentional appropriation or rejection of designs. *Part 5: Landscape Motifs in East Asian Design* includes *Chapter 5.1: Ming Period Furnishings* (c. 1368-1644) and *Chapter 5.2: Japanese Interiors in the Muromachi & Momoyama Periods* (c. 1338-1615), sharing some ceramic material technology and Buddhist symbolism but contrasting in other cultural values applying to interiority and often in relation to the landscape. Entire rooms are provided for analysis as well as distinct examples of pottery (ceramics) and furniture for continued comparative study of these interior design elements. *Part 6: Cultural Confluence in Art from the Late Islamic Period* emphasizes cultural synthesis rather than divergence. *Chapter 6.1: West Asian Carpets* picks up the discussion of textile material technology introduced previously with ancient Andean examples and focuses it on architectural interior application. The contested concept of "Islamic art" is introduced, rooting the artistic canon before the emergence of the faith. *Chapter 6.2: Interiors of Ottoman Syria* continues the discussion of defining Islamic art with the interior design of three specific rooms in Ottoman Syria, broadening artistic mediums beyond textiles (carpets) while offering recurring motifs for identification and analysis. Examples of ceramic, stonework, woodwork, and metalwork material technology further connect to previous chapters.

Parts 7-10 each include more than a paring of chapters and presents time more broadly chronologically than previously, considering the increase in global interconnectedness since around 1500 CE. *Part 7: Catholic Churches 1400s-1700s* begins with *Chapter 7.1: Renaissance Rome*, summarizing Renaissance art through examples of Catholic Churches. The global spread of Catholicism was an instrumental tool in Spanish and Portuguese colonialism that transformed Renaissance art and design into what later became known as Baroque art and design. *Chapter 7.2* introduces Baroque art as, arguably, the first global art movement and establishes its significance to glorify Catholicism in the 17th-18th centuries. *Chapter 7.3: South American Baroque* acknowledges cross-cultural influences of art, design and material technology of indigenous South America with Catholic Baroque architecture.

Part 8: Imperial Designs 1500s-1800s has some temporal overlap with the previous *Part 7: Catholic Churches* in its examination of global trade and colonialism as well as Baroque art and design. However, Part 8 shifts focus to design that underscores empires and nationhood. *Chapter 8.1: Commodities and Resources of Global Trade* relates to the previous *Chapter 7.3: South American Baroque* with examples of interior design elements that demonstrate global cultural synthesis. Examples from the Viceroyalty of New Spain and the Asante State continue to address the relationship between indigenous resources and colonial empires, providing examples that display a range of evidence of cultural legacy, from aesthetic motifs (such as blue-and-white finishes on pottery) to materiality (such as gold, completely melted down and reformed). *Chapter 8.2* returns to the Baroque movement and demonstrates the culmination of European imperial prowess in the architecture, interiors and furnishings for the Palace of Versailles, still recognized today as representative of opulence and political power. This sets out a series of what has been traditionally presented as a progression of design styles: Baroque (preceded by Renaissance), Rococo, and then various Historical Revivals. *Chapter 8.3: Rococo Interiors* explains cultural and political motivations for a shift in taste and also celebrates this design movement for its prominence in formal interior design, featuring salon interiors as "total works of art." The wave of design movements continues with *Chapter 8.4: Historical Revivals* that purposefully reject or embrace aspects of each of the design movements of preceding chapters, all whilst maintaining similar high levels of intention and importance on any design decision and effectively establishing the notion of "style" that many still hold in today in interior design; as Galen Cranz defines: "Style is the way all the parts of a composition are assembled around its main idea or attitude" (1998, p. 69).[2]

Part 9: Reforming Decorative Design 1850s-1920s begins just a bit before the Historical Revivals of Part 8 really end, in a global but Europeanized world becoming more and more stratified, with vocations and professionalization becoming more specified, art separated from function, and the social construct of man distanced from nature. Just as the design professions are materializing they are being scrutinized for reform. *Chapter 9.1: Arts and Crafts Movement* outlines organized resistance to the impact of industrialization in the two most rapidly industrializing nations at the time: Britain and the

United States. *9.2: Avant Garde Design* describes other intentional and de facto art and design movements reacting to industrialization and mechanization of the arts: Art Nouveau and Art Deco. All of these turn of the century movements have come to also be known in present-day interior design as design "styles," alongside 19th-century historical revival "styles." It's no wonder, then, that at this same historical time period we see the emergence of the interior design profession. *Chapter 9.3: Women Interior Decorators* demonstrates how the interior design profession we know today was founded by women in a climate of these battling "styles", heavily influenced by identity politics of the era.

Now that the historic beginning of the interior design profession has been established, *Part 10: Modern Design* concludes the textbook with an enumeration of sequential periods of the design movements from throughout the 20th century. *Chapter 10.1: Functionalism 1910s-1940s* explains the origins of Modern design, distinguished by minimalism in contrast to relatively more decorative design of the turn of the century (Historical Revivals, Arts and Crafts, Art Nouveau, and Art Deco). Industrial product design and the Bauhaus school are instrumental to this developing this shift. *Chapter 10.2: Modern Chair Design 1920s-1960s* picks up again the discussion of seated furniture design to communicate status and cultural values and relates the story of select iconic chairs to the larger narrative of Modernism and interior design. *Chapter 10.3: Commercializing Furniture 1950s-1980s* provides various examples of extra-European modernity emerging following World War II in West Africa and China. And while the final *Chapter 10.4: Postmodern Design 1970s-1990s* technically belongs outside the umbrella of Modernism, it is still included in Part 10 due to its identity's reliance on Modernism itself; Postmodernism is defined by the specific ways it rejects and embraces certain tenets of modernism.

Included throughout the textbook are links to external resources supportive for each topic's study: "Virtual Museum Visits" and "Further Study". They are presented as interactive box features only visible in the web-based browser view of the textbook via Libretexts (i.e. they do not print out in PDF exports). These resources are those that I believe are instrumental or extremely helpful for understanding each chapter's learning objectives and though are available at no cost to enrolled students, cannot be directly included in the OER textbook because of copyright restrictions. Those labeled "Further Study" are links to articles or essays on websites without a paywall, or available through library subscriptions. Additionally, "Virtual Museum Visits" link to webpages with virtual exhibitions from cultural institutions with high-quality visual and textual resources available online without a paywall. Where possible, cultural institutions from the San Francisco Bay Area have been chosen to encourage CCSF students to also visit and make in-person observations, incredibly useful to understanding scale and spatial experience in the study of designed interiors.

[1] Borrowing a concept from Julet Hooker's *Theorizing Race in the Americas* (Oxford University Press, 2017) via Fernando Luiz Lara's quotation (page 15) in *Spatial Theories for the Americas* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2024): "Juxtaposition places two disparate objects side by side, and it is by being viewed simultaneously that the viewer's understanding of each object is transformed."

[2] Cranz, Galen. (1998). *The Chair: Rethinking Culture, Body and Design*. W.W. Norton & Company.

Acknowledgements

I am a public educator first and have approached creating this textbook as such, outside the framework of a research institution. I have included remixed OER resources inact from multiple diverse authors as much as possible and abridged, combined or expanded resources where appropriate for the subject. In particular, I have drawn much from *Smarthistory: The Center for Public Art History* as well as the online image library of the Metropolitan Museum of Art (heavily informed by reference articles from their *Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History*) and *Explore the Collections* from the *Victoria and Albert Museum*. As well, my personal experience over years of studying the built environment firsthand through practicing architecture, traveling, visiting cultural institutions (such as museums) and secondhand through literature has greatly informed my perspective.

The overall outline of this textbook rests heavily on the monumental work of Mark Hinchman at the University of Nebraska, Lincoln. For years before branching out to this current project that has become *A History of Designed Interiors*, I taught INTD 138: Global History of Interior Design adopting Hinchman's H*istory of Furniture: A Global View* (published by Fairchild Books in 2009, now in its second edition as *History of Interior Architecture: Furniture, Design and Global Culture*). Hinchman's efforts mark a turning point from presenting the history of interiors as merely subordinate to the traditional Western architectural cannon, in his survey textbook as well as influential journal articles such as "Interior Design History: Some Reflections" in *Journal of Interior Design*, issue 38 (2009). Other journal articles authored by historians Penny Sparke and Brigit May have also been greatly influential.

Additional texts have fueled a deepening of critical thought in my historical research and curation. Long upheld as an epitomized icon in the narrative of designed interiors is the chair, its ergonomics critically challenged and necessity framed as a cultural construct by Galen Cranz in *The Chair: Rethinking Culture, Body, and Design* (W.W. Norton & Company, 1998). The essay collection *Race and Modern Architecture: A Critical History from the Enlightenment to the Present* edited by Irene

Cheng, Charles L. Davis II and Mabel O. Wilson (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2020) propelled me to further challenge designs that had always been presented to me as absolute in their achievements. Recorded lectures from “Race and the Historiography of American Architecture” publication workshop in 2021 hosted by the Society of Architectural Historians solidified my confidence in the plurality of legitimate credentials for design professionals, master builders and architects as well as interior decorators and designers. (On a personal level, I’m a tenured professor with only a bachelor’s degree, legitimized by my professional status as a licensed architect, also achieved with only a bachelor’s degree and longer supervised work experience). I find it important to not only challenge the traditional western canon but to expand from it, inspired and enlivened by Fernando Luiz Lara’s elaboration of Edmundo O’Gorman’s “[suggestion] in the late 1950s that the encounter with the Americas had triggered European modernization” with “the relationship between modernization and colonization in the Americas is a spatial one” *Spatial Theories for the Americas: Counterweights to Five Centuries of Eurocentricism* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2024). The imperative to push beyond these boundaries is globally critical.

Zeinab Badawi’s *An African History of Africa: From the Dawn of Humanity to Independence* (Harper Collins, 2024) relatedly asserts that European modernization would not have arisen if not for the exchange of culture and technologies from colonization of Africa. Indeed, much of humanity of the near future will not be western but African, with its population projected to comprise a quarter of world’s by 2050 and up to 40% of the world population by the turn of the century. Yet, on page 6 Fernando Luiz Lara makes the assessment: "We teach architectural history as North Atlantic history and we use European concepts and values to judge and discuss such architecture." This needs to change.

Moreover, I express deep appreciation for all past INTD 138 students who inspired and challenged me to bring them critical, thorough, diverse material. In particular is my first cohort of INTD 138 students with whom I shared spirited discussions on the limitations of available textbooks, and who encouraged me to create a textbook myself. Though at the time I doubted I would ever have the wherewithal to do it, it pushed me to discover more and more great content on the subject and led me to further explore the potential of OER with enthusiastic rigor. This textbook is intended as a first of many editions; I am excited about its potential for collective expansion and invite you to propose meaningful contributions to its refinement.

CHAPTER OVERVIEW

1: Origins of Interior Design

1.1: The interior, interiority, and interior design

1.2: Key terms for the historical study of designed interiors

1.3: Classical Origins of Western Domiciles

1.3.1: Learning Objectives

1.3.2: Classic, classical, and classicism explained

1.3.3: Ancient Roman Housing and Interior Design

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1.1: The interior, interiority, and interior design

Adapted from excerpts from "The interior as interiority"(2018) by V. Ionescu in *Palgrave Commun* 4, 33 with additions by Michelle Ray

The interior

Architectural history has long conceived the interior as a distinct aspect of architectural design. Various historical studies have documented how an interior's identity can evolve independently of the architectonic structure of a building (Hollis, 2009; Massey, 1997). Interiors constitute the most fragile feature of design because they are often temporary and secondary additions. They can be conceived simultaneously with the building but they are also easily transferrable and adaptable. Sometimes interior design emerges simultaneously with the exterior structure, like in the case of Art Nouveau.[1] Interior and structure follow one organic sense of form; they grow as if from one germ. However, this holistic conception of the *Jugendstil*[1] signals an ambiguity about the architectural status of the interior: is it supposed to be conceived separately from the rest of a building? This ambiguity regarding the interior justifies the contemporary distinction between decorator and interior designer (Massey, 1997). A subtle gradation determines the relation between the two: if the decorator has less of an impact on a building's structural identity, this is because to decorate implies a different relation to the identity of a building. Adorning and integrating objects within its structure affects its spatial experience (but not yet its structure). Any intervention on this level is easily reversible and adaptable. Decorating and designing an interior space concern distinct levels of interventions, determining to different degree the extent to which architecture can change. Nevertheless, it must be noted that the distinction between the titles "decorator" and "designer" arose less than a century ago, and the mere notion of the profession of interior decoration or design dates not more than two centuries ago.

So then, how can the historical study of interior design go back farther than the nineteenth century inception of professionalization? We may look to a contemporary theorization of interior design based on the concept of *interiority*. It is generally accepted that interior design is more than a spatial arrangement or a collection of objects. We argue that the interior is a moment when a building receives its cultural significance. Architecture enters cultural debates when it is arranged as an interiority, that is to say, as a place that distributes functions (work, rest, move, etc.) in a given community. Interior design and decoration are more than sartorial additions that cover an engineered structure; they are a necessary dimension that turn architectural space into a liveable place with a given stability, desirable order and readable cultural hierarchy (Verschaffel, 2002).

This brings us to the idea that the interior has always been indistinguishable from people's inner life - let us call it their *interiority*. The writer's room is more than an enclosed space where someone writes but a carrier of specific types of imagination, that of a novelist or of a psychoanalyst (Fuss, 2004; Rosner, 2005; Bauer, 2016). As Virginia Wolf observed, the kitchen is the space where a social type emerges, namely the cook, a character that changes from the Georgian cook–"a creature of sunshine and fresh air; in and out of the drawing-room, now to borrow *The Daily Herald*, now to ask advice about a hat"–to the Victorian cook who "lived like a leviathan in the lower depths, formidable, silent, obscure and inscrutable" (Wolf, 1924, p 5). In other words, the *interior* is an intramural arrangement of any built environment that actualizes a specific *interiority*. The interior is the condition of possibility that allows us to represent these (inter-)subjective dimensions: power relations, intimacy, (semi-) public encounters, imagination, memory, attention, desires and understanding.The difference between a home and hotel apartment concerns less the interior design and the spatial arrangement as the inhabitant's temporal, emotional and imaginative relation to the interior. The home is the house that contains a given symbolic order, stability and sense of time (Verschaffel, 2002; Rice, 2007; Smyth and Croft, 2006). The home implies a strongly embodied relation between an interior and the sense of interiority that it brings about (memories, sense of time, directions, fantasies, etc.).

The interior, interiority, and modern interior design

The house (interior) as a home (interiority) is particularly revealing because the modern rationalist design emerges in debates concerning interior design.[2] Already in the middle of the 19th century, Jakob von Falke (the first curator of the Viennese Museum of Applied Arts) referred to the Renaissance interior as rational and adaptable to modern life (Von Falke, 1866). The Renaissance interior was also the model for Georg Hirth as it harmonizes structure and ornament (Hirth, 1886). The rational adaptability that modern life requires was related to interior design. Modern life, from the middle of the nineteenth century onwards, is centered around an interior that accommodates its fundamental values, that is, the rational spatial division, the employment of honest materials and linear shapes that accentuate function. Reflecting on the interior means debating our interiority, more precisely clarifying our understanding of the past, both its aesthetic values *and* our specific understanding of style, including the role that fashion plays. Reflecting on interior design is not just a question of arranging and designing furniture, choosing appropriate colours or adapting past building to new requirements; it is a question of building up a scenography for our subjective life, our values, emotions and thoughts. The modernist adaptation of forms to

functions[2] means precisely that the interiority of the modern subject has become an adaptable machine. A lot of contemporary interior design, especially in the context of retail, aims at the mechanization of human interiority, its adaptation to a flat process of consumption, adjusting it to one function only: consume.

Moreover, the current cultural privileging of functionality over aesthetic value – which has begot the regulative distinction between decoration versus structure – echoes another well-known dichotomy in modern thought, namely Kant's distinction between ornament (*parerga*, something secondary) and pure form as the authentic constituent of beauty (Kant, 2000, pp 110–111). In the foundational work of modern aesthetics, *The Critique of the Power of Judgement* (1790), interior design returns at key moments. Kant argued that decorations of all sorts (from wallpapers to moldings and furnishings, rings and pill boxes) represent actual beauty because they are there without any use, "merely to be viewed, in order to entertain the imagination in free play with ideas and to occupy the power of aesthetic judgement without a determinate end" (Kant, 2000, p 201). Lack of a function guarantees a pure aesthetic experience. On the other hand, too much charm, external addenda and draperies, sensations and frames inhibit the pure aesthetic judgment (which concerns form, structure and outline). Nevertheless, this notion of "art for art's sake" was coined only as recently as the early nineteenth century (attributed to the French philosopher Victor Cousin) and is a product of Kant's Age of Enlightenment. Thus, the characteristic of functionality in an artwork is not inherently paradoxical and necessitates both aesthetic and functional considerations in the historical study of interior design and its artifacts.

Professional interior design

As Enlightenment thought and the Industrial Revolution gave rise to the nineteeth century notion of "arts for art's sake," so too did the establishment of professionalization itself. This is inclusive of what today we know as interior design but was first called interior decorating. May (2017) summarizes: "During the last quarter of the nineteenth century, many factors, such as greater emphasis on the importance of the home and its decoration, contributed to the separation of interior decoration from other similar vocations. By the early twentieth century, interior decoration as a profession and occupation had begun to gain acceptance in the market place and academic world" (p. 1). Late nineteenth century discourse on interior decoration proliferated in magazine articles such as women's consumer titles, professional art and architectural journals, and trade journals for the building and furniture industries (Aynsley & Berry, 2005) as well as many numerous popular interior-decoration advice books (Sparke, 2003). Sparke (2003) illuminates that "While each individual text had a slightly different agenda, the publications of the 1870s and 1880s on both sides of the Atlantic shared a commitment to the concepts of good taste, good workmanship and the importance of 'art' in the home" (p. 65). By the early 1900s this culminated in the recognition of professional interior decorators with scopes broadening outside of the domestic sphere and established with academic coursework such as offered at the New York School of Applied and Fine Arts in 1904, professional organizations such as the American Institute of Interior Decorators (AIID) formed in 1931, and dedicated trade journals such as *Interior Design and Decoration*, first published in 1932.[3]

The mid-twentieth century saw a shift in nomenclature from *interior decoration* to *interior design*, such as in the revised magazine title *Interior Design* (previously *Interior Design and Decoration*) in 1952 and the American Institute of Designers (previously AID, AIID: American Institute of Interior Decorators). Nevertheless, the role of *interior designer* generally remained consistent with that of the previous *interior decorator*, though the profession continued to become more regulated throughout the twentieth century. Today, professional interior design is a dynamic discipline that requires knowledge and research skills encompassing diverse areas of expertise, as evidenced by the lengthy official definition adopted by the Council for Interior Design Qualification (CIDQ). A partial definition from CIDQ (2019) states:

Interior design is a distinct profession with specialized knowledge applied to the planning and design of interior environments that promote health, safety, and welfare while supporting and enhancing the human experience. Founded upon design and human behavior theories and research, interior designers apply evidence-based methodologies to identify, analyze, and synthesize information in generating holistic, technical, creative, and contextually-appropriate design solutions.

Interior design encompasses human-centered strategies that may address cultural, demographic, and political influences on society. Interior designers provide resilient, sustainable, adaptive design and construction solutions focusing on the evolution of technology and innovation within the interior environment. Qualified by means of education, experience, and examination, interior designers have a moral and ethical responsibility to protect consumers and occupants through the design of code compliant, accessible, and inclusive interior environments that address well-being, while considering the complex physical, mental, and emotional needs of people.
Interior designers contribute to the interior environment with knowledge and skills about space planning; interior building materials and finishes; casework, furniture, furnishings, and equipment; lighting; acoustics; wayfinding; ergonomics and anthropometrics; and human environmental behavior. Interior designers analyze, plan, design, document, and manage interior non-structural/non-seismic construction and alteration projects

in compliance with applicable building design and construction, fire, life-safety, and energy codes, standards, regulations, and guidelines for the purpose of obtaining a building permit, as allowed by law.

A history of designed interiors

This brings us back to the initial question of the scope of historical study for interior design, temporal and otherwise. The interior coagulates architectonic space and turns into a *readable* place, a locally and temporally determinable dimension of *meaning* that generates specific movements, activities and roles. In this research context, the interior as interiority proposes a specific approach: instead of conceiving interior design strictly as the disposition of objects in space or even as a profession, the interior becomes a *figure* of interiority and design is an action (Hinchman, 2013). The decorum of our lived space, its furniture, walls and roof, is significant because it is a representation of our subjectivity: how we live is a sign of how we think, feel and imagine the world. In considering interior design as an intentional act of effecting interiority our historical studies cannot simply begin with the mere beginnings of professionalization in the nineteenth century and stop at the geographic edges of Europe and the United States. This study can help us understand how and why we make design decisions in the interior built environment and what their cultural and environmental implications may be. Relating the interior to interiority, interior design addresses a different challenge than that of comfortable spatial arrangements; it overcomes the reflection on interior space as a question of taste and decoration. The interior becomes an issue concerning representation: it is a model of our subjective life that in turn allows us to better understand the world we live in.

Footnotes

1. See Chapter 11.2.1: Art Nouveau
2. Modernity as it relates to art, interiors and interior design will be covered in Chapters 11: Design Reforms- 1850s-1920s, 12: Early 20th C. Decorative Design, and 13: Modern Design
3. See 12.2: Women Interior Decorators for more on the history of the interior decoration profession

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1.2: Key terms for the historical study of designed interiors

Professional Standards of Interior Design Knowledge

The Council for Interior Design Accreditation is an organization "dedicated to advancing the profession of interior design through standards and accreditation in higher education." The following standard is excerpted from the *CIDA Professional Standards 2024* and provides a framework for this study of the history of interior design.

Standard 10. History

Interior designers are knowledgeable about the history of interiors, architecture, decorative arts, and art.
Intent: This standard ensures graduates have the knowledge base of design history to inform design solutions.

Student Learning Expectations

Students demonstrate awareness of the basic context and framework of history as it relates to:

a) art.
b) decorative arts and material culture.

Students understand the basic context and framework of history as it relates to:

c) interior design.
d) furniture.
e) architectural styles and movements.
f) Students understand the social, political, and physical influences affecting historical changes in design of the built environment.

Program Expectations:

g) The program provides opportunities for exposure to diverse historical perspectives.

References

Council for Interior Design Accreditation

CIDA Professional Standards 2024

What is art history and where is it going?

by Dr. Robert Glass in *Smarthistory*, October 28, 2017, accessed February 26, 2026, https://smarthistory.org/what-is-art-history/



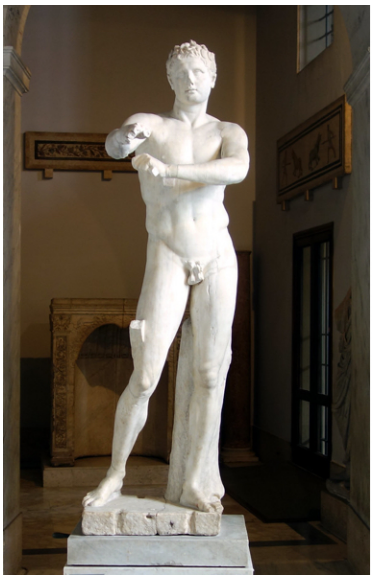
Peter Paul Rubens, three paintings from the 24-picture cycle Rubens painted for the Medici Gallery in the Luxembourg Palace, Paris. From left to right: Peter Paul Rubens, *The Presentation of the Portrait of Marie de' Medici*, *The Wedding by Proxy of Marie de' Medici to King Henry IV*, *Arrival (or Disembarkation) of Marie de' Medici at Marseilles*, 1621–25, oil on canvas (Musée du Louvre, Paris; photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Art history might seem like a relatively straightforward concept: "art" and "history" are subjects most of us first studied in elementary school. In practice, however, the idea of "the history of art" raises complex questions. What exactly do we mean by art, and what kind of history (or histories) should we explore? Let's consider each term further.

Art versus artifact

The word "art" is derived from the Latin *ars*, which originally meant "skill" or "craft." These meanings are still primary in other English words derived from *ars*, such as "artifact" (a thing made by human skill) and "artisan" (a person skilled at making things). The meanings of "art" and "artist," however, are not so straightforward. We understand art as involving more than just skilled craftsmanship. What exactly distinguishes a work of art from an artifact, or an artist from an artisan?

When asked this question, students typically come up with several ideas. One is beauty. Much art is visually striking, and in the 18th, 19th and early 20th centuries, the analysis of aesthetic qualities was indeed central in art history. During this time, art that imitated ancient Greek and Roman art (the art of classical antiquity), was considered to embody a timeless perfection. Art historians focused on the so-called fine arts—painting, sculpture, and architecture—analyzing the virtues of their forms. Over the past century and a half, however, both art and art history have evolved radically.




Left: Lysippos, *Apoxyomenos (Scraper)*, Roman copy after a bronze statue from c. 330 B.C.E., 81 inches high (Vatican Museums, photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0); right: Kiki Smith, male figure from *Untitled*, 1990, 198.1 x 181.6 x 54 cm, beeswax and microcrystalline wax figures on metal stands (Whitney Museum of American Art, New York) © Kiki Smith

Artists turned away from the classical tradition, embracing new media and aesthetic ideals, and art historians shifted their focus from the analysis of art's formal beauty to interpretation of its cultural meaning. Today we understand beauty as subjective—a cultural construct that varies across time and space. While most art continues to be primarily visual, and visual analysis is still a fundamental tool used by art historians, beauty itself is no longer considered an essential attribute of art.



Images of Peter and Paul appear much the same through the centuries in Byzantine icons. Left: glass bowl base, 4th century, Roman (The Metropolitan Museum of Art); center: mosaics, 11th century, Hosios Loukas Monastery, Greece; right: panel icon, 17th century, Greek (Temple Gallery).

A second common answer to the question of what distinguishes art emphasizes originality, creativity, and imagination. This reflects a modern understanding of art as a manifestation of the ingenuity of the artist. This idea, however, originated five hundred years ago in Renaissance Europe, and is not directly applicable to many of the works studied by art historians. For example, in the case of ancient Egyptian art or Byzantine icons, the preservation of tradition was more valued than innovation. While the idea of ingenuity is certainly important in the history of art, it is not a universal attribute of the works studied by art historians.

All this might lead one to conclude that definitions of art, like those of beauty, are subjective and unstable. One solution to this dilemma is to propose that art is distinguished primarily by its visual agency, that is, by its ability to captivate viewers. Artifacts may be interesting, but art, I suggest, has the potential to move us—emotionally, intellectually, or otherwise. It may do this through its visual characteristics (scale, composition, color, etc.), expression of ideas, craftsmanship, ingenuity, rarity, or some combination of these or other qualities. How art engages varies, but in some manner, art takes us beyond the everyday and ordinary experience. The greatest examples attest to the extremes of human ambition, skill, imagination, perception, and feeling. As such, art prompts us to reflect on fundamental aspects of what it is to be human. Any artifact, as a product of human skill, might provide insight into the human condition. But art, in moving beyond the commonplace, has the potential to do so in more profound ways. Art, then, is perhaps best understood as a special class of artifact, exceptional in its ability to make us think and feel through visual experience.



Coatlicue, c. 1500, Mexica (Aztec), found on the SE edge of the Plaza Mayor/Zocalo in Mexico City, basalt, 257 cm high (National Museum of Anthropology, Mexico City; photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

History: Making Sense of the Past

Like definitions of art and beauty, ideas about history have changed over time. It might seem that writing history should be straightforward—it's all based on facts, isn't it? In theory, yes, but the evidence surviving from the past is vast, fragmentary, and messy. Historians must make decisions about what to include and exclude, how to organize the material, and what to say about it. In doing so, they create narratives that explain the past in ways that make sense in the present. Inevitably, as the

present changes, these narratives are updated, rewritten, or discarded altogether and replaced with new ones. All history, then, is subjective—as much a product of the time and place it was written as of the evidence from the past that it interprets.

The discipline of art history developed in Europe during the colonial period (roughly the 15th to the mid-20th century). Early art historians emphasized the European tradition, celebrating its Greek and Roman origins and the ideals of academic art. By the mid-20th century, a standard narrative for "Western art" was established that traced its development from the prehistoric, ancient, and medieval Mediterranean to modern Europe and the United States. Art from the rest of the world, labeled "non-Western art," was typically treated only marginally and from a colonialist perspective.

The immense sociocultural changes that took place in the 20th century led art historians to amend these narratives. Accounts of Western art that once featured only white males were revised to include artists of color and women. The traditional focus on painting, sculpture, and architecture was expanded to include so-called minor arts such as ceramics and textiles and contemporary media such as video and performance art. Interest in non-Western art increased, accelerating dramatically in recent years.



Queen Mother Pendant Mask (Iyoba), 16th century, Edo peoples, Court of Benin, Nigeria, ivory, iron, copper, 23.8 x 12.7 x 8.3 cm (The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Today, the biggest social development facing art history is globalism. As our world becomes increasingly interconnected, familiarity with different cultures and facility with diversity are essential. Art history, as the story of exceptional artifacts from a broad range of cultures, has a role to play in developing these skills. Now art historians ponder and debate how to reconcile the discipline's European intellectual origins and its problematic colonialist legacy with contemporary multiculturalism and how to write art history in a global era.

Art, Architecture and Material Culture

As defined in the *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences* (2008):

> Culture resides in the mind and is shared across minds. **Material culture** renders culture manifest in physical, palpable, measurable form. For archaeologists, folk-lorists, historians, museum curators, and others, material culture evidences the cultural. Material culture includes what archaeologists typically refer to as *artifacts*, collectors as *relics*, and art historians as *objets d'art*. Artifacts include such objects as stone tools, potsherds, bottles, beads, buttons, fibulae, coins, clay pipes, paintings, and textiles. To this list of conventionally recognized artifacts one should add such large-scale examples of material culture as buildings, monuments, gardens, gravestones, watercraft, roads, bridges, tunnels, dams, irrigation ditches, fences, wharves, landfills, and landscapes—all part of the intentionally built environment.

Including material culture in our study expands our observations beyond individual works of art and brings in the field of anthropology to further contextualize interiors, prompting "considerations of technology and function [that] are vital to material culture studies" (*International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, 2008). The function (or perceived lack thereof) of artworks and other objects of interiors will be discussed throughout this textbook, but for now it raises the term "decorative art" in potential contrast to "art." The use of the term "decorative arts" is becoming more rare, though we still encounter it in the study of art. Since the emergence of the modern discipline of art history in Europe, artwork considered decorative art includes "any of those arts that are concerned with the design and decoration of objects that are chiefly prized for their utility, rather than for their purely aesthetic qualities. Ceramics, glassware, basketry, jewelry, metalware, furniture, textiles, clothing, and other such goods are the objects most commonly associated with the decorative arts" (Britannica, 2020). This distinction was made to elevate oil painting and sculptural art practices dominated by European men and thereby diminish other artistic techniques that included the realm of women and non-Europeans. More recently, the category has collapsed to simply use the label "art" (removing "decorative") but it hasn't completely gone away, as seen in *CIDA Professional Standards 2024*, mostly likely included to underscore the importance of this group of artistic techniques in interior design considerations, especially considering the category of furniture. *The Columbia encyclopedia* (2018) defines furniture as "properly such movables as chairs, tables, and beds; it is extended to include draperies, rugs, mirrors, lamps, and other furnishings" which has a great overlap with

traditional collections and museums of decorative arts. Moreover, since this text centers on historical studies, such a recently historical term is important to define.

Lastly but importantly, furniture has the significant quality as being movable, while architecture comprises the fixed elements of an interior. Ching (1997) provides useful definitions of "architecture" for our study: "the product or result of architectural work: buildings, collectively" and "the conscious act of forming things resulting in a unifying or coherent structure." In other words, architecture is designed buildings and provides the envelop of enclosure and setting for interiors.

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SECTION OVERVIEW

1.3: Classical Origins of Western Domiciles

1.3.1: Learning Objectives

1.3.2: Classic, classical, and classicism explained

1.3.3: Ancient Roman Housing and Interior Design

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1.3.1: Learning Objectives

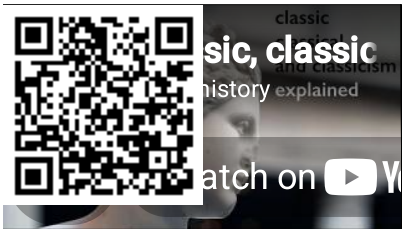
Learning Objectives

- Understand classical architectural characteristics and features as origins of western domiciles.
- Compare and contrast classical Roman domestic spaces with those of the contemporary US.
- Analyze frescos as material cultural evidence of architecture and interior design.

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1.3.2: Classic, classical, and classicism explained

by Dr. Lauren Kilroy-Ewbank and Dr. Steven Zucker



A conversation with Dr. Lauren Kilroy-Ewbank and Dr. Steven Zucker at The Metropolitan Museum of Art

Cite this page as: Dr. Lauren Kilroy-Ewbank and Dr. Steven Zucker, "Classic, classical, and classicism explained," in *Smarthistory*, April 5, 2022, accessed March 27, 2026, https://smarthistory.org/classic-classical-and-classicism-explained/.

Video Transcript

[0:00] [music]

Dr. Steven Zucker: [0:10] We're in the Metropolitan Museum, in the galleries devoted to ancient Greek and Roman art. We wanted to talk about the difference between what is classical, what is classicism, and what is classic.

Dr. Lauren Kilroy-Ewbank: [0:16] When I think of the term classic, I think of things like classic cars or classic rock. I think often I associate things that are classic with being wonderful examples of a certain era.

Dr. Zucker: [0:30] Art historians do use the term "classic." For example, we might think about the Classic Maya Period.

Dr. Kilroy-Ewbank: [0:34] When we use the term "classic" in reference to certain periods in Mesoamerican history, it's a reference to periods that are perceived by modern scholars as being the art that is considered to be among the best.

Dr. Steven Zucker: [0:49] And art historians should know better. We study history, and we know that fashions in what is considered important, even in the history of art, changes over time. Let's move on to classical.

[0:59] That's usually a reference to ancient Greek and Roman culture, this period that lasted over a thousand years. A period in which much of the Mediterranean was dominated by first the Greeks and then the Romans.

Dr. Kilroy-Ewbank: [1:10] Here we are in the court showing lots of examples of Greco-Roman sculpture that would be considered classical. More specifically, people talk about the Classical Period, which is a specific time period in ancient Greek art. These are divisions that are made by art historians in much later time periods.

Dr. Zucker: [1:34] This Aphrodite is such an exemplar of what comes to mind when we think of the classical. It's clearly informed by careful observation of the human body, although idealized, made better. So although this comes out of a period that we would specifically refer to as the late Classical in ancient Greece, it is also part of this larger, sweeping period that we call the classical, which is a reference to ancient Greece and ancient Rome.

Dr. Kilroy-Ewbank: [2:00] So if we were looking at the Renaissance era, we could think about Botticelli's "The Birth of Venus," where Venus is modeled on sculptures very similar to this Aphrodite sculpture that we're looking at. We might refer to that looking back to ancient Greco-Roman culture as looking back to classical culture.

Dr. Zucker: [2:12] Since its revival in the Italian Renaissance, an interest in classicism has never entirely been lost. Two events collided in the 18th century to bring forth what we call Neoclassicism. There was the rediscovery of the city of Pompeii, sparking this renewed interest in ancient Roman culture.

[2:33] But at the same time, there was an intellectual movement that was taking place, which we call the Enlightenment, which would revive the ancient Greek idea of democracy.

Dr. Lauren Kilroy-Ewbank: [2:39] This is when you think of buildings like the White House, Monticello. These are all being constructed thinking about the Greco-Roman world. This is also the time when you have the origins of the discipline of art history. Johann Winkelmann is interested in ancient Greek and Roman art, and he's creating these stylistic categories like the Classical period.

[3:06] Some of those value judgments that we use today, for instance, feeling that the classical era has the most sophisticated, advanced, naturalistic art, comes from that time period.

Dr. Zucker: [3:18] That idea that there is a static perfection of the past that we try to get back to came into conflict in the 19th century with ideas of industrial progress. Were the Greeks and Romans this epitome, this perfection that we can only hope to reachieve? Or, in fact, is our society moving forward? In the 19th and 20th and 21st centuries, we've been grappling with that conflict.

Dr. Kilroy-Ewbank: [3:37] When you have people looking to the ancient Greek and Roman past, they were reimagining it as this pure white marble. The great irony is that much of ancient Greek and Roman sculpture was brightly painted.

[3:55] We can still see traces on many different sculptures, although for those where you don't see traces, sometimes it was

because sculptures were later bleached to remove the traces of color.

Dr. Zucker: [4:06] The 18th and 19th centuries, and even early 20th century, were imposing their aesthetics on these ancient objects. Making them conform to their idea of what they should have looked like, even though we now know that was wrong.

Dr. Kilroy-Ewbank: [4:14] How different these periods of revival would have been if only people had been more aware of the brightly colored art and architecture of the ancient Greek and Roman past.

[0:00] [music]

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1.3.3: Ancient Roman Housing and Interior Design

Adapted from "The Early Empire" by Boundless Art History, accessed December 1, 2025, https://human.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/Art/Art_History_(Boundless)/08%3A_The_Romans/8.03%3A_The_Early_Empire.

The Roman Domus

The Roman domus, or house, played two important roles in Roman society: as a home and as a place of business for patricians and wealthy Romans. To facilitate this dual functionality, the domus had a distinct set of rooms that could be used as either public or private spaces. While no modern domus adheres to the standard model of a domus, many Roman houses, both small and large, have nearly all of these different rooms.

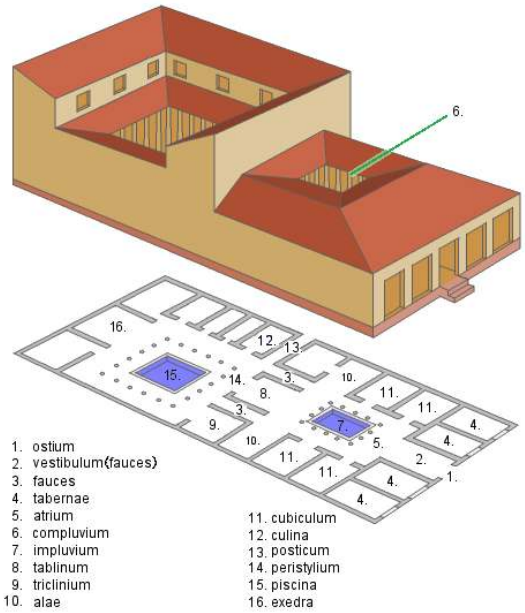


Figure 1.3.3.1: Roman Domus: A standard plan of a Roman domus. 360px-Domus_Aurea_Octagon.jpg. **Provided by**: Wikimedia Commons. **Located at**: commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=39732186. **License**: *CC BY-SA: Attribution-ShareAlike*

The design of the domus reflects the Roman patronage where a client is protected by a wealthy patron, and in return supports the actions and estate of the patron. Many of a patron's clients would be freedmen or other plebeians and lesser patricians.

The domus is often set back from the main street, and tabernae (shops) line the streets on either side of the house's main entrance. Clients entered the house through the fauces (Latin for jaw), which was a narrow entryway into an atrium.

The atrium was the most important part of the house since it was the spot where clients and guests were greeted. It often included an impluvium, or basin that collected rain water. The roof did not cover the impluvium. The open space above the basin was called the compluvium.

The atrium was often richly decorated with thematic frescos and images of the patron's ancestors. Cubicula , or rooms, lined the atrium, and at the far end was the tablinum. The tablinum functioned as the office of the patron and was where he met with his clients during the morning ritual of salutatio. The tablinum often provided a glimpse into the private sphere of the house, which was set behind the office.

Typically, the front half of the house served as public space, while the back of the domus was reserved for the more private functions of the family. In the back of the house, beyond the tablinum, would be one or more triclinium (plural: triclinia), or dining rooms. The dining rooms were lavishly decorated and typically furnished with dining couches and a low table.

A peristyle—a colonnaded courtyard—was usually the main feature of the back of the house. It could contain gardens and even a pool and provided light as well as shade and breeze for hot summer days. Other features of the domus, include alae (open rooms) with an unknown function, kitchens (culina), and additional rooms for work, sleeping, and servants.

> ***Further Study***
>
> For more on interior design of Roman Housing as well as other kinds of housing besides the domus read "Roman Housing" by Ian Lockey in the *Timeline of Art History* from the Metropolitan Museum of Art

Roman Fresco Painting

Frescoes were the primary method of interior decoration during the Roman Empire. Roman painters often painted frescoes, specifically buon fresco, a technique that involved painting pigment on wet plaster. When the painting dried, the image became an integral part of the wall. Fresco painting was the primary method of decorating an interior space. However, few examples survive, and the majority of them are from the remains of Roman houses and villas around Mt. Vesuvius.

Other examples of frescoes come from locations that were buried (burial protected and preserved the frescoes), such as Pompeii, discussed below. These frescoes demonstrate a wide variety of styles. Popular subjects include mythology, portraiture, still-life painting, and historical accounts.

The surviving Roman paintings reveal a high degree of sophistication. They employ visual techniques that include atmospheric and near one-point linear perspective to properly convey the idea of space. Furthermore, portraiture and still-life images demonstrate artistic talent when conveying real-life objects and likenesses. The attention to detail seen in still-life paintings include minute shadows and an attention to light to

properly depict the material of the object, whether it be glass, food, ceramics , or animals.

Roman portraiture further exhibits the talent of Roman painters and often shows careful study on the artist's part in the techniques used to portray individual faces and people. Some of the most interesting portraits come from Egypt, from late first century BCE to early third century CE, when Egypt was a province of Rome .



Figure 1.3.3.2: Fayum mummy portrait: A mummy portrait of a young women found in the Fayum Necropolis, Egypt, from the second century CE. Fayum Mummy Portraits. **Provided by**: Wikipedia. **Located at**: en.Wikipedia.org/wiki/Fayum_mummy_portraits%23Art-historical_significance. **License**: *CC BY-SA: Attribution-ShareAlike*

These encaustic on wood panel images from the Fayum necropolis were laid over the mummified body. They show remarkable realism, while conveying the ideals and changing fashions of the Egypto-Roman people.

Classification

At the end of the nineteenth century, August Mau, a German art historian, studied and classified the Roman styles of painting at Pompeii. These styles, known simply as Pompeian First, Second, Third, and Fourth Style, demonstrate the period fashions of interior decoration preferences and changes in taste and style from the Republic through the early Empire.

First Style

Also known as masonry style, Pompeian First Style painting was most commonly used from 200 to 80 BCE. The style is known for its deceptive painting of a faux surface; the painters often tried to mimic the richly veneered surfaces of marble, alabaster , and other expensive types of stone veneer.

This is a Hellenistic (Greek) style adopted by the Romans. While creating an illusion of expensive decor, First-Style painting reinforces the idea of a wall. The style is often found in the fauces (entrance hall) and atrium (large open-air room) of a Roman domus (house). A vivid example is preserved in the fauces of the Samnite House at Herculaneum.



Figure 1.3.3.3: Pompeian First Style: A Pompeiian first-style wall painting from the Samnite House. Fresco. Second century BCE. Herculaneum, Italy.

Second Style

Pompeiian Second Style was first used around 80 BCE and was especially fashionable from 40 BCE onward, until its popularity waned in the final decades of the first century BCE. The style is noted for its visual illusions. These trompe l'oeil images are intended to trick the eye into believing that the walls of a building have dissolved into the depicted three-dimensional space.

Wall frescoes were usually divided into three registers, with the bottom register depicting false masonry painted in the manner

of the First Style, while a simple border was painted in the uppermost register. The central register, where the main scene unfolds, is the largest and the focal point of the painting. This space was an architectural zone that became the main component of Second-Style painting.

Typically, paintings that relied on near-perfect linear perspective to depict architectural expanses and landscapes that were painted on a human scale. The desired effect was to make the viewer feel as if, while in the room, he or she was physically transported to these spaces.



Figure 1.3.3.4: Detail from the villa of P. Fannius Synistor: An architectural vista from a second-style wall painting in Boscoreale, Italy. c. 50–40 BCE. Scene 3, left. **Provided by**: Wikipedia. **Located at**: en.Wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Scene_3,_left.jpg. **License**: *CC BY-SA: Attribution-ShareAlike*

Villa of Livia

As the style evolved, the top and bottom registers became less important. Architectural scenes grew to incorporate the entire room, such as at the Villa of the Mysteries and the Villa of Livia.

In the case of the Villa of Livia, architectural vistas are replaced with a natural landscape that completely surrounds the room. The painting mimics the natural landscape outside the villa, depicting identifiable trees, flowers, and birds. Light filters naturally through the trees, which appear to bend in a slight breeze. Naturalistic elements like this, along with the flight of the birds and other details, help transport the occupant in the room into an outdoor setting.

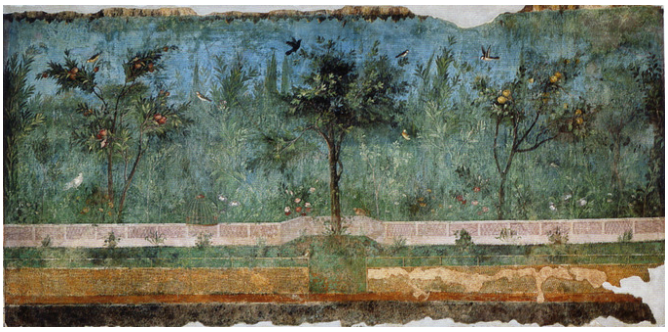


Figure 1.3.3.5: Villa of Livia: A Second-Style garden vista from the Villa of Livia, in Primaporta, Italy, from the late first century BCE. Rom-Villa-Livia. **Provided by**: Wikimedia. **Located at**: commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Rom-Villa-Livia.jpg. **License**: *CC BY-SA: Attribution-ShareAlike*

Villa of the Mysteries

At the Villa of the Mysteries, just outside of Pompeii, there is a fantastic scene filled with life-size figures that depicts a ritual element from a Dionysian mystery cult. In this Second-Style example, architectural elements play a small role in creating the illusion of ritual space. The people and activity in the scene are the main focus .

The architecture present is mainly piers or wall panels that divide the main scene into separate segments. The figures appear life-size, which brings them into the space of the room.

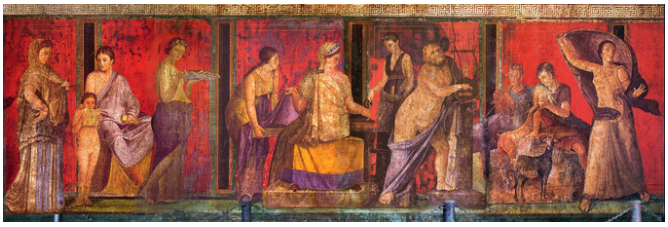


Figure 1.3.3.6: Villa of the Mysteries: One wall on the ritual scene depicted at the of Mysteries, in Pompeii, Italy, c. 60–50 BCE. Villa-dei-misteri-pannel.jp **Provided by**: Wikimedia Commons. **Located** commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Roman_fresco_Villa_dei_Misteri_Pompeii_00 **License**: *Public Domain: No Known Copyright*

The scene wraps around the room, depicting what may be a rite of marriage. A woman is seen preparing her hair. She is surrounded by other women and cherubs while a figure, identified as Dionysus , waits. The ritual may reenact the marriage between Dionysus and Ariadne, the daughter of King Minos.

All the figures, except for Dionysus and one small boy, are female. The figures also appear to interact with one other from across the room. On the two walls in one corner, a woman reacts in terror to Dionysus and the mask over his head. On the opposite corner, a cherub appears to be whipping a woman on the adjoining wall. While the cult aspects of the ritual are

unknown, the fresco demonstrates the ingenuity and inventiveness of Roman painters.

Third Style

Third-Style Pompeiian painting developed during the last decades of the first century BCE. It was popular from 20 BCE until the middle of the first century CE. During this period, wall painting began to develop a more fantastical personality.

Instead of attempting to dissolve the wall, the Third Style acknowledges the wall through flat, monochromatic expanses painted with small central motifs that look like a hung painting. The architecture painted in Third-Style scenes is often logically impossible. The wall is frequently divided into three to five vertical zones by narrow, spindly columns and decorated with painted foliage, candelabra, birds, animals, and figurines .

Often these creatures and people were derived from Egyptian motifs, resulting from a contemporary Roman fascination with Egypt known as Egyptomania , following the defeat of Cleopatra at Actium and the annexation of Egypt in 30 BCE.

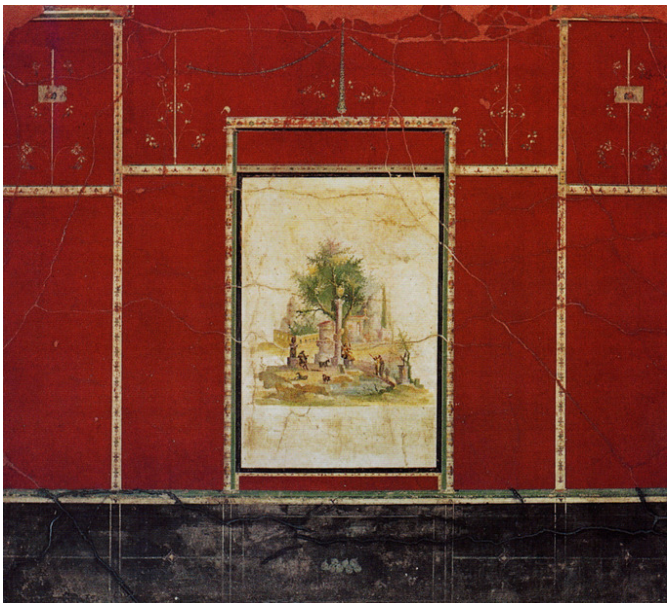


Figure 1.3.3.7: Third-Style wall painting: Detail of a Third-Style wall painting from the Villa of Agrippa Postumus in Boscotrecase, Italy, c. 10 BCE. Fresco-Boscotrecase. **Provided by**: Wikimedia. **Located at**: commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Fresco-Boscotrecase.jpg. **License**: *CC BY-SA: Attribution-ShareAlike*

Fourth Style

The Pompeian Fourth Style became popular around the middle of the first century CE. While considered less ornate than the Third Style, the Fourth Style is more complex and draws on elements from each of the three previous styles.

In this style, masonry details of the First Style reappear on the bottom registers, and the architectural vistas of the Second Style are once more fashionable, although infinitely more complex than their Second-Style predecessors. Fantastical details, Egyptian motifs, and ornamental garlands from the Third Style continued into the Fourth Style. Large pictures, connected to each other by a program or theme, dominated each wall, such as those in the House of the Vettii, discussed as an example below.

Mount Vesuvius and the Preservation of Pompeiian Art and Architecture

The eruption of Mount Vesuvius in 79 CE preserved many structures in the city of Pompeii, allowing scholars a rare glimpse into Roman life. During the Roman Republic and into the early Empire, the area today known as the Bay of Naples was developed as a resort-type area for elite Romans to escape the pressure and politics of Rome . The region was dominated by Mt. Vesuvius, which famously erupted in August 79 CE, burying and preserving the cities of Herculaneum and Pompeii, along with the region's villas and farms.

When Vesuvius erupted on August 25, a cloud of ash spewed south, burying the cities of Pompeii, Nuceria, and Stabiae. While not everyone left prior to the eruption, archeological evidence shows that people did leave the city. Some houses give the impression of having been packed up and in some cases furniture and objects were excavated jumbled together. Other objects of value appear to have been buried or hidden. There is evidence of people returning after the eruption to dig through the remains—either recovering lost goods or looting for valuables.



Figure 1.3.3.8: The eruption of Mount Vesuvius: The black and gray areas show the direction in which the wind blew the ash and pyroclastic clouds. Pompeii. **Provided by**: Wikipedia. **Located at**: en.Wikipedia.org/wiki/Pompeii. **License**: *CC BY-SA*

In Pompeii, an ash flow suffocated the remaining population and allowed all organic matter to decompose. However, where bodies and other organic objects (from bodies to wooden architectural frames) once lay or stood, empty cavities within the ash remained and preserved their outer forms .

A pyroclastic flow of superheated gas and rock went west to the coast and the city of Herculaneum. Unlike the ash blanket of Pompeii, the pyroclastic flow in Herculaneum petrified organic material, ensuring the preservation of human remains and wood,

including the preservation of wooden screens, beds, and shelving. Many of the frescoes , mosaics , and other non-organic materials in both the ash and pyroclastic flows were preserved until their excavation in the modern period.

Domus at Pompeii

Each domus throughout Pompeii represents the various ways the standard components of a domus were used to create unique floor plans that showcase the status and wealth of the owner.

The large complex of the House of the Faun encompasses an entire city block. This domus has two atria, each with its own fauces, although with two peristyles of different sizes. In essence, the House of the Faun was a private villa despite its urban setting.

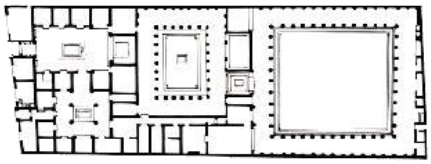


Figure 1.3.3.9: House of the Faun: Ground plan of the House of the Faun in Pompeii, Italy. House of the Faun. **Provided by**: Wikipedia. **Located at**: en.Wikipedia.org/wiki/House_of_the_Faun. **License**: *CC BY-SA*

Two houses, the House of the Vettii and the House of the Tragic Poet are simpler constructions than the House of the Faun, but both house plans still readily depict the wealth of the household.

House of Vettii and its Frescos

Visitors entering the House of the Vettii were greeted by a frescoed image of Priapus, an image that portrayed the wealth and luck of the two bachelors who lived inside. The main attributes of their house were the atrium and the large garden peristyle, surrounded by decorated triclinium and a garden complete with fountains, statues, and flowers. While this house had fewer public-private access restrictions than the standard domus, it did include the main attributes of a traditional Roman house.

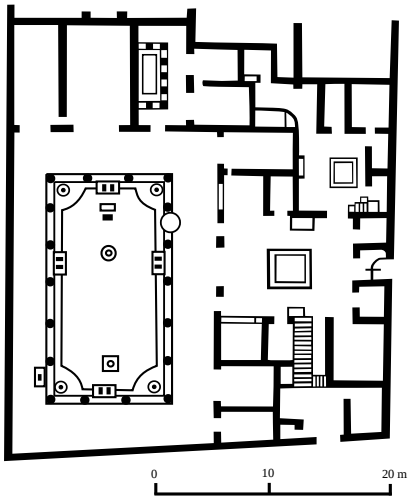


Figure 1.3.3.10: House of the Vettii: Ground plan of the House of the Vettii in Pompeii, Italy. File:Casa dei vetti - planimetria.svg - Wikipedia. **Provided by**: Wikipedia. **Located at**: it.Wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=File:Casa_dei_vetti_-_planimetria.svg&page=1. **License**: *CC BY-SA*

Fourth Style Frescos in the House of the Vettii

Many rooms in the House of the Vettii are lavishly painted. Each triclinium is themed and painted in the Fourth Style. Each panel in the room follows the room's theme, providing visual entertainment and a narrative during dining.

The Ixion Room, for instance, is a model of Fourth-Style wall painting. Within each red panel is a scene that depicts myths where the main character commits a major slight. One panel is dedicated to Ixion, who refused to pay a dowry and murdered his father-in-law. He also lusted after Zeus's wife, betraying the relationship between guest and host.

Another panel depicts Daedalus presenting a wooden cow to Pasiphaë, the wife of King Minos, so she could relieve her lust for a white bull. From this union, Pasiphaë birthed the Minotaur, a half-man, half-bull monster. Another Fourth-Style triclinium depicts scenes from the lives of Hercules and Theseus.



Daedelaus and Pasiphaë: Daedalus presents Pasiphaë with a wooden heifer. House of the Vettii. **Provided by**: Wikipedia. **Located at**: en.Wikipedia.org/wiki/House_of_the_Vettii. **License**: *CC BY-SA*

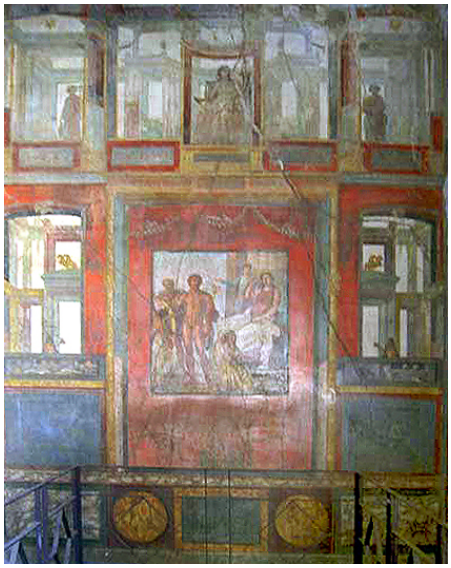


Figure 1.3.3.11: Fourth Style: A Fourth- Style wall fresco in the Ixion Room of the House of the Vettii. House of the Vettii. **Provided by**: Wikipedia. **Located at**: en.Wikipedia.org/wiki/House_of_the_Vettii. **License**: *CC BY-SA*

House of the Tragic Poet and its Frescos

The House of the Tragic Poet was small but maintained the public-private access characteristic of the traditional domus. The fauces was especially noted for its mosaic image of a dog, complete with the warning “Cave canem,” or, roughly, “Beware of dog.” The fauces led the guest into the atrium and the tablinum, which divided the public front of the house from the private back of the house, where a small peristyle and a frescoed triclinium were located.

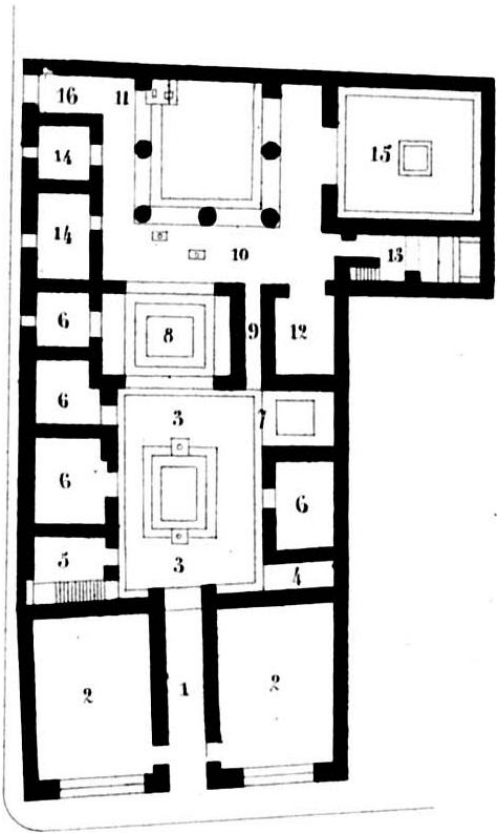


Figure 1.3.3.12: House of the Tragic Poet: Ground plan of the House of the Tragic Pompeii Region VI Insula 8 House 3 plan 01. **Provided by**: Wikimedia. **Locat** commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Pompeii_Region_VI_Insula_8_House_3_plan_(**License**: *CC BY-SA*

Fourth Style Frescos in the House of the Tragic Poet

The atrium of the House of the Tragic Poet includes a series of paintings that depict scenes from the Trojan War. The panels on the walls depict scenes that appear to be interrelated. As in the panels that decorate the House of the Vettii, the subject matter in the paintings in the House of the Tragic Poet are interrelated based on a common theme. Scholars believe these themes were carefully crafted not only to relate stories, but also to depict the virtues of the house’s owner.

Two panels on the south wall relate the beginnings of the Trojan War. One panel is of Zeus and Hera on Mount Ida. Another, badly damaged, appears to be a scene of the Judgment of Paris. These panels relate the beginnings of the Trojan War while portraying womanly ideals.

Two pairs of scenes, set across from each other, depict different, interrelated themes. The abduction of women is one theme visible in one image of Helen with Paris leaving for Troy. Another image portrays the abduction of Amphitrite by Poseidon. In both cases, a man abducts a woman.

The other two scenes deal with the argument between Achilles and Agamemnon, which begins the story of the Illiad. Of these two scenes, one depicts Achilles with Agamemnon, while the other depicts Achilles returning Briseis, his lover and captive, to his commander, Agamemnon.

A final image, found in the peristyle , depicts the Sacrifice of Iphigenia. All of these paintings are related to one another through themes such as marriage, womanly virtue, and the Trojan War.



Figure 1.3.3.13: The Sacrifice of Iphigenia: A panel in the House of the Tragic Poet, Pompeii, Italy, c. 60–65 CE. House of the Tragic Poet. **Provided by**: Wikipedia. **Located at**: en.Wikipedia.org/wiki/House_of_the_Tragic_Poet. **License**: *CC BY-SA*

Boscoreale and its Frescos

North of Pompeii, boscoreale was notable in antiquity as an area populated by numerous aristocratic country villas, some of which were preserved in the eruption of Vesuvius in 79 CE. One referred to as the Villa of P. Fannius Synistor was excavated in the early 1900s and its frescos date to 40-30 BCE, over 100 years earlier than Vesuvius' eruption and placing them in the Second Style classification.

Figure 1.3.3.14: Cubiculum (bedroom) from the Villa of P. Fannius Synistor at Boscoreale, fresco, Roman, ca. 50-40 BCE. (Metropolitan Museum of Art, public domain).

In 2007, the Department of Greek and Roman Art at the Metropolitan Museum of Art presented an installation of its extraordinary Roman wall paintings, including those from the excavations of Boscoreale. The research underlying the display of the frescos of Boscoreale included a creation of a virtual model of the villa, based on the 1901 floor plans drafted by Felice Barnabei. The video provides a virtual tour of Boscoreale for a better understanding of the interior design of this classical Roman villa.



***The Villa of P. Fannius Synistor at Boscoreale: A Virtual Tour* from the Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2010**

The plan presented in the above video was drawn by Felice Barnabei (1842-1922) and included in *La villa pompieana di P. Fannio Sinistore* (Roma: Accademia dei Lincei, 1901) and is shown again below so that it can be viewed while watching the video to help accurately locate the rooms shown in the tour of this house. The room numbers are those used in the publication by Barnabei on this villa. Please be aware that the room numbers shown reflect those used by Barnabei and may differ from any other plans or records both published and unpublished.

Figure 1.3.3.15: Barnabei F., 1901. *La villa pompeiana di P. Fannio Sinistore*. Roma: Accademia dei Lincei. (public domain).

Key:

A = Main entrance with five wide stairs that occupied the whole north side of a small peristyle, only part excavated

B = Main hallway, at the top of the five steps, with three doorways, leading to rooms D, C and corridor 1.

C = A large fauces, which formed the main entrance to the peristyle and all the rooms on north side of the building.

D = The room with the painted instruments

E = Large central peristyle

F = Dressing room of the summer triclinium

G = The summer triclinium

H = The large triclinium

I = Dressing room of the large triclinium

L = A central hallway, which corresponded to the tablinum

M = Cubiculum or bedroom

N = Dining room, maybe an ordinary dining room

O = Antechamber to cubiculum M

1 = A small corridor leading to cubiculum 2 and cubiculum 3 and to corridor 4

2 = Small cubiculum

3 = Small cubiculum

4 = Corridor with two branches one running north and one running east

5 = Service room on south side of corridor 4

6 = Service room on south side of corridor 4

7 = Service room on south side of corridor 4, with window in east wall

8 = Service room on north side of corridor 4

9 = Service room on north side of corridor 4 where a bronze candelabra and a gold ring were found

10 = Room with the graffito PHILOTONO PH on the outside wall

11 = Latrine

12 = Corridor with trapdoor to stable and areas under the service rooms and with tablet inscribed MARIO STRVCTVR

13 = Kitchen

14 = Oven and hearth

15 = Small peristyle

16 = Baths room?

17 = Baths room?

18 = Caldarium or warm bath

19 = Caldarium or warm bath

20 = Apodyterium or changing room

21 = Frigidarium or Cold bath

22 = Small room in north-east corner of peristyle E

23 = Corridor

24 = Area where grapes and olives were processed

> ***Virtual Museum Visit***
>
> Zoom in and explore high-quality images of Roman frescos from the Metropolitan Museum of Art.
>
> - Cubiculum (bedroom) from the Villa of P. Fannius Synistor at Boscoreale
> - Room H of the Villa of P. Fannius Synistor at Boscoreale
> - Room L of the Villa of P. Fannius Synistor at Boscoreale

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

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2.2.1: Introduction to Andean Cultures

2.2.2: Introduction to Ancient Andean Art

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2.1: Ancient Greek Pottery

Learning Objectives

- Explain the general value of pottery in the study of material culture and summarize how it has impacted interpretations of classical art since the Enlightenment.
- Analyze ancient Greek vase painting as evidence of material culture of domestic life.
- Describe ancient Greek processes of pottery production and decoration.

Pottery, the body, and the gods in ancient Greece, c. 800–490 B.C.E.

This section will examine the art and architecture of ancient Greece from c. 800 to 450 B.C.E., examining art from South Italy and Sicily in the west to Anatolia in the east.

Adapted from "Pottery, the body, and the gods in ancient Greece, c. 800–490 B.C.E." in *Reframing Art History*, Smarthistory, July 21, 2022, CC BY-NC-SA



Figure 2.1.1: Marble Statue of a Kouros (New York Kouros), c. 590–580 B.C.E. (Attic, archaic), Naxian marble, 194.6 x 51.6 cm (The Metropolitan Museum of Art; photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Contemporary popular culture regularly presents ancient Greece as an exceptional place—from movies like Disney's *Hercules* and *Clash of the Titans*, to video games like Assassin's Creed: Odyssey and God of War, and books like the Percy Jackson series. These movies, artworks, and novels depict the mythological exploits of heroes and gods against a background of shining white marble sculpture and architecture or present Greece as a utopian society that celebrated art, philosophy, and democracy. It is a vision of Greece that has been filtered through renaissance, eighteenth-, and nineteenth-century European ideals, and the reality rarely fits within these preconceived notions. Art was an important part of Greek culture. Yet, Greece was not the site of an isolated artistic miracle, but rather part of a larger Mediterranean world and heavily influenced by their neighboring societies. Greek sculptures were originally brightly painted in color. And the majority of Greek states limited the rights and freedoms of all except their male citizens.



Figure 2.1.2: Areas of Greek occupation at the end of the Archaic period (map: Dipa1965, CC BY-SA 4.0)

This section examines the art and architecture of ancient Greece from c. 800 to 450 B.C.E., including art from South Italy and Sicily in the west to Anatolia (today, Turkey) in the east. The chapter is divided into thematic sections, each of which is organized chronologically, and covers the periods now known as the:

- Geometric (c. 900–700 B.C.E.),
- Orientalizing (c. 700–600 B.C.E.), and
- Archaic (c. 600–490 B.C.E.)

The section considers not only changes in artistic forms across these centuries, but also how art and architecture fit within the larger context of Greek society, culture, and religion as it shifted during this period.

Defining Ancient Greece and Greek Identity



Figure 2.1.3: Hera I ("The Basilica") and "Hera II Behind. Hera I ("The Basilica"), c.560–530 B.C.E., 24.35 x 54 m, Greek, Doric temple from the archaic period likely dedicated to Hera, employs a 9:18 column ratio; and "Hera II," c. 460 B.C.E., 24.26 x 59.98 m, Greek, Doric temple from the classical period likely dedicated to Hera (not Poseidon), employs an 6:14 column ratio; both Paestum (Latin) previously Poseidonia (Greek) (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Who were the ancient Greeks? In this study of the art of the ancient Greek world, we look beyond the borders of the modern nation state of Greece. People who identified as Greek thousands of years ago lived in a much broader region, producing art in Greek styles and with Greek subjects. Being Greek was not a nationality, but rather a multifaceted identity that, in this period, was defined by a combination of ethnic, linguistic, religious, and cultural factors. Notably you were Greek if you spoke Greek (non-Greek speakers were known as barbarians, since the Greeks described them as speaking *bar-bar*, or nonsense), if your ancestors were Greek, you worshiped the Greek gods, and had common cultural touchstones (such as a knowledge of Homer), and a shared ethical system. Cities in mainland Greece, beginning in the eighth century B.C.E., established colonies across the Mediterranean and the Black Sea, notably in South Italy and Sicily and Anatolia (today, Turkey). For instance, some of the best-preserved Greek temples are in Italy, such as the temples at Paestum, where they were built by Greek colonists and their descendants.

The *polis*

Most of Greece in the period under discussion was divided into city-states known as *poleis* (*polis* singular)—such as Athens or Sparta. Each *polis* was independent, with its own government, military, and economic system, and a Greek's nationality was defined by their *polis*. The majority of the *poleis* were either oligarchies or tyrannies, with some monarchies and democracies. There were resultant cultural differences, with variations in language, gender roles, and social organization across the *poleis*. Most *poleis* controlled both the urban center and the surrounding rural space, and their populations were made up of citizens, non-citizens, and slaves. The male citizens were usually eligible to take part in civic government, while female citizens were not. Non-citizens were more restricted in their rights and participation in public life, and slaves were given few or no rights or autonomy.

Situating Greece within the Wider Mediterranean



Figure 2.1.4: Eleusis Amphora (Proto-Attic neck amphora), 675-650 B.C.E., terracotta, 142.3 cm high (Eleusis Archeological Museum, Greece; photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Greece was part of a wider ancient world, connected to other civilizations in the Mediterranean and West Asia through diplomatic and economic ties, notably through trade routes that facilitated the exchange of physical goods and people as well as ideas. Art from Egypt, West Asia (the Near East), and Etruria in the Italic Peninsula was brought to Greece, and Greek art was exported. The art of ancient Greece was heavily influenced by that of their neighboring societies. The seventh century B.C.E. is frequently referred to as the Orientalizing period, due to the influence of Egyptian and Near Eastern art on the style and subject matter of Greek art in the period, such as the Eleusis Amphora.



Figure 2.1.5: Left: Marble Statue of a Kouros (New York Kouros), c. 590–580 B.C.E. (Attic, archaic), Naxian marble, 194.6 x 51.6 cm (The Metropolitan Museum of Art; photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0); right: King Menkaura (Mycerinus) and queen (Old Kingdom, Dynasty 4), 2490–2472 B.C.E. (Menkaura Valley Temple, Giza, Egypt), greywacke, 142.2 x 57.1 x 55.2 cm, 676.8 kg (Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

In the sixth century, the *kouroi* statues emulated Egyptian artworks, notably their pose, such as we see in sculptures like the New York Kouros.

Pottery, Death, and Trade



Figure 2.1.6: Kleitias (painter) and Ergotimos (potter), François Vase (volute-crater), mid 6th century B.C.E., Attic black-figure (made in Athens), 66 cm (Museo Archeologico, Florence, photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

One of the most heavily traded artistic commodities in the ancient Mediterranean was pottery. For example, the Etruscans (in central Italy) were enthusiastic collectors of Athenian pottery in the sixth and fifth centuries, and many of the best-preserved pots, such as The Francois Vase, were found in Etruscan tombs.

While today Greek vases are housed in museums behind glass as fine art, in the ancient period, pots were primarily functional art, intended to be used rather than simply displayed. They were also cheaper than many other forms of art, like statuary, and were therefore available to a wider audience. They varied greatly in quality from plain ware with no painted decoration to large pots with elaborately painted scenes. Pots were thrown on a potter's wheel, decorated with clay slip as paint, and fired in kilns.



Figure 2.1.7: Dipylon Amphora, c. 755–750 B.C.E., ceramic, 160 cm (National Archaeological Museum, Athens, photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

In the eighth century in Athens, these everyday objects were monumentalized and used as grave markers. Pots like the Dipylon Amphora were large versions of smaller pots and decorated with geometric designs and funerary scenes, relating to their function.



Figure 2.1.7: Aryballoi, like the Macmillan Aryballos, were used to hold oil and have been found in tombs, but also in domestic and religious contexts. The amphora with animal frieze on the right is of a standard size, unlike the large Dipylon pots, and was likely intended to be functional and hold wine or oil. It has unknown provenance, and could have been domestic (most likely) or funerary. Left: Amphora with Animal Frieze, late 7th century B.C.E. (Orientalizing), terracotta, wheel made, made in Corinth, Greece, 44.4 x 30 cm (The Walters Art Museum); right: Macmillan Aryballos, attributed to the Chigi Painter, c. 640 B.C.E, terracotta, made in Corinth, Greece, 3.9 diameter, 6.9 cm high (© Trustees of the British Museum)

In the seventh century, the city of Corinth became the center of pottery production in the Greek world, producing large numbers of vases with designs influenced by Near Eastern Art, such as the Macmillan Aryballos and pots in the so-called animal style. Many of these pots were mass produced for a wide market and feature repetitive designs. Corinth was a port city, and they set their pots out on the trading vessels that regularly moved through their harbors. Corinthian pots have been found at archaeological sites across the Mediterranean.

Attic pottery

In the sixth century, Athenian (or Attic) pottery eclipsed Corinthian pottery in popularity and a booming pottery industry developed in Athens. Potters and painters, who were usually separate people, began signing their higher quality artworks. Some of these signatures are from artists who came from across the Mediterranean to work in Athens. Artists were organized into workshops, which were usually owned by a potter, who employed painters and other workmen.



Figure 2.1.8: Euthymides, *Three Revelers* (Athenian red-figure amphora), c. 510 B.C.E., 24 inches high (Staatliche Antikensammlungen, Munich)

Potting was the more highly valued skill, as these vases were, above all, intended to be functional, and potters signed their work more frequently than painters. These signatures became similar to modern brand names, providing prestige for their owners, and there was competition between artists to be seen as the best at their craft. For example, the painter Euthymides signs one pot, “As never Euphronios (a fellow painter) could do.”



Figure 2.1.9: Achilles killing the Amazon Queen Penthesilea, 540–530 B.C.E., black-figured amphora (wine-jar), signed by Exekias as potter and attributed to him as painter, 46 cm tall, Athens, Greece (© Trustees of the British Museum)

These Attic pots were painted with various subjects, including most commonly mythological and genre scenes, such as images of drinking parties, boys going to school, and women collecting water. While in the early and mid-sixth century, most of the painters, like Exekias, were using the black-figure technique to decorate their pots, the red-figure technique was invented towards the end of the sixth century in Athens, becoming the more popular style over the next few hundred years across the Greek world.



Figure 2.1.10: Niobid Painter, Niobid Krater, Attic red-figure calyx-krater, c. 460–450 B.C.E., 54 x 56 cm (Musée du Louvre, Paris, photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Developments in style in the fifth century towards more naturalistic and varied poses on pots like the Niobid Krater were primarily done in the red-figure style.

Sanctuaries: Art in Service of Gods and State



Figure 2.1.11: Temple of Zeus, c. 470–476 B.C.E., Olympia. A chryselephantine statue of Zeus by Pheidias that once stood inside, was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world (photo: Andy Montgomery, CC BY-SA 2.0)

Greek religion was polytheistic and firmly embedded in the *polis* system. Temples were often paid for by the government, and statues of and dedications to the gods were regularly made in civic buildings. Religious festivals were the major holidays in a city's calendar, and it was expected that all citizens, both male and female, participated in public religious events. Temples served as houses for the gods, with cult statues placed inside which the spirits of the gods could inhabit. In most temples, there was not room for large congregational gatherings inside. Most religious rituals happened outside of the temple. Major festivals would involve public prayers, music, and ritualized movement in processions. The culminating event of the rituals was the sacrifice of animals, which took place on altars, usually placed in front of the entrance of the temple. As the gods received the fat and the bones through burnt offerings on the altars, the meat was left for the worshippers, and feasting would follow sacrifices.

Temples were usually the largest buildings in a city, made of stone—many domestic and civic structures were made of mud brick or timber—and frequently decorated with sculpture and colorful paint. The temples usually followed similar plans and were built using similar designs on their exteriors, like the temples at Paestum.



Figure 2.1.12: Temple of Apollo (with reconstructed columns), Sanctuary of Apollo, Delphi, Greece (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

In addition to civic temples, Greeks also worshiped at sites known as panhellenic sanctuaries. These sanctuaries did not belong to a single *polis* but to all Greeks (the term "panhellenic" means all Greeks), and provided spaces for Greeks to interact with other Greeks in neutral territory. One such sanctuary was that of Apollo at Delphi. The sanctuary was oracular and people from across the Greek world came to Delphi to ask questions of the priests and priestess (known as the *pythia*) at the oracle who interpreted the infallible prophecies of Apollo.



Figure 2.1.13: Charioteer of Delphi, c. 478–474 B.C.E., bronze (lost wax cast) with silver, glass and copper inlay, 1.8 m high (Delphi Archaeological Museum; photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

In addition to the oracle, there were regular festivals that worshiped Apollo and involved prayers, feasting, and athletic games. Athletes who won at Delphi, like the patron of the Charioteer, dedicated statues in the sanctuary to advertise their win to all future visitors to the sanctuary.



Figure 2.1.14: Reconstruction of the Siphnian Treasury at the Sanctuary of Apollo at Delphi, c. 530 B.C.E. (photo and reconstruction: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

This spirit of competition spread beyond the athletic games, and both individuals and *poleis* used the sanctuaries to their advertise civic wealth and status to other *poleis* through dedications of art and architecture. One such example at Delphi is the elaborate Siphnian Treasury, which housed the dedications from the island of Siphnos to Apollo. Panhellenic sanctuaries subsequently became one of the most important spaces for the displays of art and centers for artistic production.

The Body and Greek Sculpture



Figure 2.1.15: The Moschophoros or Calf-bearer, c. 570 B.C.E., marble (Museum of the Acropolis of Athens)

One of the most common types of dedications in sanctuaries, both panhellenic and civic, were statues. Statues were commissioned by both states and private individuals for a number of different purposes. Many were votive dedications given to the gods as a form of worship, while other sculptures commemorated athletic or military victories or celebrated an individual and their accomplishments, such as in grave markers. Still other statues, including small, relatively inexpensive terracotta statues, served as decorations in homes.

Most of the statues seen in public spaces such as sanctuaries were made of either bronze or white marble quarried on the Greek islands or mainland. All of these statues were originally painted in bright colors, both their skin and clothing, and painted designs were frequently included on the sculpted fabric. Even the bronze statues were colorful, with different types of alloys or surface treatments used to distinguish between the color of hair, skin, eyes, and clothing.



Figure 2.1.16: Anavysos (Kroisos) Kouros, c. 530 B.C.E., marble, 6′ 4″ (National Archaeological Museum, Athens)

Humans were the most popular subjects of Greek statuary, and Greek artists were greatly concerned with the representation of the human body, especially the male nude. Gods, heroes, and Greek citizens were regularly depicted in the nude in Greek art, while non-Greeks were not. Goddesses and Greek women were commonly clothed in this period except when the lack of clothes indicated their vulnerability, such as victims of sexual assault, or their lower status, notably as prostitutes. Men practiced limited public nudity, notably in athletics, in their daily lives, but men in Greek art are regularly depicted in the nude in circumstances, such as warfare, when they would, in fact, have been clothed in real life. The male body therefore communicated symbolic messages about perceived Greek masculine virtues and heroic status. The male nude became an identifier for Greek men, separating them from women and barbarians.

For Greeks, the highly regarded virtue of self-control over mind, body, and emotions was expressed in an idealized, beautiful body. In addition, it also reflected ideas about the beauty of the young male body and Greek sexuality. Most Greek men had sexual relationships with both men and women. These relationships were undertaken both with prostitutes and with fellow citizens. The most common sexual relationship between male citizens was between an older partner in his twenties and a younger partner in his teens, known as pederasty. These relationships had socially defined roles for each partner, with the older man acting as the pursuer and the youth as the beloved, more passive partner. They were public relationships and were seen as having sexual and emotional benefits for the participants, as well as benefits for society since the older partner helped guide the younger partner into adulthood as a contributing member of society with an established set of socially acceptable beliefs. The male nudes of archaic and classical art are not overtly sexualized, but they represent young

men at an age when they were pursued by older men and viewed as at their most beautiful. Nude statues can be dated by their depiction of the male body, with an increasing emphasis on a naturalistic depiction of the nude body over the course of the seventh through sixth centuries.

Kouroi and *korai*

A comparison of *kouroi* (statues of young men) and *korai* (statues of young women), which were common votive dedications and grave markers in the sixth century, demonstrates the differences in how men and women were depicted differently in Greek art. The *kouroi*, like the Anavysos Kouros, depict an idealized, nude young man with aristocratic long, braided hair.



Figure 2.1.17: Peplos Kore, c. 530 B.C.E., Paros marble, polychromy, 120 cm (Acropolis Museum)

The *korai*, like Peplos Kore, depict young women in elaborate clothing that was originally brightly painted with elaborate designs and jewelry. Citizen women were expected to stay within the domestic sphere, caring for children and the home, and undertaking tasks such as weaving. In many Greek *poleis*, such as Athens, a Greek woman had a male guardian, usually her father or husband, her entire life, as women were not believed to be able to impose self-control and manage their own affairs or participate in government or civic life except for religious events. The *kore* reflects the ideal Greek woman, a symbol of beautiful fertility, overseeing a prosperous household as demonstrated by her elaborate adornment.

Art and architecture were integral parts of ancient Greek society, used to symbolize religious devotion, express civic pride, and to advertise personal success and prosperity. A study of Greek art in the eighth through fifth centuries illuminates not only the evolution of style, but how the Greeks saw themselves and their society in relation to their neighboring societies as well their gods and wider universe.

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> *Virtual Museum Visit*
>
> The Metropolitan Museum of Art's exhibition *Chroma: Ancient Sculpture in Color* (July 5, 2022 - March 26, 2024) features polychrome (color) reconstructions of ancient Greek sculptures and images with descriptions are available to view online.

Greek Vase-Painting, an introduction

As alluded above, we can learn much about the daily life of ancient Greeks from not only studying the form of the pottery they used but also from the way these vessels are decorated.

Adapted from Dr. Renee M. Gondek, "Greek Vase-Painting, an introduction" (September 9, 2016) *by DR. RENEE M. GONDEK* in *Smarthistory*, CC BY-NC-SA



Figure 2.1.18: Niobid Painter, *Niobid Krater*, Attic red-figure calyx-krater, c. 460-450 B.C.E., 54 x 56 cm (Musée du Louvre)

Useful for scholars

Pottery is virtually indestructible. Though it may break into smaller pieces (called sherds), these would have to be manually ground into dust in order to be removed from the archaeological record. As such, there is an abundance of material for study, and this is exceptionally useful for modern scholars. In addition to being an excellent tool for dating, pottery enables researchers to locate ancient sites, reconstruct the nature of a site, and point to evidence of trade between groups of people. Moreover, individual pots and their painted decoration can be studied in detail to answer questions about religion, daily life, and society.

Shapes and Themes



Figure 2.1.19: Diagram of Greek pot shapes (**British Museum**)

Made of terracotta (fired clay), ancient Greek pots and cups, or "vases" as they are normally called, were fashioned into a variety of shapes and sizes (see above), and very often a vessel's form correlates with its intended function. For example, the *krater* was used to mix water and wine during a Greek *symposion* (an all-male drinking party). It allows an individual to pour liquids into its wide opening, stir the contents in its deep bowl, and easily access the mixture with a separate ladle or small jug. Or, the vase known as a *hydria* was used for collecting, carrying, and pouring water. It features a bulbous body, a pinched spout, and three handles (two at the sides for holding and one stretched along the back for tilting and pouring).

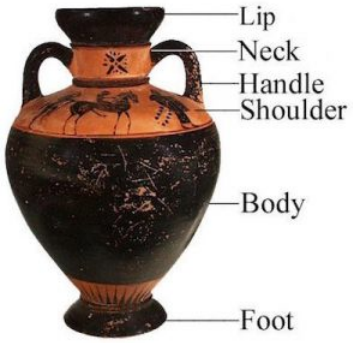


Figure 2.1.20: Parts of an ancient Greek vase

In order to discuss the different zones of vessels, specialists have adopted terms that relate to the parts of the body. The opening of the pot is called the mouth; the stem is referred to as the neck; the slope from the neck to the body is called the shoulder; and the base is known as the foot).

On the exterior, Greek vases exhibit painted compositions that often reflect the style of a certain period. For example, the vessels created during the Geometric Period (c. 900-700 B.C.E.) feature geometric patterns, as seen on the famous **Dipylon amphora** (below), while those decorated in the Orientalizing Period (c. 700-600 B.C.E.) display animal processions and Near Eastern motifs, as is visible **on this early Corinthian amphora** (The British Museum).

Later, during the Archaic and Classical Periods (c. 600-323 B.C.E.), vase-paintings primarily display human and mythological activities. These figural scenes can vary widely, from daily life events (e.g., fetching water at the fountain house) to heroic deeds and Homeric tales (e.g., Theseus and the bull, Odysseus and the Sirens), from the world of the gods (e.g., Zeus abducting Ganymede) to theatrical performances and athletic competitions (for example, the Oresteia, chariot racing). While it is important to stress that such painted scenes should not be thought of as photographs that document reality, they can still aid in reconstructing the lives and beliefs of the ancient Greeks.



Figure 2.1.21: Dipylon Amphora, c. 750 B.C.E., ceramic, 160 cm (National Archaeological Museum, Athens)

Techniques, Painters and Inscriptions

To produce the characteristic red and black colors found on vases, Greek craftsmen used liquid clay as paint (termed "slip") and perfected a complicated three-stage firing process. Not only did the pots have to be stacked in the kiln in a specific manner, but the conditions inside had to be precise. First, the temperature was stoked to about 800° centigrade and vents allowed for an oxidizing environment. At this point, the entire vase turned red in color. Next, by sealing the vents and increasing temperature to around 900-950° centigrade, everything turned black and the areas painted with the slip vitrified (transformed into a glassy substance). Finally, in the last stage, the vents were reopened and oxidizing conditions returned inside the kiln. At this point, the unpainted zones of the vessel became red again while the vitrified slip (the painted areas) retained a glossy black hue. Through the introduction and removal of oxygen in the kiln and, simultaneously, the increase and decrease in temperature, the slip transformed into a glossy black color.

Briefly, ancient Greek vases display several painting techniques, and these are often period specific. During the Geometric and Orientalizing periods (900-600 B.C.E.), painters employed compasses to trace perfect circles and used silhouette and outline methods to delineate shapes and figures (below).



Figure 2.1.22: Frieze with mourning figures (detail), *Dipylon Amphora*, c. 750 B.C.E., ceramic, 160 cm (National Archaeological Museum, Athens)

Around 625-600 B.C.E., Athens adopted the black-figure technique (i.e., dark-colored figures on a light background with incised detail). Originating in Corinth almost a century earlier, black-figure uses the silhouette manner in conjunction with added color and incision. Incision involves the removal of slip with a sharp instrument, and perhaps its most masterful application can be found on an **amphora by Exekias** (below). Often described as Achilles and Ajax playing a game, the seated warriors lean towards the center of the scene and are clothed in garments that feature intricate incised patterning. In addition to displaying more realistically defined figures, black-figure painters took care to differentiate gender with color: women were painted with added white, men remained black.



Figure 2.1.23: Exekias (potter and painter), Attic black-figure amphora (detail showing Ajax and Achilles playing a game), c. 540-530 B.C.E., 61.1 cm high, found Vulci (Gregorian Etruscan Museum, Vatican City)

The red-figure technique was invented in Athens around 525-520 B.C.E. and is the inverse of black-figure (below). Here light-colored figures are set against a dark background. Using added color and a brush to paint in details, red-figure painters watered down or thickened the slip in order to create different effects.

Watered down slip or "dilute glaze" has the appearance of a wash and was used for hair, fur, and anatomy, as exemplified by the sketchy coat of the hare and the youth's musculature on the interior of this cup by Gorgos (below). When thickened, the slip was used to form so-called "relief lines" or lines raised prominently from the surface, and these were often employed to outline forms. Surprisingly similar to red-figure is the white-ground technique.



Figure 2.1.24: Gorgos, Attic Red-figure Kylix (interior), c. 500 B.C.E. (Agora Museum, Athens)

Though visually quite different with its polychrome figures on a white-washed background, white-ground requires the craftsman to paint in the details of forms just like red-figure, rather than incise them (see the Kylix below).

Alongside figures and objects, one can sometimes find inscriptions. These identify mythological figures, beautiful men or women contemporaneous with the painter ("kalos" / "kale" inscriptions), and even the painter or potter himself ("egrapsen" / "epoiesen"). Inscriptions, however, are not always helpful. Mimicking the appearance of meaningful text, "nonsense inscriptions" deceive the illiterate viewer by arranging the Greek letters in an incoherent fashion.



Figure 2.1.25: Attributed to the Villa Giulia Painter, Attic white ground kylix (drinking cup), c. 470 B.C.E., terra-cotta, red figure, white ground, 6.2 x 16.2 cm (The Metropolitan Museum of Art)

Vases and Reception

The overall attractive quality of Greek vases, their relatively small size, and—at one point in time—their easily obtainable nature, led them to be highly coveted collector's items during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Since the later part of the nineteenth century, however, the study of vases became a scholarly pursuit and their decoration was the obsession of connoisseurs gifted with the ability to recognize and attribute the hands of individual painters.

The most well-known vase connoisseur of the twentieth century, a researcher concerned with attribution, typology, and chronology, was Sir John Davidson Beazley. Interested in Athenian black-, red-figure, and white-ground techniques, Beazley did not favor beautifully painted specimens; he was impartial and studied pieces of varying quality with equal attention. From his tedious and exhaustive examinations, he compiled well-over 1000 painters and groups, and he attributed over 30,000 vases. Although some researchers since Beazley's death continue to attribute and examine the style of specific painters or groups, vase scholars today also question the technical production of vessels, their archaeological contexts, their local and foreign distribution, and their iconography.

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Scenes of Everyday Life in Ancient Greece

The Metropolitan Museum of Art holds numerous examples of classical Greek pottery across a broad range of time. The following is a selection of objects from the collection of the Department of Greek and Roman Art whose high-quality imagery are available to view in detail online, accompanied by descriptions from the museum's curators.

Virtual Museum Visit

View a *terracotta lebes gamikos (round-bottomed bowl with handles and stand used in weddings)*, ca. 430-420 BCE online at the Metropolitan Museum of Art



Figure 2.1.26: Terracotta lebes gamikos (round-bottomed bowl with handles and stand used in weddings), attributed to the Washing Painter, ca. 430-420 BCE, (public domain, Metropolitan Museum of Art)

Virtual Museum Visit

View a *terracotta oinochoe: chous (jug)*, ca. 420-410 BCE online at the Metropolitan Museum of Art



Figure 2.1.27: Terracotta oinochoe: chous (jug), attributed to the Meidias Painter, ca. 420-410 BCE (public domain, Gift of Samuel G. Ward, 1875, Metropolitan Museum of Art)

Virtual Museum Visit

View a *terracotta kylix (drinking cup)*, ca. 500 BCE online at the Metropolitan Museum of Art



Figure 2.1.28: Terracotta kylix (drinking cup), attributed to Douris, ca. 500 BCE, (public domain, Gift of Norbert Schimmel, 1986, Metropolitan Museum of Art)

Virtual Museum Visit

View a *terracotta lekythos (oil flask)*, ca. 550-530 BCE online at the Metropolitan Museum of Art

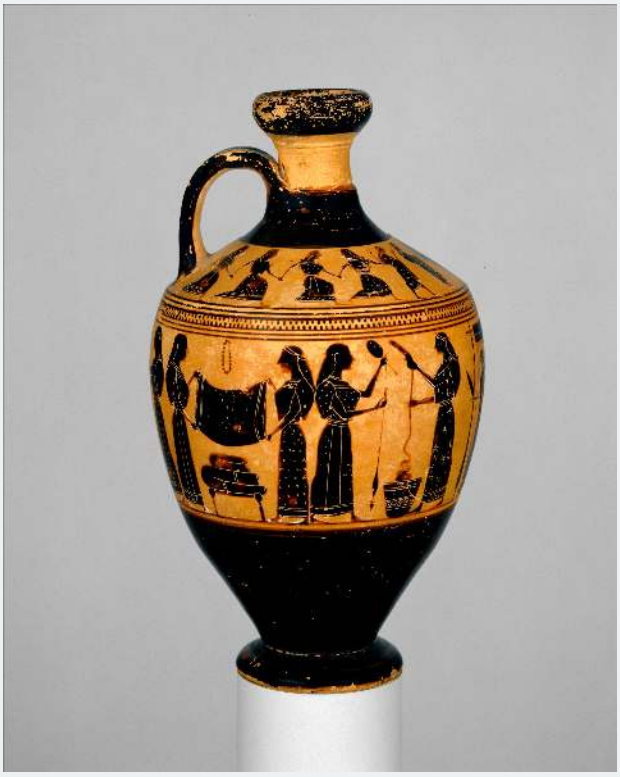


Figure 2.1.29: Terracotta lekythos (oil flask), attributed to the Amasis Painter, ca. 550-530 BCE, (public domain, Metropolitan Museum of Art)

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2.2: Ancient Andean Art

Learning Objectives

- Describe ancient Andean textile technology and its applications to art and engineering.
- Analyze the cultural, political, and religious significance of ancient Andean motifs.
- Analyze the commonalities in form and motifs between various types of ancient Andean art such as textiles, architecture, and pottery.

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2.2.1: Introduction to Andean Cultures

by **DR. SARAHH SCHER**

Page ID
371554



Figure 2.2.1.1: Inka ruins, Písac, Peru (photo: Chensiyuan, CC BY-SA 3.0)



Figure 2.2.1.2: The Andes mountains (image: NASA)

A land of contrasts

"The Andes" can refer to the mountain range that stretches along the west coast of South America, but is also used to refer to a broader geographic area that includes the coastal deserts to the west and into the tropical jungles to the east of those mountains. This region is seen as home to a distinct cultural area—dating from around the fourth millennium B.C.E. to the time of the Spanish conquest—and many of these cultures still persist today in various forms.

From the desert coast, the mountains rise up quickly, sometimes within 10-20 kilometers of the Pacific Ocean. Therefore, the people who lived in the Andes had to adapt to varying types of climate and ecosystems. This diverse environment gave rise to a range of architectural and artistic practices.

Period and time scale	North Coast	Central Coast	South Coast	North Highlands	Central Highlands	South Highlands	Titicaca region
Formative 3500-900 BCE	Cerro Sechín Huaca Prieta			Kotosh Guitarrero			Chinchorros
Early Horizon 900-100 BCE	Cupisnique		Paracas	Chavín			Pukará
Early Intermediate Period 100 BCE-600 CE	Moche Gallinazo		Nasca	Recuay			Tiwanaku
Middle Horizon 600-1000 CE	Sicán Moche	Wari		Wari	Wari	Wari	Tiwanaku
Late Intermediate Period 1000-1438 CE	Chimú Sicán	Chancay	Ica				
Late Horizon 1438-1532 CE	Inka	Inka	Inka	Inka	Inka	Inka	Inka

Figure 2.2.1.3: Table showing the time periods, cultures, and territories within Andean prehistory. While the table ends with the Spanish conquest of the Inka in 1532, native cultures continue in the Andes, with many changes from their pre-conquest forms.

Deserts, mountains, and farms

Though much of the Andean coast is near the Equator, its waters are cold, due to currents from the Antarctic. This cold water is rich in sea life; however, during El Niño years, warm water takes over, leading to large die-offs of fish and marine mammals, and often creating catastrophic flooding on the coast.



Figure 2.2.1.4: Ocean and cliffs near the site of Pacatnamú, Peru, with the foothills of the Andes visible in the distance (photo: Dr. Sarahh Scher)

In normal years, the coast is very dry. The rivers that run to the coast, fed by melting snow from the Andes mountains (called the Cordillera Blanca, or White Mountains, in contrast to the Cordillera Negra, or Black Mountains to the west where snow does not fall), create areas of agricultural lands interspersed with desert. Cultures eventually learned to create canals, allowing them to irrigate more land, and irrigation remains important to farming on Peru's coast.

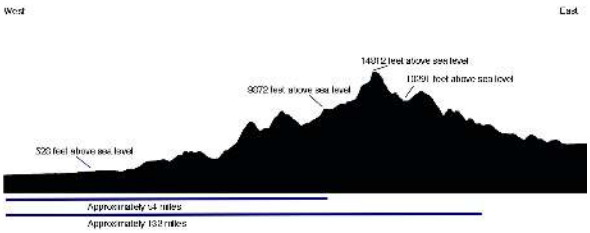


Figure 2.2.1.5: Cross-section showing typical change in elevation in the Andes (diagram: Dr. Sarahh Scher)

As the elevation climbs, different ecological zones are created, and people of the Andes used these to grow different products: maize (corn), hot peppers, potatoes, and coca all grew at different elevations. Some cultures (such as the **Cupisnique** and **Paracas**) developed on the coast, and incorporated seafood into their diet. They would trade with the cultures that lived in the highlands (such as the Recuay and the inhabitants of **Chavín de Huantar**) for the things they could not grow for themselves. The people in the highlands would likewise trade with the coastal peoples for dried fish and products that would not grow at their elevation, as well as exotic animals like parrots from the tropical jungles to the east.

Plants and animals



Figure 2.2.1.6: Leaves of an *Erythroxylum coca* plant, Colombia (photo: **Darina**, CC BY-SA 3.0)

The plants and animals of the Andes provided ancient peoples with food, medicine, clothing, heat, and many other resources for daily life. As noted above, the rapid change in elevation of the Andes meant that many different foods could be grown in a compressed area. Potatoes were a staple food of the highlands, and maize and manioc were important in the lower elevations.

Coca grew in the highlands but was traded all over the Andes. The leaves of this plant, when chewed, provide a stimulant that allows people to walk for long periods at high altitude without getting tired, and it suppresses hunger. It was used by travelers in the highlands, but was also used in ritual practices to endure long nights of dancing. In modern times, people drink it as a tea to help with the symptoms of altitude sickness.



Figure 2.2.1.7: Terraced hillsides at the Inka ruins of Písac, Peru (photo: **Paulo JC Nogueira**, CC BY-SA 3.0)

Farming in the steep topography of the mountains could be difficult, and an important innovation developed by the Andeans was the use of terracing. By creating terraces (essentially giant steps along the contours of a mountain) people were able to make flat, easily worked plots. The terraces were formed by creating retaining walls that were then backfilled with a thick layer of loose stones to aid drainage, and topped with soil.

The most important animals in the highlands were camelids: the wild vicuña and guanaco, and their domesticated relatives, the llama and alpaca. Alpacas have soft wool and were sheared to make textiles, and llamas can carry burdens over the difficult terrain of the mountains (an adult male llama can carry up to 100 pounds, but could not carry an adult human).



Figure 2.2.1.8: Left: Alpacas, Ecuador (photo: **Philippe Lavoie**, public domain); Right: Llama near Cusco, Peru (photo: Dr. Sarahh Scher)

Both animals were also used for their meat, and their dried dung served as fuel in the high altitudes, where there was no wood to burn. Andean camelids, like their African and Asian cousins, can be very headstrong. If they are overloaded, they will sit on the ground and refuse to budge. Because of this, the ancient people of the Andes did not have domesticated animals that could carry them or pull heavy wagons, and so roads and methods of moving people and goods developed differently than in Europe, Asia, and Africa. The wheel was known, but not

used for transport, because it simply would not have been useful.

Textile arts



Figure 2.2.1.9: Weaving with traditionally dyed alpaca wool, Chinchero, Peru (photo: **Rosalee Yagihara**, CC BY-NC-ND 2.0)

The ancient peoples of the Andes developed textile technology before ceramics or metallurgy. Textile fragments found at Guitarrero Cave date from c. 5780 B.C.E. Over the course of millennia, techniques developed from simple twining to complex woven fabrics. By the first millennium C.E., Andean weavers had developed and mastered every major technique, including double-faced cloth and lace-like open weaves.

Andean textiles were first made using fibers from reeds, but quickly moved to yarn made from cotton and camelid fibers. Cotton grows on the coast, and was cultivated by ancient Andeans in several colors, including white, several shades of brown, and a soft grayish blue. In the highlands, the alpaca provided soft, strong wool in natural colors of white, brown, and black. Both cotton and wool were also dyed to create more colors: **red** from cochineal, blue from indigo, and other colors from plants that grew at various elevations. Alpaca wool is much easier to dye than cotton, and so it was usually preferred for coloring. The extra time and effort needed to dye fibers made the bright colors a symbol of status and wealth throughout Andean history.

Ceramics



Figure 2.2.1.10: Oxygenated sculptural ceramic ceremonial vessel that represents a dog, c. 100-800 C.E., Moche, Peru, 180 mm high (Museo Larco).

Though ceramics were not as valuable as textiles to Andean peoples, they were important for spreading religious ideas and showing status. People used plain everyday wares for cooking and storing foods. Elites often used finely made ceramic vessels for eating and drinking, and vessels decorated with images of gods or spiritually important creatures were kept as status symbols, or given as gifts to people of lesser status to cement their social obligations to those above them.

There are a wide variety of Andean ceramic styles, but there are some basic elements that can be found throughout the region's history. Wares were mostly fired in an oxygenating atmosphere, resulting in ceramics that often had a red cast from the clay's iron content. Some cultures, such as the Sicán and Chimú, instead used kilns that deprived the clay of oxygen as it fired, resulting in a surface ranging from brown to black.



Figure 2.2.1.11: Non-oxygenated ceramic feline bottle, 12th–15th century, Chimú (Peru), 28.26 cm high (**The Metropolitan Museum of Art**)

Decoration of ceramics could be done by incising lines into the surface, creating textures by rocking seashells over the damp clay, or by painting the surface.

Some early elite ceramics were decorated after firing with a paint made from plant resin and mineral pigments. This produced a wide variety of bright colors, but the resin could not withstand being heated and so these resin-

painted wares were only for display and ritual use. Most ceramics in the Andes instead were slip-painted. Slip is a liquid that is made of clay, and the color of the slip is determined by the color of the clay and its mineral content. Most slip painting was applied before firing, after the semi-dry clay had been burnished with a smooth stone to prepare the surface. The range of slip colors could vary from two (seen in **Moche ceramics**) to seven or more (seen in Nasca ceramics). Once fired, the burnished surface would be shiny. Ceramics, because of their durability, are one of the greatest resources for understanding ancient Andean cultures.



Figure 2.2.1.12: Female figurine, 1400–1533, Inka, Silver-gold alloy, 14.9 x 3.5 cm (**The Metropolitan Museum of Art**)



Figure 2.2.1.13: Knife (*tumi*) with Removable Figural Handle, Moche, 50-800 C.E., green copper with patina, 11.43 x 2.5 x 1.43 cm (**Walters Art Museum**)

Metalwork

Metalworking developed later in Andean history, with the oldest known gold artifact dating to 2100 B.C.E., and evidence of copper smelting from around 900–700 B.C.E. Gold was used for jewelry and other forms of ornamentation, as well as for making sculptural pieces. Inka figurines of silver and gold depicting humans and llamas have been recovered from high-altitude archaeological sites in Peru and Chile. Copper and bronze were also used to create jewelry and items like ceremonial knives (called *tumis*).

Architecture

The architecture of the Andes can be divided roughly between highland and coastal traditions. Coastal cultures tended to build using adobe, while highland cultures depended more on stone. However, the lowland site of Caral, which is currently the oldest complex site known in the Andes, was built mainly using stone.



Figure 2.2.1.14: Caral, Peru, founded c. 2800 B.C.E. (photo: **Pativilcano**, CC BY-SA 3.0)

Beginning with Caral in 2800 B.C.E, various cultures constructed monumental structures such as platforms, temples, and walled compounds. These structures were the focus of political and/or religious power, like the site of **Chavín de Huantár** in the highlands or the Huacas de Moche on the coast. Many of these structures have been heavily damaged by time, but some reliefs and murals used to decorate them survive.



Figure 2.2.1.15: Painted adobe relief, Huaca de La Luna,100 CE to 800 C.E., Moche (Peru) (photo: **Marco Silva Navarrete**, CC BY-NC-ND 2.0)

The best-known architecture in the Andes is that of the **Inka**. The Inka used stone for all of their important structures, and developed a technique that helped protect the structures from earthquakes. Because of its stone construction, Inka architecture has survived more easily than the adobe architecture of the coast. Ongoing efforts by archaeologists and the Peruvian Ministry of Culture

are also focused on restoring and preserving the great works of coastal architecture.



Figure 2.2.1.16: Inka stone doorways, Qoricancha, Cusco (photo: **Jean Robert Thibault**, CC BY-SA 2.0)

Ancient past, continuing traditions

From textiles to ceramics, metalwork, and architecture, Andean cultures produced art and architecture that responded to their natural environment and reflected their beliefs and social structures. We can learn much about these ancient traditions through the artifacts and sites that survive, as well as the many ways that these practices—such as weaving—persist today.

Additional resources:

Dualism in Andean Art from The Metropolitan Museum of Art's Timeline of Art History

The Lost Inca Empire from PBS

Chavin (UNESCO World Heritage Site)

Project page for the Huaca de la Luna restoration by the World Monuments Fund

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- **11.5: South America before c. 1500** by Smarthistory is licensed CC BY-NC-SA 4.0.

2.2.2: Introduction to Ancient Andean Art

by **DR. ANANDA COHEN-APONTE**

Page ID
371555



Figure 2.2.2.1: Map of South America showing the Andes (map: **Mapswire**, CC BY 4.0)

Mountain highlands to arid coastlines

The Andes region encompasses the expansive mountain chain that runs nearly 4,500 miles north to south, covering parts of modern-day Venezuela, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, Bolivia, Chile, and Argentina. The pre-Columbian inhabitants of the Andes developed a stunning visual tradition that lasted over 10,000 years before the Spanish invasion of South America in 1532.

One of the most ecologically diverse places in the world, the Andes mountains give way to arid coastlines, fertile mountain valleys, frozen highland peaks that reach as high as 22,000 feet above sea level, and tropical rainforests. These disparate geographical and ecological regions were unified by complex trade networks grounded in reciprocity.

The Andes was home to thousands of cultural groups that spoke different languages and dialects, and who ranged from nomadic hunter-gatherers to sedentary farmers. As such, the artistic traditions of the Andes are highly varied.

Pre-Columbian architects of the dry coastal regions built cities out of adobe, while highland peoples excelled in stone carving to produce architectural complexes that emulated the surrounding mountainous landscape.

Artists crafted objects of both aesthetic and utilitarian purposes from ceramic, stone, wood, bone, gourds, feathers, and cloth. Pre-Columbian Andean peoples developed a broad stylistic vocabulary that rivaled that of other ancient civilizations in both diversity and scope. From the breathtaking naturalism of **Moche** anthropomorphic ceramics to the geometric abstraction found in **Inka textiles**, Andean art was anything but static or homogeneous.

Characteristics

While Andean art is perhaps most notable for its diversity, it also possesses many unifying characteristics. Andean artists across the South American continent often endowed their works with a life force or sense of divinity. This translated into a process-oriented artistic practice that privileged an object's inner substance over its appearance.



Figure 2.2.2.2: Border fragment, Paracas, 4th-3rd century B.C.E., cotton and camelid fiber, 1.43 x 12.7 cm (The Metropolitan Museum of Art)

Andean art is also characterized by its environmental specificity; pre-Columbian art and architecture was intimately tied to the natural environment. Textiles produced by the Paracas culture, for instance, contained vivid depictions of local birds that could be found throughout the desert peninsula.



Figure 2.2.2.3: Hummigbird, Nasca geoglyph, over 300 feet in length, created approximately 2000 years ago (photo: **Diego Delso,** CC BY-SA 4.0)

The nearby Nazca culture is best known for its **monumental earthworks** in the shape of various aquatic and terrestrial animals that may have served as pilgrimage routes. The **Inkas**, on the other hand, produced windowed monuments whose vistas highlighted elements of the adjacent sacred landscape. Andean artists referenced, invoked, imitated, and highlighted the natural environment, using materials acquired both locally and through long-distance trade. Andean objects, images, and monuments also commanded human interaction.



Figure 2.2.2.4: A window frames a view of the surrounding mountains, Machu Picchu (photo: Sarahh Scher, CC BY-NC-ND 4.0)

Worn, touched, held, maneuvered, or ritually burned

Pre-Columbian Andean art was meant to be touched, worn, held, maneuvered, or ritually burned. Elaborately decorated ceramic pots would have been used for storing food and drink for the living or as grave goods to accompany the deceased into the afterlife. Textiles painstakingly embroidered or woven with intricate designs would have been worn by the living, wrapped around mummies, or burned as sacrifices to the gods. Decorative objects made from copper, silver, or gold **adorned the bodies** of rulers and elites. In other words, Andean art often possessed both an aesthetic and a functional component — the concept of "art for art's sake" had little applicability in the pre-Columbian Andes. This is not to imply that art was not appreciated for its beauty, but rather that the process of experiencing art went beyond merely viewing it.



Figure 2.2.2.5: Mantle, created to wrap a mummified body ("**The Paracas Textile**"), Nasca, 100-300 C.E., cotton, camelid fiber, 148 x 62.2 cm (Brooklyn Museum)



Figure 2.2.2.6: Detail, Mantle, created to wrap a mummified body ("The Paracas Textile"), Nasca, 100-300 C.E., cotton, camelid fiber, 148 x 62.2 cm (Brooklyn Museum)

The supernatural



Figure 2.2.2.7: A bead from a necklace buried with the Old Lord of Sipán, 300-390 C.E., gold, 3 × 5.2 × 4.5 × 8.3 cm (photo: Sarahh Scher, CC BY-NC-ND 4.0)

At the same time that Andean art commanded human interaction, it also resonated with the supernatural realm. Some works were never seen or used by the living. Mortuary art, for instance, was essentially created only to be buried in the ground.

The magnificent ceramics and metalwork found at the grave of the **Lord of Sipán** on Peru's north coast required a tremendous output of labor, yet were never intended for living beings. The notion of "hidden" art was a convention found throughout the pre-Columbian world. In Mesoamerica, for instance, burying objects in ritual caches to venerate the earth gods was practiced from the **Olmec** to the **Aztec** civilizations.

Works of art associated with particular rituals, on the other hand, were often burned or broken in order to "release" the object's spiritual essence. Earthworks and architectural complexes best viewed from high above would have only been "seen" from the privileged vantage point of supernatural beings. Indeed, it is only with the advent of modern technology such as aerial photography and Google Earth that we are able to view earthworks such as the Nazca lines from a "supernatural" perspective.

Art was often conceived within a dualistic context, produced for both human and divine audiences. The pre-Columbian Andean artistic traditions covered here comprise only a sampling of South America's rich visual heritage. Nevertheless, it will provide readers with a broad understanding of the major cultures, monuments, and artworks of the Andes as well as the principal themes and critical issues associated with them.

Additional resources:

Dualism in Andean Art on The Metropolitan Museum of Art's Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History

Music in the Ancient Andes on The Metropolitan Museum of Art's Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History

Birds of the Andes on The Metropolitan Museum of Art's Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History

Elizabeth Hill Boone, ed., *Andean Art at Dumbarton Oaks* (Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 1996)

Sarahh Scher and Billie J. A. Follensbee, eds., *Dressing the Part: Power, Dress, Gender, and Representation in the Pre-Columbian Americas* (University Press of Florida, 2017)

Rebecca Stone. *Art of the Andes: from Chavín to Inca* (Thames & Hudson 2012)

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2.2.3: Andean Textiles

Andean Textiles

by Michelle Ray

Though the individual fibers might deteriorate relatively quickly, Andean textile technology and art has endured over millennia. It is evident that visual patterns found on Andean textiles are repeated motifs across time and materials, seen recurring on various textile artifacts over time as well as in other applications such as architecture and engineering. American art scholar Julia McHugh summarizes:

> For centuries prior to the Spanish Conquest, Andean textiles were used to express identity and ancestral belief. Considered the first art form in the region, cloth has possessed unparalleled importance in the Andes since the second millennium B.C. . . . To this day, Andean textiles are both utilitarian items and instruments of ritual that embody Andean worldviews and cultural values . . . Across the Andes, the act of clothing the body was very political. Garments served as important markers of identity and status, and encoded signs and symbols that differentiated royalty from commoners . . .
>
> Textiles also delineated sacred spaces, both outdoors and as architectural adornment. Evidence suggests that the Chimú used wall hangings, as demonstrated by a large, woven panel, which emulates the sculptural reliefs on the palace walls at the north coast capital of Chan Chan. Feathered panels may have served a similar function for the Wari on the southern coast. The Inca used *cumbi* to adorn natural, sacred sites (*huacas*) such as rock outcroppings. Sixteenth-century Spanish chronicles also describe the Inca custom of ceremoniously decorating interior spaces with cloth.
>
> *from "Andean Textiles" (June 2020) by Julia McHugh in the* Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History *from the Metropolitan Museum of Art*



Figure 2.2.3.1: (1300-1470). *Chimú hanging* [textile]. H. 82 x W. 63-7/8 in. The Michael C. Rockefeller Memorial Collection, Bequest of Nelson A. Rockefeller, 1979, at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Public domain.

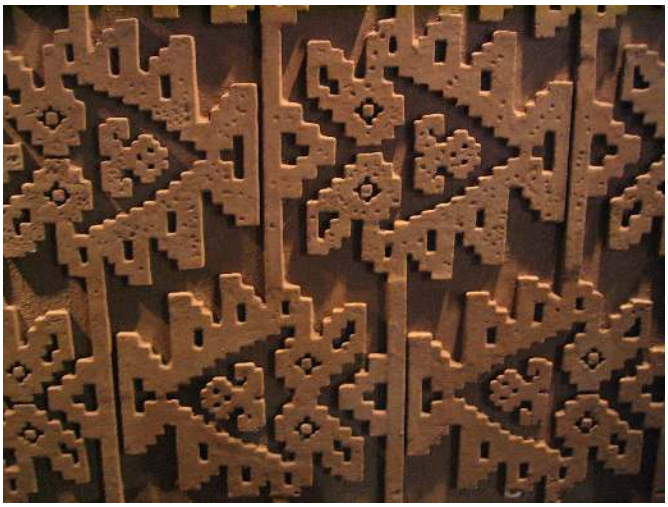


Figure 2.2.3.2: Carved adobe decoration, Chan Chan Archaeological Zone, Peru, taken on 23 November 2005 by MacAllen Brothers, Wikimedia Commons, CC BY-SA 2.0

For instance, the images above demonstrate a great resemblance in the stepped and interlocking geometric patterns in a large textile that was likely hung in an interior space with a carved adobe wall relief, both found at a palace in Chan Chan, the 15th century Chimú capital in the Andean region.

Another example pairing shown below exhibits the recurring motif now known as Paracas flyers across varying media: textiles and ceramics. Both the ceramic vessel and textile mantle were made during the later phase of Paracas art (c. 400 B.C.E. into the first centuries of the common era) when flying figures became common in both ceramic and embroidered textile iconography, with many holding knives and heads in the same manner as this painted ceramic image. Art historians have interpreted the figures in various ways—as spirits taking flight in the afterlife (linking them to the burial context of the art), or as representations of living humans in a state of trance during a ceremony. Many flyers, including the bowl's flying Oculate Being, carry heads and accessories resembling knives, perhaps a reference to ferrying powerfully symbolic heads to another realm. Whatever their original meaning, these energized, animated beings certainly demonstrate the creativity and technical virtuosity of Paracas artists in all media.



Figure 2.2.3.3: 3rd–1st century B.C.E., Paracas, Ceramic, post-fired paint, 5.1 × 17.5 × 17.5 cm (public domain, The Metropolitan Museum of Art)



Figure 2.2.3.4: Detail, Man's mantle and two border fragments, Paracas, 50–100 C.E., wool plain weave, embroidered with wool, 101 x 244.3 cm (Museum of Fine Arts, Boston)

The later Inkan emipre (which historically followed the Chimú in the Andes) are known for employing textiles for practical engineering purposes in addition to political, religious, and other cultural rituals. The Inka capital controlled twelve million subjects and was considered one of the world's largest empires at this time. The Inka were great engineers and built or rebuilt 14,000 miles of roads, from the coast to the two central regions north and south. They had a swift system of runners who traveled from the coast to the capital of Cusco in 3 days – up to 250 miles a day. When the terrain was steep, they erected stairs, and over rivers or valleys, they constructed textile bridges.



Figure 2.2.3.3: Inka bridge - by Alun Salt CC BY-SA 2.0

The Inka did not develop a writing system as we define a writing system, however, they use textiles to record historic events of their culture. They maintained rigorous control over their vast empire using a *quipu*. Quipus is a sophisticated record-keeping system. The *Quipucamayoc*, or lord of knots, was the quipu reader to determine how much tribute and food, for example, was available in any storeroom throughout the empire. Quipus were made up of the main thread with multiple

knotted threads hanging perpendicularly from the main thread. The color, position, kind of knot, and location recorded a variety of things. Although still not clearly understood today, the quipus demonstrated that Inka knew of the decimal system and were familiar with the concept of zero. The quipu was lightweight and portable for the Quipucamayoc to carry as they traveled over the rugged terrain of the empire. Interestingly, after the conquest of the Inka by the Spanish, it was noted converts to Christianity continued to use quipus to recount their sins in confession.



Figure 2.2.3.4: Quipu, AD 1400 - 1532, Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian, Smithsonian, CC 0 1.0

Since the Inka did not have a writing tradition, pre-conquest manuscripts are not available to study. However, Guaman Poma, an indigenous person who the Spanish Christianized, wrote a 1000-page letter to the King of Spain, illustrating the injustices occurring at the hands of the Spaniards. A reproduction of his letter and illustration depicts the Quipucamayoc. The letter, *El primer Nueva Corónica y Buen Gobierno* (The First New Chronicle and Good Government), chronicled Inka history by the indigenous Inka historian Felipe Guaman Poma de Ayala (ca. 1535–1616).



Figure 2.2.3.5: Sketch from of a Quipucamayoc from (1936), Public Domain

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Paracas Textiles, an introduction

by DR. ANANDA COHEN-APONTE



Figure 2.2.3.6: Color Block Mantle, Peruvian (Paracas), first century C.E., wool, plain weave, embroidered with wool, 142 x 241 cm (**Museum of Fine Arts, Boston**)

A Desert Necropolis in Peru

At around the same time that Chavín culture flourished in the highlands, the Paracas peninsula on the southern coast of Peru witnessed the rise of a new society of farmers and fishermen. The Paracas culture (c. 700 B.C.E.–200 C.E.) is best known not for its monumental architecture, but for what lay buried below the ground: a necropolis of hundreds of miraculously preserved mummy bundles. The Paracas mummies were buried in two different types of burial chambers. The Paracas Cavernas (cavern) pits were small bottle-shaped shaft tombs, while the Paracas Necropolis crypts were large mausoleums fitted with masonry walls.



Figure 2.2.3.7: The Paracas peninsula (map: Google)

Located within these tombs were mummy bundles wrapped in sumptuous embroidered textiles, some reaching up to four feet in circumference. The textiles ranged in quality from rough swaths of undecorated cloth to finely embroidered mantles. Mummies were also buried with offerings of food and jewelry to accompany the deceased into the afterlife. The types of textiles and offerings associated with a mummy bundle shed light on the individual's social status; the larger and more elaborate the bundle, the higher social standing the person held during his or her life.

Paracas textiles provide some of the most stunning examples of pre-Columbian Andean fiber art. Close examination of Paracas textiles reveals a great deal of information on the sophisticated embroidery techniques developed by Paracas artists, their system of textile production, and their belief systems.

Material



Figure 2.2.3.8: Alpaca wool (photo: Cgoodwin, CC BY-SA 3.0)

Paracas embroidered cloths were made out of cotton and camelid fibers. Cotton is a local coastal crop that would have been readily accessible to Paracas artists. Camelid (related to the camel family) fiber, on the other hand, derives from llamas, alpacas, and vicuñas indigenous to the highlands.

Paracas weavers would have procured camelid fiber through long-distance trade. Cotton would have been used for weaving the ground cloth while the silkier, high-quality camelid threads were typically used for the embroidery.

Style and techniques

Linear style

Linear Style textiles are embroidered cloths that feature repeating geometric designs. Many Linear Style textiles appear to be woven because the embroidery covers nearly the entire surface area of the ground cloth. Paracas textile specialists would embroider designs on a grid pattern instead of stitching along the contours of the design. In other words, the embroiderers would stitch each color separately in a linear fashion until the entire composition became filled in with lines. This required a great deal of planning and visualization to achieve the final product. Paracas textile specialists employed an apprentice system in which less experienced embroiderers produced designs alongside those of experts in order to mimic their designs and techniques. One single cloth could bear the work of many different hands with varying levels of expertise.



Figure 2.2.3.9: Linear Style Paracas textile, 5th–3rd century B.C.E., camelid hair and cotton (**The Metropolitan Museum of Art**)

The Block Color style, on the other hand, was made by stitching outlines of shapes and then filling them in with broad areas of color. Block Color style tends to be less geometric than Linear Style, and has more open spaces between motifs. Both Linear and Block Color styles were being used during the same time period.



Figure 2.2.3.10: Detail of a Paracas Block Color mantle, 50–100 C.E., embroidered wool (**Museum of Fine Arts, Boston**)

Symbols

Felines, serpents, birds, and fish dominate the Linear Style symbolic repertoire, while human figures are added to the subject matter of Block Color textiles. Unlike what we see at Chavín, Paracas symbolism mainly consists of local wildlife, including fish, pampas cats, falcons, and hummingbirds.



Figure 2.2.3.11: Double Fish Mantle, Block Color style, Paracas, 0-100 C.E. (**The Brooklyn Museum**)

In the *Double Fish Mantle* we see a series of paired fish transposed to one another, with each head facing the tail of the other. Art historian Mary Frame suggests that they represent sharks due to the appearance of gills behind the eyes. In the orange border, smaller sharks are enclosed within the protected space of their connected bodies, and may be a reference to fertility and reproduction. The Paracas embroiderers depicted a range of aquatic and terrestrial life in their textiles, providing a comprehensive picture of the peninsula's thriving ecosystem.

Paracas textiles contain standardized geometric, linear representations of animal motifs. The repeating images have a rhythmic character and usually remain faithful to the pattern. The designs are dense and compact, and bear little distinction between foreground and background. In the *Double Fish Mantle*, the fish motifs are arranged symmetrically within the mantle, with four pairs of fish embroidered along the long edges, followed by a row of five pairs, with six pairs along the center of the mantle.



Figure 2.2.3.12: Double Fish Mantle, detail, Block Color style, Paracas, 0-100 C.E. (**Brooklyn Museum**)

While the number and distribution of the fish pairs conform to a set pattern, a great deal of diversity can be found in the details of the embroidery. Some are green, blue, and pink; others are black, pink, and brown, while others are yellow, blue, and brown. The specific color combinations vary across the composition and do not fit into any discernible pattern. The

subtle interventions made by the embroiderers, which break the pattern through the unsystematic distribution of colors, lend the mantle a powerful visual dynamism. The orange borders of the mantle offer a pop of color and also feature a slight variation of the fish motif.



Figure 2.2.3.13: Double Fish Mantle, detail, Block Color style, Paracas, 0-100 C.E. (**Brooklyn Museum**)

Use



Figure 2.2.3.14: A mannequin displaying a Linear Style "turban," 300 B.C.E–100 C.E., camelid fiber and feathers (**Brooklyn Museum**)

Paracas embroidery adorned a number of different types of textiles and garments. Everyday clothing such as hats, and ponchos often contained embroidered sections executed in the linear style.

The most elaborate embroideries can be found in mummy bundles. Long swaths of cloth embroidered in the linear style were wrapped around the deceased to create a bundle, some measuring up to 85 feet in length.



Figure 2.2.3.15: The turban seen at left (**Brooklyn Museum**)

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"The Paracas Textile"

by **LOIS MARTIN**



Figure 2.2.3.16: Nasca, *Mantle* ("*The Paracas Textile*"), 100-300 C.E., cotton, camelid fiber, 58-1/4 x 24-1/2 inches / 148 x 62.2 cm, found south coast, Paracas, Peru (Brooklyn Museum)

Mummy bundles

One of the most extraordinary masterpieces of the pre-Columbian Americas is a nearly 2,000-year-old cloth from the South Coast of Peru, which has been in the collection of the Brooklyn Museum of Art since 1938.

Despite the textile's small size (it measures about two by five feet), it contains a vast amount of information about the people who lived in ancient Peru; and despite its great age and delicacy, its colors are brilliant, and tiny details amazingly intact. This is due to the arid environment of southern Peru along the Pacific shore, where it is so dry that organic material buried in the sand remains well preserved for hundreds or even thousands of years.



Figure 2.2.3.17: Paracas National Reserve, Peru (photo: **ilker ender**, CC BY 2.0)



Figure 2.2.3.18: The Paracas peninsula, Peru

In the ancient cemeteries on the Paracas Peninsula, the dead were wrapped in layers of cloth and clothing into "mummy bundles." The largest and richest mummy bundles contained hundreds of brightly embroidered textiles, feathered costumes, and fine jewelry, interspersed with food offerings, such as beans. Early reports claimed that this cloth came from the Paracas peninsula, so it was called "THE Paracas textile," to mark its excellence and uniqueness. Currently, scholars have revised this provenance, and now attribute the cloth to the related, but slightly later Nasca culture.

Thread by thread

Recently, the Brooklyn Museum has posted high quality, close-up views of this masterpiece online, allowing viewers to scrutinize the textile, thread by thread. Such a detailed inspection has not been possible since the piece was first made. With simple tools, the early cultures of the Andean region of South America produced textiles of astonishing virtuosity. Some extremely fine pieces, like this one, are too delicate to have served any utilitarian purpose, and so are considered ceremonial.



Figure 2.2.3.19: Detail of border figure 61, Nasca, *Mantle* ("*The Paracas Textile*"), 100-300 C.E., cotton, camelid fiber, 58-1/4 x 24-1/2" / 148 x 62.2 cm, found south coast, Paracas, Peru (Brooklyn Museum)

Like some other very fine cloths, the Brooklyn textile is finished so carefully on both sides that it is almost impossible to distinguish which is the correct side. Although the central cloth and its framing dimensional border are created by different techniques, both display perfect reversibility—except for three border figures. These three—instead of being duplicated on the back (as if flipped in mirror image), like all the others—appear in back view on one side of the cloth, thereby designating a "front" and "back" to the textile.



Figure 2.2.3.20: Center detail, Nasca, *Mantle* ("*The Paracas Textile*"), 100-300 C.E., cotton, camelid fiber, 58-1/4 x 24-1/2 inches / 148 x 62.2 cm, found south coast, Paracas, Peru (Brooklyn Museum)

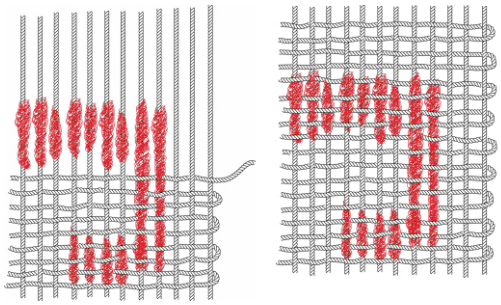


Figure 2.2.3.21: Warp wrapping (diagram by Lois Martin)

The central cloth's design of 32 geometric faces is created by "warp-wrapping," a technique in which colored fleece is wound around sections of cotton warp threads before weaving.

Because the central cloth and the border have different color palettes, they may have been created at different times. The triple-layer border has colorful outer veneers of wool "crossed-looping" that envelop inner cotton cores of looping or weaving.

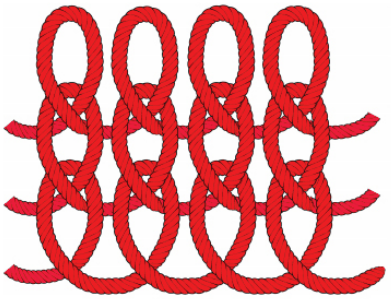


Figure 2.2.3.22: Crossed looping (diagram by Lois Martin)

"Crossed-looping" resembles knitting (but is accomplished with a single needle); in areas where the threads are broken, it is possible to glimpse the underlying cotton substrates. While the cotton is off-white, the wool is dyed in jewel-bright tones.



Figure 2.2.3.23: Alpaca herd, Ausangate, Peru (photo: Marturius, CC BY-SA 3.0)

The combination of materials suggests extensive trading relationships: for while cotton was grown in coastal valleys, wool came from camelids (such as the llama, alpaca, and vicuña) that live at high altitudes in the Andes mountains.



Figure 2.2.3.24: The llama is laden with a bounty of vegetables. Since pre-Columbian people had no wheeled vehicles for transport, llama caravans carried goods between regions. Border figure 26, Nazca, *Mantle* ("*The Paracas Textile*"), 100-300 C.E., cotton, camelid fiber, 58-1/4 x 24-1/2 inches / 148 x 62.2 cm, found south coast, Paracas, Peru (Brooklyn Museum)

Monstrous hybrids

On the border, a parade of 90 figures is linked together on their lower bodies, which are worked two-dimensionally against a red background.



Figure 2.2.3.25: Detail of border figures (composite photo), Nasca, *Mantle* ("*The Paracas Textile*"), 100-300 C.E., cotton, camelid fiber, 58-1/4 x 24-1/2 inches / 148 x 62.2 cm, found south coast, Paracas, Peru (Brooklyn Museum)

Each figure's upper body and head is constructed as a separate unit, and attached to the woven strip. The upper bodies are worked in bas-relief, with some parts projecting outwards from the plane of the fabric. Tiny components (like leaves and feathers) were worked as separate pieces and then attached, giving a wonderful three-dimensionality and liveliness to the figures, especially because they mingle and overlap.



Figure 2.2.3.26: Nasca, *Mantle* (“*The Paracas Textile*“), 100-300 C.E., cotton, camelid fiber, 58-1/4 x 24-1/2 inches / 148 x 62.2 cm, found south coast, Paracas, Peru (Brooklyn Museum)



Figure 2.2.3.27: Nazca ornament, gold (Brooklyn Museum)

The parade is arranged in four, single-file, L-shaped lines that proceed around each corner of the cloth. A wide variety of types appear, including human, animal, and monstrous hybrids. Some figures are unique, others are twins, triplets, or even sextuplets; a few are in related groups.

Most of the animals and plants that appear can be tied to species still found on the South Coast, and many human figures wear or carry items that directly relate to the archaeological record.

Their jewelry, for example, corresponds to specimens formed from thin sheets of gleaming gold. These include: “forehead ornaments” (shaped like a bird with outstretched wings); “hair spangles” (disk or star shapes that dangle from the wingtips of the forehead ornament); slender, feather-shaped headdress “plumes;” and “mouthmasks.” Mouthmasks hung from the nose septum, and had flaring extensions, like cat whiskers.



Figure 2.2.3.28: Detail with face ornament, border figure 63, Nasca, Mantle (“The Paracas Textile”), 100-300 C.E., cotton, camelid fiber, 58-1/4 x 24-1/2″ / 148 x 62.2 cm, found south coast, Paracas, Peru (Brooklyn Museum)

Garments

The border figures’ clothing also matches examples found archaeologically, and some bear minuscule designs that faithfully represent embroidered decorations found on life-sized garments. Some wear wrap-around dresses of a style worn by women in ancient times; others wear two-part outfits, associated with men (below). The largest and most beautifully decorated garments were mantles that draped over the shoulders, and fell to the knee. By examining stitches on actual mantles, archaeologists have determined that teams of artists worked on them, sitting side-by-side.



Figure 2.2.3.29: One of three figures with a front and back, painted or tattooed skin, wears a bristling mouthmask, and a headdress with flower-like plumes. He carries a striped staff topped with a winged creature, and wears a tunic and loincloth. Over his shoulder hangs a boldly-patterned mantle ending in a feline. Detail of border figure 16, Nasca, *Mantle* (“*The Paracas Textile*“), 100-300 C.E., cotton, camelid fiber, 58-1/4 x 24-1/2” / 148 x 62.2 cm, found south coast, Paracas, Peru (Brooklyn Museum)

Other border details, rather than realistic, seem to be fantastic or mythological. The severed heads (sometimes called “trophy heads”) brandished by some figures, for example, sometimes sprout flourishing plants—as if to suggest themes of sacrifice and fertility. And snake-like streamers that flow from some figures do not correspond to any known object, and may indicate supernatural qualities.

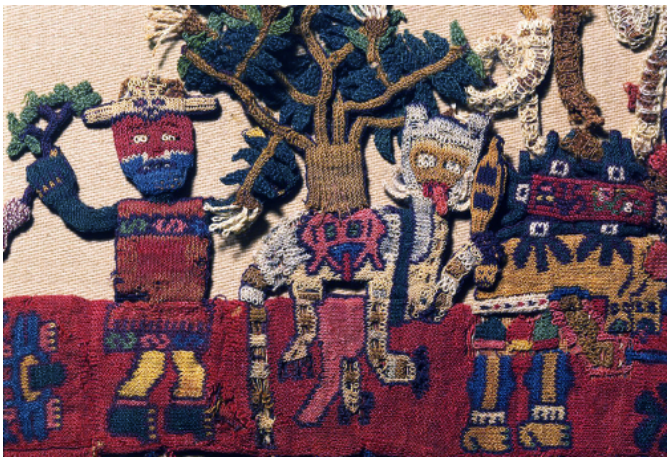


Figure 2.2.3.30: Pampas cat and tree, border figure 3, Nasca, *Mantle* ("*The Paracas Textile*"), 100-300 C.E., cotton, camelid fiber, 58-1/4 x 24-1/2" / 148 x 62.2 cm, found south coast, Paracas, Peru (Brooklyn Museum)

When they depicted clothing, Paracas and Nazca artists often added a face, or an animal body to the loose ends of fabric hanging behind a wearer. This artistic convention seems to suggest the lively movements of cloth fluttering behind a wearer, and hints that these ancient people considered cloth a precious carrier of vitality: an interpretation that seems warranted because this vibrant textile gives us such an evocative and animated glimpse into their world.

Backstory

The Paracas Textile is only one of hundreds of similar textiles that originate from multiple burial sites on the Paracas peninsula. These burials were first identified and excavated by the renowned Peruvian archaeologist Julio Tello in the 1920s. For political reasons, Tello was forced to abandon the site in 1930, and, without a team of archaeologists to oversee the area, a period of intense looting followed. It is now believed that a great number of the Paracas textiles in international museum collections were acquired as a result of this looting, which occurred most heavily between 1931 and 1933.

A large group of these illegally acquired textiles is held by the **Gothenburg Collection** in the **Museum of World Culture** in Gothenburg, Sweden. The objects were smuggled out of Peru by the Swedish consul in the early 1930s, and donated to the city of Gothenburg. The museum and city fully acknowledge the objects' illicit provenance, and have been working with the Peruvian government on a plan for their systematic return. As stated on the museum website,

> Large quantities of Paracas textiles were illegally exported to museums and private collections all over the world between 1931 and 1933. About a hundred of these were taken to Sweden and donated to the Ethnographic Department of Gothenburg Museum. Today, problems associated with looted artifacts and illicit trade in antiques are better acknowledged and being addressed.

Though Peru began lobbying for repatriation in 2009, Gothenburg has been somewhat slow to respond to the requests, partly due to the fragile condition of the textiles. According to the museum website, even the transport of these objects between the museum's archives and their exhibition space in Sweden—a distance of only a few kilometers—has resulted in their **deterioration**. Despite these concerns, a plan has been put in place to systematically return some of the textiles to Peru. The first four were delivered **in 2014**, and another 79 **in 2017**. Further works are set to be returned by 2021. The repatriated textiles are now in the possession of Peru's General Directorate of Museums of the Ministry of Culture.

The case of the Gothenburg Paracas textiles highlights the need not only for governmental and institutional agreements regarding the restitution of illegally acquired objects, but also for oversight concerning the continued stewardship and preservation of these fragile artworks.

Backstory by Dr. Naraelle Hohensee

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

3: Ritual Symbolism in Figural Architectural Ornamentation

3.1: Devotional Art from the Indian Subcontinent

3.2: Artworks of the Benin Kingdom

3.2.1: Understanding Figurative African Art

3.2.2: The Court of Benin

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3.1: Devotional Art from the Indian Subcontinent

Learning Objectives

- Generally describe the role of architectural ornamentation in Hindu and Buddhist rituals.
- Discuss the spiritual significance of the human figure in Indian Hindu and Buddhist visual art.
- Evaluate the extent to which Hindu and Buddhist values influence each other in Indian art.

Understanding South Asia's Religious Art

by Jinah Kim and Todd Lewis

in *Education About Asia* (Volume 25:3, Winter 2020)

There are many ways to talk about the art of India (here, India is a shorthand for the South Asian subcontinent). From a serene stone sculpture of a meditating Buddha to the dynamic image of Dancing Shiva in bronze, to cosmic symbolism of soaring temples covered in sensuous celestial bodies built in stone to the perfect architecture of Taj Mahal, to colorful paintings of heroes and heroines of love stories and myths to intricate carvings on ivory, to stunning hand-woven or embroidered textiles, there is no shortage of wondrous sights to admire when it comes to Indian art. Exploring this kaleidoscopic world can be daunting and overwhelming for any instructor or student unfamiliar with the subcontinent's culture and history.[1] One needs a hook to enter this esoteric world: patronage and religion are perhaps the two most common threads used to tell the story about the art of premodern South Asia. In this essay, we suggest yet another lens through which to present the story of Indian art: that of ritual, which is often neglected in more conventional accounts of India's rich artistic traditions. Considering artistic outputs through the lens of ritual allows us to see various ways in which art served (and is still serving) Indic religious communities not only by illustrating mythic narratives and doctrinal teachings, but also by manifesting the belief and the worldview of the people who sponsored, engineered, and used it. It is important to recognize that art in South Asia, especially during premodern times, was not made for the sake of beauty or to express an individual artist's originality or creativity. We have to embrace a completely different working definition of art: art that can be living and functional as auspicious/divine presence and works to be enjoyed and experienced not just through the sight but also through all other senses. In this definition, art is something to be touched, adorned, and performed. Thinking about India's art through ritual helps us appreciate this performative aspect that may be lost in a museum setting or in a historical narrative focused on patronage, politics, or doctrine.



Figure 3.1.1: Dancing Ganesha, Lord of Obstacles. Eleventh to twelfth century, Bangladesh, Dinajpur District. Sculpture. Phyllite (65.41 x 33.66 x 12.7 cm). Source: *Los Angeles County Museum of Art* website at https://tinyurl.com/yy2s5sxo.

A stone sculpture of Dancing Ganesha, the hugely popular elephant-headed Hindu god, the remover of obstacles, now resides in the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. It may be a visual delight to study the pot-bellied, animal-headed god who gracefully dances on tiptoe on the back of his vehicle *idur* (pronounced "ee-dur," a rodent), which is carved expertly on gray-black stone with a polished sheen (Figure 1). If this Ganesha from medieval Bengal, spotless in a climate-controlled gallery environment, may enjoy curious admiration by museum visitors in North America, on any given day, another dancing Ganesha installed in the Meenakshi Temple in Madurai, Tamil Nadu (southern Indian state), enjoys devotees' daily homage in the form of flower garlands, application of unguents, and other colorful and fragrant substances smeared upon his body while standing outdoors under an auspicious tree. This Ganesh welcomes pilgrims and worshippers to the famed temple

dedicated to the Hindu goddess Meenakshi and her husband, Sundareshwar (literally "beautiful lord," a form of Shiva) (Figure 2). This sculpture is no longer just a piece of stone carved into a specific form—in this case, a four-armed, dancing Ganesha—but rather an immediate presence of the Hindu god Ganesha that interacts with the devotees directly in a physical and manifested manner.

This understanding of the tactility and immediacy of the transcendent divine predominates the practices of Indic religious traditions, namely Buddhism, Hinduism, and Jainism, and in a way helps us explore why figurative forms prevail in South Asian artistic traditions, whether in the fantastic images of gods and goddesses with multiple heads or limbs, or in heroes and heroines of love poems and epics. If the sensuous bodily form is the "leitmotif of Indian art," exploring India through ritual art puts the body of the people who designed, sponsored, and used these images in the very context of its production and use.[2] Before moving to explore some salient characteristics of Indian art with this in mind, we need to clear away a number of common misconceptions.



Figure 3.1.2: Paying homage to Ganesha, Meenakshi Temple, Madurai, Tamil Nadu. April 2004. Source: Photo © Jinah Kim.

Buddhism and Hinduism in Western Imaginations

Early scholars held that "true Buddhists" followed a rational, atheistic belief system and that most focused on meditation, fervently intent on nirvana realization; "true Hindus," likewise, were those devoted to yoga and *samadhi* (trance meditation) in pursuit of *moksha* (final liberation from rebirth). This elitist Western stereotype also posits that as time went on, both traditions were corrupted by "popular" practices—especially rituals directed to "idols" and countless "superstitious" practices. These ideas have endured, especially in common portrayals of Hinduism and Buddhism in the West, and echoed by modern reformers in India. In fact, this "first draft of history" is wildly incorrect. What the earliest canonical texts and archaeological remains show, instead, is that both traditions had a much broader scope, far beyond the few religious virtuosos. The Buddha taught—as part of his Dharma ("teachings")—that Buddhist monastics and householders must perform rituals: the former as part of their communal life, the latter by earning merit and securing worldly blessings through rituals focusing on shrines and images. Likewise, from its origins in the Vedic hymns, Hindu traditions were centered on rituals that were designed to please the gods, especially through offerings in a *homa* (sacred fire). In fact, most of the *Veda* consists of hymns to be chanted and detailed instructions for doing homa and many other rituals. A scholarly survey of both traditions from their origins onward show that in practice Hinduism and Buddhism were—and are—as much concerned with securing worldly blessings through ritual actions as they are with seeking transcendent goals. Both have a broad spectrum of focuses and functions.



The Meenakshi Teemple, Madurai, Tamil Nadu. Source: *Wikimedia Commons* at https://tinyurl.com/ya34zwh4.

Anyone who has visited Hindu communities in South Asia or Buddhist communities across Asia (or been welcomed in Asian immigrant temples in the West) can witness the reality of pragmatic practices dominating these faiths and how art serves this central purpose. It would be extremely rare, in fact, to find the *Upanishads* or the *Bhagavad Gita* or a Buddhist philosophical text such as the *Dhammapada* being read in a temple or monastery! It is important for students to understand the breadth of paths and personal possibilities in being a "good Buddhist" or "good Hindu."[3] With this basic understanding of Indian traditions in mind, let us now turn to the first topic: how to understand the many heads and limbs of the deities.

Multiplicity and Unity: Multi-Armed, Multi-Headed Gods and Goddesses

South Asian religious images, especially those in Buddhist meditation halls or *ashrams* (Hindu monasteries), are made to convey the central spiritual ideals of the faith. The body of a Buddha, for example, should convey physical strength, mental serenity, detachment, and discernment; the ancient tradition specifies thirty-two characteristic bodily features that each have a meaning. Most generally, Buddha images should be beautiful, conveying calm, discernment, detachment, and mastery of this life. Similarly, the multiarmed Hindu deities convey their omnipresence, multiple powers, and readiness to aid devotees. Shiva as Nataraja ("King of the Dance") can encode an entire theology (see sidebar), as do depictions of Krishna (one of the human incarnations of Vishnu) dancing with the Cowherdesses (Gopis). Art can also provide a basis for understanding subtle theological conceptions, especially when accompanied by oral teaching.



Figure 3.1.3: Avalokiteshvara, ca. late eleventh or twelfth century. Second floor of Sumtsek, Alchi. Ladakh, India. Mural. Source: Photo © Jaroslav Poncar.

One of the most common questions that students encountering the art of India for the first time ask is why there are many limbs and heads on a deity.4 For example, a painted image of Avalokiteshvara, a bodhisattva (a Buddhist enlightened being postponing the entrance to nirvana or final extinction to aid suffering beings) surviving in a sumptuously painted medieval Buddhist temple (called Sumtsek, literally "three-storied building") at Alchi in the Indian Himalayas (in today's Ladakh) can be bewildering at first sight (Figure 3): the standing figure of this benign bodhisattva of compassion shows eleven heads in three different colors (white, red, and blue) and varying countenances (from peaceful to wrathful) stacked tall (3–3–3–1–1 configuration) and twenty-two arms splayed around like a body-halo holding various objects. Some (like *vajra* and *ghanta*, a thunderbolt and a bell held in uppermost hands on either side) are important ritual tools in certain Buddhist circles or symbolic attributes (like a rosary, a manuscript, a noose, and the gesture of giving), while others are weapons (like bow and arrow). How to comprehend such an abundant multiplicity in bodily forms? Two key terms can help: abstraction through figuration and unity in multiplicity.

First, it is important to recognize that these images manifest the abstract, whether the divine or the transcendent, in the most graspable, immediate form, of a human body. (The body here is not the anatomically correct, physical body of a human that is valorized in Renaissance art but rather the idealized body that can be reduced to a grid or a symbolic system in abstraction.) Every aspect of a deity's power is made immediately visible through multiple limbs and the attributes they hold, like all the marvelous weapons that, for example, the goddess Durga wields in her eight arms in slaying the buffalo demon, Mahishasura (Figure 4). To borrow today's superhero comics analogy, the lightning on Flash's suit along with red and yellow trim signal his superpower, that of lightning speed. Buddhist and Hindu deities are mighty powerful in ways that make the whole cast of the Avengers pale in comparison. Their extraordinary bodily features—like the twenty-two arms and eleven heads of the Buddhist bodhisattva of compassion, Avalokiteshvara—represent, quite literally, his manifold ability to listen to and see the sufferings of all sentient beings, relieve their distress, and lead them on the path to enlightenment. The strength and ability of Indian deities to intervene in devotees' lives are clearly articulated in their fantastic forms with the various tools they hold at once. Consider, for example, the goddess Durga in a twelfth-century metal sculpture from the Himalayan foothills in Figure 4: she holds a sword and a shield, a skull cup and a bell, a bow and an arrow, a trident and the demon she subdued. Historical studies have shown that these tools changed and developed over time. To continue the superhero comics analogy, just as new suits of armor or new versions of superheroes appear in different circumstances or universes, the iconographic forms of Indian deities have changed in response to the different social, political, and environmental needs of the communities that revered them. For this reason, one encounters many different forms of the same deity, and a deity can be called in many different names or epithets: the more popular a deity, the more names and forms are used to refer to the god or goddess.

Second, the multiple limbs (and heads) on a single body ingeniously capture multiple moments of interventions in one frame. Avalokiteshvara's ability to see all around and intervene whenever and wherever is encapsulated in one frame, as if multiple rescue scenes are overlapped in one image. (This is particularly true in a form known as the thousand-armed Avalokiteśvara.) What would require multiple panels in a comic

strip or a manipulated time lapse in a film is conveniently packaged in one body: a still image that is intended to be seen as constantly moving, transcending time. While delivering the message of awesome power immediately, such complex iconographies also can incite the onlooker to start recounting the stories that are compressed within them or to search for a teacher who can explain the code. The eight arms of the goddess Durga, seen in the twelfth-century metal image from the Chamba Valley (Himachal Pradesh, India), would immediately convey her magnificent power (see Figure 4). Once that recognition sets in, those in the know can start telling the story of how the male gods who could not deal with one monstrous buffalo demon had come together to ask the goddess to help and then give each of their signature weapons to her. This moment is not depicted here but can be pulled out from the details included in the image. Durga heroically steps on the buffalo while striking it with a trident, a weapon of Shiva, while her vehicle, the faithful lion, bites the animal in the behind. In one version of the story, the goddess chops the head of the buffalo off, and the demon who has taken the animal's form escapes from the severed neck. Here, the unnamed artist depicts the buffalo's head intact but indicates that the lifeforce of the buffalo has left by depicting his tongue rolling on the ground. The goddess grabs the helpless demon who emerged out of the buffalo by the top of his hair: in his last resistance, the demon holds up his tiny sword against the mighty goddess, but his diminutive size and compromised position make his futile attempt appear almost comical.

These stories, whether Hindu, Buddhist, or Jain, have been essential to the growth and maintenance of religious communities. Until very recent human history, the main ideas that constituted the bases of all religions were conveyed through narratives told in spoken word and through visual images in art. Painting and sculpture in the temples and monasteries of South Asia have been made for centuries to educate followers. As is true of all societies, religious traditions have had to be continuously explained and illustrated for the young.



Shiva as Lord of Dance (Nataraja), Chola period, ca. eleventh century, Tamil Nadu, copper alloy (68.3 cm x 56.5 cm). Source: Metropolitan Museum of Art 1987.80.1.

The Dance of Shiva

by Todd Lewis

***O**ne of the most lyrical and evocative symbols of Hinduism, especially in the sweeping design of South Indian artisans, is that of Nataraja, Shiva as Lord of the Dance. The upper right hand holds the twin-sided drum, from which sacred sound emerges, counting time and originating*

sound's creative resonance. The opposite hand shows on it a flame so that in Shiva's holding a fire, he points to his being a refuge in the fires of samsara. Fire also alludes to this deity's role as destroyer at the end of a great world era. Both hands move together in Shiva's great dance, ceaselessly integrating cosmic creation and destruction, including all the gods. Another hand shows the "fear-not" gesture, and the fourth points to his upraised foot, the place Hindu devotees touch most often in ritual. Shiva dances while treading on a demon who symbolizes heedlessness. Thus, to enter into the Dance of Shiva means to brave the circle of rebirth, transcend the limitations of time and apparent opposites, and join with the divine powers of the great deity whose grace and eternal energy can remove spiritual obstacles. Because the cosmos has become a manifestation of Shiva's power, a dance done simply for the purpose of his own entertainment, wherever individuals can cultivate artistic pleasure, they can find union with Shiva.

Storytelling and Narratives: Educational and Community-Building Power of Art

Extensive narrative art traditions developed to serve Buddhist, Hindu, and Jain communities include sculpture and paintings that skillfully illustrate important tales about the lives of the Buddha or the Jina Mahavira (for Jains) or the glorious acts of the Hindu gods, such as Shiva, Vishnu, Durga, etc. The world-famous fifth-century murals at Ajanta Caves (in Maharashtra, India) show how Buddhists may have experienced the Buddha and his teaching, especially through the visual narratives that illustrate details of the Buddha's life and *jataka* (his previous lives), along with more devotional offerings and auspicious symbols and images of the Buddhas and bodhisattvas. Walls in Buddhist monasteries in Sri Lanka are also routinely covered with paintings illustrating details of the Buddha's life and the jataka tales.



Figure 3.1.4: The Goddess Durga Slaying the Demon Buffalo Mahisha, twelfth century. Probably Chamba Valley, Himachal Pradesh. Brass (57.2 cm x 33 cm x 21.6 cm). Source: *Metropolitan Museum of Art* 2008.271.

As the world's first missionary religion, Buddhism spread from its land of origins in northeast India to all of South and Southeast Asia, then to China and East Asia. Monks and nuns were instructed by the Buddha to use vernacular dialects, matching the level of teaching with the capacity of the audience to follow. In this tradition, a wealth of art was created and designed to explain the Dharma, the Buddha's teaching. Most famous and well-employed would be the "Wheel of Life," which shows the six major rebirth venues for living beings in *samsara*, our world characterized by suffering, impermanence, and ignorance; according to one Buddhist monastic code, the Buddha instructs the monastics to place these paintings at the entrance of a monastery to educate visitors. It is still found at the entrance to most living Himalayan Buddhist monasteries like the Lamayuru monastery in Ladakh, India (Figure 5).



Figure 3.1.5: Wheel of existence (bhavacakra) at the entrance of Lamayuru monastery, Ladakh, India. June 2005. Source: Photo © Jinah Kim.

The story of the great goddess Durga, which informs the brass sculpture discussed above, is told in the *Devimahatmya* (literally *The Hymn to the Great Goddess*), an important Sanskrit text that extols the goddess under whose feet were subdued many powerful demons. The episode of her killing the buffalo demon narrated in the text became popular all over the subcontinent from the seventh century onward; many temples, especially royally sponsored temples, carry the narrative on their walls, as seen on the impressive panel on the wall of a cave shrine (known as the Mahishasura Cave) at Mamallapuram in today's Tamil Nadu (Figure 6). Carved out of granite, one of the hardest stones to sculpt, this tableau vivant tells the story of the goddess's victory against the buffalo demon by choosing the moment before the goddess slays the buffalo. With more space and with more actors, the drama unfolds: the goddess strides over her mighty lion facing the buffalo demon, shown here in an anthropomorphic form with a buffalo head. Although here she is petite in size in comparison to the demon, there is no mistaking her victory: the buffalo demon retreats with his army, some of whom is already fallen to ground, while the goddess sits tall on her mount, charging with her bow and other weapons against the enemy. Her many *ganas* (dwarf-like figures around her) also come to her aid, and a female warrior strikes a victim with a sword in front of the goddess just as another victim falls headfirst from above this warrior.



Figure 3.1.6: Durga battling the buffalo demon, Mahishamardini Cave. ca 670–700 CE (reign of Parameshvara, Pallava Dynasty), Mammalapuram. Granite, tableaux. Source: Photo © Jinah Kim.

The fate of the world hangs in balance: the artist(s) took pain to indicate the extreme danger posed by the buffalo demon, also marked by an umbrella over his head, a sign of respect and importance in the Indic context. His size here that is larger than the goddess conveys his power as a woeful foe, although the individual stances and the composition suggest that the goddess will ultimately prevail. Clever details and variations supplied by the unnamed artists add wit and humor, which incites telling of a story that can be further embellished and expanded by the knowledge experts such as a priest or elder in the community. Such images are often central to teaching religious and moral values, but at the same time, we should remember that performing these stories, which were conducted often with images—whether it is a street performance of the Hindu epic *Ramayana* or a singing about a local hero like Pabuji in Rajasthani villages or a storytelling session by a Buddhist priest in Nepal or singing of the hymns to the goddess during the Durga festival in West Bengal—provided (and still provides) entertainment and spectacles, bringing each community together.



Figure 3.1.7: Krishna Raising Mt. Govardhan, c. 1825, Mandi, Himachal Pradesh, India. Pigments and gold on paper. Source: Philadelphia Museum of Art 1994 148–507.

Stories about Krishna, Vishnu's incarnation, became a major impetus inspiring artistic creations from the sixteenth century onward as the devotional communities centered around the mischievous yet charming and youthful god grew exponentially across northern India. Painters serving courtly patrons were

skilled at bringing out the subtle humor and delight from well-known Krishna stories (recorded in texts like the *Bhagavata Purana*). So in an early nineteenth-century painting from the Himalayan foothills (Mandi, today's Himachal Pradesh, India), the artist portrays Krishna holding up the Mount Govardhan with a single pinky to protect the townspeople of the town Vrindavan, while angry Indra riding his white elephant brings about a torrential storm with lightning (Figure 7). The sky is dark with swirling gold, and one can almost hear the thunder. The townspeople look up gratefully while Krishna stands with his hip swayed to one side and one leg bent in a relaxed posture, gazing gently toward a lady who is adoringly touching his arm. The painter added delightful details of little pods under which families gather hiding from the rain (one of the men dearly holds a calf) and small children running about around women's and Krishna's feet, further animating the scene.



Figure 3.1.8: Miniature wooden dolls of Jagannath in Puri, Odisha, India. Source: 123RF Stock Photos. © Ravi Krishanan Gupta.

While such a courtly production, especially in the form of miniature, may have had a limited audience, certain artistic strategies developed in these circles did trickle down to inform artists serving communities with lesser means. Today, pilgrims visiting the town of Nathdwara, an important Krishna pilgrimage site in Rajasthan, can pick up pilgrims' souvenirs in various mass-produced media, like printed and framed images of Shrinathji, the special form of Krishna enshrined in the main temple, while painted images produced by the local artist workshops who serve the temple are also available. Miniature wooden dolls of Jagannath (a local form of Vishnu) with his brother and sister, and including many sets of dresses to change them, are popular souvenir items that pilgrims acquire from another important Vaishnava pilgrimage site of Puri in Odisha, often brought home to make their own Jagannath shrine ritually enlivened (Figure 8).

Living Arts and the Museum

A Buddhist or Hindu deity in a living shrine, whether at home or in a major temple, is treated as a living presence. In addition to the offerings of prayers, lamplight, incense, flowers, and food, the deities get special outfits, ornaments, jewelries, and furnishings. Sometimes these furnishings can become quite elaborate, which can include a bed, a sofa, and even a swing. In an early nineteenth-century painting from a Rajasthani court at Kota, the king (identified as Maharao Kishor Singh II of Kota, 1781– 1828) offers his evening prayer while holding his puja tray with a burning lamp and flowers in front of an elaborate miniature silver shrine (Figure 9). The shrine is dedicated to miniature images of Krishna, and two consorts dressed in finery. In the lower terrace of the multitiered shrine structure is a chess set with mini cushions on either side, as if set up to be played by the god. Hanging glass lanterns in multiple colors and a chandelier, all with a heavy dose of gold trimming everywhere (most likely painted in real gold), suggest the opulence of the patron devotee. It also shows the intimate physical environment in which many of these images were interacted with and venerated. These enshrined images were meant to be touched and cared for, just as the dancing Ganesha welcoming devotees to a major Hindu temple like the Meenakshi Temple mentioned at the beginning of this essay.

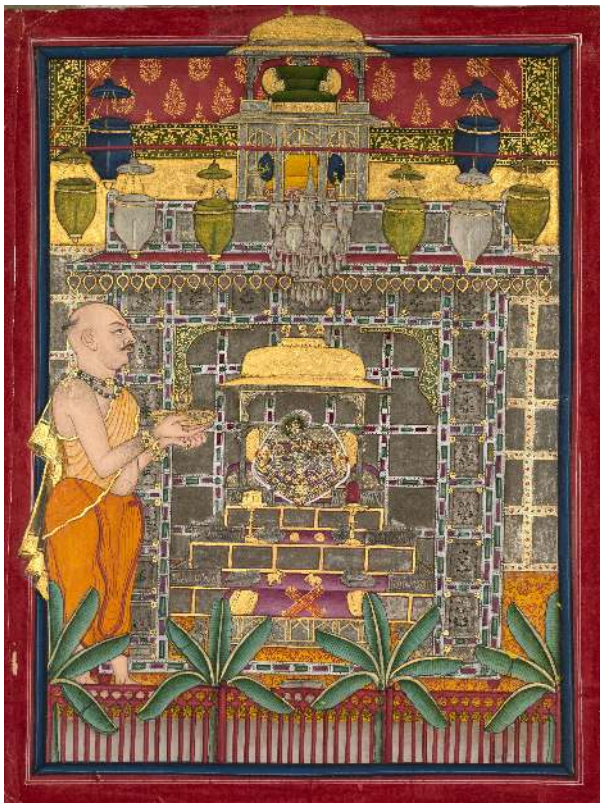


Figure 3.1.9: Maharao Kishor Singh II (1781–1828) of Kota Worshipping Krishna as Brij Rajji, c. 1825. Rajput Kingdom of Kota, Rajasthan. Gum tempera, tin, and gold on paper; overall: 24.5 x 18.8 cm. Source: The Cleveland Museum of Art, James Albert and Mary Gardiner Ford Memorial Fund 1978.71.

The goddess Durga, now in the Metropolitan Museum of Art (introduced earlier, see Figure 4), was most likely an enshrined image like the Krishna image in the painting. The goddess stands in front of an extravagant background, which was cast separately to support the image from behind as a frame. Topped

by a tiered roof with a lobed discus called *amalaka*, typical of the architectural finial of a Hindu temple, the design of the backdrop intimates that the goddess is installed inside a shrine. That the image must have been ritually activated and used is also indicated by the pedestal with a protruding sprout, which is designed to channel the water from ablutions offered to the deity. Another important physical trace of its function as a focal point of a ritual is the abrasion noticeable on the surface of the goddess's head. The shine on the forehead that nearly obliterates her eyebrows, parts of the hair, and the diadem is due to repeated touching.



Figure 3.1.10: Somaskanda in worship (ca. eleventh-century metal sculpture with recent adornments), Ekamranatha Shiva Temple, Kanchipuram, Tamil Nadu. March 2004. Source: Photo © Jinah Kim.

Touching the deity (or the living presence of the deity in an image) with sandalwood powder or vermilion powder is one of the most common devotional actions performed in South Asia. Unlike in a museum (or even a Christian church), touching is, in fact, the most natural devotional activity in the Indic context.5 The divine is present in a living image for immediate, tactile access. Many images that we see today in a museum setting were most often living presences to the communities in South Asia, and rarely seen in this denuded form without ornaments and garments when they were ritually active (Figure 10). If the image has been empowered with the divine presence through consecration and proper ritual maintenance by priests, and it has a proven record of channeling the divine presence and blessings to devoted petitioners, its aesthetic appearance is, in a way, secondary to the purpose of the image.



Figure 3.1.11: Display of South Indian bronzes at the Newark Museum of Art with a consecrated and fully adorned metal statue of Parvati to the far right. August 2016. Source: Photo © Jinah Kim.

It has in recent years become a source of debate as to whether to introduce the original ritual context to an object in a museum or not, and how much ritual reactivation is appropriate. In the Newark Museum of Art in Newark, New Jersey, a metal image of the goddess Parvati that entered its collection was reactivated through a consecration ritual performed by a local priest with donations from the South Asian diaspora community (Figure 11). The goddess is installed with garments and jewelry as she would be installed in a living shrine, while the other sculptures from south India in the same display case remain bare as museum objects with miniature crowns installed in between them along with a photograph showing enshrined images from a living temple in south India, a way of acknowledging their original ritual context. According to Katherine Paul, the curator behind this experiment, this image receives special reverence from visitors from the diaspora community. 6

Conclusion

In South Asia, Brahmins and Buddhist ritual masters perform dozens of rituals that define being a Hindu or Buddhist. One essential practice that ritualists of both traditions do for devotees is to draw down the presence of the focal divinity so it can be worshipped by them with songs, chants, food offerings, incense, etc. The image along with a *kalasha* (special vase) is essential for the successful performance of the *puja* (ceremony). For this purpose, devotees can use whatever image of the deity they have; it can be an exquisite work of art, a simple clay statue, or an inexpensive lithograph print. The sanctity of the art is not contingent on its beauty since the success of the ritual depends on the performance of the priest. An inexpensive lithograph that is sold across India for the popular Vishnu Satya Narayan Vrata conveniently shows the entire ritual context (Figure 12). The Brahmin priest on the right conducts the ritual using a text in folio for a husband and wife sitting opposite him. Lamps and food offerings separate them (note the kalasha vase on the tray), as these have been laid out before a four-armed Vishnu standing behind holding his characteristic objects (conch, lotus, mace, discus) flanked by two Brahmin assistants.



Figure 3.1.12: Vishnu Satya Narayan Vrata, lithograph. Source: Todd Lewis collection.

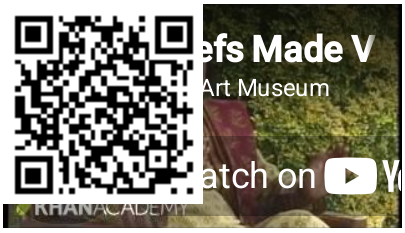
Most Hindu or Buddhist householders of limited wealth cannot afford exquisite images like those now coveted by art collectors. For this reason, there are artists across South Asia who produce a great variety of images and paintings for use throughout the festival year that cost little and are typically sold in the market as festivals for the various deities approach. Although these may lack the refined qualities, these images bring the presence of the divine into the minds and hearts of practitioners. Even lithographs and their knockoff copies sold on the streets can be venerated as artworks channeling the living divine presence after a ritual. Ultimately, the degree of sanctity in an image largely depends on the actions of its users, not only the correct performance of an appropriate ritual(s) but also the repeated devotional acts that leave physical traces.

Notes

1. There are a number of introductory essays and online teaching tools available for educators to engage with this material. A number of resources on the Metropolitan Museum of Art's website are useful. For a general introduction to the art of South Asia, see https://tinyurl.com/y5s5xepr; for educational resources relating to Indian art assembled under the Timeline of Art, see the essay and related resources under https://tinyurl.com/y5fcnyjt; a sample lesson plan for teaching with the Indian art material, like dancing Shiva image, see https://tinyurl.com/yyaobc3b. Many more lesson plans are available under: https://tinyurl.com/yyql6rda.
2. Vidya Dehejia, *The Body Adorned: Dissolving Boundaries between Sacred and Profane in India's Art* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009).
3. We must obviously use blanket terms to label "Hinduism" and "Buddhism" as singularities here, a simplification that instructors will necessarily challenge. In addition, the study of all religions must recognize a "bell curve" that maps the range of how individuals engage with their religion. This was explained in an earlier article: Todd Lewis, "Getting the Foundations Right When Teaching Asian Religions," *Education About Asia* 15, no. 3 (2010): 5–13.
4. Fascination or bewilderment with such images is an age-old response to Indian images in the West, as Partha Mitter observes, "the problem of accommodating multiple limbed Indian gods in the European aesthetic tradition became the leading intellectual pre-occupation as early as the sixteenth century. Partha Mitter, *Much Maligned Monsters: History of European Reactions to Indian Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), vii.
5. Ritual practices in South Asia vary by region and deity, regarding exactly who can touch the image. In the south, brahmins only are permitted to touch the deity on behalf of devotees.
6. I thank Katherine Paul for sharing her story during my visit in 2016.

Beliefs Made Visible: Hindu Art in South Asia

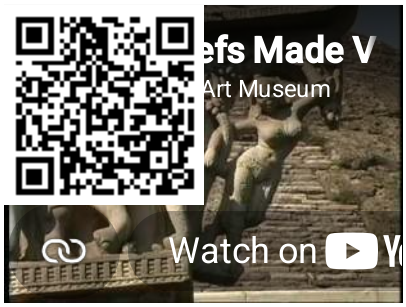
"Beliefs Made Visible: Hindu Art in South Asia" was produced by the Asian Art Museum in San Francisco and features interviews with members of the Bay Area South Asian community to provide an introduction to Hindu beliefs as they relate to art and architecture in India.



Asian Art Museum, "Beliefs made visible: Hindu art in South Asia," January 27, 2016

Beliefs Made Visible: Buddhist Art in South Asia

"Beliefs Made Visible: Buddhist Art in South Asia" was produced by the Asian Art Museum in San Francisco and features interviews with members of the Bay Area South Asian community to provide an introduction to Buddhist beliefs as they relate to art and architecture in India.



Asian Art Museum, "Beliefs made visible: Buddhist art in South Asia," January 27, 2016

Figure of Shiva, Khmer Empire

© Trustees of the British Museum, "Figure of Shiva, Khmer Empire," in *Smarthistory*, May 24, 2021, accessed March 26, 2026, https://smarthistory.org/shiva-khmer-empire/

Hinduism and Buddhism were present in mainland South-east Asia from the first centuries C.E. brought from India by merchants and mercenaries. In the eleventh and twelfth centuries, Cambodia was the center of the Khmer Empire with its capital at Angkor. One of the world's greatest temples, Angkor Wat, was built during this period. Hinduism and Buddhism were both patronized by the Khmer kings. Large numbers of Hindu and Buddhist temples and images were produced in the distinctive Khmer style.

This image is of the major Hindu deity Shiva, who can be identified by the third eye in his forehead. Although now missing, this image was originally holding a trident, Shiva's characteristic weapon, in its right hand. This attribute is unlike any of the Shiva images produced in India, and demonstrates the local adaptation of Hinduism to South-east Asian culture.

Like many of the Buddha images of mainland South-east Asia, this Hindu bronze image was originally gilt. The broad face, clearly defined lips and eyes, and the wide crown are all distinctive features of the Khmer style of sculpture.



Shiva**, 11th century, Khmer Empire, gilt bronze, 29 x 9.5 cm, Cambodia (© Trustees of the British Museum)**

Pensive bodhisattvas

by Dr. Haewon Kim

One of the most famous and beloved Buddhist statues in Korea is the Pensive bodhisattva designated as National Treasure #83.

In Korean, sculptures of this type are called "*banga sayu sang*," with "*banga*" referring to the distinctive positioning of the figure's legs (with one leg raised to rest horizontally across the other vertical leg), "*sayu*" indicating contemplation or pensiveness, and "*sang*" meaning a statue or image.



Pensive Bodhisattva (National Treasure #83), early 7th century (Three Kingdoms Period), gilt-bronze, 93.5 cm high (National Museum of Korea, Seoul)

Like many sculptures on the theme of thinking or contemplation, this work calls to mind another well-known sculpture that emerged from a completely different context: Auguste Rodin's *The Thinker*. Looking at the figures in these two works of art, it is probably easier for us to relate to the man in *The Thinker*, who shows the gravity and anguish that we tend to associate with deep thought, with a furrowed brow, tightly sealed lips, and chin pressing down upon the back of his hand. The Pensive Bodhisattva also seems to be absorbed in thought, with his eyes half-closed, his head tilted slightly forward, and his fingers placed gently on his cheek. But unlike the man in *The Thinker*, the divine bodhisattva shows an expression of pure serenity, with his lips curling slightly upward in a near smile. We cannot help but wonder, what is he thinking? And why is he smiling?



Auguste Rodin, *The Thinker*, cast c. 1910, bronze, 70.2 cm high (The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York)

Iconography of the pensive bodhisattva



Face (detail), Pensive Bodhisattva, early 7th century (Three Kingdoms Period), gilt-bronze, 93.5 cm high, National Treasure 83 (National Museum of Korea, Seoul)

The theme of a bodhisattva in this pensive pose can be traced back to 2nd- and 3rd-century images from Gandhara and Mathura in what is now India, Pakistan, and Afghanistan, major centers of early Buddhist art. In particular, East Asian images of the pensive bodhisattva are often said to have originated from Gandharan reliefs of Gautama Siddhartha (who attained enlightenment and became Shakyamuni Buddha) engaged in his first meditation. According to Buddhist scripture, the young Prince Siddhartha once came across a farmer and his bull plowing a field. As he watched their strenuous efforts, while also noticing insects being eaten by birds, the prince became filled with pity for all living creatures. He then began to meditate under a *jambu* tree, where he eventually realized the transient nature of life and the world. Over time, this episode and related images of Prince Siddhartha in meditation were

transmitted to East Asia, inspiring similar Chinese works called "*taizi siwei xiang*," or "pensive image of the crown prince."



Map of the many ways that Buddhism spread from India to other places in Asia © The Brooklyn Museum

In Gandharan and Mathuran art, the signature seated pose of the pensive bodhisattva was not exclusively associated with scenes of Siddhartha in meditation. Other figures who were sometimes depicted with this pose include Demon Mara and Seer Ashita in narrative scenes, anonymous attendants in scenes of the Buddha preaching, and Avalokiteshvara Bodhisattva, in both independent and flanking images. After this motif was transmitted to China, it seems to have developed to encompass new ideas and conceptions. For example, in addition to the aforementioned "pensive image of the crown prince," other Chinese images of figures in this pose were inscribed simply as "*siwei xiang*," or "pensive image." While some regard this phrase as a mere abbreviation of "*taizi siwei xiang*" ("pensive image of the crown prince"), others feel that it demonstrates an increasing interest in the theme of contemplation or pensiveness itself. Another key term found in related inscriptions is "*longshu siwei xiang*," or "pensive image under a dragon tree." This phrase seems to be related to Maitreya, the Future Buddha who Buddhists believe will descend to this world from Tushita Heaven 5,670,000,000 years after the *nirvana* of Shakyamuni, the Buddha of the present world. The "dragon tree" is thought to correspond to the "dragon-flower tree" (*longhua shu*) under which Maitreya will reputedly give three sermons.



Demon Mara in pensive pose in "Mara's Attack," Scenes from the Life of the Buddha, 2nd or 3rd century (Gandhara), grey schist, 67 cm high (National Museum of Asian Art, Washington, D.C.)

In China, pensive bodhisattva images first appeared in the 5th and 6th centuries. Initially, the pensive pose was primarily limited to narrative scenes or secondary figures, but by the mid- to late 6th century, independent images of figures in this pose were increasingly produced, mostly in the Hebei and Shandong regions of China. In Korea, pensive bodhisattva images were popularly produced in the 6th and 7th centuries, many of which were intended as the main icons for worship. In China, most independent pensive bodhisattva images were made from stone, while gilt-bronze or bronze was favored in Korea.



Left: Pensive Bodhisattva, 6th century (probably from Hebei, China), marble, 44 cm high (National Museum of Korea, Seoul); right: Pensive Bodhisattva, c. 575 (probably from Hebei, China), marble, 33 cm high (National Museum of Asian Art, Washington, D.C.)

Unfortunately, no relevant inscriptions of Korean pensive bodhisattva images have survived, making it almost impossible to trace their iconography. However, these images are widely

believed to be associated with the worship of Maitreya, which also gained popularity in the 6th and 7th centuries. Supporting this premise, some later texts describe the importance of Maitreya worship among the Hwarang (“flower boys”), an organization of young aristocratic warriors of the Silla Kingdom which rose to prominence in the mid-6th century. Records also indicate that followers of the famous Silla general Kim Yusin were known as “Yonghwa Hyangdo” (“Dragon Flower Aspirants”), alluding to the dragon-flower tree under which Maitreya will preach. However, it is impossible to know whether all pensive bodhisattvas of this era were associated with Maitreya, or whether any of them were meant to depict the general theme of pensiveness.



Left: Pensive Bodhisattva (National Treasure #78), late 6th century (Three Kingdoms period), gilt-bronze, 83.2 cm high (National Museum of Korea, Seoul); right: Pensive Bodhisattva (National Treasure #83), early 7th century (Three Kingdoms Period), gilt-bronze, 93.5 cm high (National Museum of Korea, Seoul)

The most famous pensive bodhisattvas

Today, approximately 40 pre-modern Korean pensive bodhisattva images are extant. Among them, the two most famous examples are National Treasure #78 and National Treasure #83.

Although both images were originally created as objects of religious worship, they are now also recognized as masterful works of art. The positions of the arms and legs were meticulously calculated to attain the most graceful depiction of their complex pose. The bodies are well proportioned and elegantly adorned with various intricate details for added balance and splendor. Comparing the two, National Treasure #78 features more decorative details, such as the crown, necklace, and sashes across the shoulders, while #83 shows a more three-dimensional and realistic rendering of the body, accentuated by irregularly cascading folds beneath the legs. While #83 also wears a crown and necklace, the surface of the body is completely undecorated, emphasizing the natural form.



Left: face (detail), Pensive Bodhisattva (National Treasure #78), late 6th century (Three Kingdoms period), gilt-bronze, 83.2 cm high (National Museum of Korea, Seoul); right: face (detail), Pensive Bodhisattva (National Treasure #83), early 7th century (Three Kingdoms Period), gilt-bronze, 93.5 cm high (National Museum of Korea, Seoul)



Pensive Bodhisattva, Three Kingdoms period gilt-bronze, 17.1 cm high (National Museum of Korea, Seoul)

Among all the marvelous details on these two sculptures, viewers are most often amazed by their facial expressions. Both bodhisattvas are obviously immersed in thought, yet they each have a subtle smile on their face. A clue to understanding this smile can be found in the scriptures that relate the story of Siddhartha’s first meditation. It is written that, when the prince realized the transient nature of the universe, his mind became utterly composed and his worldly desires disappeared. Hence, one might speculate that the producers of pensive bodhisattva images were likely trying to capture the precise moment of realization. However, not all Korean pensive bodhisattvas wear a smile on their face; some have a more serious or a blank expression, with their upper body leaning dramatically forward. Thus, it would seem that those who produced the two National Treasure Pensive Bodhisattvas wished to combine both the idea of meditation and the realization of the truth, an objective that they brilliantly achieved.

The two images, both of which are hollow, are also notable in terms of their casting technique. They are the largest pensive bodhisattva images made from bronze, but their layers of bronze are remarkably thin and even. The bronze layer of National Treasure #78 is between 2 and 5 mm, while that of National Treasure #83 is around 10 mm.



Pensive Bodhisattva, Bukjiri in South Gyeongnam-do Province, late 7th century, 170 cm high (Kyungpook National University Museum, Daegu)

The largest pensive bodhisattva



Pensive Bodhisattva, probably Maitreya, 7th century, red pine wood, 163.2 cm high, Koryuji Temple, Kyoto, Japan

In 1965, a large fragment of a granite pensive bodhisattva sculpture was discovered in Bukjiri, which is about 200 km northwest of Gyeongju, the former capital of the Silla Kingdom. Excavations at the site also yielded roof tiles with inscriptions attesting to the presence of a Buddhist temple, as well as a stone platform on which the Pensive Bodhisattva was once presumably placed. Only the lower half of the sculpture remains, but it measures around 170 cm in height. Based on this fragment, the full original sculpture is estimated to have been at least 300 cm tall, making it the largest known pensive bodhisattva image in Asia.

In terms of style, the modeling of the body and the irregularly cascading folds under the right leg are comparable to National Treasure #83. While the provenance of National Treasure #83 has yet to be confirmed, these similarities provide important evidence that it was produced by Silla.

Notably, the same details can also be seen on a Pensive Bodhisattva from Koryuji Temple in Kyoto, Japan, which is often described as the “twin” of National Treasure #83. As compared to the Koryuji sculpture, the Bukjiri sculpture is a bit more striking and elaborate in its details, featuring a slimmer waist and more lavish ornaments on both sides. Thus, it would seem that the Bukjiri sculpture represents the maturation of the influential style of National Treasure #83 and the Koryuji sculpture. With its huge scale and prominent position within the stylistic genealogy, the Bukjiri sculpture demonstrates the increasing significance of religious practices and beliefs related to pensive bodhisattvas.

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3.2: Artworks of the Benin Kingdom

Learning Objectives

- Discuss the symbolic use of human figures in artworks of the Benin Kingdom and other examples from the African continent.
- Analyze design techniques used to emphasize social hierarchy in artworks of the Benin Kingdom.
- Explain the lost wax technique in bronze artworks and their application as architectural ornamentation in the Court of Benin.

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3.2.1: Understanding Figurative African Art

Adapted from "2.3: 'Rules' for Traditional African Art" in *The Bright Continent - African Art History* by Kathy Curnow, accessed December 8, 2025



Figure 3.2.1.1: Even a whistle often bears a human image. Holo artist, Democratic Republic of Congo, 19th-20th century. Ivory. Courtesy Dallas Museum of Art, 1969.S.62. The Clark and Frances Stillman Collection of Congo Sculpture, gift of Eugene and Margaret McDermott

Africa is immensely varied in visual expression and the variety of traditional art is still immense. Nonetheless, a group of traits applies generally to most figurative African traditional art. When these rules are broken, which sometimes happens, it is noteworthy.

Human-Centered



Figure 3.2.1.2: This Tsonga headrest from South Africa or Zimbabwe incorporates a rare depiction of an inanimate object without a human presence. © British Museum, Af1954,+23.1824. Creative Commons CC BY-NC-SA 4.0

Traditional African art is human-centered. This is true even in abstract terms: body arts are by definition concerned directly with human beings, structures are built on a human scale, textiles are meant to wrap around a person or decorate their environment, pots are meant for their direct use. Many utilitarian objects that require no ornamentation–combs, cups, spoons, whistles (above)–are nonetheless ornamented with human faces or bodies. In figurative terms, it is clear that most traditional African representations typically depict one of two things: human beings or animals. Landscape references do not exist, for the most part, nor does still life imagery of inanimate objects or flowers and fruit. When such portrayals occur, these exceptions deserve comment (below).



Figure 3.2.1.3: This machine-embroidered Asante textile from Ghana includes the elephant as a symbol of leadership, along with other leadership metaphors, including some inanimate objects such as a stool. 20th century. Minneapolis Institute of Arts, 86.100.42. Gift of Roberta and Richard Simmons. Public domain.

This concentration on the human form (even if it represents spirits or deities, which it sometimes does) is greater than what is found in most parts of world art history. When animals appear, they are rarely just allusions to the human habitat. While they can represent simple game in a hunting society, they are more likely metaphors for certain types of human beings or for human traits. Leopards and elephants, for example, often relate to rulership or leadership, because of their deadliness or power, respectively. They are not simply observed animals who happen to appear locally. Many of these are part of the verbal world featuring in commonly-used proverbs that make their visual occurrences easily interpretable to their audience. An Akan proverb from Ghana states, “No one following an elephant has to worry about vines catching him”, i.e. the elephant plows down all obstacles in its path. This refers to a chief or other powerful man, who clears the way for those who are attached to him. Because verbal references like this are part of the culture, representations of the elephant instantly call to mind the chief (above).



Figure 3.2.1.4: The crocodiles on this masquerade's brass headpiece emerge from the nostrils of a deified ritual specialist, signifying the power of his very breath. Ritual specialists are believed to be able to move from this human world to the supernatural world. Edo artist, Benin Kingdom, Nigeria, 18th century. © British Museum, Af1944,04.12. Creative Commons CC BY-NC-SA 4.0.

One category of animals frequently occurs in art: the liminal animal. **Liminality**, in general, refers to a state of in-betweenness; the word's Latin origin means "threshold," and defines a state that is between two defined identities. In the insect world, a caterpillar and a butterfly are two distinct identities of one insect, and the cocoon marks its liminal state. In African cultural life, some societies mark the liminal state of man's changing identities of child and adult with initiation, a period of transition and transformation. The **liminal animal,** however, is at a threshold of a different source. This is a class of animals that regularly lives in two distinct worlds. Some liminal animals commonly depicted in African art move between land and water, such as tortoises, crocodiles, pythons and other water snakes (not snakes in general), and mudfish, a catfish-related animal that can crawl on damp earth or survive in mud for extended periods. Others move between land and sky, such as most birds. Animals like this can represent people who move between the two worlds of humans and spirits, that is, priests/priestesses, ritual specialists (above), monarchs, and witches.

Frontality

Frontality refers to the position of the body in both two and three dimensions. In a frontal depiction, the head and spine are perfectly aligned in a straight line (below). The position of arms and legs is immaterial, but the head cannot turn or tilt. This reinforces formality; it is a pose that artists have employed throughout world art's history when representing deities and rulers. Frontality imbues a figure with a sense of permanence and dignity. The concept of frontality only applies to human beings, since animals' heads and spines are not normally aligned, and it only refers to representations that at least include a torso; i.e. masks are not referred to as frontal.



Figure 3.2.1.5: Frontal figure on a Kanyok waterpipe from Democratic Republic of Congo, late 19th/early 20th century. Dallas Museum of Art, 1969.S.18. The Clark and Frances Stillman Collection of Congo Sculpture, gift of Eugene and Margaret McDermott. Public domain.

In traditional African art, the non-frontal figure is usually negligible–a child (below), a member of an entourage, or some lesser being. Even these individuals are usually depicted frontally, however.



Figure 3.2.1.6: The child on his mother's back turns his head, breaking frontality. Children are not expected to be consistently dignified. Yoruba artist from Oyo, Nigeria, first half 20th century. Indianapolis Museum of Art, 1989.723. Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Harrison Eiteljorg.

It's vital to remember that photographers often prefer to take object photos from an angle, so a viewer's immediate impression may not be that of frontality. If the alignment of facial features on a vertical axis conforms to the known line of the spine, however, discernment of frontality is easily achieved (below).

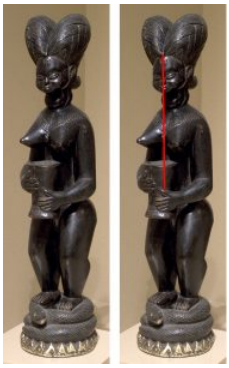


Figure 3.2.1.7: Although this Mende figure from Sierra Leone has been photographed in a three-quarter view, you can "draw" an invisible line down the middle of the face and it continues between the breasts through the rest of the torso–it's frontal. 1920-1950. Indianapolis Museum of Art, 1995.131. Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Harrison Eiteljorg.

Stillness

An emphasis on dignity and permanence also favors the representation of stillness in figurative art. Movement is temporary and implies some form of work, however tangential. Stillness underlines the innate qualities of an elevated being. Although the mother in the Mende figure above is not quite frontal, since her head's angle does not match that of her spine, she is shown in a still, kneeling position of maximum dignity.

Self-Composure (Expressionlessness)

With very few exceptions, traditional African art does not display human emotions. This is a reflection of desirable public display (a ruler at a festival, an initiation girl when presented to the public, a politician posing for a formal photograph). The ideal "face" is that of serene self-composure, unrocked by moods and reactions to others. This same ideal applies to artistic imagery. Figures normally have a restrained, dignified expression on their faces, without scowls or smiles (below). When figures do show their teeth, it may be meant as an aggressive gesture, as in the Edo masquerade brass headpiece with the crocodiles, above.



Figure 3.2.1.8: The self-composed expression of this Fang head is typical of traditional African art. 1875–1925. Photo Thomas R. DuBrock. Museum of Fine Arts Houston, 2009.485. Museum purchase funded by the Alice Pratt Brown, Museum Fund. Public domain.

Ephebism

Ephebism refers to ideal age. Culturally, age is valued and venerated in Africa, with privileges not found among the young. Nonetheless, representations usually show individuals at a fully adult age that is still replete with physical vigor, yet without youthful recklessness–the maturity and power of someone in their early 30s. Even when a sculpture represents an elder, his face does not reflect his age. Instead, cultural cues (which vary according to ethnic group) may indicate advanced years. In Baule sculpture, for example, a beard is visual shorthand for an elder, yet the faces of bearded figures lack wrinkles or sagging skin (below). Youthful musculature usually also marks the elder's physique.



Figure 3.2.1.9: The beard of this early 20th-century Baule figure indicates an elder, yet his face is smooth and wrinkle-free. Brooklyn Museum, 22.1091. Museum Expedition 1922, Robert B. Woodward Memorial Fund. Creative Commons-BY.

Hardly any artworks depict visible older individuals, but those rare instances that do are usually representations of those who lack social position and therefore do not need to be flattered. Conversely, although we see infants held by their mothers, older children cannot be distinguished. There are even times when infants are represented as adults because of ideal age–that is, in some West African cultures, twins who died in infancy are carved as fully grown adults, visually appeased by providing them with the bodies they never attained (below).



Figure 3.2.1.10: This Ewe twin figure from Togo represents a child that died in infancy, yet the carving provides her with full breasts, allowing her to achieve the ideal age she was never able to reach.



Figure 3.2.1.11: This Efut masquerade from Nigeria has a very naturalistically-rendered face. Late 19th/early 20th century. Princeton University Art Museum, 1997-6. Gift of the Friends of the Princeton University Art Museum on the occasion of the 250th Anniversary of Princeton University. artmuseum.princeton.edu

Abstraction

Most traditional African art avoids **naturalism** in favor of **abstraction**, although there is a full spectrum between the extremes of each. There are examples of naturalism, they are simply not standard (above). Disinterest in realism often seems conceptual; over-sized heads on Yoruba figures, for example, exemplify philosophical underpinnings that equate the head with one's destiny and worthy of honor. Quite a lot of African art is fairly naturalistic, even if exaggerations and distortions occur, but even extreme abstraction (below) has identifiable characteristics that permit recognition of humanity.



Figure 3.2.1.12: Maskette (lukwakongo), ca. 1900. Lega artist, Democratic Republic of Congo. Princeton University Art Museum, 2015-6700. Gift of Perry E. H. Smith, Class of 1957. artmuseum.princeton.edu

Generic Physiognomy

When a traditional African artist creates a face, his training tends to ensure that face is consistent with other faces he makes. That is, learning how to make an eye, fashion a nose, or abstract an ear becomes habitual, and artists develop a "type" that they tend to reproduce instead of individualizing each face. Producing faces that resemble specific individuals is extremely rare; rather, **generic physiognomy** is the rule. This tends to work hand-in-hand with abstraction, but is evident even in fairly naturalistic works.

While the apprenticeship system partially explains this approach, it may not be the whole story. Avoidance of specificity may have its distant origins in concerns that reproducing someone's face might have nefarious origins, meant to control them or cause harm.

Hieratic Scale

Scale, as we've previously discussed, relates to relative size, while hierarchy is a social sorting system–some people are at the top, others in the middle, with still others at the bottom. In art, **hieratic scale** or **hierarchical scale** or **social scale** all mean the same thing: figures whose size indicates their relative social standing. This concept applies only when we aren't looking at single figures. A size relationship must be present, and this cannot be a natural size relationship–babies are naturally smaller than adults, and this does not reflect their social status. Under hieratic scale, three figures of varying heights in an artwork do not indicate three figures who happen to be taller or shorter than each other. Instead, the largest figure is the most important, while the middle one is of lesser significance and the smallest are inconsequential in comparison. This is determined by rank (below), rather than individual worth or age; the child of an important figure might be rendered larger than a member of that figure's entourage, despite a reverse height disparity in actual life.



Figure 3.2.1.13: These three figures all represent adults. The one at center is the monarch, flanked by two of his chiefs. Their height disparity distinguishes their social status. He is larger, thus clearly more important. Yale Art Gallery, 2006.51.194. Gift of Charles B. Benenson, B.A. 1933. Public domain.



Figure 3.2.1.14: This Dogon figure from Mali has an elongated torso and very short legs. Quai Branly Museum, 71.1935.60.371

Distorted Body Proportion

Abstraction in African art often means the exaggeration or distortion of one or more aspects of the body. Some Chokwe figures, for example, have enormous hands and feet. Dogon sculpture can have extremely elongated necks and/or torsos (above), or Chamba figures may have shoulders that push forward in an unnatural manner (below).

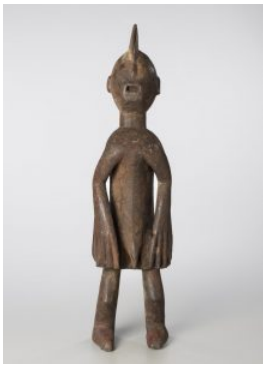


Figure 3.2.1.15: This Chamba figure from Northern Nigeria has huge hands, as well as shoulders that hunch forward in an unrealistic manner. Brooklyn Museum, 2011.31.1. Gift in honor of William C. Siegmann in recognition of his contributions to the study and understanding of African Arts; 2011.31.1. Creative Commons-BY.

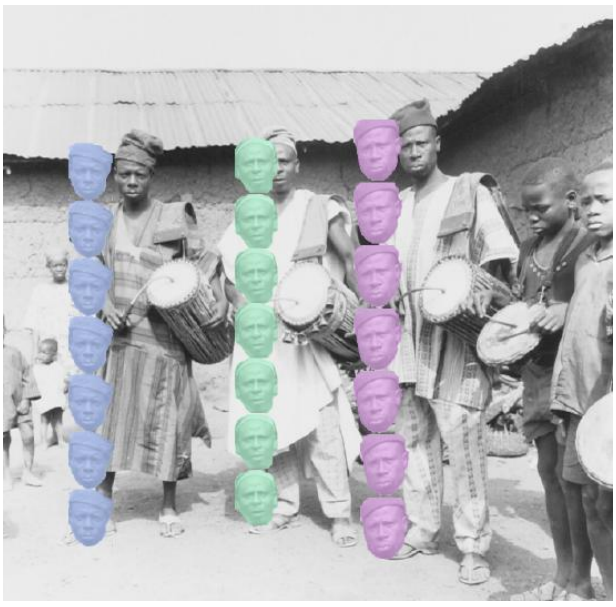


Figure 3.2.1.16: Despite the fact that these three adults have differing heights, their head-to-body ratios are all 1:7, natural proportions for adults. Photo of three Yoruba musicians, Aran Orin, Nigeria, 1977. Tropenmuseum. Creative Commons CC BY-SA 3.0, with overlays of heads added.

These are all distortions of the natural body and aspects of style that deserve mention, as are over- or undersized facial features. One of the most notable proportional distortions is that of the head to the body: that is, the head is often significantly oversized in African sculpture and can sometimes be undersized–but it is extremely rare for the head-to-body relationship to be represented naturalistically. What are natural **head-to-body proportions** in an adult (children, whose heads tend to be larger in relation to their bodies than those of adults, are not part of this equation)? They tend to be fairly consistent, despite variations in height, and are expressed in a mathematical ratio. **That ratio is expressed as 1:x**, with one representing the measurements of the person's head, and x representing their height with the head as a unit. How many heads high is that person is the germane question, with the head measured from chin to top, discounting beards, hats, and coiffures. Actual humans' head-to-body proportions are usually about 1:7 (above)–the ratio always begins with 1 (the head as the measurement) and the second number indicates "how many heads high", and includes the head itself.

African art displays a much greater variety of head-to-body ratios, as can be seen below (below). Once you can visually isolate the head, you can mentally use it as a ruler to determine head-to-body proportions, using the same ratio of 1(head): x (heads) to describe it. This becomes challenging only when a figure is sitting, kneeling, or squatting, but follows the same principles; one has to mentally wrap the heads (or portions of heads) around the bent joints.



Figure 3.2.1.17: The disembodied heads demonstrate the head-to-body ratios of these figures. L to R: 1) Bamana figure, Mali,19th or 20th century. Brooklyn Museum, 76.20.1. Gift of Marcia and John Friede; 2) Lega figure, DRC, late 19th or early 20th century. Brooklyn Museum, 74.66.1. Gift of Marcia and John Friede; 3) Teke. Standing Female Figure (Buti), 19th or 20th century. Wood, 11 1/4 x 2 1/2 x 3 1/4in. (28.6 x 6.4 x 8.3cm). Brooklyn Museum, Museum Expedition 1922, Robert B. Woodward Memorial Fund, 22.111. All photos Creative Commons-BY. Heads and text added, backgrounds cropped.

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3.2.2: The Court of Benin

Adapted from "4.6: Kingdom-based art" and "1.2: Gender, Materials, Techniques in Traditional Art" in *The Bright Continent - African Art History* by Kathy Curnow and "Benin Plaques" (December 1, 2018) by Dr. Kathryn Wysocki Gunsch and Dr. Beth Harris in *Smarthistory*, accessed December 8, 2025

The Benin Kingdom

The geographic extent of the historic Benin Kingdom resides within the borders of present-day Nigeria in a greater region known as the Lower Guinea Coast whose populations had linked trading patterns and share certain cultural, linguistic, and historic features: present-day southern Togo, Benin Republic, and Nigeria. Although this region does not appear to be physically large, it includes the densest populations in Africa, and is one of two key sculpture-producing regions.



Figure 3.2.2.1: Geographic location of the historic kingdom of Benin, situated within current geopolitical borders

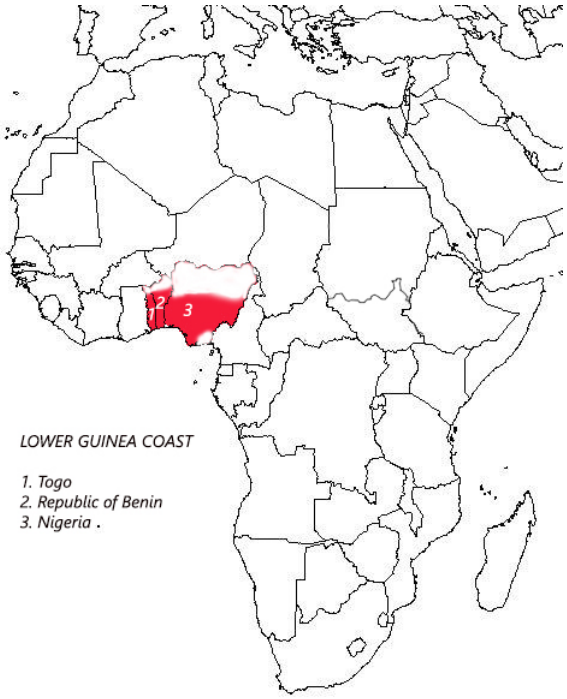


Figure 3.2.2.2: Lower Guinea Coast: present-day southern Togo, Benin Republic, and Nigeria.

Nigeria's Benin Kingdom offers an unusual opportunity to examine the pace of change in African royal art, both in terms of object types and style, for it is the only African polity outside of North Africa, Nubia, and Ethiopia with 500 years' worth of extant court art. This is due both to the materials palace artists most commonly used–brass and ivory–and the fact that Benin never endured a successful invasion until the British conquest in 1897, when thousands of objects from the palace, shrines, and other structures were stripped and shipped to London for auction (below), ending up in private and public collections around the world. After a trial that saw the involved chiefs hanged and the monarch exonerated, they nonetheless exiled the Oba of Benin for the remainder of his life. In his absence, they razed parts of the palace grounds for new roads, administrative buildings, and living quarters, and set up their colonial government. In 1914, the exiled Oba's son was allowed to take the throne as Oba Eweka. He rebuilt the palace–albeit on a smaller site–and the hereditary royal guilds began to cast brass and carve ivory and wood once more to decorate the palace and ornament the bodies of the monarch, his chiefs, and other aristocrats.



Figure 3.2.2.3: British officials seated in the remains of the Oba's palace with some of the thousands of objects they looted; most of the items visible are brass plaques. Photo by Reginald Granville. Benin City, Nigeria, 1897. Public domain.

The Palace, its Altars and Royal Ancestral Shrines

The current dynasty, which has been on the throne since about the late 13th or early 14th century, replaced an older dynasty that seems to have ruled since the 11th century. The newcomers built their palace on the cemetery of the indigenous rulers, laying claim to the land through its ancestors; this rite, however, was reenacted with each ruler "buying" the land from the representative of its autochthones. While this original earthen palace is long gone, we know it followed a building pattern that still exists: a walled royal compound consisting of multiple

buildings constructed around open courtyards, their thatched roofs overhanging a walkway around the rooms themselves. By the 15th century, each monarch customarily built a new residential courtyard and reception hall when they came to the throne. They were eventually buried in their residential courtyard, with a royal ancestral altar constructed over the site. Annual ceremonies honoring past rulers took place in succession, each occurring in the courtyard of the Oba being celebrated.



Figure 3.2.2.4: This plaque shows a section of Oba Esigie's palace, already featuring the non-functional towers that persisted until 1897 and may have been present earlier. Plaques of four Portuguese faces decorate the visible side of each wooden post. Edo male artist, Benin Kingdom, Nigeria, 16th century. H 20.55″. Photo by Claudia Obrocki. © Ethnologisches Museum | Afrika; Ethnologisches Museum der Staatlichen Museen zu Berlin – Preußischer Kulturbesitz, III C 8377. Creative Commons CC BY-NC-SA.

In the 16th century, Oba Esigie erected his own royal quarters, and their appearance was partially recorded by a royal brasscaster (above). Though the use of hieratic scale emphasized the court attendants more than the building, we still have a sense of the structure and its galleries. The latter were supported by wooden pillars, four of which appear in the plaque. Each post originally had four brass plaques nailed to each side of its surface. The partially-broken plaque also refers to several other key palace features. One was the existence of non-functional towers that are reminiscent of those marking major entrances of Yoruba palaces (below). Another was the use of nailed wooden shakes, rather than thatch, for the roofing, a technique foreign to West Africa, and a third was the attachment of a snake and a bird (now missing) to the side and top of the tower. Like successive rulers, Oba Esigie used this prominent structure to project his wealth and innovative tastes.

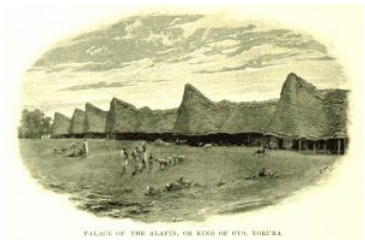


Figure 3.2.2.5: The late 19th-century Yoruba palace of the Oyo Kingdom had a thatched roofline marked by numerous tower-like projections over its entrances. Engraving from Robert Brown's *The Story of Africa and its Explorers*, vol. 2 (London; Cassell & Co, 1892): 466. Public domain.

Seventeenth-century palace visitors commented on the vastness of the palace. The Dutch publisher Olfert Dapper compiled information by an anonymous mid-17th century Dutch East India Company trader who had been resident in the area. He described the palace complex:

"The King's court is square and stands on the right side of the town when you enter the gate [which leads] from Gotton [Ughoton, the river port where European ships docked]. It is easily as big as the town of Haarlem and enclosed by a wall of its own, similar to the town wall. It is divided into many fine palaces, houses and rooms for courtiers, and it contains beautiful long square galleries [other contemporary authors mentioned three or four] about as big as the exchange at Amsterdam, some bigger than others, resting on wooden pillars, covered from top to bottom with cast copper, on which deeds of war and battle scenes are carved [actually cast]. These are kept very clean. Most of the palaces and royal houses in the court are covered with palm-leaves instead of shingles, and each is adorned with a turret tapering to a point [tapered, but actually flat-topped], upon which are skillfully wrought copper birds, very life-like, spreading their wings."



Figure 3.2.2.6: This hinged brass box depicts a section of the palace that includes the characteristic horizontal fluted walls reserved for the Oba and his chiefs, as well as one tower ornamented by snakes on both sides and a bird on top. The roofline also shows two armed Portuguese shooting at additional birds, an allusion to an event in Oba Esigie's lifetime. They may have been present in earlier centuries, but were not depicted on the more restricted view of the building on the 16th-century plaques, nor did visitors describe them. Edo male artist, Benin Kingdom, Nigeria, 18th century. H 12.24″ x L 23.58″; weight 36.49 lbs. Photo by Martin Franken. © Ethnologisches Museum | Afrika; Ethnologisches Museum der Staatlichen Museen zu Berlin – Preußischer Kulturbesitz, III C 8488. Creative Commons CC BY-NC-SA.

As the limited floorplan below of an earlier layout indicates in part, the main palace includes numerous shrines to the deities of the waters and wealth (Olokun), medicine (Osun), iron and war (Ogun), the national deities (Uwen and Ora), the guardian of the Oba's children (Azama), and others, including his head and right arm. Additional shrines are found on the royal compound's grounds, while other royal shrines are visible elsewhere in the city and throughout the kingdom. While photographs of more recent interior palace shrines to deities have not been published, images of older shrines are known–if imperfectly identified.



Figure 3.2.2.7: Partial plan of Oba Akenzua II's palace, sometime between 1958-1965. After the plan by Z.R. Dmochowski, *An Introduction to Nigerian Traditional Architecture, vol. 2: South-West and Central Nigeria* (London: Ethnographica, 1990): 1-18.

Within the palace, the royal ancestral altars are key sites of veneration. This gallery acts as the dais during many major ceremonies, and the seated Oba thus visibly and metaphorically has the backing of his royal ancestors. Shrine furniture includes brass heads of monarchs mounted by carved tusks, as well as metal sculpture, bells, a ceremonial sword and *ukhurhe* royal staffs.



Figure 3.2.2.8: An unknown Briton painted this watercolor at the time of the 1897 invasion. Relatively few photos of the palace at the time of the sack were taken; the "feathers" on the heads suggest this altar was dedicated to a 19th-century monarch. A photo of a royal altar taken earlier that decade is the only one that shows an intact royal ancestral altar. W 14.17″. © Trustees of the British Museum, Af2006,Drg.20. Creative Commons CC BY-NC-SA 4.0.

These were placed in pairs or sets of pairs on and beside the altars (above) and are not intended to be portraits of the deceased. They are emblematic rather than individualized, with

an emphasis on the high status conferred by the beaded collar and crown, and on the powerful stare conveyed by iron-inset irises–the latter would have been intensified by their darkness contrasting with the surrounding brass.



Figure 3.2.2.9: Scale drawing of four centuries of Benin brass royal commemorative heads, originally placed on altars. representing (from left) the 16th, 17th, 18th, and 19th centuries. Illustration by Linda Herman for Kathy Curnow.

Decoration for a grand audience hall

The plaque below was originally displayed on a pillar in an audience hall located deep within the palace. Pillars held up the roof of a veranda with built-in seating that ran around a large open-air courtyard in the center.

Historical accounts from visiting traders to Benin City suggest that the audience courtyard was roughly 30 by 60 meters (98.43 x 196.85 feet) [1] and could fit 500 people.[2] Likely beginning during the reigns of Oba Esigie (who ruled from 1517 to the 1550s) and his son Orhogbua (who ruled from the 1550s–1570s), the pillars surrounding the audience court were covered with more than 850 bronze relief plaques like this one.



Figure 3.2.2.10: Artist Unidentified, *Relief plaque showing two officials with raised swords*, c. 1530-1570, copper alloy (Robert Owen Lehman Collection, Courtesy Museum of Fine Arts, Boston)

A surviving plaque shows what the audience hall must have looked like at the time, with a high roof ornamented by a cast-bronze snake and depictions of courtiers and warriors on the plaques decorating the pillars below. Hanging on all sides of the columns, the plaques would have created the impression that the pillars were of solid bronze — a form of currency at the time.



Figure 3.2.2.11: Plaque depicting an audience hall, 16th -17th century, 55 x 39 cm, Edo peoples, Benin, Nigeria (photo: British Museum, CC BY-NC-SA 4.0)

The plaques were deinstalled from the audience court in Benin City before the beginning of the eighteenth century, and kept in a storeroom within the palace until the British invasion of 1897. They are kept today in museums in Nigeria, the UK, Germany, Austria, and the United States. Recent research suggests that the plaques were made in three separate periods.

Casting in bronze

The early plaques are all low reliefs, meaning that they are fairly flat, without many details that rise off the surface of the plaque, like this plaque depicting a crocodile biting a mudfish.



Figure 3.2.2.12: Artist Unidentified, *Relief plaque showing a crocodile with mudfish*, c. 1530-1570, copper alloy (Robert Owen Lehman Collection, Courtesy Museum of Fine Arts, Boston)

The plaques were all made using the lost wax method, a material technology that has been historically used in various locations throughout the African continent and elsewhere around the world. Also known as **cire-perdue**, in this technique an artist creates a form in wax, covers it in layers of clay, and bakes the mold until the wax runs out. The artist then pours molten bronze into the hardened clay form, and breaks the form to release the final casting. The use of molten metal poured into molds can produce more complex results than other techniques working thin sheet metal, which can be decorated by pressing designs into the surface (**chasing**), creating dots on the surface (**stippling**) or hammering designs outward from the back to create a relief (**repoussé)**. These methods create an embossed effect.



Figure 3.2.2.13: Axum coin made from a reusable mold, Ethiopia, 4th century. One of Two Coins Depicting Ousanas and an Anonymous King. Silver with gilt. Walters Art Museum, 59.794. Gift of Joseph and Margaret Knopfelmacher. Creative Commons CC BY-SA 3.0.

To produce such a casting, the artist begins with a lump of clay, shaped loosely like the desired result. The artist covers that core with a thin layer of malleable beeswax and works details into the wax with a tool. Sometimes the wax is rolled between the palm to form wax "threads," which can then be coiled or hatched, producing a raised texture. **Sprues** and **vents** are then attached to the wax. Both are wax cylinders; the sprue will eventually become the channel where liquefied metal enters the mold, while the vent provides an exit for any gases. The artist then applies a fine, semi-liquid layer of clay to the wax surface, making sure it fills all crevices. He then packs clay around the object, including all but the ends of the sprues and vents. This outer pack of clay is called the **investment**, and it is allowed to air dry. At this point, the object looks like a dry clay lump. Placed in a fire, it is positioned so that the liquefying wax will run out. The wax itself is what is "lost" in the process, although the artist usually collects the liquid run-off for reuse. The lump now has the following three layers: the clay core, a gap where the wax once was (including empty channels were the sprues and vents were), and the outer investment. Metal has been heated in a crucible and is poured into the sprue channels until all empty spaces are filled. The metal is left to cool, and the outer clay mold is cracked off. The sculptor then files down the metal sprue projections and cleans the surface. He may choose to remove the clay core or leave it in place (Figure 21).

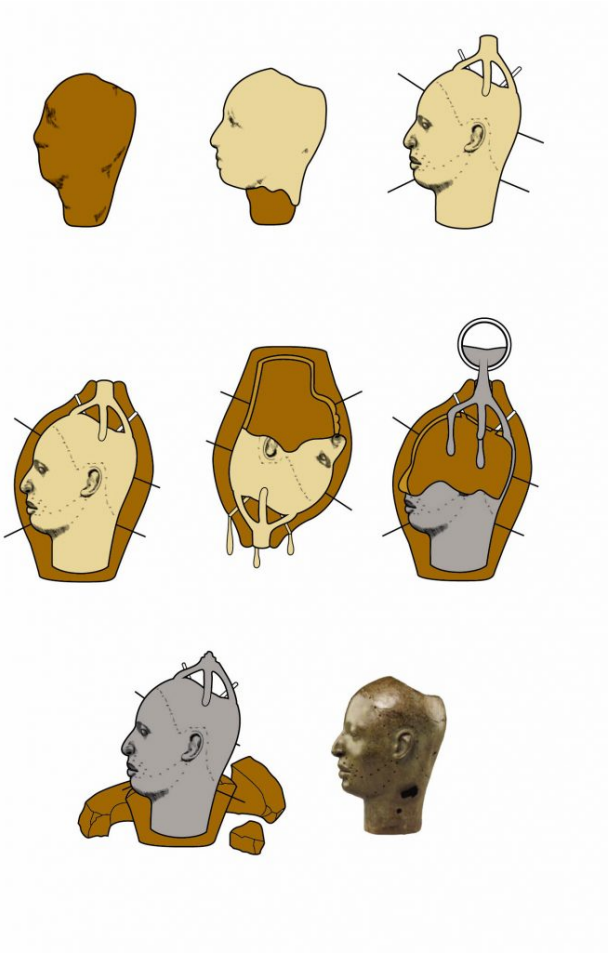


Figure 3.2.2.14: This lost-wax casting diagram (using a 15th-century Yoruba bronze head from Ife, Nigeria as an example) shows the steps of this technique from left to right: 1) roughly-shaped clay head, 2) beeswax applied and details created in wax, 3) wax sprues and vents attached to surface, 4) fine clay and regular clay packed around head, spues and vents extending to surface, 5) head heated, wax runs out, 6) molten metal poured; fills in gaps left by wax, 7) outer terracotta shell broken off, 8) sprues and vents filed down, finishing work complete. © Trustees of the British Museum. Creative Commons CC BY-NC-SA 4.0.

For most of Africa before the 20th century, brass and bronze—both copper-based or cuprous alloys—were the most valuable metals, for these alloys depended on imported or long-distance trade components. Copper itself does not flow readily, so sculptors usually add other metals to form alloys for smoother castings: copper plus tin makes **bronze** (Figure 22), while copper plus zinc makes **brass**. Gold was exploited in Senegal and what is now Ghana, as well as in parts of southern Africa, and can also be cast through cire-perdue. Relatively little silver occurs in Africa; its use in art (Figure 23) typically derives from imported metal, particularly the European Maria Theresa *thalers*, first minted in the 18th century.



Figure 3.2.2.15: These silver armlets with gold ornaments belonged to the last monarch of the Dahomey Kingdom, Behanzin. Fon male artist from Hountondji family, Dahomey Kingdom, Republic of Benin, late 19th century. 7.5″ long. Ethnologisches Museum | Afrika, III C 5548 a,b. © Foto: Ethnologisches Museum der Staatlichen Museen zu Berlin – Preußischer Kulturbesitz. Fotograf/in: Hendryk Ortlieb. Creative Commons CC BY-NC-SA 3.0 DE.

From low to high relief

Low reliefs are easier to cast, because the artist does not need to worry about molten metal reaching each part of the form before it cools. In the later series of plaques, however, artists cast high reliefs, meaning that they have greater depth. In the plaque discussed above, the thin swords are fully free of the plaque surface, a daring compositional choice that required careful management of the hot bronze to fill the form.



Figure 3.2.2.16: Detail of relief plaque showing two officials with raised swords, showing the high relief of the bodies and fully-free swords (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 4.0)

The switch to high relief suggests that the artists were becoming more confident in the medium of bronze reliefs. It may also reflect the artists' observations of how the completed reliefs looked once installed on the palace pillars. The later plaques, characterized by high-relief compositions of human figures that fill the entire surface, would have been easier to see from across the large courtyard.

Prestige Materials: Coral, Ivory, Brass, and Red Ododo Cloth

During the sixteenth century, the pillars of the Oba's audience hall would have been covered in bronze relief plaques like the one above. The men wear coral beaded regalia from head to toe —coral crowns, special high collars called *odigba* that signal their elite rank, beaded sashes across their chests, and beaded bands around their wrists and ankles.

The red and pink coral beads worn by the oba are one of Benin's most striking dress elements. First imported by the Portuguese in the late 15th century, they were eagerly purchased, perhaps because reddish-brown stone beads made from jasper or chalcedony already served as marks of high status, and coral's brighter color and status as a luxury import made them equally desirable. Red is a key color in Benin symbolism, as is white. White is associated with peace, prosperity, coolness–white kaolin "chalk" paints parts of the palace interior, and anoints people during ceremonies as a sign of luck, while ivory is also white. Red is associated with blood, war, power, and things threatening. The Edo categorize colors as white, black, cool (blue, green, violet), or hot (red, yellow, orange). Brass (when kept polished) is thus red, as are coral beads.



Figure 3.2.2.17: This netted coral crown was a more informal, lighter form of royal headgear. The beaded flywhisk imitated the more standard flywhisk made from a handle and a horse or other animal tail, but was considerably heavier. Flywhisks are used by rulers to salute citizens, wave at crowds in acknowledgment of their cheers, etc.; they are not really used to swat flies away. Tassled Crown: Edo male artist, Benin City, Nigeria, 19th century or earlier. © Trustees of the British Museum, Af1898; 0630.5. Creative Commons CC BY-NC-SA 4.0. Flywhisk: Edo male artist, Benin City, Nigeria, 19th century or earlier. L 40.55″. © Trustees of the British Museum, Af1898,0630.3. Creative Commons CC BY-NC-SA 4.0.

No one wears or owns more coral than the Oba, whether marine coral or stone "coral." His regalia Figure xxx) includes not only a selection of crowns, bracelets, anklets, necklaces, the high beaded collar called *odigba*, and crossed chest bands, but also coral-ornamented shoes, flywhisks, and netted beaded wrappers

and shirts (Figs. xxx and xxx). Because these items are heavy, most are not worn on a daily basis. A cloth cap can serve as crown, and netted garments are reserved for festival appearances. A coral circlet (*ikele*), coral bracelets and anklets are, however, standard.



Figure 3.2.2.18: Oba Ewuare II wore a full complement of coral attire on his coronation day, including netted wrapper and shirt and his most formal crown with an *oro* projection. The outer two figures are chiefs; both wear *ikele* circlets and bracelets, but only the chief at right wears an *odigba* stacked collar and crossed coral chest bands. Single frame of Channels Television's "Special Report: Coronation Of The Oba Of Benin, Oba Ewuare II Pt 2," 2016.

Coral beads have amulet-like protective powers, as well as prestige. Those belonging to the royal family and the chiefs are recharged during a palace festival by the sacrifice of a cow. In centuries past, a slave was sacrificed over them, a rare occurrence that spoke to their significance and power. Ivory is another precious material that is normally restricted to the Oba. It also is a medicine–literally. The carvers' guild keeps all ivory shavings, for they are critical ingredients in certain mystical preparations. Because the color white represents peace and joy to the Edo, ivory has assumed those associations. For centuries, the Oba has worn ivory armlets at the wrist, as well as pendants at the waist. Among the latter are some of the most prized art objects from Benin: a 16th-century pair of waist pendants that represent Idia, the mother of Oba Esigie (below).



Figure 3.2.2.19: This pair of matching ivory waist pendants depict Idia, the mother of 16th-century Oba Esigie. Edo male artist, Benin City, Nigeria, 16th century. Left: H 9.65″. © Trustees of the British Museum, Af1910,0513.1. Creative Commons CC BY-NC-SA 4.0. Right: H 9.38″. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, The Michael C. Rockefeller Memorial Collection, 1978.412.323. Public domain.

Brass has always been a valuable material, controlled by the monarch. Its reflectivity and–according to Edo terminology–reddishness have accorded it power, and its rarity before direct contact with Europe established it as a luxury metal. Obas have used it not only for royal altarpieces, but for architectural decorations, like the plaques that once decorated Oba Esigie's reception hall, or the brass snakes on palace towers, or objects that decorated the royal interiors.



Figure 3.2.2.20: This plaque contains only one frontal figure, and its hieratic scale demonstrates that he is the least important figure. Four members of the Benin forces attack what is probably an Igala mounted warrior: he has a large gash across his chest. Edo male artist, Benin City, Nigeria, 16th century. H 15.75″ x W 15.75″. © Trustees of the British Museum, Af1898,0115.49. Creative Commons CC BY-NC-SA 4.0.

The plaques–over 800 were once nailed to the wooden posts that supported the courtyard roof of his reception hall–demonstrated the Oba's great wealth and taste to any visitor. These rectangular plaques featured numerous subjects: primarily courtiers (above), relatively few images of the Oba himself, numerous animals–especially mudfish, snakes, crocodiles, leopards, and birds, the Portuguese, and a few inanimate objects. Most depictions of people are formal, frontal, and iconic; when multiple figures appear, their faces are shown identically, and hieratic scale indicates their relative importance. Less-dignified individuals were sometimes experimentally placed in a three-quarter, turned pose, a treatment most often accorded to the Portuguese, whose foreign printed sources probably served as models for the position. Other unusual treatments that seem to have a foreign impetus are references to foliage and even to action, which occurs in a handful of battle scenes. While courtier depictions ranged from the monarch and his noblemen to guild members and even low-ranking page boys, no women appear on the plaques. The plaques include highly unusual examples of still life depictions in African art–fans, gongs, aspects of ceremonial attire, a bag, a leopard pelt–but they are formally presented, without environmental references.

Brass had many personal uses for the aristocracy. Monarchs have also consistently granted many chiefs the privilege of wearing brass armlets (below) and hip pendants, as well as other accessories, all marks of royal favor. Chiefs' wives and women with minor palace titles stick thin brass "feather" ornaments into their *okuku* beehive-style coiffures.



Figure 3.2.2.21: This brass armlet is one of a matched set that would have been worn by a chief. Its imagery features the stylized heads of Portuguese foreigners and mudfish. Edo male artist, Benin City, Nigeria, 19th century. L 6″. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1991.17.78. Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls. Public domain.

High-ranking chiefs often own special gowns used today only for palace ceremonies. Made of *ododo*, they have a long history; some of Esigie's plaques show war chiefs wearing them for a festival, holding their ceremonial *eben* dancing swords. Made from overlapping scalloped strips, their surface is petal- or feather-like, but they actually represent animal scales–the scales of the pangolin, a mammalian anteater who curls itself into a ball when threatened (Figure xxx). When thus protected, as an Edo proverb states, "Even the leopard can crack its teeth on the pangolin." As such, this garment, known as "pangolin skin," reminds the monarch and spectators that chieftaincy at their level is not to be taken lightly. In their progress through chiefly ranks, they had to combine political cunning with supernatural medicine for self-protection. If the Oba tries to dispose of them, he may find it difficult or impossible.



Figure 3.2.2.22: The pangolin metaphor in Edo chiefly dress. **Top**: The curled-up, invulnerable pangolin. Wildlife Alliance, 2010. Creative Commons CC BY-SA 2.0; cropped horizontally. **Middle**: A brass plaque depicting two high-ranking chiefs in "pangolin skin" at a place ceremony. Edo, Benin Kingdom, Nigeria, 16th century. H 18.31″ x 13.5″. © Trustees of the British Museum, Af1898,0115.58. Creative Commons CC BY-NC-SA 4.0. **Bottom**: The Obasogie of Benin Kingdom, a high-ranking Eghaevbo n'Ore chief, in procession with "pangolin skin" cloth, his eben raised. Photo by © Kathy Curnow, 1997.

Symbols of Power

Like many African societies, Benin's imagery is a rich reflection of metaphors drawn from proverbs, divination, and other oral references. The pangolin is only one example; Benin art is full of significant depictions that have meanings beyond the obvious. The chiefly armlet shown above, for example, includes representations of both mudfish and Portuguese heads. Both refer to the watery world of Olokun, lord of riches, because of their associations with water, and the Oba is considered Olokun's counterpart on earth. One of his thrones shows interlocked mudfish (below), a reference both to Olokun and his own liminality.



Figure 3.2.2.23: A low brass stool throne in the form of intertwined mudfish. Edo, Benin City, Nigeria, 16th c.? A similar throne in the National Museum, Lagos probably replaced this damaged work. H 4.92″ x W 14.17″. © Trustees of the British Museum, Af1923,1013.1. Creative Commons CC BY-NC-SA 4.0.

The Oba himself is identified not only with Olokun, but with the leopard, who shares the Oba's beauty and fierceness. The Edo view the feline as the king of the forest, or bush; one of the Oba's praise names is "leopard of the home." So strong is this identification that there are many leopard euphemisms that refer to the monarch: "the leopard is in the shelter' (the Oba is sleeping) or "the leopard is sick in the bush" (the Oba is very ill). Royal guilds for capturing, taming, and sacrificing leopards existed in the past, and depictions of the feline could be found in many secular forms. The palace contained both sculptures of leopards and leopard vessels. They appeared on numerous plaques with and without bells at the neck, the marker of the domesticated cat. On both castings (below) and carvings, a leopard attacking an antelope stood for the Oba's destruction of his enemies. Only the monarch had the right to take life, but he conferred this right to his military officers, frequently with visual markers. Some wore actual leopard pelts on their chests, while others bore cloth tunics embroidered so their whiskers and eyes made the feline correspondence evident. Both the Oba and certain military chiefs wore leopard head pendants at the waist or hip, though the mediums differed.



Figure 3.2.2.24: This fragmentary plaque depicts two very high-relief leopards, one gnawing on an antelope. Edo male artist, Benin City, Nigeria, 16th century. H 11.01″ x W 7.09″. © Ethnologisches Museum | Afrika; Ethnologisches Museum der Staatlichen Museen zu Berlin – Preußischer Kulturbesitz, III C 8485. Creative Commons CC BY-NC-SA.

Similar pendants representing crocodile heads were also worn, and multiple representations of the reptile were found on courtyard plaques as well. The crocodile is viewed as Olokun's military enforcer, but a proverb also refers to the Oba's tenacity: "When a crocodile grips its prey, it doesn't let go."



Figure 3.2.2.25: Brass plaque in the shape of a crocodile. Edo male artist, Benin City, Nigeria, 16th century. H 18.23″ x W 7.68″. © Ethnologisches Museum | Afrika; Ethnologisches Museum der Staatlichen Museen zu Berlin – Preußischer Kulturbesitz, III C 8270. Creative Commons CC BY-NC-SA.

Snakes frequently appear in Benin art as well: on the palace turrets, on plaques, emerging from the nostrils of ritual specialist on brass heads, pendants, and vessels, and on other objects. Most Benin animal portrayals are not species-specific, so it is often difficult to know which variety of snake is depicted. Poisonous snakes are often associated with ritual specialists and their medicinal power, said to extend to their breath. The puff adder is allied to riches, while the non-poisonous python–since it is at home in the water as well as the land–is part of the world of Olokun. Two royal thrones are supported by snakes that are presumed to be pythons (below), their surfaces covered with land and water animals. While the seat of the earlier is example bears two crocodiles and two mudfish, as well as patterns, the later version is covered with blacksmith's tools, simian faces, an elephant with trunk-hand, and two pythons who have swallowed a human being each, a fist protruding from each mouth. While the meaning of some of the imagery remains obscure, each includes references to supernatural medicines and to power.



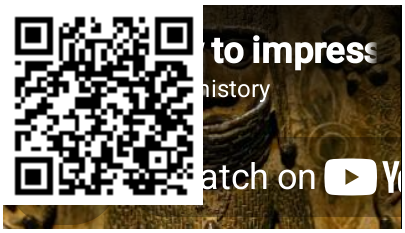
Figure 3.2.2.26: These two royal brass thrones were made for Oba Esigie (left) and Oba Eresonyen (right), respectively; Oba Eresonyen's was a copy of Esigie's. Both were made by Edo male artists, Benin City, Nigeria. Ethnologisches Museum | Afrika; Ethnologisches Museum der Staatlichen Museen zu Berlin – Preußischer Kulturbesitz. Photos are from Felix von Luschan's Die Altertümer von Benin. Berlin and Leipzig: Walter De Gruyter & Vo., 1919, figs. 814 and 813. Public domain. Left: 16th century. H 15.16″. Right: 18th century. H 15.75.

Mudfish frequently appear on Benin art. Plaques show them–as they do other fish–swimming in the water, as well as coiled and skewered, the way they're smoked for sale and consumption. But Benin has many varieties of mudfish. While all are related to the water, and all constitute liminal animals, only one type carries an electrical charge. This electrical mudfish is associated with the Oba, because he is said to have the power to shock and awe those in his presence, just as the mudfish physically shocks individuals. Frequently the Oba is depicted with mudfish legs, a feature that aligns him with Olokun, ruler of the waters, his divine counterpart (below). This is a glorifying image; here, the Oba shows his mastery of his bush counterpart, the leopard. Carved tusks and other ivories frequently show him similarly holding crocodiles.



Figure 3.2.2.27: The Oba, clothed with beads, including the bead that makes others tremble in his presence, is seen with electric mudfish replacing his legs. This is a reference to the deity Olokun; in one sense, all Obas of Benin are identified with the god. On the other hand, he is clearly the Oba and not the deity, for he holds two tamed palace leopards, as marked by the bells around their necks. Edo male artist, Benin City, Nigeria, 16th century. H 15.16″ x W 12.6″. © Trustees of the British Museum, Af1898,0115.30. Creative Commons CC BY-NC-SA 4.0.

How to impress your courtiers: a lesson from the Kingdom of Benin



Benin Plaques, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Edo peoples, Benin kingdom, Nigeria c. 1530-1570 (Museum of Fine Arts, Boston). Speakers: Dr. Kathryn Wysocki Gunsch, Teel Curator of African and Oceanic Art, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston and Dr. Beth Harris

Transcription of "How to impress your courtiers: a lesson from the Kingdom of Benin" video

[0:00] [music]

Dr. Beth Harris: [0:08] We're here in the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, looking at the Benin plaques.

Dr. Kathryn Wysocki Gunsch: [0:11] The Kingdom of Benin is in present-day Nigeria. It was founded around the year 900. The current reigning king, Oba Ewuare II, dates his dynasty back to around the year 1250. At its height, Benin controlled a kingdom about the size of New England, with two million inhabitants.

Dr. Harris: [0:28] "Oba" is the word for king. So here we are, looking at the Oba dressed in fabulous regalia and holding symbols of his power.

Dr. Gunsch: [0:37] We know that this is the Oba because he's wearing a phenomenal crown made of coral beads. It has this tall basketry projection called an oro projection, which is a sign of leadership. He's wearing a tunic made entirely of coral. He's wearing a beautifully imported damask skirt, and he's got coral on his ankles, on his arms.

[0:56] Most importantly, he's wearing the bead of rule on his chest.

Dr. Harris: [1:00] This coral is a beautiful deep orange red.

Dr. Gunsch: [1:03] We also see the king holding leopards, which are a metaphor for his power. The leopard is the fastest, most ferocious creature in the forest, and so it's an emblem of the king.

[1:13] Then around his waist, we have these mudfish. The mudfish is an interesting creature in that it can bury into the mud during the dry season and survive until the rainy season. It has this ability to live in two worlds. Also, mudfish sometimes have an electrical charge and can shock you.

[1:28] He is frontal.

Dr. Harris: [1:29] He's frontal. His body is symmetrical.

Dr. Gunsch: [1:31] This is an aesthetic choice that you see in Benin art of many media. I always ask people to mimic his posture. It's very uncomfortable to hold your hands in line with your torso.

[1:42] That tells you that this is a little bit less naturalistic in just the posture of the king. As we look at other plaques in the collection, you'll see that artists become more comfortable showing movement in the body.

Dr. Harris: [1:53] This plaque originally would have really gleamed.

Dr. Gunsch: [1:56] Visitors to the court noticed that they were glistening in the sun and that the Benin courtiers kept them polished. You see them brown in most European and American collections because Europeans like their bronzes to be dark, they oil them.

[2:09] So when the Benin bronzes showed up in Europe, people oiled them. Today, we're nervous to remove that oil because it's affected the layer of the metal and we worry about losing detail.

Dr. Harris: [2:18] Casting bronze is difficult. We're talking about really accomplished artists.

Dr. Gunsch: [2:23] We'll see as we look at different plaques how the artists gained greater confidence in this medium over time. What you see in the background is the most common motif. It's a river leaf motif.

[2:33] That makes sense if we think about the coral that the king is wearing. There's a belief that coral comes from the god of wealth, Olokun, who lives underneath the river. And so this river leaf pattern is related to that sense that the king [is] controlling wealth.

Dr. Harris: [2:46] Visitors to the court in Benin City would have seen a fabulous palace with an audience hall decorated with these plaques.

Dr. Gunsch: [2:55] That's our understanding from visitors to the court and court tradition. They would have surrounded the pillars that supported the roof of the audience hall. It had an open ceiling that let in sunlight.

[3:06] The plaques would have gone around all four sides of those pillars. That's the theory today.

Dr. Harris: [3:11] We can imagine people entering the audience hall, seeing the king at the other end, and looking at these images on the pillars that speak to the power of the king.

Dr. Gunsch: [3:20] It would have been very impressive, especially when you consider that copper was a medium of exchange in this period. Try to imagine wrapping the halls of the president with hundred dollar bills. It's that kind of wealth that you're looking at when you walk in.

Dr. Harris: [3:33] Then when you saw the Oba at the end of that audience hall dressed in this gleaming orange coral, this was quite a sight.

Dr. Gunsch: [3:41] Like courts around the world, the idea was to dazzle you when you walked in to visit the king.

Dr. Harris: [3:46] Maybe we should talk about why you can go to so many museums in the United States and in Europe and see these plaques.

Dr. Gunsch: [3:53] It seems like every museum has at least one Benin plaque. That's dated to a terrible moment in Benin history. In 1897, due to a trade dispute, there was a war between Britain and Benin.

[4:05] The British forces invaded Benin City, burnt it to the ground, and occupied it and took at least a third of the royal treasury and sold it at auction in Europe. People were amazed by the beauty of Benin art. Very quickly museums around the world bought pieces of Benin art.

Dr. Harris: [4:19] One of my favorite plaques is of a mudfish all by himself. It reminds us that the plaques had basically two

different sizes. A narrow size and a wide size.

Dr. Gunsch: [4:28] It seems that the narrow plaques are meant to work together with the wide plaques to sheathe a column. This plaque with the mudfish is a great example of the earliest work that the guild is accomplishing.

[4:39] It's an incredibly low relief mudfish. What we mean by that is that the fish doesn't really emerge from the surface of the plaque more than an inch, inch and a quarter.

[4:49] The artist has been fairly safe in the way that he's molding this figure, keeping it close to the surface of the plaque.

[4:55] That's something that might have given him confidence that it would cast well. You can see that artists are really interested in decoration.

Every bit of this fish has some fine decoration on it, and especially when it was bright and shining, it would have been more impressive.

Dr. Harris: [5:12] Let's look at a wider plaque, this one in higher relief, which was likely made later. Here, we see a very common motif in Benin art and that is three figures.

Dr. Gunsch: [5:23] Very often in Benin art, you see something called triadic symmetry, where you have a central figure and then figures on either side that are symmetrical.

Dr. Harris: [5:31] In the center of this one, we see a figure playing a drum.

Dr. Gunsch: [5:34] This is probably a warrior. He's wearing a warrior's bell on his chest and he's wearing a leopard-tooth necklace, a sign that he's in the Oba's militia.

Dr. Harris: [5:42] I see bells also dangling from his belt.

Dr. Gunsch: [5:45] If you look closely, those bells are attached with a leopard-skin leather, which is a symbol of his relationship to the Oba.

Dr. Harris: [5:53] He's larger than the figures on either side of him. This is something that we also see in Benin art often.

Dr. Gunsch: [5:59] Although it's interesting, in this corpus you start to see artists abandoning that. That might be because it makes the side figures much harder to see from a distance. In later plaques, we start to see three figures who are all the same size, even if one of them is hierarchically more important.

Dr. Harris: [6:16] I'm seeing so much more movement here.

Dr. Gunsch: [6:18] Yes. If we think of the mudfish we looked at as the earliest kind of plaque, very simple, very flat, the farther along we go, the more fun we can see the artists are having with the medium. Here, the arms of the drummer are off the plaque's surface.

[6:34] They're touching that drum in a way that feels believable and comfortable to mimic with your own body, same with the attendants who are playing a double gong. Their arms are off of the surface of the plaque. The artist is still a little cautious. The arms are attached to their chests, and yet we get that sense that they are moving out to play this instrument.

Dr. Harris: [6:53] Their heads tilt slightly. There's a real sense of animation to the figures.

Dr. Gunsch: [6:57] Even the way the bells are tipped, it seems like they've just moved or come to rest. For me, at least, that helps me imagine the sounds these figures are making.

Dr. Harris: [7:06] These are figures who are entertaining the king.

Dr. Gunsch: [7:09] These were likely in a procession coming to or from the Oba's palace.

Dr. Harris: [7:13] Now we're looking at another plaque of three officials, but these figures are all the same size.

Dr. Gunsch: [7:19] It's unlikely that they are the same hierarchy. It seems that the figure with the helmet is a more important member of the court than these two figures with the crown and the feathers.

Dr. Harris: [7:28] We can tell that because of that coral necklace that he's wearing.

Dr. Gunsch: [7:32] These coral necklaces are given by the king to important courtiers. The more coral you're wearing, the greater favor you have with the king. We know that this figure wearing the high coral collar, which is called an odigba, was quite important.

Dr. Harris: [7:44] We see the leopard's-tooth necklaces and also the warrior bells.

Dr. Gunsch: [7:48] They're all wearing emblems that they are members of Benin militias. If you look at their stomachs, you can see a stylized head of a leopard. This is a kind of armor made out of a stiffened leather.

Dr. Harris: [7:58] This is so much more complex. The decorative forms of their regalia stand out more. We have more of a contrast of light and dark.

Dr. Gunsch: [8:08] You could look at this plaque for an hour and see different textures. You can see those cascades of bells on the figures to the left are different from the bells worn by the figure in the helmet. They're attached differently. The skirts are different. There are different levels to each figure's skirt.

[8:24] There's many different kinds of textile depicted. The figures are wearing different bracelets. The figures on the left have upper-arm decorations that are separate.

Dr. Harris: [8:32] These are figures that would be processing toward the king.

Dr. Gunsch: [8:35] Because that central figure is holding an offering box, we know that those carry either a gift from a king

to his subject or taxes from a subject to the king's court.

Dr. Harris: [8:44] The figures on either end in their left hand carry a sword that really emerges from that background. We've moved from that low relief to higher relief. I can see how these figures would be more readable across a large space.

Dr. Gunsch: [8:58] They have much larger eyes. The way that the eyes are set into the head, it's a deeper recess, which gives us a better legibility to see those eyes across the space. The eyeball itself is tipped forward, making it easier for light to reach that part of the plaque and for us to see it from a distance.

Dr. Harris: [9:14] So we see stylistic change as we look at this corpus of more than 850 plaques.

Dr. Gunsch: [9:19] You can start to see how the artists are developing the medium, how they're changing composition over time, how they're learning from the act of creating this large commission. It was probably made by two kings, King Esigie and his son Orhogbua. When Esigie took the throne in 1517, he had great problems with his court.

[9:38] He created this commission to imagine the court that should be. It seems to have succeeded, to have created that sense of awesomeness of the king's power. That contributed to the way that he repaired relationships with his court and assured the dominance of the Benin king over his subjects.

[9:54] In the museum, we look at these frontally, but in the palace, you would have navigated around the columns in order to sit down. And then these figures would have taken on even greater sense of life and vitality. They're becoming almost courtiers themselves, present in space with you.

Dr. Harris: [10:09] What an impressive environment for an audience with the Oba.

[10:12] [music]

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

4: Wood Constructions of Northern Climates

4.1: Pacific Northwest Coast

4.1.1: Totem Poles

4.1.2: Haida and Tlingit Architectural Interiors

4.2: Furniture in the European Middle Ages

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4.1: Pacific Northwest Coast

Learning Objectives

- List key design principles and characteristics of art and design of the First Peoples of the Pacific Northwest coast.
- Analyze architecture of First Peoples of the Pacific Northwest coast as evidence of social values and structure.
- Describe the use of wood material for structure and aesthetics in Pacific Northwest coast art and architecture, noting technological and cultural significance.

Background: First Peoples of the Pacific Northwest Coast

Known for their art and design, the Haida, Tlingit, Tsimshian and Coast Salish are among the first peoples of the Pacific Northwest coast. For more than 10,000 years native people have continuously inhabited and stewarded the coastal regions of Yakutat Bay in Alaska to the Columbia River in Washington state (as they are known now). Artwork and cultural events such as potlatches convey kinship, spirit powers, or territories. They have traditionally built permanent structures forming large villages and broad regional social networks, adorned with intricate artwork. The crest has significant meaning and can been used in many architectural contexts, exterior and interior.

The visual realm of the people of the northwest coast provides a remarkable example of how art can function as currency in a system of social status, self-display, and family prestige. The Tlingit have lived in the panhandle region of Alaska for several thousand years, and have used for well over a thousand the distinctive pictorial style they share with their Haida and Tsimshian neighbors in Canada. Though this art is made principally from local materials such as cedar, it has long been involved in an international exchange of ideas and materials. Before the coming of Europeans in the eighteenth century, the Tlingit traded with Eskimos to the north for walrus ivory, with Athabaskan peoples in the interior for animal hides embellished with bird quill decoration, and with neighboring Northwest Coast groups.

Native people came into contact with Europeans in the late eighteenth century. By the nineteenth, some grew wealthy from their exchanges with British and American fur traders. While the northwest coast may seem remote from the cosmopolitan cities of Europe and eastern North America, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries it was a crossroads of cultures, a meeting place of Native, Russian, Spanish, British, and American economic interests from the previous century. In addition, traders, whalers, explorers, military men, and missionaries pursued diverse ambitions in the territory. Their impact on Native cultures was dramatic. Some Native individuals and communities prospered through participation in the international fur trade; others were almost wiped out by smallpox, influenza, and other diseases. Some groups became mutual trading partners, while in other cases coercion and bloodshed ruled. Later artworks embodied these cultural changes, as Native cultures seamlessly integrated such external influences into their social needs and ceremonial life, and as imported goods became fundamental to clothing, sculpture, and the ritual of gift exchange, for example. The non-Native arts that we compare to Native ones are small portable objects made by whalers rather than broadly appealing images directed at a national audience.

In the early to mid-nineteenth century, the Tlingit sold artworks in exchanges with British and American fur traders. The outpouring of art made during this period is a reflection of that relationship. Traditional culture was highly stratified, from chiefs of important clans and their close relatives downwards. Art works commissioned for chiefly feasts and give-away ceremonies, known as "potlatches," displayed family crests and emblems. In Northwest Coast belief, Raven, Whale, Wolf, Bear, and other animal heroes interacted with ancestors in the distant past, and that relationship formed the basis for social status, embodied in artistic imagery.

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4.1.1: Totem Poles

Reading a Haida clan crest totem pole

For the Indigenous peoples and nations of southeast Alaska and the coasts of British Columbia and Washington State, totem poles convey the stories and status of the clans, or matrilineal families, that create them. All clans are members of one of a number of moieties, or groups within their community. Each moiety is represented by an animal such as the raven, eagle or wolf, and is indicated by the carving of that animal on a totem pole. Humans, animals, and supernatural beings are also carved on poles as crests; the particular combination of crests on a pole is unique to each clan. Crests reflect the stories of the clan ancestors' interactions with the beings depicted, and remind family members about their heritage. Crest imagery can be found in many architectural elements in addition to totem poles such as interior house poles, house-front paintings, interior partition screens, as well as smaller, non-architectural objects for everyday use or ceremony such as containers (boxes, bowls, baskets), textiles (clothing, blankets, mantles) or rattles.

The following video features a Haida totem pole and provides further explanation of the imagery and significance of a crest.



Cite this page as: Dr. Lauren Kilroy-Ewbank and Teresa DeWitt, Totem Heritage Center Museum Attendant, "Haida Totem Pole, from Old Kasaan," in *Smarthistory*, August 12, 2021, accessed January 30, 2026, https://smarthistory.org/haida-totem-pole-from-old-kasaan/.

Transcript of "Reading a Haida clan crest totem pole"

[0:00] [music]

Dr. Lauren Kilroy-Ewbank: [0:06] We're here at the Totem Heritage Center in Ketchikan, Alaska, and we're looking at a very tall totem pole in the center of five poles.

Teresa DeWitt: [0:14] The pole we're looking at is sharing a certain clan's history. When you look at a pole, you can see the different clan crests and the different figures of humans and animals.

[0:24] What a clan crest for us amongst our Tlingit, Haida, and Tsimshian people, it's like a last name. You have a family that we follow, and it's always matrilineal. From your mother's side is where you claim your clan crest from. We always acknowledge our father's people and who you're the child of, but we always follow the mother's side.

[0:43] Each family has a set of clan crests that they claim, and it's just not saying that it's theirs, but it's sharing and reminding them of their history of their ancestors. Each animal crest that people put on their regalia, on their jewelry, on their hats when they dance, or on a totem pole has a very special story that goes with it and how their ancestors interacted with that particular animal.

[1:07] If you look at this pole here, you see a combination of animals that are on the pole. Each family has up to five or six clan crests that the family claims. That's why I tell people it's like a hyphenation. You don't just claim one, but you have a variety of clan crests that you claim because of your history through your mother's side.

[1:26] If you look at the very top of the pole, you see a bird. We could tell it's either a Thunderbird or an eagle by the short, hooked beak. Now, if it was straight and pointy, then it would be a raven.

[1:38] Right below the claws of the bird, you see that very particular face that has that wide eyes, that special nose, and a very wide mouth that is horizontal. That there is actually a frog. It reasserts that it's a frog design by the hands that are hanging on to the bentwood box.

[1:55] We think of ourselves as we hang on to a box that our joints and our human fingers are straight. They don't curve. If you look at the hands that's hanging on to the bentwood box, that the fingers are curved, it re-emphasizes that it's a frog hanging on to the box.

[2:11] Right below the box, you see that tall figure, which we could tell it's a beaver by its ears that are close-set on top of the head, that very distinguished nose. And you've got the two front teeth and the eyes.

[2:23] The animal crests all have different eyes that vary from one animal to another. Right below the chin, you can see the hands that are hanging on to the chew stick. Right below the chew stick, you see remnants of a baby beaver hanging on to the cross-hatched tail of the beaver.

[2:38] When we look at it, we could tell what family this is representing by the combination of the clan crest that's on display on the pole.

Dr. Kilroy-Ewbank: [2:46] I want to go back to something that you mentioned earlier. You noted that the frog is holding a bentwood box. Let's elaborate on what that is.

Teresa: [2:55] When you see this on a totem pole, I was told that it's representing a sense of wealth that the clan has. We don't think of wealth as in money or we got a huge house or a car like we think of nowadays.

[3:08] Traditionally, when we think of wealth, we think of unity. We think of the skill that we have. If you're wealthy, maybe you might have three or four Chilkat weavers in your family, in your clan, or you might have three or four totem-pole carvers and you have the unity of your clan members working together to complete different cultural events.

Dr. Kilroy-Ewbank: [3:27] I'm really struck by the different ways that the carver has accentuated features for the different crests here. Look at the eyes of the frog, the deeper carving to give the sense that the eyes are inset like you might see on an actual frog, and then with the shallower carving to differentiate parts of the mouth or the teeth.

[3:45] It really gives you this three-dimensional quality that would have been picked out with paint at one point to accentuate these features further.

Teresa: [3:52] When you see a pole like this, where it has the clan crest, and when we raised the poles long time ago, one of the common things that you would notice is that normally you would see all the totem poles facing the water. It would help identify what clans live or interacted with the village area that you're in.

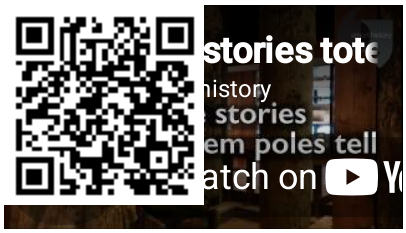
[4:09] The idea is when you go by a village in a canoe, you can look at the shoreline, you can look at the houses and the totem poles, and you can see the different clan crests. If you look at a totem pole like this and you see those three figures, then you know what clan is involved or lived in this area, that's interacted with them.

[4:27] [music]

Haida potlatch pole

First peoples of the northwest coast hold specific techniques to pole carving -- and woodcarving, in general. For example, many art practices are formalized, and the "formline" became the primary design element that defines outlines and colors. The colors of formline painting are based on black lines, red lines, and different blue and green tones. The other color pigments were mixed with dried salmon eggs as a fixative, and their brushes have usually been made from porcupine hairs. Technique and cultural significance extends to restoration customs, as well.

The following video features a Haida potlatch pole, elaborating on cultural values exhibited in artwork, art practice, and gathering events.



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Transcript of "the stories totem poles tell"

[0:00] [music]

Dr. Lauren Kilroy-Ewbank: [0:06] We're here at the Totem Heritage Center, looking at a group of totem poles, and I'm fascinated by one that only has carving at the top and the bottom.

Teresa DeWitt: [0:15] This pole here is from the Haida people, and it is representing a clan that is being memorialized. Long time ago, there was a highly respected clan leader amongst the Haida people. His name was Skowal, and when his young grandchild passed away in a very tragic accident, he had a totem pole raised to memorialize the individual.

[0:37] At the top of the pole, there's remnants of an eagle. You just see the wings and the feet that are sitting at the top. Unfortunately, the rest of it has decayed.

[0:46] At the bottom is the clan crest of the beaver, which we can tell by the ears on top of its head and the shape of the eyes, the nose. And you can see the remnants of the paws that are in front of the beaver, which at one time was holding a chew stick.

[1:02] Right below, you can see the figure of a baby beaver that's hanging onto the crosshatched tail. This beaver at one time had a face on it and it was all in one piece. You can see the different sections that look like cylinders that are pieced together. Some people think that it's forgotten, that they were going to go back and carve it later or they just didn't have time.

[1:22] What actually you're looking at is something that is very special when you see on a totem pole. Some people call them potlatch rings.

[1:29] When the newcomers came up here, they went through many different tribes as they continued to explore the Indigenous people of this area. One of the words that they came across from another tribe was potlatch. The word potlatch translates into a gift-giving ceremony or gift-giving event.

[1:47] Now, when the newcomers came up through here, they noticed something common that was amongst the Tlingit, Haida, and Tsimshian people that are cultural events. There is many gifts given out to your opposite clans throughout the event.

[1:58] The word potlatch is actually describing totem pole raisings, name-giving ceremonies, clan houses that were opening, or re-dedications of clan houses. It takes anywhere between one to five years to get ready for an event.

[2:12] What goes on during that time, the clan that's hosting the cultural event start making things, start handing out gifts when

the time comes. So they could be creating new paddles for the men that paddle the canoes. They could start making dance paddles for those that dance with paddles in the clans that will be coming.

[2:31] It could be new Chilkat blankets being woven, new button-robe blankets. It could be bentwood boxes. There's many different things to be made. The year of the event, the clan that's hosting it, they'll gather enough food not only for themselves but for the entire event. The event itself can last anywhere between one or two days up to one or two weeks.

[2:51] During that time, the clan that's hosting it will take care of all their guests, their opposite clans that are invited. Your opposite clan could be of your spouse, or your father's clan, or your mother's father's clan. It's somebody that balances you out in life and throughout the culture. When they invite them, they make sure that nothing has gone wanted for.

[3:10] They'll make sure that they're housed, that they're fed, that everything is taken care of. At the event, the guests and the hosting clan will have a chance to share their clan's songs, their stories, bring out some special items, or in Tlingit we call at.óowu, something that is precious to the clan.

[3:28] When they go back to their original villages they came from, the hosting clan will then give them enough food to go to the village that they're traveling back to.

[3:37] When you look at a totem pole such as this one with these potlach rings, you count them. On this one, there is six rings. We know that this clan is very wealthy, not wealthy as in having a lot of money, having big houses, and all these special items.

[3:51] They're wealthy within the terms of the clan is able to work together to accomplish these cultural events, that they have this time to have their clan weavers weave these special gifts, that they might hand out different canoes or paddles. It's the skills and the respect that they put into the event that makes them rich and wealthy.

Dr. Kilroy-Ewbank: [4:12] All of that is so beautifully represented here in this pole. I'm struck by the ways that the carvers have used different depths of perception to show parts of the beaver's body three-dimensionally, other parts' details. For instance, if we're looking at the arms of the beaver that are held up, there's a very deep carving that gives a nice play of light and shadow.

[4:36] But then if we look at the open mouth, we can see that the carvers have given us detail to pick out each individual tooth. The lines there are shallower and so demonstrating the expertise of the different depth of carving. Originally, this pole would have been painted. We still see some of that paint on this pole.

Teresa: [4:52] You can see underneath the wings of the eagle, and you can see at the bottom by the beaver's face, underneath the chin, around the eyes of the beaver, within the ears of the beaver. Unfortunately, a lot of these poles have seen a lot of weatherization within the over 100 years of being out in the open elements. This pole's one of the fortunate ones where it was standing within the village.

[5:13] A long time ago, we put up the pole and we leave it as is. We don't repaint it out of respect of the carver and the person that owned the pole.

[5:21] Where nowadays, a lot of people that have poles that are set out in the open air in public have a tendency to touch up the paint, to go wash the poles as needed. They inspect the top and the bottom. That's one of the big differences that we're looking at today.

[5:37] [music]

Proud Raven totem pole at Saxman Totem Park

On this clan crest pole, the raven at the base identifies the Gannax.ádi clan as part of the Raven moiety and the inclusion of the male figure at the top is a reference to the clan's history of seeing the first white man in Tongass Tlingit territory. Oral history and sovereignty are of great importance to the Indigenous peoples and nations of the Pacific Northwest Coast. For the Gannax.ádi clan, the sighting of the first white man in the area in the 18th century (likely a European or Anglo-American fur trader) is evidence of the Tlingit claim to the land—they were there before the white newcomers. Raising the original version of this totem pole on Tongass Island a century later was an important reminder of Tlingit sovereignty following the U.S.'s recent purchase of Alaska from Russia in 1867. The depiction of Abraham Lincoln on the pole was intended as a generic reference to the emergence of the white newcomer. For non-Native audiences, however, the inclusion of Lincoln on the pole was erroneously read as a memorial to the great leader and emancipator.

Saxman Totem Park was one of six parks built between 1938 and 1942 as part of the U.S. government's New Deal labor and cultural preservation programs, specifically emerging from the 1934 Indian Reorganization Act. The federal government paid Tlingit and Haida men, as members of the Civilian Conservation Corps, to repair or recreate more than one hundred 19th-century totem poles from uninhabited Native villages in Southeast Alaska. This particular pole was one of the catalysts for the entire totem pole restoration program because of the appeal of the image of Abraham Lincoln to New Deal officials who perpetrated the false story of the pole being a memorial to the former president.

The following video summarizes this history as well as providing images of the Proud Raven pole that communicate its

visual prowess. Unlike with the previous examples of totem poles, this video features painting that has been brilliantly restored so that we can get a sense of the polychromy traditional to these artworks. Additionally, the height of the pole is emphasized as well as the depth of its foundation, significant engineering considerations, especially as we next will look to the use of carved poles in examples of house architecture.



Cite this page as: Dr. Lauren Kilroy-Ewbank and Dr. Emily Moore, "Proud Raven totem pole at Saxman Totem Park," in *Smarthistory*, August 25, 2021, accessed January 30, 2026, https://smarthistory.org/proud-raven-totem-pole-saxman-totem-park/.

Transcript of "Proud Raven ('Lincoln') Pole" video

[0:00] [music]

Dr. Lauren Kilroy-Ewbank: [0:06] We're at the Saxman Totem Park, and we're standing in front of an enormous raven. This is the "Proud Raven Pole" that has also come to be known as the "Lincoln Pole."

Dr. Emily Moore: [0:16] The base of the pole is more important for Tlingit people. It shows the crest of the Gaanax̲.ádi clan from the Taant'a kwáan Tongass people. This pole was originally erected in the 1880s on Tongass Island. It depicts at the bottom this beautiful raven carving with outstretched wings. These wings are appended when the carver added them to the main shaft of the pole.

[0:42] On his breast is this human figure with crossed arms. If you look carefully, the legs of the human figure morph into those of the raven. This was a person of the Gaanax̲.ádi clan, of this raven crest, who almost becomes one with that crest.

Dr. Lauren Kilroy-Ewbank: [0:59] While we're seeing about 30 to 40 feet of this pole rising from the ground, it actually goes into the ground. We're not entirely sure how deep it goes, but some went down as deep as 18 feet to stabilize the pole.

[1:13] If we look above the "Proud Raven," we see an undecorated shaft. And as we lift our eyes to the top of the pole, we find the figure of Abraham Lincoln.

Dr. Moore: [1:23] This was a likeness of Lincoln. This is what captured the attention of non-Natives. In the 1920s, there was a famous Alaskan judge who published a story about this pole being a memorial to Lincoln, that Tlingit people were so grateful to Abraham Lincoln for having emancipated slaves.

[1:43] Actually, what Tlingit elders emphasized instead was that this was never a memorial to Abraham Lincoln. This pole was a record of the pride of the Gaanax̲.ádi Raven Clan at having been the first to see a white man in Tongass territory.

[2:01] This encounter probably took place in the late 18th century, during the fur trade, when Spanish, English, and American ships were plying the waters of Southeast Alaska for sea otter pelts. This particular encounter for the Tongass people probably took place on Duke Island, again, south of Ketchikan.

[2:22] It overlooks the broad expanse of the open Pacific Ocean, where it would have been very likely they saw one of these European sailing ships. Maybe a century later, this pole was erected in the 1880s on Tongass Island to commemorate that encounter and to recall the pride of the Gaanax̲.ádi Ravens at having been the first to see this white man on their territory.

Dr. Lauren Kilroy-Ewbank: [2:44] When this pole was erected in the later 19th century, Lincoln has recently been assassinated, the Civil War has ended, Lincoln has cast this really large shadow on people's imaginations.

[2:56] It's not surprising to me that non-Native people would get very excited at this story that you mentioned earlier, this idea of Lincoln, the great American hero, but really, it has a very different meaning for the local Indigenous people. It becomes a record of sovereignty, their claim to the land.

Dr. Moore: [3:13] Right, they were here before these first white men ventured to their shores.

[3:18] The photograph that was probably used was a photograph taken during the Civil War of Abraham Lincoln standing at Antietam. In those photographs, he's standing with his arms clasped behind his back. The carver interpreted this as arms akimbo.

[3:35] This first white man standing at the top of this pole, this image of Abraham Lincoln, was likely given to them as a diplomatic gift on Tongass Island. Because Tongass Island was not only the site of a prominent Tlingit village, but also the first US military base built in Alaska after the United States purchased Alaska from Russia in 1867.

[3:58] In this really complex time of transition, with Americans arriving on the scene, claiming the land, Tongass Tlingits erect this pole that claims their sovereignty on this land that Americans are now claiming, that looks back to a time when they were the first to see white people coming to their shores.

Dr. Kilroy-Ewbank: [4:18] When the Saxman Totem Park was constructed in the 1930s during the Great Depression, when the US Forest Service and the local Native communities were coming together to create this park — in part to appeal to tourists, to appeal to people who would be passing by the park on steamships, who could see the totem row as it ascends up the hill — it makes sense to me that they would continue to draw up

support for this myth of Lincoln as the emancipator, as the savior of people.

Dr. Moore: [4:46] It's interesting because this pole was one of the catalysts for the Totem Pole Restoration Program.

[4:52] When the Forest Service first applied for money, New Deal officials labeled this request to restore totem poles in the remote islands of Southeast Alaska as the "boondoggliest of boondoggles," this watchword for needless spending during the Great Depression.

[5:09] And yet, when they saw that there was a Tlingit pole that depicted Lincoln, this was the selling point, this was something everyone could agree should be preserved.

[5:19] What's really important is that the story became known that this was not a memorial to Abraham Lincoln, but instead this document of Ǥaanax̲.ádi pride, of their sovereignty, their clan history on this land long before white people arrived.

[5:34] [music]

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4.1.2: Haida and Tlingit Architectural Interiors

Haida Architecture

The impact of European contact and conquest can be seen on all forms of art to varying degrees, including architecture. This chapter will focus on architecture of the Pacific Northwest pre-contact, as later chapters will touch on shifts in design culture as a result of the European invasion of the American continents.



Figure 4.1.2.1: Houses and poles along the beach in 1884. Photo: Richard Maynard. (public domain, George and Joanne MacDonald Northwest Coast Image Archive)

Haida villages consisted of houses aligned linearly facing the waterfront. These served as permanent winter homes while in other seasons, people would labor in seasonal camps. Buildings are post-and-beam wood construction using wood joinery with massive Cedar logs from felled or standing trees, sheathed with planed planks. This "Plank House" style architecture continues to be built today, though often with use of metal fasteners. Buildings have symmetrical structures with four corner posts supporting rectangular exterior walls and a single gable roof. Smaller houses use two beams to support the roof while larger houses use six beams. The even number of roof beams allow for a central opening in the roof to vent the central hearth. Traditionally the entrance was centered in the facade. For six-beam structures, the opening would be at the base of the crest totem pole (below). When photographed in 1888 the "House Where People Always Want to Go" had an additional European-style hinged door added towards the center of the facade (below).



Figure 4.1.2.2: Chief “Highest Peak in Mountain Range” in front of “House Where People Always Want to Go.” Haina, 1888. His ceremonial garments include a spruce-root crest hat and Chilkat robe, and he holds copper shields. Photo: Richard Maynard, 1888. (public domain; Wikimedia Commons)

The interior took the form of a great hall space centered around a central hearth. The floor was excavated below the level of the entry with planks added to retain the earth, resulting in stepped recesses radiating around the central hearth. This provided terraced seating and work and storage surfaces, as well as thermal insulation from being depressed into the earth. All interior life took place in these buildings: cooking, eating, sleeping, working, spiritual rituals, which dominated daily life during the winter months. Small houses comprised thirty to forty related family members (relations claiming a common ancestor) and averaged 20 by 30 feet while large houses were up to 50 by 60 feet and could house up to eighty residents, more extended family members and any slaves they might have had. The space was generally shared by all family members, though partition screens provided privacy to certain members such as the sleeping area for the head of the household.



Figure 4.1.2.3: Interior of Chief Wiah's Monster House as it were when the house was still occupied in 1884. Photo: Richard Maynard. (public domain, George and Joanne MacDonald Northwest Coast Image Archive)

Chief Wiah's Monster House was occupied in the late nineteenth century and retained many of the traditional forms of Haida architectural interiors, such as the terraced floor and central hearth (below). However, note that furniture (such as turned wooden chairs and tables) and lamps are present as typical of a late nineteenth century household. Traditionally, bentwood boxes were used as storage furniture and often ornamented with paintings and/or carvings, elevating their significance from utilitarian to aesthetic, social and spiritual. Subject motifs and forms related strongly to the artwork of totem poles.

Bentwood Boxes



Cite this page as: Teresa DeWitt, Totem Heritage Center Museum Attendant and Dr. Lauren Kilroy-Ewbank, "Bentwood Boxes of the Northwest Coast peoples," in *Smarthistory*, December 9, 2021, accessed February 3, 2026, https://smarthistory.org/bentwood-boxes-northwest-coast/.

Transcript of "Bentwood Boxes of the Northwest Coast peoples"

[0:00] [music]

Dr. Lauren Kilroy-Ewbank: [0:05] We're in the Totem Heritage Center, and we're looking at three bentwood boxes.

Teresa DeWitt: [0:11] The bentwood boxes for people amongst Tlingit, Haida, and Tsimshian is something precious to us. And it's a special skill that goes into making bentwood boxes.

[0:20] What we put inside the boxes could be food that we gather throughout the year, like seaweed, dried fish, dried hooligans. It could also be clan items or regalia. It couldbe blankets that we use on a daily basis. There could be at.óowu, something that is special to the clan.

[0:37] The box itself is made of three pieces of wood. One is the bottom part of the box. The second being the top lid. And the third piece is all the sides of the box, and that's all made from one flat board.

Dr. Kilroy-Ewbank: [0:50] We can see that expertise and the time that it would have taken to carve something like this. Look at how even each of the sides are and if we're looking inside, we can see the evenness of the grain of the wood. To be able to cut into the tree originally to make it this precise would have been extraordinarily time consuming.

Teresa: [1:10] They would take the wood and cut it with the grain very precisely to make sure it's all even. Then when they have the board laying flat, they would cut three different grooves into the board, that would help with the bending process.

[1:23] Once they have the wood cut, then they would have to moisten it down, and very carefully, at the precise moment, start bending the box, because if they start bending it too fast or too soon, it could crack and break the board. If they go too slow, it could damage and break it as well.

[1:40] Once they have all the sides closed in, they would connect the two ends with either sinew or pegs. Nowadays, they might put nails and pegs, but they would use the sinew to make sure it's nice and tight. If you're able to look down inside the box, you can see the thickness to make sure it's very even, it's nice and sturdy.

[2:01] When we brought these boxes in from storage and were able to put them on display, I could actually smell the seaweed coming out of one of the boxes. This family stored seaweed inside of the bentwood box.

[2:13] One of the other bentwood boxes, I could smell dried fish. All the oils from the dried fish have a special color inside of the box. Being it's from Old Kasaan, over in Prince of Wales, estimated to be decades old, when the family moved to New Kasaan, these boxes were brought with them.

[2:31] They're definitely well over 75 to a estimated 100 years old when I was visiting one of the owners of the box.

Dr. Kilroy-Ewbank: [2:37] On two of the sides of each of these boxes, we see different designs.

Teresa: [2:42] The designs would all vary on the family that owns the boxes, so they could put their clan crests on the box. You might find one design that wraps all the way around it, or one design that might fit on one side or two sides.

[2:55] Along with the lid, also, the designs change and fluctuate to the individual that's ordered the box or making the box. A lid

might be anywhere between two to three inches tall, all the way up to, this one here in front of us is about four to six inches deep. And it's specially made to cover the box so it catches it perfectly, so it doesn't slide around.

Dr. Kilroy-Ewbank: [3:15] The lid has also been adorned with shells in three parallel lines.

[3:21] I want to go back to the functions of these boxes. These were intended to be moved.

Teresa: [3:26] The different sizes of boxes can come anywhere between one foot square and one foot high, all the way up to, some that I've personally seen, estimated about three feet by four feet. They all come in different sizes, designs, and embellishments that they want to create their box with.

[3:44] So you might see not just shells like you see here, but you might see the abalone shells, copper that's embedded on it. It's all up to the individual that is making it their own. So it's not just lasting for the year, but something that they cherish and they hand down from one generation to the next.

[3:59] [music]

Tlingit bentwood box, 1880

Bentwood box techniques are shared across indigenous people of the Pacific Northwest Coast, including Haida and Tlingit peoples, and functioned well as water-tight storage containers.



Figure 4.1.2.4: Bowl, Haida or Tlingit, early 19th century, wood (public domain; The Metropolitan Museum of Art)

The ornamented Tlingit storage chest below dates to 1880 and displays elaborate relief carvings and traces of polychrome paint. The broad, frontal face with bared teeth and tongue dominates the front of the chest, representing the shape-shifting sea monster Gonakadet, the Chief of Wealth, described in the oral traditions of the Tlingit (McLennan and Duffek 2000: 129). Centered below is a human form, a face between two symmetrical hands, and at each corner salmon-trout-heads, echoing symmetry. "The act of painting and carving the creature's image is believed to invoke the spirit to dwell within the chest and guard its valuable contents, as well as assign value to the container as a symbol of social rank and wealth" (Wellons (2019), as cited in Stewart 1984: 87).



Figure \(\
PageIndex
{5}\): Tlingit storage chest, ca. 1880, wood, paint (public domain, The Metropolitan Museum of Art)

Polychrome painting is an important feature of artwork of the Northest Coast and has the effect of emphasizing edges and forms in carvings. Rattles from the same time period as the bentwood box above still exhibit painting that has been excellently preserved, due to their different nature of use and size. Rattles are most often associated with spiritual rituals and were stored, their ornamentation well preserved.



Figure 4.1.2.6: Left: Raven rattle, Tsimshian, 19th century, cedar, pebbles, polychrome (public domain, The Metropolitan Museum of Art). Right: Cecoq (rattle), Tlingit or Haida, mid 19th century, wood, polychrome, pebbles (public domain, The Metropolitan Museum of Art)

Tlingit Design Principles

Excerpted from "Native Arts of Alaska" in *American Encounters: Art, History, and Cultural Identity* (Miller, Berlo, Wolf, and Roberts)

Art of the Northwest Coast is immediately recognizable because of its graphic design system, shared by the Tlingit, Haida, and Tsimshian peoples. Worked out by artists centuries ago, and still in use today, this system is built of formlines, ovoids, and split U-forms. A formline is a connecting contoured line which structures the design and generally outlines human or animal anatomy. An ovoid is a slightly rectangular oval shape (usually with a hint of an upward bulge at its base) which delineates eyes, feathers, joints, and other points of emphasis. Feather-like U-forms often fill both formlines and ovoids in a harmonious way. The carver would trace formlines on the wood, either freehand or using a stencil, before he began to use his adze.

An artist could use formlines and ovoids in a simple manner, to make a graphic image easily legible or in a complex manner, to make the images almost disappear in an elegant welter of shapes decipherable only by another master artist.



Figure 4.1.2.7: UNKNOWN ARTIST, Interior house screen from the Grizzly Bear Clan house, Tlingit Culture, Wrangell Village, Southeastern Alaska, c. 1840. Cedar, paint, 15 x 9 ft (4.57 x 2.74 M). Denver Art Museum, Colorado.

All of the artworks illustrated here were used in status-conferring rituals, feasts, and theatrical displays. Central to understanding Tlingit art is the concept of at.óow (status, meaning, and power derived through ownership). Art objects, names, stories, and other things both tangible and intangible can accrue at.óow when they are displayed, sung, danced, or recounted in public ritual witnessed by other people. Objects, names, and songs can be handed down from generation to generation, accruing more meaning, value, history, and prestige with each generation. This system connects past generations with those to come, and links the human community to the spiritual one.

Contemporary Tlingit poet and scholar Nora Dauenhauer has described her culture's art in Western museums as "like a movie without a soundtrack," for without the animating force of oratory and the public acknowledgment of rights, an art object is essentially meaningless, according to Tlingit worldview. Western museums may contain objects that are recognized by the Tlingit as still being the property of particular clans, or of individuals. For example, for more than fifty years the Denver Art Museum has "owned" a painted architectural screen from the Grizzly Bear Clan House at Wrangell, Alaska. The Grizzly Bear is the most important crest of the Shakes family, whose chiefs go back countless generations. Although the screen itself is in a museum, the crest image is owned by Chief Shakes, in a system akin to a Western system of copyright. The Denver screen, dating from the mid-nineteenth century, probably

replicates an even earlier house screen. In the 1930s, the Denver screen served as the model for a new community house dedicated to the seventh Chief Shakes, Charley Jones, who assumed his hereditary title when this building was dedicated in 1940.

In Northwest Coast culture, replacements are routinely commissioned for worn-out heirlooms; what an individual holds inalienably is the right to own, display, and replicate certain enduring family emblems. Oral history relates that in ancient times the bear accompanied Shakes ancestors as they scaled a mountain to escape a flood; since that time they have owned the rights to the bear emblems. In an early-twentieth century photograph of a modern Chief Shakes house, European-style architecture (with wooden clapboards, glass windows, and hinged door) provides the setting for Chief Shakes Vi's totem poles (George Shakes, who served as chief from c. 1876 to 1916). One pole depicts a human figure wearing a Killer Whale crest hat; the other depicts the Grizzly Bear of the clan's founding legend. On the pole are the footprints of the bear as it scaled the mountain with the Shakes family's ancestors. Tradition exists seamlessly with modern "improvements."



Figure 4.1.2.8: LLOYD WINTER & E. PERCY POND, Totem poles, Chief Shake's House, Fort Wrangell, Alaska, c. 1900. Photograph. Alaska Historical Society, Juneau.

Tlingit Architecture

Similar to the Haida, Tlingit architecture consists of post-and-beam buildings arranged facing the waterfront. This urban form continued with the integration of European trading communities (below).



Figure 4.1.2.9: Drawing of Russian and Tlingit buildings at Sitka, Alaska in 1843. Artist: Ilia Gavrilovich Voznesenskii. Glenbow Archives. (public domain, Wikimedia Commons)

Similar to Haida architecture, Tlingit architecture was generally rectangular of Western Red Cedar construction, though the cedar had to be procured through trade with others because it does not grow profusely in their territory. Houses were also organized in a reflected symmetry around a centralized entrance with a two-beam roof structure. However, the split ridge beam (to allow for an opening to vent the hearth) was topped by an additional superstructure of two smaller beams supporting a higher roof to shelter the hearth fire (below).

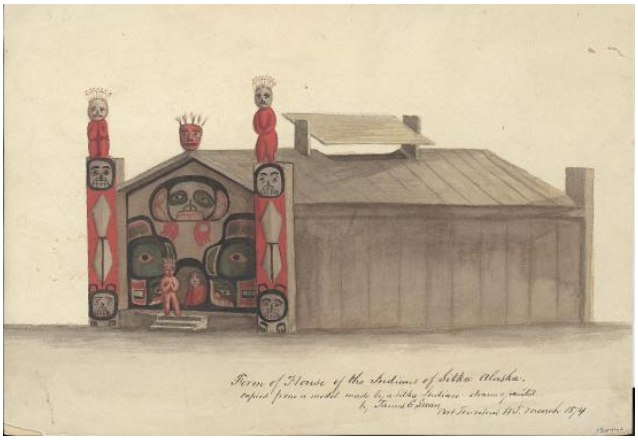


Figure 4.1.2.10: Painting of a Tlingit house model from Sitka, Alaska. Artist: James G. Swan, 1874. (public domain; National Anthropological Archives)

And, while Haida exterior walls were typically left with a natural wood finish, some Tlingit houses had elaborate painting on the facade reflecting the clan crest, such as the Raven House of the early 20th century (below).



Figure 4.1.2.11:
Housefront formerly painted as a sea monster has been re-created as a raven with its head protruding from above the entry way. The mouth of the raven was rigged to open and be used as an entry during potlatches. There is a large pole carved by Mungo Martin on the far side of the house which formerly stood at the entry. Photographer: C.F. Newcombe, 1917. (public domain, George and Joanne MacDonald Northwest Coast Image Archive:

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A photograph of the Whale House of Chilkat in 1895 shows elaborate ornamentation in the interior on the screen at the entry as well as on structural posts, retaining planks, and bentwood boxes (below). Motifs repeat in each of these artforms as well as on textiles worn by the Gaanaxteidi family photographed. This image gives a sense of the architectural experience, as we can see how some of the post-and-beam structure comes together along with sunlight entering from the roof opening above the hearth, also acting as a skylight to illuminate the space.





Figure 4.1.2.12:
Rain Screen, su kheen, formed the front wall of the sleeping chamber of the master of the house. The large partition stood between the rear support posts and is made of thin split red cedar boards of varying widths. The front surface is intricately carved in low relief and painted to represent the Spirit of Rain, Su, which was symbolized by a great crouching figure with outstretched arms. The boarder of minture creatures represents the splashing of rain as it strikes the ground. Some scholars suggest that the screen may not represent the Rain Spirit, but Raven who stole fresh water for the benefit of mankind (see Jonaitis 1986:113-15). Opinions differ as to who executed this work, but it is generally held that the Rain Screen and the Whale house posts were carved by different artists as the style differs significantly. Whale house, Ganaxtedi clan. Photo: Winter & Pond, 1895.
(public domain; George and Joanne MacDonald Northwest Coast Image Archive:

Klukwan079

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Another photograph from the Tlingit village of Klukwan from around the same period shows the interior of the Frog House (below). Here, we can see more of the timber roof structure as well as a relative modernization of the hearth for the late 19th century: a wood stove with a chimney.



Figure 4.1.2.13: Frog posts and Raven screen, Ganaxtedi clan. Photo: J.M. Blankenberg, 1895-1905. (public domain; George and Joanne MacDonald Northwest Coast Image Archivehttps://digital.lib.sfu.ca/macdonald-nw-coast-image/frog-house-interior)

Relief carving and painting was not restricted to Tlingit architectural interiors nor Haida exterior totem poles. This elaborate ornamentation was also found on interior posts such as those of the Grizzly Bear House of the Haida village of Masset in 1906.



Figure 4.1.2.14: Interior posts of the Grizzly Bear House. Newcombe recorded in 1906 that these were the posts taken by Johan Adrian Jacobsen, 1853-1947 to Berlin. He states that they supported the large round roof beams and faced the door. Here they are shown just before their removal from Masset, arranged for display with a Chilkat blanket, painted hat, and two daggers that probably belonged to Xa'na. The formal display represented in the photograph is typical of that put on at a chief's funeral. The Chilkat blanket is draped over a box that may be the coffin box of Xa'na. Photo: Richard Maynard, 1884. (public domain; George and Joanne MacDonald Northwest Coast Image Archive)

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4.2: Furniture in the European Middle Ages

Learning Objectives

- Describe how various familial and extra-familial occupants would have used a domestic hall typical of the European middle ages, listing its design characteristics and features.
- Describe the form, material, ornamentation and use of typical domestic wooden furniture of the European middle ages.
- Analyze the role and use of wooden furniture during the European middle ages, comparing with that of today.

The English castle: domestic space in the middle ages

Adapted from "The English castle: dominating the landscape," by Dr. Ron Baxter in *Smarthistory*, December 5, 2020, accessed November 20, 2025, https://smarthistory.org/english-castle-dominating-landscape/.

The traditionally popular view of a medieval English castle is that it was designed for warfare, suggesting that medieval lords were perpetually either at war or preparing for it. Until recently castles were mostly studied by military men or at least by men with a military background who had fought in one of the two world wars. Their work on castles extended their interest in warfare back to an earlier period and into an area which had been little studied in comparison with religious architecture. For these men, castles were defined as strongly fortified residences, and both elements, fortification and accommodation, must be present if a building is to be a castle. More recently many scholars have argued that castles had more to do with factors other than warfare, such as dominating the landscape, and that they are best seen as an architectural expression of the social status of their owners.

It is accepted by the archaeologists who have excavated them that castles were introduced to England by the Normans (who came from Normandy in Northern France, and conquered England in 1066). The typical form was a wooden keep (a fortified tower) built on top of a motte (a mound of earth), the whole surrounded by a ditch.



Figure 4.2.1: Mountfitchet Castle, Essex (photo: Ron Baxter, CC BY-NC-SA 4.0)

A reconstruction of a Castle has been created at Stansted Mountfitchet (in Essex), by building a fence made of chestnut wood palings around the top of a motte which dates to the time of the Normans, and calling it a “Medieval Experience.” Only a few Norman mottes ever became fully fledged stone castles (the earliest Norman castles were built of timber and earth).



Figure 4.2.2: Distribution of Norman mottes – each dot is a motte

A glance at the distribution map shows that there was a heavy concentration of mottes along the borders between England and Wales and Scotland, but otherwise they were evenly spread across populated areas. Apart from the strategic border castles that were genuinely intended either to guard against invaders or to act as garrisons for raids into Wales, mottes were built in cities, boroughs and practically every town of any size. It was not that the Normans were expecting attacks from the townspeople or even those of the neighboring town. Rather they were building physical statements of their dominance. These mottes are not very high as a rule, and they didn’t need to be to tower over a cluster of surrounding buildings that were little more than huts made of wattle and mud.



Figure 4.2.3: Hedingham Castle keep from the Southwest (photo: Ron Baxter, CC BY-NC-SA 4.0)

Hedingham Castle

Hedingham Castle in Essex is one of the strongest and most impressive castles in Eastern England, and it was built by one of the richest and most powerful families, the de Veres, Earls of Oxford, most probably in the 1140s. It was an expensive project: there is no suitable local stone, and the high-quality limestone used to build it had to be carted eighty miles from the quarries at Barnack in Northamptonshire. Its tall keep rises to a height of almost 100 feet and dominates the flat surrounding landscape for miles in every direction. This business of height is important. The taller a building, the less stable it is. A genuinely defensive building should be low and squat. But at Hedingham visual prominence is the important factor.

A close examination of the keep shows that a lot of the height is fake.

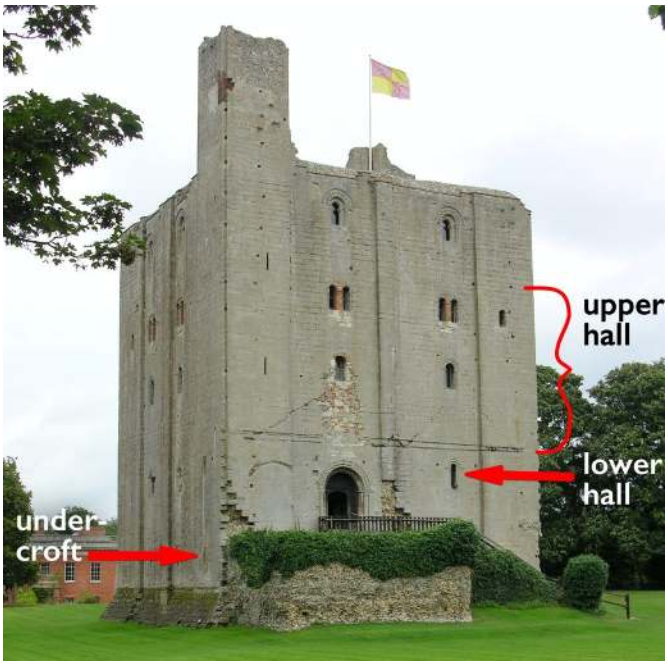


Figure 4.2.4: Hedingham Castle keep showing floor levels

There is an undercroft (a lower hall at the level of the main doorway), and a double-height upper hall with two rows of windows, and that is all. The row of windows at the top were originally above the roof so that this whole upper storey was open to the sky. It was later roofed in and called the dormitory, but the roof is modern, and the inner walls were never plastered because they were outside.



Figure 4.2.5: Hedingham Castle top floor with typical period furnishing (photo: Ron Baxter, CC BY-NC-SA 4.0)

The false upper storey was not unusual in the Norman period—the White Tower, William the Conqueror's keep at the Tower of London, was just the same.

This is not the whole story, of course. Castles were luxurious residences too. The luxury is not usually obvious because most castles are ruined nowadays, but the evidence is there to be found. At Hedingham there are richly chevron-decorated arches, fireplaces with carved capitals. and plastered walls, sometimes with traces of painted decoration still surviving.



Figure 4.2.6: Hedingham Castle, upper hall with typical period furnishings (photo: Ron Baxter, CC BY-NC-SA 4.0)

Fortification and Residence

The traditional definition of a castle is that it is a fortified residence, and both elements—fortification and residence—are essential before something can be called a castle. The work of recent writers like Robert Liddiard, Oliver Creighton, and Matthew Johnson presents a very different and more complex idea of how castles worked. First there has been a tendency to downplay the military aspect, not least by pointing out that most castles were never under siege. The rules of medieval warfare were designed to avoid genuine sieges. A full-scale siege required enormous resources of men and horses, siege engines had to be constructed and dragged into position, and men committed for weeks or months to operating them and finding suitable ammunition. If the defenders surrendered, they should be allowed to march away unharmed, while the attackers gained only a ruined castle. In practice a siege was usually unnecessary because castles could simply be bypassed by invading forces wishing to advance.

John Goodall has suggested a new definition of a castle as "the residence of a lord made imposing through the architectural trappings of fortification, be they functional or decorative" (Goodall, 2011, p.6). This introduces the idea of fortification as an architectural style, which has much to commend it.

Goodrich Castle

Goodrich Castle in Herefordshire is strategically placed on a sandstone outcrop overlooking the river Wye, near the border between England and Wales. Goodrich reached its full medieval development in the fifteenth century. It was never under siege or serious attack until the English Civil War of the seventeenth century.

To properly understand the way castles worked it is important to try to see them as their users saw them, which can be difficult because there are always additions and losses and, most importantly, there are no longer any inhabitants.

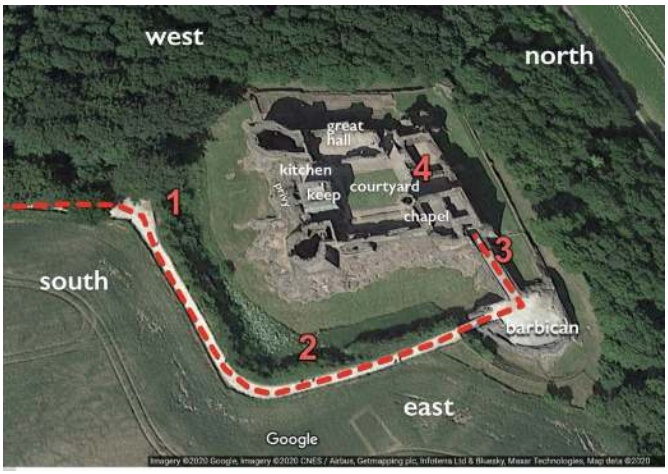


Figure 4.2.7: Plan, Goodrich Castle

A knight visits the castle

Let's try to put ourselves in the position of a medieval visitor of high status — a knight in the fifteenth century.



Figure 4.2.8: View #1: the approach to Goodrich Castle (photo: Ron Baxter, CC BY-NC-SA 4.0)

As usual there is just one main approach road. The lower orders might do something slightly different, but our knight simply follows the road and is led by the clues it gives. He approaches from the south with his retinue and gains his first view of the castle. In the center he sees a big square building (the keep), obviously older than the rest, which tells him that the castle is ancient—he is visiting a venerable family (in fact the Talbot Earls of Shrewsbury).



Figure 4.2.9: View #2: Goodrich Castle, east side (photo: Ron Baxter, CC BY-NC-SA 4.0) (Google street view)

The knight follows the road to the right, around the south-east tower, and sees the east side of the castle, originally reflected in the water of the moat, doubling its size. It has an impressive curtain wall with battlements and arrow slots. Immediately beyond the round corner tower, he sees a newly installed three-seater garderobe or privy — the last word in late-medieval plumbing. Imagine the sight and the smell as he rounds that corner and sees the human waste staining the walls as it drops into the moat. Matthew Johnson has argued that this was an important part of the castle experience, and that all that shit and food waste would have impressed the visitor with the wealth of the occupants and the lavishness of their table. Throughout the ride along the east side, our knight is separated from the castle by a deep moat, but he is observed by watchers on the battlements who will give warning of his approach. An attacking force would be most vulnerable at this stage.



Figure 4.2.10: View #3: the approach to Goodrich Castle from the Barbican (photo: Ron Baxter, CC BY-NC-SA 4.0) (Google street view)

The knight rides on and reaches the barbican—a fortified outwork where he sees the gateway ahead and must dismount. No horses were allowed inside the castle. Retainers dressed in the Talbot family livery take his horse to the stables. All the servants wear the badge of the Lord so our knight can never forget whose roof he is under. To the left of the gateway he sees a chapel — recognizable by its traceried window.

He walks under the gateway and sees murder holes overhead. Perhaps he looks upwards and feels nervous as he sees the portcullis and the murder holes, through which molten lead could be poured on invaders.



Figure 4.2.11: Goodrich Castle gateway with murder holes overhead (photo: Ron Baxter, CC BY-NC-SA 4.0)

These so-called defensive features were not designed to deter a large force (which would probably bombard the walls rather than using the gatehouse), but to impress a single man or a small group.



Figure 4.2.12: View #4: Goodrich Castle: the courtyard seen from the gatehouse (photo: Ron Baxter, CC BY-NC-SA 4.0) (Google street view)

The knight emerges into the central courtyard and immediately knows where he is — even if he has never been here before— because the elements of a castle were the same everywhere. The building on the right is the Great Hall, with the dining hall in the centre, the Lord's lodgings at this end, the high end, and the kitchen at the far end.

See an interactive view of the ruins of the Great Hall of Goodrich Castle on Google street view.

As a visitor our knight will use the entrance at the low end, between the kitchen and the hall itself, but he cannot simply walk in. There is a lobby area with benches for visitors to wait until the Lord is ready to receive them.



Figure 4.2.13: Goodrich Castle: lobby at the low end of the Great Hall (Great Hall on right, kitchens on left) (photo: Ron Baxter, CC BY-NC-SA 4.0)

Courtly life was ritualized in this period. The retainers wore their costumes, and the Lord had his part to play like anyone else. A castle was the stage on which social relations were played out, and it was important that all the actors knew their moves and their lines. The similarities between castles were vital to the maintenance of correct social relations, which is why the component parts of a castle were designed to be easily recognizable: the tall window recesses in the Great Hall gave away its function from the exterior, as did the elaboration of the Lord's private quarters and the traceried windows of the chapel.



Figure 4.2.14: Great Hall, Goodrich Castle (photo: Ron Baxter, CC BY-NC-SA 4.0)

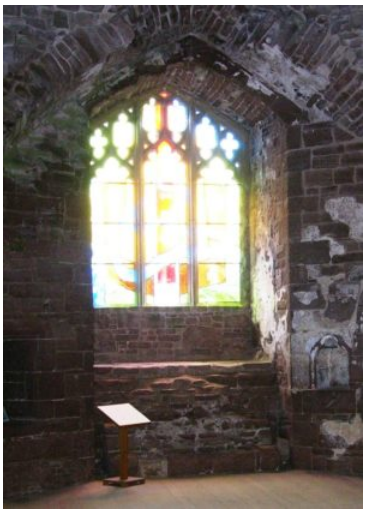


Figure 4.2.15: Traceried window, Chapel, Goodrich Castle (photo: Ron Baxter, CC BY-NC-SA 4.0)

A castle visit can be a haunting experience; the crumbling walls evoking thoughts of medieval warfare and lost grandeur. But also, for historians who can read their messages, castles provide valuable evidence of the way life was lived in the Middle Ages. The problem is how to interpret what we see. Churches and cathedrals still operate today; we know what they do and how the various parts fit together as a setting for the liturgy. Even a ruined monastery is not such a puzzle that we cannot work it out. But castles like those I have looked at here function today as tourist destinations and occasionally as wedding venues. They can be settings for pleasure, ritual, and feasting, but not as they were originally conceived. Their value for the historian is that they provide the physical setting for social life in the Middle Ages, and the effort made to interpret them is generously repaid by the understanding these ruins provide.

Types of medieval furniture

This section contains a selection of furniture typical to the medieval household. Where possible, examples have been chosen photographed in their domestic context.

Chest

© Victoria & Albert Museum, London

Chests were the earliest form of furniture used for storage and seating and could easily be carried from place to place. This one is smaller than most and easily transportable. Chests were used for storing clothes, linen, documents or money and often had locks for security, as in this case. They were used in churches, as well as in houses, to store valuables. This chest is said to have come from a church in Hampshire. The decoration is contained entirely in the chip-carved roundels on the front. Other chests with similar chip-carving have been found, mainly in Surrey and Sussex.

The front is framed with wide uprights or 'standards' and the lid revolves on pivots or 'pin hinges', a device seldom found after the 13th century. The chip-carved roundels reflect contemporary architecture treatment. This chest is said to have come from a church in Hampshire. Originally such a chest would probably have been intended for domestic use, but many were later deposited in churches, often containing valuables placed there for safe-keeping in times of trouble.

Physical description: Chest of clamped-front type, the front carved with three large roundels incised with geometric patterns. The front and back are composed of a single panel flanked by wedge-shaped stiles.The end panels slope slightly inwards and are faced with a framework of chamfered rails halved together and tenoned into the stiles, with a removeable mid, upper, section (one missing, one replaced). The plain back board (which is split at its bottom edge) is recessed between the rear stiles, where the front is flush with the front stiles. The lid, which is a single, wide board, is fitted with pin hinges (repaired originals), and has rails (one replaced) with curved chamfers fixed on the underside (using large trenails) which fit down into slots. A long hole has been drilled diagaonally through the replaced rail into the stile, presumably for a long peg to secure the lid. The bottom boards (replacements) are aligned side to side and sit in a groove run along the bottom edge of the front, back and side panels. These four panels were riven and are noticeably thicker along their bottom edge, also having been cut back to create a deep 'lip' on their inside face at the bottom edge, into which a deep groove was cut to receive the bottom boards (probably originally aligned front to back). Inside the chest are grooves which originally held a lidded till (now missing). There is a large lockplate in the front.

Along the front edge of the lid are four holes, more or less equally spaced, and now partly plugged. The two central holes possibly held two iron staples that engaged with an internal sliding lock mechanism. The two outer holes are countersunk and appear to be of relatively modern date, possibly having been used with screws to fasten the lid shut.

Relatively fast growth oak was used throughout. The lid if wedge-shaped, having been riven.



Figure 4.2.16: Chest, British 13th century, with roundels of chip-carved decoration, H: 53cm W:111cm D:49.5cm (© Victoria and Albert Museum, London)

Cupboard

© Victoria & Albert Museum, London

Physical description: Cupboard, oak, with wrought iron hinges and scrollwork.The front of four panels, each decorated with foliated hinge work enriched with stamped ends and square bosses; the two middle panels are hinged as doors, and fitted with twisted ring-handles with cut and embosses escutcheons and plain keyhole plates. At each end is a narrow door with two hinges and ring handle.The framing is moulded with hollow chamfers. The ironwork on the front has evidently been taken off and re-fixed with new nails after scraping and polishing the panels; the cupboard appears to have been reduced in length. The back and the shelves are of relatively recent date, and also the middle foot.



Figure 4.2.17: Oak cupboard with wrought iron hinges and scrollwork, English, c. 1400, H: 46cm W:69.5cm D:13.8cm (©

Victoria and Albert Museum, London)

Stool

© Victoria & Albert Museum, London

Folding stool, wrought iron, with inlay of copper and silver, and knobs and bands of copper with traces of gilding. It is of X form, composed of bars of hexagonal section hinged at the centre. The crosspieces terminate above in rounded but slightly faceted knobs decorated on one facet, and below with animal hoofs. The leather seat is a modern replacement. The two pairs of straight legs are each joined with a stretcher towards the base, and at the top are each joined by a cross bar, one of which holds the leather seat. Each stretcher, cross bar and leg has two plain moulded collars along its length. Each join terminates in a rounded moulded knop. The inlaid decoration comprising a feathered-edge decoration in zig-zag line, x and lozenge shaped, spiral lines and strapwork.

The date of this stool remains a puzzle and continues to be debated, as it appears to be later than other comparable examples. In form it resembles a group of folding stools of the 6th and 7th centuries. These have been found in a wide area, ranging from France, the Carpathian basin, to Italy and one to North West Iran. It is thought that they may have been produced in the Byzantine sphere of influence, quite possibly in northern Italy. More recently it has been suggested that they may have been produced in Rome. The currently-known comparable examples all have decoration that is more complex and varied than that on the V&A example.



Figure 4.2.x: Folding stool, iron inlaid with copper and silver, with bronze decoration, possibly German or Italian, possibly 11th century. H:53cm W:62.5cm D: 45cm (© Victoria and Albert Museum, London)

Furniture as Status Symbol

Adapted from *Global Traditions and Technological Innovations in Clay, Fiber, Glass, Metal, and Wood - Volume V: Islamic & Medieval*, Carol Ventura, CC BY-NC-SA 2025

In the European Middle Ages, the rich upper class owned several homes and moved between them seasonally. Little of the furniture survives but many examples are depicted in paintings and are frequently described in inventories. These sources document two types, lightweight pieces that were easily transported (such as the folding stool above, a furniture form with origins back as far as the ancient Egyptian Middle Kingdom in the second millennium B.C., below) and built-in or heavy furniture (too difficult to steal) that were left in place. Common seating consisted of stools, benches and chests. Cushions added comfort as upholstery was in its infancy.



Figure 4.2.x: folding stool, wood, leather, bronze or copper alloy, Egypt, Middle Kingdom, ca. 2030-1640 B.C. (public domain, The Metropolitan Museum of Art)

Beds were status symbols and heirlooms specifically mentioned in wills. Few survive, but some have been depicted in paintings. Some were richly draped or canopied with a carved wooden frame. The curtains could be closed for additional warmth and privacy. Textiles were vehicles of extravagant display, often costing much more than the wood furniture they accompanied.



Figure 4.2.1: Jan Van Eyck (Flemish, 1390-1441), Giovanni Arnolfini and
His Bride, oil on oak, 32 ½ x 23 5/8 in / 82.6 x 60 cm, Netherlands, 1434
(The National Gallery, London). CC BY-NC-ND 4.0
https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/p...lfini-portrait

Designer and historian Galen Cranz (1998) provocatively asserts that "[b]iology, physiology, and anatomy have less to do with our chairs than do pharaohs, kings, and executives" (p. 23). Her etymological analysis offers great insight into the hierarchal symbology of seating during the European middle ages, whose social implications have carried through until today:

The word "chair" comes from the Greek language, a contraction of cathedra *-- in turn a compound of* kata, *meaning "down," and* hedra, *from "to sit." A chair is a piece of furniture with a back, and usually four legs, on which one person sits. But so is a throne.*

However, the word "throne" has a different origin. It comes from the Indo-European base dher, *meaning "to hold or support." The throne supports, while the chair is a place to sit down. A throne suggest the palanquins on which a potentate might be carried, while the underlying meaning of a chair is quite different. Physically, almost anyone can sit down, whereas only a very privileged few can be carried. Thus, a chair is more common and ordinary than a throne. From the beginning of recorded history, two types of chairs developed: the upright throne, and the more relaxed* clismos, *a chair with a modestly inclined back. (p.31)*

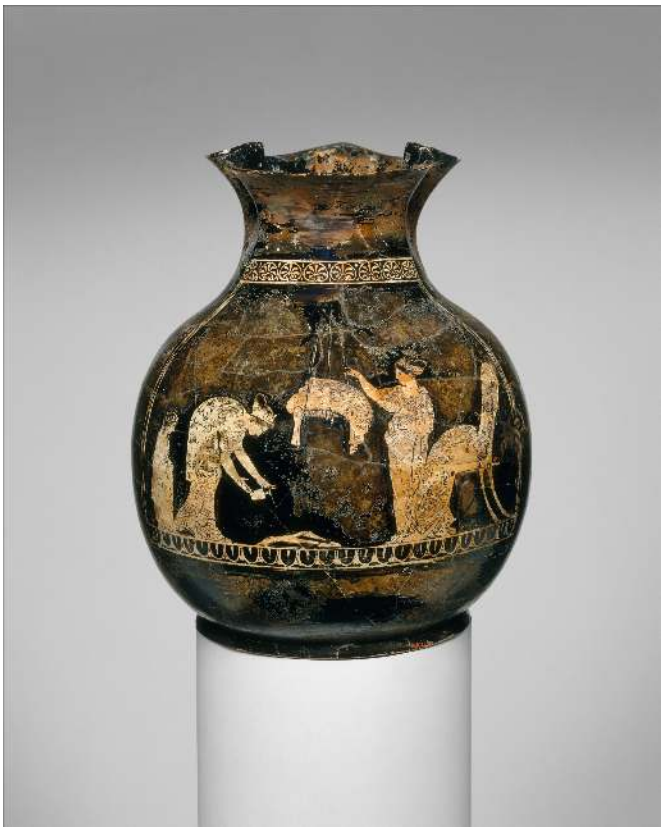


Figure 4.2.*x*: Red-figure painting of klismos chair on terracotta oinochoe: chous (jug), attributed to the Meidias Painter, ca. 420-410 BCE. See 3.1: Ancient Greek Pottery (public domain, Gift of Samuel G. Ward, 1875, Metropolitan Museum of Art)

Thrones were constructed from elaborately decorated planks. The most celebrated example is the Coronation Chair of King Edward I (below) upon which the kings and queens of England are still crowned. It is the oldest dated piece of English furniture carved by a known artist, Walter of Durham.



Figure 4.2.*x*: Walter of Durham (English, died ca.1305), Coronation Chair
of King Edward I with the Stone of Scone, carved oak, ca. 1296 (Westminster Abby). https://www.westminster-abbey.org/hi...ronation-chair

The figure shows the chair with the Stone of Scone (on which Scottish kings had been crowned for over 300 years) that King Edward brought to England after
defeating the Scots in battle. The Stone was returned to Scotland in 1996. Though the four gilded lions that support the base were added later, the chair was originally gilded, painted and inlaid with glass mosaic, similar to architectural ornamentation one would find in a Gothic cathedral (a Christian church which holds the *cathedra* of a bishop) such as Chartres Cathedral (below), such as quatrefoils. This symbolically links the monarchy to connotations of religious authority, even if he was not a religious leader, per se.

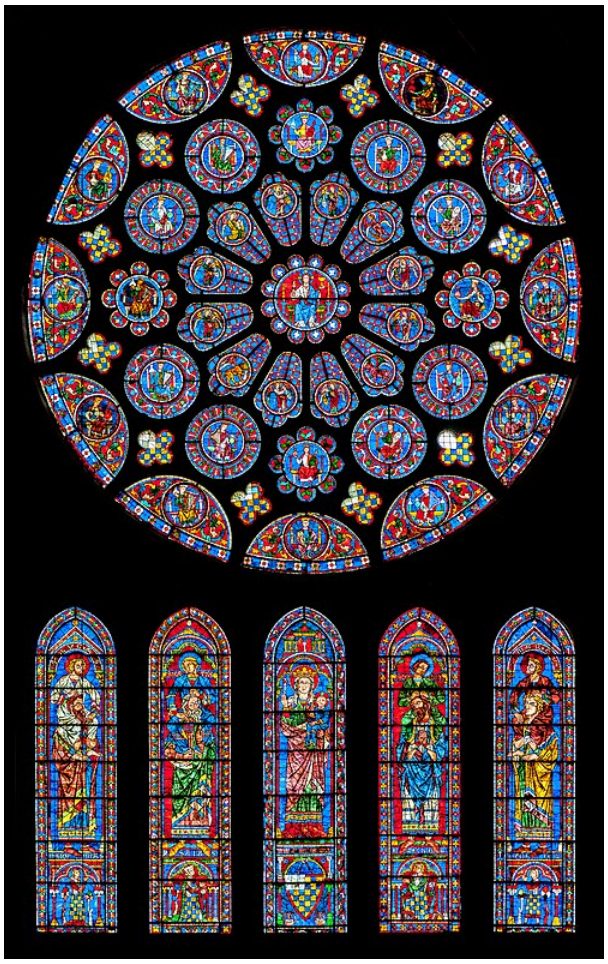


Figure 4.2.*x*: Rose and Lancets Windows, stained glass, Chartres Cathedral,
France, Gothic Period, 1235 (photograph by PtrQs, CC BY-SA 3.0). https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Staine...2_DSC08269.jpg

Chartres Cathedral in France has the largest original collection of stained glass windows; 172 windows populated by 8,000 figures. Vertical and horizontal metal iron bands reinforced stained glass windows until the 13th century, when the bands began to follow the outlines of the imagery. They appear as dark lines around the medallions as shown above, in a window commissioned by the Chartres guild of wood workers. Forty-two craft guilds donated windows, twenty-five of which include artisans engaged in their jobs, providing a lively record of daily life in Medieval Chartres.

Reference

Cranz, Galen. (1998). *The Chair: Rethinking Culture, Body and Design*. W.W. Norton & Company.

Bed

Adapted from Forino, I. The *interno nell'interno*: some furnishing paradigms for an interior as interiority. *Palgrave*

Commun **3**, 17022 (2017). https://doi.org/10.1057/palcomms.2017.22 CC BY

In the medieval home, characterized by an absence of distinct spaces and functions, the bed was made up of a wooden frame or a pair of trestles and a panel made of boards set together, varying in width from 1.60 to 3.50 metres. As a rule it would be occupied by the married couple with their younger and older children, as well as brothers and sisters, or even strangers who needed to share the room. In the upper classes it was more common for servants or housemaids to lie down together with the lord and lady to protect their masters' sleep. Such promiscuity in sleeping habits mirrored a semi-nomadic lifestyle, with temporary arrangements or furnishings that could be dismantled and were convenient when moving from castle to castle, as well as a domestic community in which conviviality and cohabitation were the rule. (Cf. Forino, 2001: 44)

In the late fourteenth century, a more conscious design of the home and its spaces, in addition to greater self-awareness, caused sleeping to become "ever more confined behind the scenes of the human community" (Elias, 1936: 301). Furthermore, the Christian view of sex, backed by a new awareness of hygiene, supported the idea of sleeping in separate rooms and beds. The married couple required more intimacy: privatisation of the marriage imposed isolation and "intimacy of the bed came before the separate room" (Mumford, 1938: 30). The addition of a headboard, curtains and chests surrounding it gave the bed a monumental character, made even more conspicuous if it was placed in the centre of the room away from the corners. Its furnishings increasingly structured it as a separate pavilion, a small independent setting within the bedroom, so as to finally become a miniature version of the dwelling itself. Not only did its formal appearance change, but also the relation between the furniture and its inhabitants: the bed became a protective and private space, encouraging love-making, undisturbed rest and daydreaming. The idea of borders, of enclosure, of secrets emerged in the house. It was a gradual evolution that found a representative image in some definite types: the bed with independent curtains, the wardrobe bed, the "architectural bed".

Beds with independent curtains became popular during the Renaissance, later growing more complex, with cone-shaped or domed coverings and hanging canopies of increasingly elaborate shapes, so that four small columns were necessary to support the heavy drapery and the higher fabric cover (four-poster bed).

Bed, 1500-1600

© Victoria & Albert Museum

An oak four-poster bed with panelled and carved headboard, low carved fooposts to the bedstock, with separate show footposts, octagonal above a squared base, the tops of these posts joined together and to the headposts by a later frieze and cornice. The headboard is composed of 8 panels, 3 carved with banners bearing phrases in archaic English and the bed is heavily carved overall with at least two distinct types of carving. That on the lower level of the headboard, on the friezes and on the PL rail the bedstock shows large-scale flowers, foliage, birds and fabulous beasts. That on the upper part of the headboard, the bedstock posts, the showposts and the PR and foot rails of the bedstock is much smaller in scale and consists of trefoil or quatrefoil foliage ornament set within trellises of triangular or lozenge-shaped panels. The woodwork is darkly varnished overall, except on the back of the headboard. The bed has undergone much repair and alteration and the dark varnish was probably added when the frieze and cornice were added and other alterations made. English, probably made up from 16th century and other elements of more than one bed. The bed is now fitted with modern curtains of crewel-work on linen, two at each side and two at the foot.

The quality of the carving on the headboard is high, including flowers and figures of doves that bear in their beaks banners with the advice to 'drede [dred] god', 'love god' and 'prayse [praise] god'. The frieze and cornice, however, are certainly from a different source and other parts of the bed may also be. Such 'making up' was very often done in the 19th century, when the overall appearance of such a bed was valued more highly than its authenticity. By tradition it was associated with Crackenthorpe Hall near Appleby in Westmorland. That house was sold out of the possession of the Machel family, who had owned it since medieval times, in 1786, although it was reacquired by a distant member of the family in 1877 and only sold finally in 1928 or 1929. Whether the bed was preserved from early times in some other family house is not known.



Figure 4.2.19: oak four-poster bed, English made, 1500-1600 possibly (© Victoria and Albert Museum, London)

The Corbet Bed

© Victoria & Albert Museum

The headboard, tester, and bed posts are elaborately carved. The frieze of the headboard is inlaid with the date 1593 and the initials R.C. carved on the headboard and inlaid on the frieze of the tester are crows, the punning crest of the family of Corbet of Moreton Corbet Castle, near Shrewsbury, whose property the bed originally was.

Physical description: Bedstead, walnut inlaid with holly and bog oak. The carved and inlaid head-board of architectural character has pilasters, brackets, and inlaid sunk panels; the panelled tester with elaborately carved and moulded cornice is supported by two bulbous, gadrooned and fluted bed posts with square bases and large Ionic capitals. These stand clear of the bedstock, the frame of which has vertical holes for the bed-staves used to retain the bedclothes in position. The frieze of the head board is inlaid with the initials R. C., and the date 1593.

Hangings
The bed is displayed (2010 onwards) with a set of six curtains, a counterpane with the Corbet arms, and three embroidered lower valances made 1997-2010 by a team involving 170 Shropshire people, some working as far away as New Zealand. The curtains and counterpane were inspired by hangings that survive at Hardwick Hall. The valances with Shropshire scenes were inspired by the Bradford table carpet, (V&A: T.134-1928) embroidered 1600-15.

The designs for the embroidered floral slips were created by Margaret Owen with reference to embroideries in the collections of the Victoria and Albert Museum, Traquair House, Hardwick Hall, Blickling Hall and Parham House. Designs were drawn on graph paper with felt tip pens, and kits made up using Madeira silks and canvas (18 hole per inch). The cotton-backed, silk plain-cut velvet was attached to beech wood frames which could be worked on by up to 10 people. The cut-out slips were then attached to the silk using a grid pattern, overseen by Margaret Owen.

More information can be seen in the publication *The Corbet Bed Project*, available (2022) from Shrewsbury Museum.



Figure 4.2.20: bedstead of walnut inlaid with holly and bog oak and inscribed 'R.C.', England, 1593 (© Victoria and Albert Museum, London)

The Seventeenth-Century Interior

Adapted from "3.5: Design, Material Culture, and the Decorative Arts" in *American Encounters: Art, History, and Cultural Identity* (Miller, Berlo, Wolf, and Roberts) CC BY-NC-SA

Seventeenth-century colonial settlers in the Americas from the British Isles brought with them chests and needlework patterns, tools, and velvet cloth as well as European ideas about how to live. They equipped their houses with furnishings that appealed to their European tastes. The objects that have survived-furniture, textiles, and silver- suggest a preference for intricate patterns, rich textures, and bold contrasts. Observe the furniture and its arrangement in the following images and descriptions, noting the strong resemblance to the halls of the English castles examined in the previous section. Though the seventeenth-century room of the Winterthur Museum showcases domestic interiors much more recent than the English castles of the middle ages, domestic interiors and furniture did not change very drastically over this period of hundreds of years.



Figure 4.2.16: Seventeenth-century room, Winterthur Museum, Winterthur, Delaware.

Figure 16 shows a group of surviving seventeenth century objects assembled in a seventeenth-century room installed in a twentieth-century museum. The low ceiling (with heavy beams and joists), the bare, wide floorboards, and the combination of furnishings for eating, sleeping, working, and storage are typical of the period. The cavernous fireplace surmounted by a massive girt (or structural beam) is characteristic of the hall, the room where most cooking was done and where the household gathered for meals, work, and prayer. Two centuries later the idea of the kitchen/ hall with its dramatic hearth was seized upon by historically minded architects looking for symbols of colonial American authenticity. Family rooms today are frequently equipped with fireplaces-not as shrines to outmoded cooking and heating technology, but to suggest the aura of wholesome virtue and community that the wood-burning fireplace has come to symbolize in American culture.

Furniture examples

The Chair

In furnishing their seventeenth-century hall, the curators of the Winterthur Museum have included one armchair, two side chairs, and a long bench, suggesting what we know from other sources, such as probate inventories: that the armchair was available only to the head of the household. Side chairs (called back stools) were sometimes available to other senior members of the household, but most ate and worked on benches and stools. Young children stood to eat, a signal of their deference and dependence. The term "chairman" derives from this seating arrangement. Some of these magisterial seventeenth century armchairs have survived, including the Pierson chair at Yale, official seat of the college's president (fig. 17). Even softened by feathered pillows, which would have made it more comfortable, the Pierson chair is uncompromisingly upright, as the design intent was to denote hierarchal status and not for comfort, not dissimilar to that of the Coronation Chair of King Edward I.



Figure 4.2.17: Wainscot Chair, 1640-60. White oak, 41¼ x $20^{15/16}$ x 13⅜ in (104.8 x 53.2 x 35.2 cm). Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, Connecticut. Gift of John E. Bray.

The Court Cupboard

Similarly foursquare and crafted of sturdy oak, the furniture form known as the court cupboard speaks a language of geometric solidity, but with surface elaboration (fig. 18). Like the John Ward House -- the sort of prosperous home in which such an object would be found -- this court cupboard sports giddy overhangs, emphasized by pendant drops. The flat top, the

shelf lying on stretchers at ankle height, and the canted corners on the middle section provided places to display pewter, ceramic, and silver objects. More important, the volume enclosed in the middle section served as lockable storage for these and other valuables. Locks are one of the most telling design features of case furniture chests, boxes, desks, and chests of drawers-made in the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century colonies, overall more intricate designs than those of case furniture of the earlier middle ages. The introduction of locks in case furniture goes hand in hand with the new importance attached to privacy and personal property during this period. Whether imported or made locally, crafted objects were prized (and coveted) for their workmanship, their design, and, in the case of silver, gold, and textiles, their materials.



Figure 4.2.18: Court cupboard, Massachusetts, 1667(?). Winterthur Museum, Winterthur, Delaware. Bequest of Henry Francis du Pont.

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

5: Landscape Motifs in East Asian Design

5.1: Ming Period Furnishings

5.2: Japanese Interiors in the Muromachi and Momoyama Periods

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5.1: Ming Period Furnishings

Learning Objectives

- Describe the form, material, ornamentation, use, arrangement and construction techniques of typical wooden furniture of the Ming period.
- Analyze aesthetics with regard to form and material in Ming period furniture and ceramics.
- Analyze the significance of Chinese porcelain technology on global markets throughout history, giving examples of cross-cultural influences.

Ming dynasty (1368-1644), an introduction

by National Museum of Asian Art, Smithsonian Institution



Figure 5.1.1: Map of the Ming Empire c. 1580 (Michal Klajban, CC BY-SA 3.0)

After nearly a hundred years of Mongol rule, China returned to native rulership in the Ming dynasty (1368–1644). The Ming was founded by a commoner, Zhu Yuanzhang (1328–1398), who established Nanjing as his capital. However, nearly fifty years later, the third Ming emperor relocated the capital to Beijing, which has remained China's main seat of government ever since. The Ming dynasty's almost three hundred-year span witnessed unprecedented economic and cultural expansion and the near doubling of its population. The last century of the Ming, however, was besieged by border troubles, crop failure, fiscal instability, and court corruption leading to an overthrow by Manchu invaders from the north, who took Beijing in 1644.

During the Ming, most people believed simultaneously in multiple gods and followed the Three Teachings of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism. Commoners and emperors alike supported temples and honored devotional images in their homes. In addition, overland and maritime trade routes kept China open to followers of Islam and allowed for the arrival of European Christians.

Notable Ming achievements include the refurbishment of the Great Wall to its greatest glory, large naval expeditions, vibrant maritime trade, and the rise of a heavily monetized economy. Vital cultural achievements included the production of exceptional—and often colorful—porcelains, paintings, lacquers, and textiles, which created a dazzling visual world. The rise of the novel as a popular literary genre, accompanied by affordable illustrated books, brought literature to many. As a result of cultural achievements and economic achievements, the Ming saw a larger consumer base for luxury goods than any earlier period.

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Chinese porcelain: production and export

by The British Museum © Trustees of the British Museum

Porcelain was first produced in China around 600 C.E. The skillful transformation of ordinary clay into beautiful objects has captivated the imagination of people throughout history and across the globe. Chinese ceramics, by far the most advanced in the world, were made for the imperial court, the domestic market, or for export.



***Large porcelain flask*, c. 1426–35, Ming dynasty, Xuande mark and period, painted with underglaze blue decoration,**

Jingdezhen, 12 x 5.8 cm, China (© Trustees of the British Museum)

What is porcelain?

The Chinese use the word *ci* to mean either porcelain or stoneware, not distinguishing between the two. In the West, porcelain usually refers to high-fired (about 1300º) white ceramics, whose bodies are translucent and make a ringing sound when struck. Stoneware is a tougher, non-translucent material, fired to a lower temperature (1100–1250º).



***Porcelain Ding ware bowl*, Song dynasty, late 11th–early 12th century, Hebei province, northern China, 21.3 cm (© Trustees of the British Museum)**

A number of white ceramics were made in China, several of which might be termed porcelain. The northern porcelains, such as Ding ware, were made predominantly of clay rich in kaolin. In southern China, porcelain stone was the main material. At the imperial kilns at Jingdezhen, Jiangxi province, kaolin was added to porcelain stone; in Fujian province, on the coast and east of Jiangxi, porcelain stone was used alone. The results differed in that northern porcelains were more dense and compact, while southern porcelains were more glassy and "sugary."

Ceramics may be fired in oxidizing or reducing conditions (increasing or restricting the amount of oxygen during the process). Northern porcelains were usually fired in oxidation, which results in warm, ivory-colored glazes. Southern wares were fired in reduction, producing a cool, bluish tinge. An exception to this was blanc de Chine, or Dehua ware, from Fujian province, whose warm ivory hue came from oxidizing firings.

The export market

Chinese ceramics were first exported in large quantities during the Song dynasty (960–1279). The government supported this as an important source of revenue. Early in the period, ports were established in Guangzhou (Canton), Quanzhou, Hangzhou and Ningbo to facilitate commercial activity.

The ceramics trade established in the Song dynasty was maintained throughout the succeeding Yuan dynasty (1279–1368) and with a few interruptions, the Ming (1368–1644) and Qing (1644–1911) dynasties as well. The markets were concentrated in different regions at different times, but the global influence of China's porcelains has been sustained throughout. Within Asia, up until the fourteenth century, the potters of Korea imitated China's porcelain with considerable success, and Japan's potters did so for a still longer period. In the Middle East, the twelfth-century attempts to reproduce Chinese wares went on throughout the Ming period. In Europe however, porcelain was barely known before the seventeenth century. The English and Germans produced mass quantities of a similar hard-bodied ware in the eighteenth century.



Left: Scrolling lotus flask, Ming dynasty, Jingdezhen, China, 1426–35 (© The Trustees of the British Museum); right: Mosque Lamp, c. 1510, fritware, Iznik, Turkey (© The Trustees of the British Museum)

Chinese porcelain influenced the ceramics of importing countries, and was in turn, influenced by them. For example, importers commissioned certain shapes and designs, and many more were developed specifically for foreign markets; these often found their way in to the repertory of Chinese domestic items. In this way, Chinese ceramics were a vehicle for the worldwide exchange of ornamental styles.

Chinese porcelain: decoration

by The British Museum © The Trustees of the British Museum



***Large underglaze-painted jar*, 14th century (Ming dynasty, Hongwu period, Jingdezhen, Jiangxi province, southern China) 67.2 cm high (© The Trustees of the British Museum, London)**

Chinese porcelain decoration: underglaze blue and red

Though Chinese potters developed underglaze red decoration during the Yuan dynasty (1279–1368 C.E.), pottery decorated in underglaze blue was produced in far greater quantities, due to the high demand from Asia and the Islamic countries of the Near and Middle East. Painting with underglaze red was more difficult than underglaze blue: the copper oxide used as the coloring agent was harder to control than the cobalt that was used for the underglaze blue. The firing left parts of the red areas grey, as on this large jar.

The first emperor of the Ming dynasty, which was to rule China for the next 300 years, was the general Zhu Yuanzhang, whose title was Hongwu. He overthrew the Yuan dynasty, whose rulers had been foreigners (Mongols). He was determined to re-establish the dominance of Chinese style at court, and blue-and-white porcelain was produced in designs following Chinese rather than Islamic taste. Similar pieces were executed with underglaze red for use by the emperor.

Hongwu banned foreign trade several times, though this was never fully effective. The import of cobalt was disrupted, however, which resulted in a drop in the production of blue-and-white porcelain. For a short time at the end of the fourteenth century, more wares were decorated with underglaze red than underglaze blue.

Blue-and-white porcelain

The earliest blue-and-white ware found to date are temple vases inscribed 1351. These display a competence which indicate that the underglaze-painting technique was well-established by that time, probably originating in the second quarter of the fourteenth century. Cobalt blue was imported from Iran, probably in cake form. It was ground into a pigment, which was painted directly onto the leather-hard porcelain body. The piece was then glazed and fired. “Blue-and-white” porcelain was used in temples and occasionally in burials within China, but most of the products of the Yuan dynasty (1279–1368) appear to have been exported.

Trade remained an essential part of blue-and-white porcelain production in the Ming and Qing dynasties (1644–1911). Europe, Japan and Southeast Asia were important export markets. Vessels, with numerous bands of decoration, were painted with Chinese motifs, such as dragons, waves and floral scrolls. The potters of Jingdezhen also produced wares to satisfy the demands of the Middle Eastern market. Large dishes were densely decorated with geometric patterns inspired by Islamic metalwork or architectural decoration.

Blue-and-white porcelain was particularly admired by the Imperial court, and it is interesting to trace the shapes and motifs preferred by different emperors, many of whom ordered huge quantities of porcelain from the imperial kilns at Jingdezhen.



The jug probably had a lid, which has been lost. *Blue-and-white porcelain jug*, early 15th century (Ming dynasty, Jingdezhen, Jiangxi province, southern China), 14 cm high (© The Trustees of the British Museum, London)

The blue-and-white wares of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries often took their shapes from Islamic metalwork. The globular body, tall cylindrical neck and dragon handle of this jug all imitate contemporary metalwork of Timurid Persia. The crowded decoration of this jug is a feature of early blue-and-white porcelain that continued into the early part of the Ming dynasty. It is very different to the generally more subtle character of Chinese ornament. The motifs used in decorating the jug, however, are still distinctly Chinese, notably the breaking waves on the neck and floral scroll on the body.

Overglaze enamels

The term "overglaze enamels" is used to describe enamel decoration on the surface of a glaze which has already been fired. Once painted, the piece would be fired a second time, usually at a lower temperature.

The first use of overglaze enameling is found on the slip-covered wares of northern China. This was an innovation of the Jin dynasty, with documented pieces as early as 1201. These were utilitarian wares, not for imperial use. Under the emperors of the Ming (1368–1644) and the Qing (1644–1911) dynasty, the various techniques of overglaze enameling reached their heights at the manufacturing centre in Jingdezhen.



***Doucai vase*, c. 1723–35 (Qing dynasty, Yongzheng period, Jingdezhen, Jiangxi province, southern China), 9.5 x 6.8 cm (© The Trustees of the British Museum, London)**

The most highly prized technique is known as *doucai* ("joined" or "contrasted" colors), first produced under the Ming emperor Xuande, but more usually associated with Chenghua. Cobalt was used under the glaze to paint the outlines and areas of blue wash needed in the design. The piece was then glazed and fired at a high temperature. Overglaze colors were painted on to fill in the design. The piece was then fired again at a lower temperature. The vase above, which dates to the reign of Emperor Yongzheng, is a very good example of the technical perfection in later *doucai* wares. The main design comprises green, yellow and mauve dragon medallions. The dragons are five-clawed, whose use was restricted to the emperor. Auspicious Buddhist emblems decorate the shoulder of the vase.

New colors (including pink!)

There were also important developments under the Qing dynasty. Famille rose (pink), jaune (yellow), noire (black) and verte (green) were overglaze enamel-decorated porcelains made from the Kangxi period and later.



Butterfly medallion (detail), *Famille rose butterfly bowl*, c. 1723–35 (Qing dynasty, Yongzheng period, Jingdezhen, Jiangxi province, southern China), 6.86 cm high (© The Trustees of the British Museum, London)

Accordingly to Chinese tradition, butterflies are an auspicious sign. They convey a wish for longevity, and were therefore often used to decorate birthday gifts or lanterns given during the Autumn Moon Festival: on the 15th day of the 8th month of the lunar calendar (usually around September). The Festival is celebrated by lighting lanterns of different shapes, sizes and colors, and by gazing at the moon. The bowl above, made at the imperial kilns at Jingdezhen, may have been presented by the emperor to a family member or worthy subject on such an occasion.

The bowl is decorated in famille rose overglaze enamels. This technique was perfected under the Yongzheng emperor (reigned 1723–1735) and is considered the last major technological breakthrough at the Jingdezhen kilns. The great innovation was the production of the distinctive pink enamel from which the wares take their name. The pink color was provided by adding a very small amount of gold to red pigment. The resulting color was opaque, as were the other famille rose enamels, and so could be mixed to create a wider range of colors than had been possible before.

Canteen

by National Museum of Asian Art, Smithsonian Institution



Canteen, Ming dynasty, early 15th century, Jingdezhen ware, porcelain with cobalt pigment under colorless glaze, China, Jiangxi province, Jingdezhen, 46.9 × 41.8 × 21.3 cm (Freer Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC: Purchase — Charles Lang Freer Endowment, F1958.2)

Look at this interestingly shaped ceramic object made of porcelain produced in Jingdezhen. By the thirteenth century C.E., the potters there had developed a recipe for a compound clay, which when fired to an extremely high temperature, created a stunning white ceramic material. The object is in the shape of a canteen, or water carrier. It has a circular body. On a functional canteen, the loop and ring handles on each side of the neck would have held a leather strap to make it easy to carry the vessel over one's shoulder; however, this canteen seems too heavy to use in that way. The short, cylindrical ribbed neck would originally have had a cover or stopper. The front of the body is decorated with intricate blue patterns on a white background: a ring of waves encircles the edge and, inside the ring, a floral scroll fills the surface. The center of the canteen has a dome with a central, wave-like pattern surrounding an Islamic eight-pointed star, leaves, and a lotus scroll. Each point of the star contains a single leaf. The side of the body is covered with a continuous scrolling design of lotus and other flowers. The back is undecorated and unglazed porcelain (without color).



Canteen, Ayyubid period, mid-13th century, Mosul School, brass, silver inlay, Syria or Northern Iraq, 45.2 x 36.7 cm (Freer Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC: Purchase — Charles Lang Freer Endowment, F1941.10)

Canteens were common objects used by ordinary people to carry liquids. Religious pilgrims in the European Middle Ages (fifth to fifteenth century) also used them to hold holy water and oil. In the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, artists in the Near East created elaborate metal canteens that seem to have inspired this Chinese example. The eight-pointed star in the center, for example, is a symbol often found in Islamic art.



Canteen (detail), Ming dynasty, early 15th century, Jingdezhen ware, porcelain with cobalt pigment under colorless glaze, China, Jiangxi province, Jingdezhen, 46.9 × 41.8 × 21.3 cm (Freer Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC: Purchase — Charles Lang Freer Endowment, F1958.2)

However, the technique used to create this canteen reflects its origin in China. The material of white porcelain decorated with

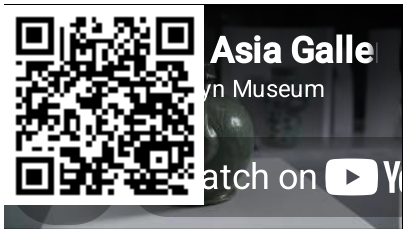
cobalt (blue) designs was a Chinese invention. The heavy weight of the canteen seems to suggest that it was made for decorative or ornamental purpose rather than for actually carrying water. It may have been hung on the wall or placed on a flat surface in a wealthy patron's residence.

During the reigns of the Yongle and Xuande emperors (1403–35) in the Ming dynasty, potters at the famous Chinese porcelain-producing town of Jingdezhen quickly absorbed artistic ideas from imported foreign goods. They experimented with many shapes and decorations modeled after Islamic silver, gold, and brass vessels. This canteen, with its unusual shape and decoration, was either made to be exported to the Near East or was made for a follower of Islam living in China. It exemplifies the dynamic flow of ideas and objects between the Islamic world and China that invigorated both artistic traditions.

Ceramic innovation in East Asia

by Brooklyn Museum

In the pre-modern period, ceramics represented the cutting edge of material science. Asian cultures were world leaders in this technology, and you can see evidence of their innovations throughout our galleries.



Miniature furniture and figurines in a Ming tomb

by Dr. Kristen Loring Brennan and Dr. Beth Harris

The following video describes objects from a tomb of an official of the Ming dynasty (1368-1644) that features miniature furniture of the time period. From this example you can see various types of furniture typical to the period.



Miniature furniture and figurines from the Tomb of Pan Yongcheng, 16th–17th centuries (Ming dynasty), local beech wood and metal, excavated in Shanghai in 1960 (Shanghai Museum)

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Transcription of "Miniature furniture and figurines in a Ming tomb" video

[0:00] [music]

Dr. Beth Harris: [0:00] We're in the Shanghai Museum, looking at miniature furniture found in a Ming tomb.

Dr. Kristen Brennan: [0:12] This was the tomb of an official during the Ming Dynasty, and has wooden figurines and also furniture from the late 16th and early 17th century.

Dr. Harris: [0:21] When we go back in Chinese history [we] see how emperors and elites were buried with objects that related to their everyday life when they were alive with the idea of continuing that life after their death.

Dr. Brennan: [0:36] You would wish for that same sort of social status in your life. You would expect that, and you'd bring everything that you would need to continue your leisurely pursuits in the afterlife.

[0:46] Here, though, we're much later. We're in the Ming Dynasty, so actually, a lot more materials have survived, wood being one of them.

Dr. Harris: [0:53] Anything made of wood that was as ancient, for example, as the Han Dynasty or earlier, would likely not have survived. Wood decomposes so quickly.

Dr. Brennan: [1:03] We've got a great insight into what the furniture from this period might have looked like.

Dr. Harris: [1:08] In addition to dozens of figures in a procession, some of the figures carrying a sedan chair for presumably the person who this tomb was for. But we see a daybed, trunks, tables, chairs, racks, and everything so carefully carved, so thoughtfully carved.

Dr. Brennan: [1:28] There's a difference between even just the two sets of figures. We have wooden figures with hats and robes carrying the sedan chair. Those contrast with the servants, ready to help with whatever needs the tomb occupant would have.

Dr. Harris: [1:48] Art historians can look at miniature furniture from this tomb and get a sense of how furniture was made and the design of the furniture itself.

Dr. Brennan: [1:52] As we look closely at this, you can see that the Ming aesthetic was very clean, simple lines. Not a lot of ornamentation, but everything fit together in very geometric patterns, a lot of careful joinery and little flourishes, just slightly upturned edges. Very elegant aesthetic.

Dr. Harris: [2:18] For example, when we look at the daybed that has the rattan, the weaving in the center, we look at those legs. We can see a little flourish, a little curve toward the bottom. Or

the table that probably contained a fire for the water and the teapot to be heated has lovely curved legs.

Dr. Brennan: [2:26] We also see openwork. When we look to the daybed, we see intricate carving of the wood, as if this was also a larger piece of furniture or even part of the openwork or lattice on a garden corridor.

Dr. Harris: [2:44] And minimal decoration that we see in the Ming dynasty is really a contrast with the style of the next dynasty, the Qing, which is much more elaborate and highly decorative.

Dr. Brennan: [2:50] Looking closely at some of these features, you can see even the techniques used in furniture carving and the way that pieces were joined together.

Dr. Harris: [3:04] I see, in that table with the teapot, mortise and tenon joinery in the wood. We can see the metal clasps on the sides of the trunk.

Dr. Brennan: [3:11] We've got the same materials as one would have in life. This concept of the afterlife and the needs that one would have in the afterlife changed, but they certainly reflect the fashions of that time.

Dr. Harris: [3:18] Not everyone could have afforded this, but if you could, you'd want to bring these things into the afterlife.

Dr. Brennan: [3:24] This is an important point too, about this Confucian ideal and this idea of filial piety, that the sons of the tomb occupant would provide the best possible burial for the deceased. At any scale of life, they would always try and buy the best and provide the most for their ancestors.

Dr. Harris: [3:43] That Confucian idea of everyone playing their role, observing funerary rites, and honoring one's ancestors.

[0:00] [music]

Examples of Ming furniture

In her book, *The Chair: Rethinking Culture, Body, and Design* (1998), Galen Cranz both celebrates chairs as "true cultural artifacts" (p. 16), underscored by the certainty that "our chair habit was created, modified and nurtured, reformed and democratized in response to social -- not genetic, anatomical, or even physiological -- forces" (p. 30). The video above shows evidence that chairs were very much a part of everyday life for elite figures during the Ming dynasty and the examples below will demonstrate how they symbolized social hierarchy in Chinese culture in aesthetic design as well as their very presence as chairs. Cranz summarizes the increased presence of chairs during the Ming dynasty:

When [the chair] was introduced to China in the second century A.D., the Chinese called it the "barbarian [their word for anything foreign (sic.)] bed." It connoted informal use because of its years of association with military camps, temporary travel furniture, and garden use. It was more like a cot, and for years was never used indoors. People sat on it tailor-fashion, showing contempt, indifference, or extreme confidence. Nine hundred years later, a new seating type evolved: a folding chair with a back. This chair then became acceptable and was used by all, but the language of dignity and honor retained the use of the term 'mat' [which was traditionally used for seating] rather than 'chair' (Kjaier, 1980). The Chinese are noteworthy for having integrated the chair into their lives without letting it dominate. (p. 29)

The transient association (military camps, travel, etc.) the Cranz refers to is because the x-frame folding stool has its origins back as far as the ancient Egyptian Middle Kingdom in the second millennium B.C. By the second century A.D., the folding stool had been adapted throughout the Eurasian and African continents through the cultural influences of trade and conquest.



Figure 5.1.*x*: folding stool, wood, leather, bronze or copper alloy, Egypt, Middle Kingdom, ca. 2030-1640 B.C. (public domain, The Metropolitan Museum of Art)

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Horseshoe chair

by Victoria and Albert Museum

This folding armchair is among the Museum's most important Chinese treasures. One of the most renowned of all imperial palace workshops was the Orchard Factory. According to a number of later sources, the Orchard Factory was set up in the new capital, Beijing, at the beginning of the Ming dynasty in order to produce the finest carved lacquer. The chair may be a product of that workshop. Paintings reveal that folding chairs were used by Ming emperors when on their travels. He might be hunting, inspecting territories or making sacrifices at the tombs of his ancestors. The chair is decorated with patterns of five-clawed dragons and lotus flowers. This chair carries the mark of the Xuande reign period (1426-35), although stylistically it would appear to date from rather later, towards the mid-16th century.

Horseshoe arm chair - construction techniques

Adapted from *Global Traditions and Technological Innovations in Clay, Fiber, Glass, Metal, and Wood - Volume II: Continental Asia - China & India*, Carol Ventura, CC BY-NC-SA 2025

This armchair probably accompanied a Ming emperor during his travels and, at times, could have functioned as a portable throne. The fiveclawed dragons, carved into the chair's back splat, as well as the red color of the lacquer, symbolically surround the emperor with power and prosperity. The emperor's feet would rest on images of the lotus, carved into the lacquered hinged footstool. The lotus associated him with rebirth, new life, and purity. The excellence of the craftmanship here, such as positioning the footstool on the stretcher between the front legs and the flexible woven seat, with its diamond pattern, indicate the skillful, creative approaches in the emperor's workshops. The arms and rails form one continuous curve that resemble the shape of a horseshoe, thus the name of this form of chair

This folding chair is an exceptional example of carved lacquer that is colored red with cinnabar / mercuric sulfide. Many thin coats were applied, allowing each to harden for a day or more, before the lacquer was thick enough to carve. Some Chinese carved lacquer pieces dating to ca. 500-1700 CE are composed of as many as 200-300 layers. Workshop records from those early periods document large pieces that took years to prepare and carve. Lacquering techniques originated in China as early as the Neolithic period and spread throughout east Asia, with gold and silver foil inlay appearing in Japan and Korea in the 8th century. Organic lacquer is extracted from certain plants and insects. The most common source is the poisonous sap of the Asian lacquer tree (Toxicodendron vernicifluum). Europeans began imitating east Asian lacquerwork in the 16th century, using varnishes instead of sap of the Asian lacquer tree. Other ingredients are added to make it more colorful. Lacquer was used at first to make clay vessels watertight, but it is now mostly applied to wood and metal.



Figure 5.1.3: Chair, red lacquer on wood with woven mat seat, 45 in / 114.5 cm high, China, Ming Dynasty, ca.1500-1560 (© Victoria and Albert Museum, London, Given by Sir Harry Garner and Lady Garner).

Yokeback armchairs

by Brooklyn Museum

This pair of armchairs, with well-proportioned and graceful linear contours and emphasis on the natural grain and color of the huanghuali hardwood, embodies the qualities of restrained elegance associated with Chinese furniture design from the Ming (1368-1644) and early Qing (1644-1911) dynasties. Yokeback armchairs that have top rails and arms with protruding ends, as depicted here, are known in China as the official's hat armchairs (guanmaoyi) or the official's hat armchairs with four protruding ends (sichutou guanmaoyi).



Figure 5.1.2: Yokeback Armchair, One of Pair, first half 17th century. Huanghuali wood, 43 5/8 x 24 x 23 in. (110.8 x 61 x 58.4 cm). Brooklyn Museum, Gift of Alice Boney, 78.246.2. CC BY-NC-SA

Folding Chair

Folding chairs, horseshoe chairs, and yokeback chairs were all popular designs during the Ming period and could be seen in various combinations. Below is an example of yokeback folding chair. It contrasts to the example above in it's lack of arms (designating it a sidechair, rather than armchair) and folding mechanism (rather than fixed with side rails).



Figure 5.1.x: folding chair, Ming dynasty, 16th century, wood (public domain, The Metropolitan Museum of Art)

Kang table

© Victoria and Albert Museum, London

This low table is generally referred to as 'kang table', because it was used on a 'kang', a hollow brick platform built into a room and heated by a fire underneath it. The kang served primarily as a bed but other activities, for instance taking tea and conversing, took place on it as well.



Figure 5.1.4: Table, huali wood, H: 25cm L: 70.5cm D: 49cm, China, Ming period ca. 1550-1600 (© Victoria and Albert Museum, London, Sir John Addis Bequest).

Table

by Brooklyn Museum

This table, as part of a grand and elaborate bedroom set, would have been the center of attention in the master bedroom of an affluent Ming dynasty household, complementing the beauty of the lady of the house and symbolizing wishes for the success and prosperity of the family.



Figure 5.1.5: Table, late 16th century. Rosewood (Huanghuali), 30 x 43 x 21 1/2 in. (76.2 x 109.2 x 54.6 cm). Brooklyn Museum, Purchased with funds given by the B.D.G. Leviton Foundation and the J. Aron Charitable Foundation, 82.28. (Photo: Brooklyn Museum) CC BY-NC-SA

Couch

by Metropolitan Museum of Art

In warm weather, one would sit on the rattan mat with legs either crossed or pendant. In cold weather, quilts and cushions were added for comfort.



Figure 5.1.6: Couch, 17th century. Wood (huanghuali, or Dalbergia odorifera), H. 26 1/4 in. (66.7 cm); W. 80 3/4 in. (205.1 cm); D. 44 7/8 in. (114 cm). (Metropolitan Museum of Art, public domain).

Hinged cupboard

This cupboard was used to store goods and its material, finish and detailing -- including the apron design -- are typical of Ming period furniture.



Figure 5.1.7: Hinged Cupboard, 1368–1644. Wood, 68 x 37 x 19 1/2 in. (172.7 x 94 x 49.5 cm). Brooklyn Museum, Gift of Alice Boney, 82.172. (Photo: Brooklyn Museum) CC BY-NC-SA

Chinese courtyard house

With more than 3,000 years of history, the courtyard composition (*si he yuan*) was the basic pattern of residence, palace and even temples in China. Watch the following video from the *Chinese Learning Center of Miami* for a brief introduction to this important architectural form to better understand the context of domestic furniture use.



Ming dynasty (1368-1644), an introduction

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5.2: Japanese Interiors in the Muromachi and Momoyama Periods

Learning Objectives

- List the design elements of a shoin style room and explain their historic origin and cultural significance during the Muromachi and Momoyama periods.
- Analyze the expression of nature in Japanese art and design during the Muromachi and Momoyama periods, specifying key materials and forms.
- Evaluate the degree to which foreign versus domestic cultural values influenced art and interiors during the Muromachi and Momoyama periods.

The Muromachi Period

Although the Emperor of Japan was the titular head of government, the *shogun* (samurai military commander) was the authority that governed the country from 1185 until 1868. As the leader of the *daimyo* (local samurai warlords) and their samurai (warriors), the shogun had an elite army to fight, conquer, control, and manage the masses. Early shogun and *daimyo* were in constant warfare until the Edo period (1615-1868) when Tokugawa Shogunate unified the country. 1450-1600 cover the Muromachi period (1338-1573) and Japan's Momoyama period (1573-1615). These periods yielded artworks forming the foundation of today's Japanese visual culture: ink washes, Zen paintings, and screen paintings.

During the Muromachi period (1333–1578), also known as the Ashikaga period, a profound change took place in Japanese culture. The Ashikaga clan took control of the shogunate and moved its headquarters back to Kyoto, to the Muromachi district of the city. With the return of government to the capital, the popularizing trends of the Kamakura period came to an end, and cultural expression took on a more aristocratic, elitist character. During the Muromachi Period, Zen Buddhism rose to prominence—especially among the elite Samurai class, who embraced the Zen values of personal discipline, concentration, and self-development.

The establishment of the great Zen monasteries in Kamakura and Kyoto had a major impact on the visual arts. Because of secular ventures and trading missions to China organized by Zen temples, many Chinese paintings and objects of art were imported into Japan, profoundly influencing Japanese artists working for Zen temples and the shogunate. These imports not only changed the subject matter of painting, but they also modified the use of color; the bright colors of Yamato-e yielded to the monochromes of painting in the Chinese manner of Sui-boku-ga (水) or Sumi-e (墨). This style mainly used only black ink—the same as used in East Asian calligraphy.

Zen Buddhism was introduced into Japan at the end of the 12th century. It quickly achieved a wide following, particularly among the Samurai class and war lords, who admired its doctrine of self-discipline. The gardens of the early zen temples in Japan resembled Chinese gardens at the time, with lakes and islands. However, in Kyoto in the 14th and 15th century, a new kind of garden appeared at the important zen temples. These zen gardens were designed to stimulate meditation. “Nature, if you made it expressive by reducing it to its abstract forms, could transmit the most profound thoughts by its simple presence,” Michel Baridon, a well-known researcher, wrote. “The compositions of stone, already common China, became in Japan, veritable petrified landscapes, which seemed suspended in time, as in a certain moment of Noh theater, which dates to the same period.”

Ink Painting during the Muromachi Period

Two of the Ashikaga shōguns, Yoshimitsu (14th century) and Yoshimasa (15th century), are associated with the Kitayama and Higashiyama cultures, respectively—two sub-periods of cultural efflorescence that nurtured important developments in Japanese arts across mediums. Kitayama culture, so named after an area north of Kyoto where Ashikaga Yoshimitsu had a golden pavilion—Kinkakuji 金閣寺—built for his retirement, is known for the emergence of Noh and the increased influence of Zen Buddhism and Chinese ink painting.

Art coming from contemporaneous Ming-dynasty China as well older Chinese art—dating from the Song and Yuan dynasties, such as the works of Muqi (Mokkei 牧谿 in Japanese)—deeply influenced Japanese arts, especially the emerging local tradition of ink landscape painting.



Figure 5.2.1: Muqi (active 13th century), *Kannon framed by Crane and Gibbons*, three hanging scrolls, ink and light color on silk, 174.2 cm x 98.8 cm (Kannon). Japanese artists like Hasegawa Tōhaku, who traced their stylistic roots to Sesshū, had opportunities to study these paintings at a Buddhist temple in Kyoto where they have been housed for centuries (Daitokuji)

The most influential Japanese ink master, the 15th-century painter and Zen monk Sesshū Tōyō combined, in his works, Zen principles and lessons learned from Song-dynasty Chinese ink painting—most notably a double sense of austerity and

immediacy, highly admired by the Ashikaga shōguns and the samurai class who embraced Zen Buddhism.



Sesshū, *Splashed-Ink Landscape* (or *Broken-Ink Landscape, haboku sansui zu*破墨山水図), 1495, ink on paper, 148.6 × 32.7 cm (full scroll) (Tokyo National Museum, image: Wikimedia Commons)

Sesshū was a celebrated artist in his own lifetime and continued to be revered as a model by later generations of painters. He became a Zen Buddhist monk at a young age and his master taught him both about Zen and about Chinese ink painting. To perfect his understanding of both, Sesshū traveled to China, where he was honored as a distinguished guest. It is believed that he painted in both palatial and monastic contexts. Upon his return to Japan, he laid the foundation for a new era of Japanese ink painting that straddled religious and lay patronage and combined Chinese and Japanese stylistic elements.

Over the centuries, painters emulated Sesshū's style, especially his "splashed ink" or "broken ink" technique, and its roots in the literati tradition, some even affixing the painter's seal to their works, all in an attempt to follow into the footsteps of a revered artist and to attract patrons. The Unkoku school strategically considered its painters to be in the direct lineage of Sesshū. The Hasegawa school similarly traced its stylistic genealogy to Sesshū. These two schools are just two of many examples of Japanese artists embracing a stylistic lineage, whether real or construed, leading back to Sesshū or another master. Legitimizing genealogies are a hallmark of Japanese art history.



Kano Motonobu, *Birds and Flowers of the Four Seasons*, 16th century, pair of folding screens, ink, color, and gold on paper, 162.4 × 360.2 cm each (Hakutsuru Fine Art Museum, Kobe)

The imperial court had its own favored line of painters, who worked in the *yamato-e* tradition and often specialized in pictures drawn from the *Tale of Genji*. (Both *yamato-e* and the *Tale of Genji* are described in the section on Heian-period art.) These painters are known as the Tosa school; the earliest mention of a painter named Tosa dates from the early 15th century and refers to a painter who was also the governor of the Tosa province. Contemporaneous with the beginnings of the Kanō school was Tosa Mitsunobu, who expanded his school's repertoire much like Kanō Motonobu did for his school, except in opposite directions: while the Kanō artist added elements of traditional Japanese painting, the Tosa artist began to incorporate elements of Chinese painting. In this sense, the two schools created separate versions of a Chinese-Japanese stylistic synthesis, with the Tosa relying more heavily on the Japanese tradition and the Kanō, on the Chinese.



Storage jar, 14th–15th century, stoneware with natural ash glaze, Shigaraki, 46.7 cm high (The Metropolitan Museum of Art)

At the same time, the tea ceremony (*chanoyū* 茶の湯) emerged as a ritualized form of preparing and enjoying powdered green tea. For this ritual, domestic ash-glazed stoneware vessels, coiled by hand and fired in wood-burning kilns, began to be favored for their austere elegance or sense of *sabi* 寂—an important Japanese aesthetic concept that stands for seeking beauty in what is simple, solitary, and withered.

These different art forms and mediums—painting, ceramics, dramatic performances, collaborative poetry-writing parties, and tea rituals—converged in shogunal residences like the Golden and Silver Pavilions and especially in the decor of these residences, governed by the aesthetic principle of *fūryū* 風流—another enduring aesthetic notion in Japan, referring to a refined taste that favors rarified elegance and sensual beauty.

The Momoyama Period

During the Momoyama period (1573–1603), Japan underwent a process of unification after a long period of civil war, and rulers Oda Nobunaga and Toyotomi Hideyoshi built castles as symbols of their power. Typically, castles build during this period consisted of a central tower or tenshu surrounded by gardens and fortified buildings. The dark interiors of castles were often decorated by artists, and the spaces were separated using sliding fusuma panels and byōbu folding screens. The ornate castle architecture and interiors, adorned with painted screens embellished with gold leaf, marked a clear departure from the somber monotones favored during the previous Muromachi period. The shoin style, or a style of Japanese residential architecture that forms the basis of today's traditional-style Japanese houses, had its origins within the earlier Muromachi period and continued to be refined during the Momoyama period.

Shoin

A shoin (書, drawing room or study) is a type of audience hall in Japanese architecture that was developed during the Muromachi period. The term originally referred to a study and a place for lectures within a temple, but later it came to mean simply a drawing room or study. The shoin-zukuri style takes its name from these rooms. In a shoin-zukuri building, the shoin is the room dedicated to the reception of guests. The *shoin* 書院 architectural style entailed a main area flanked by aisles, wall-to-wall tatami-mat flooring, square pillars, and various types of sliding doors and walls that partitioned and reconfigured space. *Shoin* also featured an alcove in the reception room, known as *tokonoma*, and elements developed in the Muromachi period for shogunal residences such as staggered shelves and a built-in desk.



The Shiro-shoin at Hongan-ji: Shoin is a type of audience hall in Japanese architecture.

Like other opulent residences of its time, the Azuchi castle of the warlord Oda Nobunaga comprised numerous buildings in the *shoin* architectural style. Sometimes this period is also known as the Azuchi-Momoyama, getting its name from the opulent residences of two *daimyo* who attempted to unify Japan at the end of the Sengoku ("warring states") era, namely Oda Nobunaga's Azuchi Castle and Toyotomi Hideyoshi's Fushimi or Momoyama Castle. Both castles were not only martial structures for strategic warfare and defense, but also luxurious mansions meant to impress and intimidate political rivals. The architectural style of these residences derived from that of the pavilions built by Ashikaga shōguns during the previous historical period.



Jodan-no-ma (feudal lord's audience chamber), Honmaru Palace, Nagoya Castle, first built 1615 for Tokugawa Ieyasu's son, reconstructed 2009-18 (image adapted from: japan-guide)

The foundations for the design of today's traditional Japanese residential houses were established in the late Muromachi period and refined during the ensuing Momoyama period. Shoin-zukuri, a new architectural style influenced by Zen Buddhism, developed during that time from the earlier Heian

period's palaces and the subsequent residential style favored by the warrior class during the Kamakura period.

One of the most noticeable changes in architecture to arise from the shoin came from the practice of lining floors with tatami mats. Since tatami mats have a standardized size, the floor plans for shoin rooms had to be developed around the proportions of the tatami mat; this in turn affected the proportions of doors, the height of rooms, and other aspects of the structure. Before the shoin popularized the practice of lining floors with tatami mats, it had been standard to only bring out a single tatami mat for the highest-ranking person in the room to sit on.

The architecture surrounding and influenced by the shoin quickly developed many other distinguishing features. Because guests sat on the floor rather than on furniture, they were positioned at a lower vantage point than their Chinese counterparts at that time, who were accustomed to using furniture. This lower vantage point generated such developments as suspended ceilings, which functioned to make the room feel less expansive and also resulted in the ceilings rafters no longer being visible, as they were in China. The new suspended ceilings also allowed for more elaborate and ornate decoration.

Other characteristics to arise from the lower vantage point were the tokonoma and chigaidana. The tokonoma was an elevated recess built into the wall to create a space for displaying Chinese art, which was popular at the time, at a comfortable eye level. The chigaidana, or "staggered shelves," were shelving structures built into the tokonoma to display smaller objects. Fusuma, or sliding doors, were also becoming a popular means to divide rooms. As a result, columns began to be created that were square-shaped to accommodate the sliding doors.

The asymmetry of the tokonoma and chigaidana pair, as well as the squared pillars, differentiated the shoin design from the contemporary Chinese design of the time, which preferred symmetric pairs of furniture and round pillars. Soon after its advent, shoin architecture became associated with these evolving elements as it developed into the predominant format for formal gathering rooms.

Kano School

Most paintings in the Momoyama period existed to decorate the interiors of castles. In concert with the imposing nature of a castle, the paintings were equally flamboyant. The subject matters of these paintings ranged from landscapes, vegetation, animals to genre scenes of life in the cities. These were painted on the large-scale surfaces prevalent in the castle interior: *fusuma* (sliding door panels) and *byobu* (free-standing folding screens). Kano Eitoku's *Chinese Guardians Lions* (below) painted on a 6-panel *byobu* typifies this visual style. Emerging from a field of gold, a pair of mythical animals with muscular bodies and glaring eyes stride confidently toward the viewers; the bold images are set in a shimmering background on an awe-inspiring, large tableau. The tableau provided a visual backdrop for the *daimyo* when they received their vassals, entertained their guests, issued their orders, or meted their punishments. The gold glittered and gleamed as the screens reflected candlelight in the castle, impressing the daimyo's audience. As successful military leaders in turbulent times, *daimyo* sought to perpetuate the image of power, authority, and fortune to bolster their hard-fought status.

Under Kano Eitoku (1543 - 1590), the Kano School emerged as the dominant purveyor of Momoyama paintings, such as *Chinese Guardian Lions.* "Kano School" denotes a lineage of hereditary professional artists operating within the Kano familial orbit. At the start of the Momoyama period in 1573, the Kanos had been in operation for 100 years, providing affluent clients with a wide array of subject matters in various formats.



Figure : Chinese Guardian Lions (late 16th century, ink and gold leaf on paper, 450 x 225 cm) Public Domain

Kano Masanobu (1434 - 1530), the school's founder, was skilled in the Chinese ink-wash painting of landscapes favored in the Muromachi period. Chinese ink wash painting emphasizes the qualities of lines and brushwork; the image was constructed out of monochromatic tonalities varied by the concentration of the black ink wash. Kano Motonobu (1476 - 1559), Masanobu's son and the second patriarch of the school, was a versatile artist. He was adept in the ink wash style, also painting figural themes according to the Japanese-style convention *yamato-e* consisting of flat areas of bright colors without any visible brushwork. In *Hosokawa Sumimoto on Horseback (*below), the body of the horse and samurai in armor were outlined in black and filled with red, black, and white without any concept of shading. This method of painting allowed detailed patterns and decorations to be added, as in the detailing of the armor with white dots and red mosaic-like tiles.



Figure : Hosokawa Sumimoto on Horseback (1507, hanging scroll, ink, and colors on silk, 119.5 x 59.5 cm) Public Domain

The other Japanese convention Motonobu brought and developed in the Kano school repertoire was using delineated negative space – often in the shape of clouds – to cover and divide the composition. In *Flowers and Birds of the Four Seasons* (below) the sea dominates the painting's top and left-hand side and the tree branches tower above the rock outcrop. While Motonobu used very subtle, minimal shading to outline them, the sea generally remains as unpainted shapes.



Figure : Flowers and Birds of the Four Seasons, Public Domain

In contrast, the jagged rock formation demonstrated the brushwork and different shades of ink-wash to define its craggy and sharp shapes. In this painting, Motonobu merged the two lineages -- the Chinese brushwork and the Japanese flat patterning of shapes -- into synthesis and the signature style of the Kano School. Since this painting is mainly monochromatic, the clouds are left as unpainted areas; in colored Japanese-style (*yamato-e*) paintings, the negative space/cloud formations were typically filled with gold. Motonobu's innovative synthesis and the practice of gilding large-scale surfaces were passed onto and perfected by his successor, the third patriarch of the school, Kano Eitoku.

In the context of the evolution of Kano School's visual style, Eitoku shifted Motonobu's emphasis toward bolder brushstrokes and more prominent motifs, more decorative and stylized. A comparison between Motonobu's *Patriarchs of Zen Buddhism*, *Xiangyen Zhixian Sweeping with a Broom*, and Eitoku's *Chinese Guardian Lions* demonstrates how the cloud formations became more stylized. The shading towards the edge of the clouds and the ground the man is standing on in Motonobu's image are gone; in contrast, Eitoku's cloud and ground have fused into a flat, ambiguous surface of gold. Brushstrokes and shading suggesting landscape features in Eitoku's painting are primarily obscured by silhouettes of clouds. The heavily stylized curls in the lions' manes and tails, and the outlined bodies of the lions, emphasize their decorative rather than naturalistic qualities.

Having struck a chord with the elite samurai clientele, Kano Eitoku received a significant number of commissions from the most powerful *daimyo* of the period, Oda Nobunaga and Toyotomi Hideyoshi. Eitoku involved all members of the Kano School -- from apprentices, junior artists, and himself (as the master/principal designer) – to complete the commissions on time. The apprentices prepared the pigments and papers; the junior artists painted assigned areas while Eitoku designed the overall composition and painted the most important parts. Momoyama's glittering folding screens and sliding doors of gold-leaf backgrounds were produced this way.

Colors and gold-leaf, bold brushstrokes, and monumental motifs came together in Eitoku's 8-panel *byobu Cypress Tree* (below). A towering, almost 2-meter-high cypress tree with a solid half-a-meter trunk anchors the composition. Despite Eitoku's palpable sweeping brushstrokes, the curving trees are highly simplified and stylized. The bold outlines of the tree branches portray undulating movements against the shimmering gold backgrounds. Complimenting the massive brown silhouette of the tree is the delicate detailing of the grey lichens on the trunk and the olive-green leaves sprouting out of the branches. Flat areas of sapphire blue peek through the silhouette of gold clouds indicating water with outcropped rocks. While bringing the painting alive and accentuating its decorativeness, colors also define this screen within Japanese-style (*yamato-e)* tradition.

The imposing cypress tree parallels the ferocity of the Chinese lions; both are symbols of power and dominance highly favored by the Momoyama *daimyo* to decorate their castle interiors.



Figure : Cypress Tree (1590, color and gold leaf on paper, 170.3 x 460.5 cm) Public Domain

Tea Ceremony

The tea service was an important part of the Shogun ceremonial events and the room for the ceremony demonstrated the value and prestige of the shogun as the ruling regent. One of the first elaborate tea rooms was constructed for Toyotomi Hideyoshi when he was named Imperial Regent. The tearoom was portable, ready to be assembled inside of a larger room and transported with the regent wherever he traveled. Although the original tearoom was destroyed over time, replicas based on documentation were reconstructed in different castles. The gold room (below) was small, only 2.7 meters by 2.55 meters, and made from cypress wood covered with thousands of sheets of gold leaf on every surface; the walls, ceiling and *shoji* (sliding doors). On the floor sat crimson *tatami* mats made from the lush, expensive fabric.



Figure : Gold tea room - Public Domain

The shimmering tea service (below) was also made from gold or gilded in gold, all meant to impress others and display the regent's power to all who came to visit him.



Figure : Gold tea set - CC BY-SA 3.0

The art of the tea ceremony flourished during the Momoyama period (ca. 1568–1603). Both Oda Nobunaga—the initiator of the unification of Japan under the shogunate in the late 16th century—and his successor Toyotomi Hideyoshi lavished time and money on this pastime, collecting tea bowls and other implements, sponsoring lavish social events, and patronizing acclaimed masters of the tea ceremony. The Japanese tea ceremony or *chanoyu*, also known as the Way of Tea, is a Japanese cultural ritual involving the cemeronial preparation and presentation of *matcha* or powdered green tea. Loose leaf green tea or *sencha* is also used, but far less commonly. Zen Buddhism was a formative influence in the development of the tea ceremony.

By the 16th century, tea drinking had spread to all levels of society in Japan. Sen Rikyū (1522–1591) is perhaps the most well-known and still revered figure in the history of the tea ceremony. He was driven by the concept of ichi-go ichi-e, a philosophy that each meeting should be treasured, for it can never be reproduced. His teachings perfected many newly developed forms in architecture, gardens, art, and the full development of the Way of Tea. He also reestablished and emphasized several key aspects of the ceremony, including rustic simplicity, directness of approach, and honesty of self. The principles he set forward—harmony, respect, purity, and tranquility—are still central to the tea ceremony today.



The tea ceremony flourished during the Momoyama period: An open tea house serving matcha (right) and a peddler selling decoctants (left). The monk clothing depicts the relationship between matcha culture, tea ceremony, and Buddhism.

The Japanese tea ceremony developed as a transformative practice and began to evolve its own aesthetic over the years. Murata Jukō is known as an early developer of the ceremony as a spiritual practice; he studied Zen Buddhism under the monk Ikkyū, who revitalized Zen in the 15th century, and this is considered to have influenced his use of the Zen concept of *wabi-sabi* in the aesthetic of the tea ceremony.

"Wabi" represents the inner spiritual experiences of human life. Its original meaning indicates quiet or sober refinement, or subdued taste characterized by humility, restraint, simplicity, naturalism, profundity, imperfection, and asymmetry. "Sabi," on the other hand, represents the outer material side of life. Originally, it meant "worn," "weathered," or "decayed." Together, *wabi-sabi* emphasizes simplicity, humility, consciousness of impermanence, and intense appreciation of the immediate experience, and this was reflected in the aesthetics of the tea ceremony.

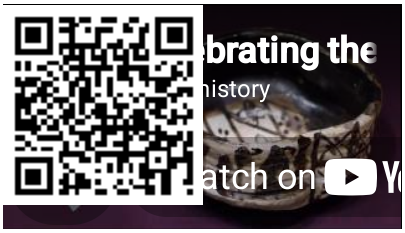
Tea Ceremony Objects

Tea equipment is called chadōgu. A wide range of chadōgu are available and different styles and motifs are used for different events and in different seasons. All of the tools for the tea ceremony are handled with exquisite care. They are scrupulously cleaned before and after each use and before storing, and some are handled only with gloved hands. Some items, such as the tea storage jar "chigusa," were so revered that they were given proper names like people.

The pottery used for the tea ceremony is often simple and natural, in accordance with wabi-sabi, and came to transform the manner in which the Japanese viewed ceramic ware. Tea master Sen Rikyū was involved in the innovation of Raku teabowls with the collaboration of a tile maker named Raku Chōjirō, prompted by his preference for simple, rustic items made in Japan rather than the expensive Chinese ware that was in fashion at the time. These hand-moulded and glazed vessels have become intimately connected with the tea ceremony and are still in use to the present day.

The following are a few of the essential components:

- The chakin, a small rectangular white linen or hemp cloth mainly used to wipe the tea bowl.
- The tea bowl, available in a wide range of sizes and styles, with different styles used for thick and thin tea. Shallow bowls, which allow the tea to cool rapidly, are used in summer, while deep bowls are used in winter. Bowls over four hundred years old are in use today. The best bowls are thrown by hand, and irregularities and imperfections are prized and often featured prominently as the "front" of the bowl.
- The tea caddy, a small lidded container in which the powdered tea is placed for use in the tea-making procedure.
- The tea scoop, generally carved from a single piece of bamboo, ivory, or wood and used to scoop tea from the tea caddy into the tea bowl. Different styles and colors are used in various tea traditions.
- The tea whisk, used to mix the powdered tea with the hot water and typically carved from a single piece of bamboo.



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Transcript of "Oribe Tea Bowl" video

[0:00] [music]

Dr. Steven Zucker: [0:08] We're on the second floor of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, in the galleries devoted to the arts of Japan. We're looking at a small ceramic bowl, and it's so unexpected for me. When I think about the ceramics of Japan, of China, of Korea, I think about impossibly thin-walled beautiful examples of porcelain, perfect geometries. This is anything but.

Dr. Sonia Coman: [0:26] We're looking at an early 17th century Oribe bowl. It is very irregular in its shape. The rim is undulating. The roundness is distorted in various ways. We see various motifs on its surface as well as inside the bowl.

Dr. Zucker: [0:46] This is a hard piece of ceramic; if we dropped it on the floor, it would break. But it feels organic. It feels as if it's still pliable, as if it's still in the process of being formed.

Dr. Coman: [0:57] It preserves the ways in which the potters manipulated its material. While the bowl was still malleable, the

potter would have distorted the perfect shape of a regular round bowl and created these indentations.

Dr. Zucker: [0:00] The willing and active deformation of perfect forms.

Dr. Coman: [1:21] The shape is known as a clog shape, reference to the aesthetic principle dominant in the early 17th century called wabi. Wabi refers to the simple and the austere. It refers to something that is beautiful without artifice, something artlessly beautiful.

Dr. Zucker: [1:43] In some ways, it's a lie, because this bowl was once perfect, so the lack of artifice has been layered over the artifice, creating a hierarchy where this notion of wabi is paradoxically even more refined than the refined bowl from which this came.

Dr. Coman: [2:01] Exactly. The beauty of the bowl derives from playfully knowing that the artifice that created the bowl has the effect of beauty without artifice.

Dr. Zucker: [2:15] This paradox would have been especially apparent in the early 17th century, when this bowl was made, because this would have been seen in opposition to highly refined objects that would traditionally have been used for the tea ceremony. And so when objects like this were introduced into the tea ceremony, it was really revolutionary.

Dr. Coman: [2:32] Oribe ware created a revolution in Japanese ceramics. The name Oribe comes from Furuta Oribe, a warlord and tea master in late 16th century Japan.

Dr. Zucker: [2:54] It may be unexpected that a warlord could also be associated with the tea ceremony, but this was exactly the case.

Dr. Coman: [2:56] Inside the bowl, we see a stylized form of a flower, as well as a plum blossom.

Dr. Zucker: [3:09] The plum blossom has literary references and can specifically denote the idea of the ephemeral. A plum blossom [is] this perfectly beautiful thing that lasts only a moment.

Dr. Coman: [3:15] For the user of this bowl, who would have seen these motifs up close, these plum blossoms would have had all kinds of allusions to classical Japanese poetry. In combination with the geometric patterns, that would have created a very pleasant visual contrast, one that paralleled an array of poetic allusions. All for the enjoyment of the participant in a tea ceremony.

Dr. Zucker: [3:44] It's extraordinary to look at in its complexity, its imperfection, its almost brutalized surface, but I think that that would be enhanced even more if I was holding it in my hand. I can imagine feeling a contrast between the smooth surface of the glaze and the rough quality of the clay underneath.

Dr. Coman: [4:01] Wabi can be considered integral to a larger concept called sabi. Sabi in Japanese may refer to the verb "sabu," to wither. It can also refer to the adjective "sabishii," which means lonely. Sabi is something austere, something isolated.

Dr. Zucker: [4:28] Maybe it's appropriate the way that the Metropolitan Museum of Art has placed this bowl by itself, on a shelf, alone, austere, and beautiful in its imperfection.

Dr. Coman: [4:35] When you hold a bowl like this and rotate it, it is different bowls, different aesthetic solutions, all embedded into this one very rich object.

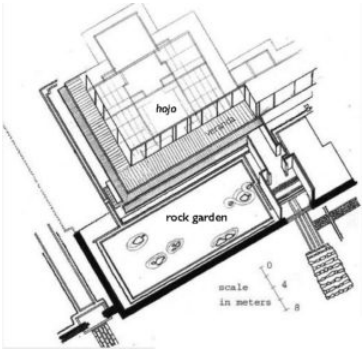
[0:00] [music]

Ryōanji (Peaceful Dragon Temple)

The most famous of all zen gardens in Kyoto is Ryōan-ji, built in the late 15th century where, for the first time, the zen garden became purely abstract. Ryōanji is a temple located in north Kyoto, Japan affiliated with a branch of Zen Buddhism. Ryōanji thrived as a great Zen center for the cultural activities of the elite from the late sixteenth through the first half of the seventeenth century under the patronage of the Hosokawa family, spanning the Muromachi period (1338-1573), Momoyama period (1573-1615) Through the Edo Period (1615-1868).



Gate, Ryōanji (Peaceful Dragon Temple), Kyoto, Japan (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)



Ryōanji (Peaceful Dragon Temple), Kyoto, Japan

When visitors pass through the main gate, they encounter the Mirror Pond (*Kyōyōchi*) on the left with a scenic view of surrounding mountains. Walking along the pilgrim's path and entering the second gate, visitors arrive at the main building of the monastery, the *hōjō* (abbot'sresidence). The rock garden is located in the front of the *hōjo* and is viewed either from the wooden veranda embracing the building or from inside the room.



Dry rock garden, study and grounds, Ryōanji (Peaceful Dragon Temple), Kyoto, Japan (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Dry Landscape Garden (*karesansui*) in Ryōanji

The Ryōanji garden is one of the most famous examples of a rock garden—a form which developed during the Muromachi period (1392–1573) with the efflorescence of Zen Buddhism in medieval Japan. This type of garden consists of rocks and pebbles rather than vegetation and water, and was mainly created on the grounds of temples for encouraging contemplation. White gravel often symbolizes flowing elements such as waterfalls, rivers, creeks, or sea, while rocks suggest islands, shores, or bridges.



Muqi Fachang, *Returning sails off a distant shore* (from *Eight Views of the Xiao and Xiang Rivers*), 13th century, handscroll cut and remounted as eight hanging scrolls, ink on paper, 103.6 x 32.3 cm (Kyoto National Museum)

The garden may have been inspired by aspects of both Japanese and Chinese culture. For instance, Shinto, an indigenous religion of Japan, focuses on the worship of deities in nature. Also, Zen Buddhism, which is derived from Chan Buddhism in China, emphasizes meditation as a path toward enlightenment. Medieval Chinese landscape paintings associated with this sect of Buddhism often displayed a sparse, monochromatic style that reflected a spontaneous approach to enlightenment. Together, these concepts promoted the aesthetic values of rustic simplicity, spontaneity, and truth to materials that came to characterize Zen art. Today, the sea of gravel, rocks, and moss of the rock garden and the earthy tones of the clay walls contrast with the blossoming foliage beyond—evoking stillness and contemplation suitable for meditation.



Dry rock garden, Ryōanji (Peaceful Dragon Temple), Kyoto, Japan (image: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Like other Japanese rock gardens, the Ryōanji garden presents stones surrounded by raked white gravel with minimal use of plants. Fifteen rocks of different sizes are carefully arranged in groups amidst the raked pebbles covering a 250-square-meter rectangle of ground. The stones are carefully arranged so that one can only see no more than fourteen of the fifteen at once from any angle. Staring from the largest group on the far left, a visitor's eyes rhythmically move through the garden from the front to the rear and back, and then from the front to the right upper corner.



***Hōjō*, Ryōanji (Peaceful Dragon Temple), Kyoto, Japan (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)**

The garden is located on the south side of the *hōjō*, the main building used for the abbot's personal study and living quarters. The *hōjō* is divided into six rooms by sliding doors called *fusuma*; three rooms on the south (a reception, a lecture room, and a meeting room) and those on the north (a study, a changing room, and a central room consisting of three subdivisions of a serving chamber, alter, and sleeping room). The *hōjō* also includes gardens on each side of the building—a moss garden called the West Garden, a stone and moss garden, and a garden with a tea house.

Scholars debate the exact dating of the garden, but the consensus is that it was originally created in the fifteenth century and that its present design dates from the Edo period (1615–1868). The identity of the garden's creator is also controversial, as no records of the rock garden can be found prior to the early 1680s. Early descriptions explain that the garden has nine big stones representing "tiger cubs crossing the water" and attribute the design to Matsumoto, the chief patron of Ryōanji, or Sōami (the connoisseur, painter, and garden designer) attending the Ashikaga shogunate. An inscription carved on the back of one stone bears witness to the involvement of professional laborers in the garden's architecture —the stone has two names, Kotaro and Hikojiro, who were known as *sensui kawaramono* (riverbank workers) belonging to the lower social strata. As the garden has fifteen stones today, it is certain that the arrangement we see now cannot be the same as the original medieval design (which had nine stones). Although it remains unclear who designed the garden, or what it originally looked like, it is evident that the Ryōanji garden has changed throughout time.



Ryōanji (Peaceful Dragon Temple), dry rock garden, study and grounds, Kyoto, Japan (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Many different theories on the garden's meaning have been suggested—some say it represents islands floating on an ocean, or a mother tiger carrying cubs over the sea, while others say it symbolizes the Japanese aesthetic concept of *wabi* (refined austerity) and *sabi* (subdued taste), or the fundamental ideal of Zen philosophy. A more recent theory argues that it is an expression of a pure form of abstract composition meant to incite meditation. Whether originally intended to represent pictorial images or symbolize metaphysical concepts, it is certain that the rustic austerity and minimalist rock garden at Ryōanji has played a significant role in art and architecture from medieval times to the present in Japan.



***Kyōyōchi* (Mirror-Shaped Pond), Ryōanji (Peaceful Dragon Temple), Kyoto, Japan (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)**

Art and architecture in Ryōanji

The fame of the stone garden at Ryōanji is so imposing that it has overwhelmed the other parts of the temple, including *Kyōyōchi* (Mirror Pond, located in the lower part of the site), a small west garden, and a rear garden with a teahouse. The

Mirror Pond is reminiscent of courtly gardens from the Heian period (794–1185), while the teahouse and garden date back to the seventh century. Near the teahouse is a famous stone water basin.



***Appreciation of Painting*, from a set of the "Four Accomplishments," Kano school, Momoyama period, c. 1606, four of eight panels mounted on sliding-door panels, ink, color, gold and gold leaf on paper, 182.9 × 731.5 cm (The Metropolitan Museum of Art)**

The wall door paintings that once decorated the *hōjō* are preserved today in Japanese and overseas collections. Among them, two large panels depicting "Chinese Immortals" and the "Four Elegant Accomplishments" belonged to Ryōanji's main hall and once faced its rock garden. They were removed from Ryōanji and sold in 1895, when Buddhism was persecuted during the new Meiji regime. These works entered the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1989. Contrary to the austere monochrome ink paintings of landscapes and bird-and-flower paintings decorating the abbot's quarters in Zen temples dating from the Muromachi period, they depict Chinese narrative themes rendered with extravagant colors on golden backgrounds. This permits a glimpse into a radical shift in the interior program of the Zen monastery during the late Momoyama and early Edo periods, led by the rise of samurai warlords as prominent patrons of art and formidable political entities.

Ryōanji and Zen culture in the modern era

Recent scholars criticize the romanticized notion of Zen art and culture as a symbol of Japanese aesthetic—pointing out that this interpretation is largely a product of the twentieth century, fueled by growing nationalism in Japan. Furthermore, Zen Buddhism was disseminated in the West and filtered through modernist artists, who were fascinated by the minimalistic perspectives and abstracted forms of Japanese rock gardens. Whatever the skepticism one reserves for existing assumptions about the Zen garden and culture, no one can deny the cultural and historical significance of Ryōanji and its rock garden.

Ryōanji: A conversation with Dr. Beth Harris and Dr. Steven Zucker



Transcript of "Ryōanji" video

[0:00] [music]

Dr. Steven Zucker: [0:05] We've made our way up the steep hillside on the north end of Kyoto, and we've entered into the temple complex of Ryōan-ji.

Dr. Beth Harris: [0:13] When we entered the temple, we were asked to take off our shoes. We're in a spiritual space, but also one that tourists are making their way through. The complex consists of many temples, and shrines, and places of meditation for the monks who lived here.

[0:30] This is specifically a place related to Zen Buddhism. The most famous place within is the rock garden, and that's where we're standing now.

Dr. Zucker: [0:39] You can see the garden as a distillation of the ideas of Zen Buddhism, and of the highly refined sense of Japanese aesthetics. This is such a refined space. We see an enclosed courtyard filled with light-gray stones, with a series of moss islands from which rocks protrude.

Dr. Harris: [0:57] When we think of a garden, we think of flowers. We might think of a water feature, the informality of an English garden, the rigid geometry of a French garden, but a Zen garden is to encourage meditation. In fact, the word "zen" means "meditation."

Dr. Zucker: [1:14] The central idea of Buddhism is cultivating oneself, of reaching enlightenment. A garden is an attempt to cultivate nature, to bring out its essential qualities.

Dr. Harris: [1:25] For Buddha, the world was a place of suffering, and desire was the cause of suffering. The goal is to transcend that suffering, to transcend the cycle of rebirth, of samsara. In Zen Buddhism, the path is sudden enlightenment that comes through meditation.

Dr. Zucker: [1:42] Nature is looked at carefully: its innate qualities, its imperfection, its inherent forms, and that becomes the starting point. The idea is not to erase nature and make something that's perfect. The idea is to examine something, to understand its qualities, and then to enhance them.

Dr. Harris: [2:00] Finding beauty in what is worn, what is aged. When we look around the edges of the rock garden of this enclosure, we see a wall that hasn't been recently painted, it's worn.

Dr. Zucker: [2:12] That creates this atmospheric quality that makes the entire garden reminiscent of a Japanese painting, where the rocks function as mountains, and the two-dimensional wall functions as an atmospheric space.

[2:25] In the study area for the abbot that is just adjacent to the garden, there are paintings that show rocky crags emerging out of a sea of mist. It's a perfect reflection of the garden itself.

Dr. Harris: [2:35] It's more beautiful in a Japanese aesthetic to not see a perfect view of the mountain on a perfectly clear day, but rather for the mountain to be obscured by the mist. There's an opening for interpretation, for the suggestive, for…

Dr. Zucker: [2:52] Surprise.

Dr. Harris: [2:53] …for things that are half there, half hidden. And as we move through the garden, our view shifts, the numbers of rocks that we see shift. That idea of never seeing the whole, but the appreciation for the incomplete, is here.

Dr. Zucker: [3:08] The pebbles have been raked into a very deliberate pattern, one that emphasizes the horizontal. It slows our eyes down. Ovoid shapes frame each of the individual islands, the waves of the sea.

Dr. Harris: [3:20] The analogy of water. It also suggests to me, in its sparseness, when the stuff of the world came to being out of nothingness.

Dr. Zucker: [3:30] This is a garden that's meant to incite enlightenment that could come to you at any moment. That, even on this cloudy, slightly rainy day, the garden is bright and feels dry.

[3:40] But just immediately to its right is a densely forested rectangle, slightly smaller than the rock garden. It is completely carpeted with green moss, and it's such a relief for the eye.

Dr. Harris: [3:53] This is all about our eye, awakening our eyes, asking us to look, asking us to pay attention. The very act of paying attention takes us out of our everyday lives and takes us to a place of heightened awareness, of standing apart from things. And in that way, helping to prepare the path for enlightenment.

[4:16] [music]

Attributions

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Gustlin, Deborah & Gustlin, Zoe. "Muromachi and Momoyama Periods (1338-1615 CE)." *A World Perspective of Art History: 1400CE to the 21st Century*

"The Muromachi Period." *Art History (Boundless)*

"The Momoyama Period." *Art History (Boundless)*

Dr. Sonia Coman, "Nanbokuchō and Muromachi periods, an introduction," in *Smarthistory*, January 20, 2021, accessed January 29, 2026, https://smarthistory.org/nanbokucho-and-muromachi-periods/.

Dr. Sonia Coman, "Azuchi-Momoyama period, an introduction," in *Smarthistory*, January 20, 2021, accessed January 29, 2026, https://smarthistory.org/azuchi-momoyama-period/.

Dr. Yoonjung Seo, "Ryōanji (Peaceful Dragon Temple)," in *Smarthistory*, September 18, 2016, accessed January 29, 2026, https://smarthistory.org/ryoanji-peaceful-dragon-temple/.

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

6: Cultural Confluence in Art from the Late Islamic Period

6.1: West Asian Carpets

6.1.1: Silk Roads - Cultural exchange pre-Islam

6.1.2: Court Carpets of the Ottoman, Safavid, and Mughal Empires

6.2: Interiors of Ottoman Syria

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6.1: West Asian Carpets

Learning Objectives:

- Analyze carpets from the late Islamic period as examples of textile arts for interior design
- Summarize and discuss the use of the term "Islamic art"
- Evaluate the extent to which Islamic religious motifs are used in carpets from the late Islamic period
- Identify design traits that signify cultural fusion in carpets from the late Islamic period

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6.1.1: Silk Roads - Cultural exchange pre-Islam

Context

Most of the examples from this module come from what is characterized as the "later period" of Islamic art which begins with the 14th century. Nevertheless, to best understand cultural exchange present in arts in this region, you must first get an introduction to the Silk Roads, a trade network that dates back to 1000 B.C.E. The carpet examples from Khotan in this section are from the 5th and 6th centuries C.E. and therefore pre-date Islam (which was founded in 610 C.E.). However, many varied characteristics you will find in examples of later Islamic art can be seen as a continuation of cultural exchange of the Silk Roads.

Cultural exchange and integration, a Khotanese carpet on the Silk Road

by Dr. He Zhang

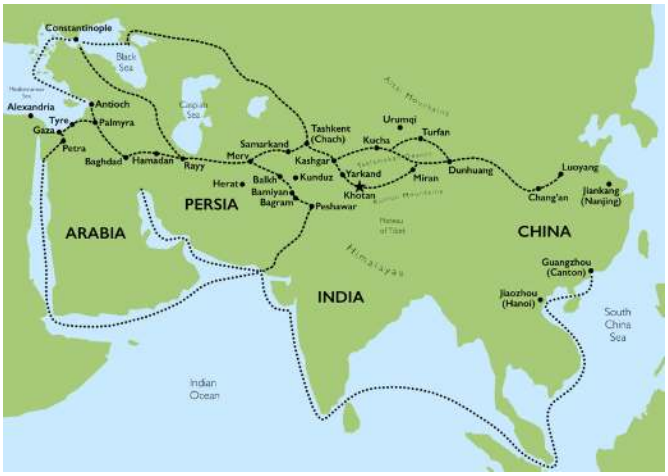
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Knotted Carpet with human figures and Brahmi/Khotanese inscriptions, 5th–6th century C.E., Shanpula Township, Khotan District, Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region, China (photo: Qi Xiaoshan)

Imagine a carpet being as valuable as gold. At Khotan, one location in western China on the ancient global trading network known as the Silk Roads, high-quality carpets made of wool became luxurious trade items. One brightly colored 5th–6th century knotted carpet was made from wool to cover a bed or floor. The carpet depicts human figures, trees, and includes an inscription woven in between (images below). The border offers decorative motifs, stylized animal forms, and wave motifs. Due to the dry climate in this region, the amazingly bright colors and much of the wool are naturally preserved despite the passage of 1,500 years.

Carpets like this one reveal how multiple cultural ideas, art traditions, and aesthetic tastes—from India, Bactria, the Hellenistic world, the early Roman Empire, and Persia (Achaemenid and Sasanian)—informed objects made and traded on the ancient Silk Road.



Map showing Khotan (near center) in the network of trade routes that made up the Silk Roads (adapted from a map by Dr. Evan Freeman, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

The Silk Road

The Silk Road is a romantic term given by some Europeans of the late 19th and early 20th centuries to describe an ancient global trading network that extended from East Asia to Europe (for example, from China to Rome), from about 1000 B.C.E. (or earlier) to early modern times. Despite its name, it was not a single road, and the merchandise traded included far more than silk. Trade along these roads included spices, precious stones, jewelry, glass, textiles, exotic plants and animals, and much more. This large network was connected via caravan posts in numerous small oases that made it possible to traverse vast deserts, mountains, and other types of harsh terrain, and via ships over the rivers and seas.

A single trader would not likely travel the entire route (except for some diplomats or individuals like the Venetian explorer and merchant Marco Polo). Most traders would exchange their merchandise at certain posts on the borders with other countries or territories. An object—such as a bolt of silk—would go through several or many hands like a relay race before it arrived at the end-users.

China kept silk-making a secret for many centuries, so the silk trade is almost all from China to other places. However, besides

the trade of luxurious Chinese silk, other textile materials were traded extensively and in multiple directions across trading networks. Woolen textiles from Hellenistic and Roman-ruled Syria from places like Palmyra and Dura-Europos), and cotton cloth from India have been discovered in many oasis towns in the Taklamakan Desert in Xinjiang, a western region of China, where the knotted carpets in question are found.

Ideas about politics, philosophy, religion, technology, art making, and aesthetics became integrated as a result of trade and military campaigns between empires (such as Alexander the Great's conquest of the Persian Empire and the Chinese Han Dynasty's expansion to the western region and Central Asia). Cultural exchange and integration took place on a near global scale, and has proven to be the most significant impact of the Silk Road.

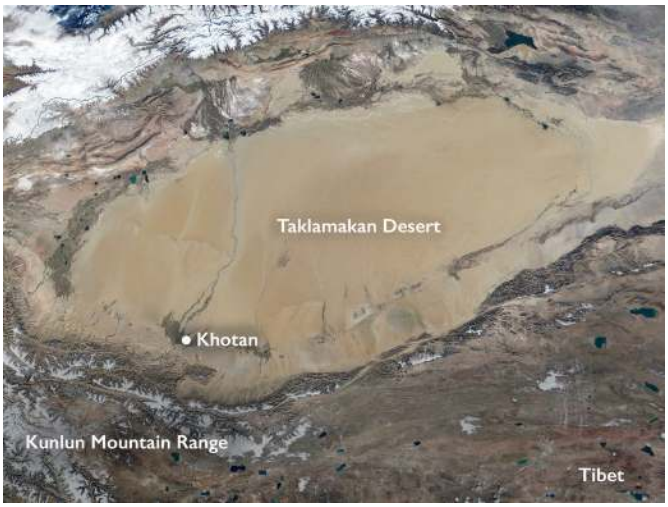
Knotted carpets in Central Asia

Carpets could be made in different ways. A knotted carpet, like the one above, was made by weaving the wool yarn with extra yarn threads piled up on warps to produce a thicker and fluffier surface.



Carpet fragments from Yanghai, Xinjiang, China, 1000–700 B.C.E.

The earliest wool knotted carpets known are from the western region of China, dated to 1000–700 B.C.E. and the Altai region of Russia, dated to 500–400 B.C.E. [3] More carpets, dated from 200 B.C.E. to 600 C.E., have been discovered in many sites in Xinjiang (including Khotan) and some sites in northern Afghanistan. They include plain ones and colorful ones with geometric patterns and natural representations. Among these peoples and places, Khotan in west China developed into a renowned carpet-making center.



Khotan and Khotani carpet

Khotan is an oasis town on the southern edge of the world's second largest desert, the Taklamakan Desert. Two seasonal rivers Yurumkash (White Jade) and Karakash (Black Jade) from the Kunlun Mountains nourished this large oasis for millions of years, making it suitable for people to live. It was also an important station for caravan traders and other travelers from either the east or west to rest during their long distance journey. The diverse population included Sakas, Gandhari Prakrit Indians, Khotanese-Sakas, Chinese, Tibetan, and Turkic groups.

At the crossroads of the Silk Road, Khotan developed into a significant center of culture and commerce. Multiple religions were practiced in Khotan, including Shamanism, Zoroastrianism, Buddhism, Brahmanism (Hinduism), Manicheanism, Christianity, and possibly Judaism. [4] Several well-known historic people visited Khotan—such as Chinese General Ban Chao, monks Fa Xian, Song Yun , Xuan Zang, and Marco Polo and his father and uncle, who traveled from Venice, Italy, to Beijing, China.

Even though silk had to be imported from central China at first, in the 5th century C.E. it appears that the Khotanese learned the secret of silk making. Supposedly, the king married a Chinese princess (described by Xuan Zang in his 7th-century diary), who had smuggled silkworm eggs into Khotan in her hair. Long before the arrival of silk, however, Khotan had already made its fame with carpets, known as "Khotani Carpets." In surviving documents, Khotan carpets appear as either gifts or commercial payment that could even replace gold. The immense value of these carpets is even noted in one document from c. 235–325 C.E.:

> ***On another occasion, the queen came here. She asked for one golden stater (coin). There is no gold. Instead of it we gave***

> ***tavastaga (knotted carpet), thirteen hands long. Seraka took it. Many people here know this matter as witnesses. . . .[5]***



King and Queen of Khotan standing on carpets, reconstructed painting of Dunhuang Cave 98, east wall, Five Dynasties, 907–60 C.E.

Khotan's renown as a carpet-making center is indicated in depictions of the Khotanese. For instance, in paintings from Dunhuang—a famous Buddhist site east of Khotan in Gansu province, where there are about five hundred rock-cut caves full of mural paintings—the king and queen of the Khotan were painted standing on carpets. Most of Khotani carpets were originally used to cover beds, floors, and seats.



Dancers and musicians on a carpet, detail of a palace scene. Dunhuang Cave 156, north wall, late Tang, 827–59 C.E.

We also see dancers and musicians dancing and sitting on carpets (such as in Dunhuang Cave 156) in numerous scenes. The designs of these painted carpets match actual carpets found in Khotan and the rest of Xinjiang.



Three of the five carpets looted from Shanpula Township. Left: carpet with putti figures and Brahmi/Khotanese inscriptions, Shanpula, 5th–6th century; center: knotted wool carpet, 5th or 6th century, Shanpula; right: carpet with putti figures and Brahmi/Khotanese inscriptions, Shanpula, 5th–6th century (photos: Qi Xiaoshan)

A group of carpets

In 2008, a group of seven carpets, all dated 5th–6th century C.E., was looted from Shanpula Township (Luopu County, Khotan District, Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region, China). Five of them were caught from the looters, including the one that is the focus of this essay.

The carpets are the first known examples of human figures set within natural features and in a narrative in the history of Khotan carpets. The complexity of the design and bright colors make them very rare cases in the world history of knotted carpets of this early time.



Another carpet that survived looters' hands. Carpet with putti figures and Brahmi/Khotanese inscriptions, Shanpula, 5th-6th century C.E. (photo: Qi Xiaoshan)

As a group, the five knotted carpets tell us a great deal about the shared cultural ideas and traditions in Khotan. They all have striking, bright colors with a unique figurative and naturalistic style (versus the earlier geometric style in Xinjiang carpets), each with rich border designs composed of flowers and leaves, waves, animals, and some unidentified motifs. Four of the five carpets have Khotan-Saka inscriptions woven into them—such as the carpet that opens this essay. The inscription is puzzling: while it is based on Indian Brahmin scripts, it represents Khotanese language, an ancient eastern Iranian language.





Left: Knotted Carpet with human figures and Brahmi/Khotanese inscriptions, 5th-6th century CE; Shanpula Township, Khotan District, Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region, China (photo: Qi Xiaoshan); right: line drawing of the Knotted Carpet

Let's focus on this carpet in more detail. It is in relatively complete condition, with relatively minimal damage given its age, which helps us to identify images and their narrative relationships. In the center portion of the carpet, we see human figures arranged in seven horizontal rows. Nearly all are shown in a three-quarter view and characterized by prominent eyes and noses and naturalistic bodily proportions.



Detail of several figures, with the Brahmi script between them in bright blue. Knotted Carpet, detail of two human figures, 5th–6th century C.E., Shanpula Township, Khotan District, Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region, China (photo: Qi Xiaoshan)

If a particular body part does not contrast sufficiently from the red background, it is carefully set off by a thin contour line of contrasting color—black, blue, or yellow; otherwise, red is generally used. In many areas, especially faces, arms, and legs, a light red or pink line is added within the outer contour line as if to suggest some form of modeling or shading. The skin tone of most figures is pinkish. Hands and feet appear unusually large; the individual fingers are carefully shown and all feet are bare.



Blue Krishna in Lila Dance, detail of Knotted Carpet with human figures and Brahmi/Khotanese inscriptions, 5th–6th century C.E., Shanpula Township, Khotan District, Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region, China (photo: He Zhang)

Who are the figures?

Although the carpet was found in China, its subject matter and motifs share more in common with art from South Asia and Central Asia. For example, there is a small figure in dark blue, who appears twice in the composition and is reminiscent of an Indian deity, Krishna, who often appears in blue color in Hindu art. Krishna, whose name means "dark" or "dark blue" in

Sanskrit, and appears in Hindu epics such as *Mahabharata, Harivamsa,* and *Bhagavata Purana*.



Detail with two figures, possibly showing Yashoda sitting in Indian royal posture *lalitāsana,* and the little blue Krishna holding a butter ball motif in the right hand. Knotted Carpet with human figures and Brahmi/Khotanese inscriptions, 5th–6th century C.E., Shanpula Township, Khotan District, Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region, China (photo: He Zhang)

In the carpet, the small blue figure appears twice among people of all ages and genders—male and female, old and young.

Figures also appear to wear Indian dress in the trees, water, hills, which provide landscape settings for Krishna's youthful life as herdsman in the countryside. In one scene, we see a figure sitting in Indian royal posture (*lalitāsana*) and the little blue figure holding a ball-shaped motif in the right hand. This is likely supposed to relay the story of how, as he grew up, Krishna was mischievous, stealing butter from his mother Yashoda, a *gopi* (cowherd woman), and the other *gopis* to feed monkeys. In another scene, the blue figure is between two *gopi* girls, one is playing flute and the other is reaching out her hand to another young man as if dancing, which suggests a typical Lila dance in the Krishna stories.

The appearance of the Krishna story makes the carpet significant in two ways. First, it provides evidence of Hindu imagery early on in Khotan. Also, it is the earliest example of Krishna in blue color—almost one thousand years before the next existing image of a blue Krishna appears in Indian art. Incorporating Hindu imagery reveals the transmission of ideas and art along the Silk Road—so too does the carpet's style.

The carpet's style

The design of the carpet shows several artistic styles and motifs from different cultures on the vast trading network. We see a number of visual elements that borrow from Indian stories and art, as noted above. Besides Krishna, we see figures in Indian dress (such as *dhoti*), sitting in specific royal postures, and conducting Hindu rituals (such as the *aarti* fire ritual).



Detail of a man in baggy trousers, holding a lamp and conducting an aarti. Knotted Carpet with human figures and Brahmi/Khotanese inscriptions, 5th–6th century C.E., Shanpula Township, Khotan District, Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region, China (photo: Qi Xiaoshan)

Visual motifs from Central Asia are also apparent. For example, some male figures wear long tunics with a waist belt or baggy trousers, which are typical of Central Asian dresses seen with the Kushans—a nomadic people who ruled Central Asia and northern India in the first few centuries C.E.





Left: Seated figure, detail of a second carpet from the same hoard with the similar design as the main carpet in this

essay; the same figure in the main carpet is damaged. Pay attention to the sitting posture and border design of running waves in the carpet and the Greek vase. Knotted Carpet with human figures and Brahmi/Khotanese inscriptions, 5th–6th century C.E., Shanpula Township, Khotan District, Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region, China (photo: Qi Xiaoshan); right: Bell-krater (mixing bowl) with seated male figure and running wave motif, c. 350–325 B.C.E., attributed to Python, terracotta, Greek, South Italian, Paestan, 30.7 cm high (The Metropolitan Museum of Art)

There are also a number of Greco-Roman and Bactrian influences. For instance, the natural and free manner of representing human figures and landscapes with natural body movements and postures is similar to figures on many Greek vases and Greco-Roman mosaics. The carpet figures' faces also are often shown in a three-quarter profile, which is also a Mediterranean tradition. Likewise, the wave motifs in the carpet's narrow borders also borrow from Greco-Roman art.

A carpet at the crossroads



Knotted Carpet with human figures and Brahmi/Khotanese inscriptions, 5th–6th century C.E., Shanpula Township, Khotan District, Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region, China (photo: Qi Xiaoshan)

This carpet indicates that the knowledge, art making technique, and aesthetic taste traveled with the materials to many places of the world and were willingly accepted and blended by local peoples of different places, like those of Khotan. The carpet showcases the cultural interaction and integration happening at the crossroads of East and Central Asia, South Asia, and China in the 5th–6th century on the ancient Silk Road.

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6.1.2: Court Carpets of the Ottoman, Safavid, and Mughal Empires

Context

In this section, you will first be introduced to the broad term: "Islamic art" and go on to read a historical background to give you a better understanding of the geopolitical region and period of focus, contextualizing artworks of the roughly concurrent Ottoman (1300-1924), Safavid (1502-1736) and Mughal (1526-1858) empires. Then, you will go on to learn about specific examples of Islamic carpets from various contemporary Islamic empires.

Arts of the Islamic world

by DR. ELIZABETH MACAULAY-LEWIS



Figure 6.1.2.6: Taj Mahal, Agra, India (photo: **David Castor**)

What is Islamic Art?

The Dome of the Rock, the Taj Mahal, a Mina'i ware bowl, a silk carpet, a Qur'an; all of these are examples of Islamic Art. But what is Islamic Art?

Islamic Art is a modern concept, created by art historians in the nineteenth century to categorize and study the material first produced under the Islamic peoples that emerged from Arabia in the seventh century.

Today Islamic Art describes all of the arts that were produced in the lands where Islam was the dominant religion or the religion of those who ruled. Unlike the terms Christian, Jewish, and Buddhist art, which refer only to religious art of these faiths, Islamic art is not used merely to describe religious art or architecture, but applies to all art forms produced in the Islamic World.

Thus, Islamic Art refers not only to works created by Muslim artists, artisans, and architects or for Muslim patrons. It encompasses the works created by Muslim artists for a patron of any faith, including Christians, Jews, or Hindus, and the works created by Jews, Christians, and others, living in Islamic lands, for patrons, Muslim and otherwise.

One of the most famous monuments of Islamic Art is the Taj Mahal, a royal mausoleum, located in Agra, India. Hinduism is majority religion in India; however, because Muslim rulers, most famously the Mughals, dominated large areas of modern-day India for centuries, India has a vast range of Islamic art and architecture. The Great Mosque of Xian, China, is one of the oldest and best preserved mosques in China. First constructed in 742 C.E., the mosque's current form dates to the fifteenth century C.E. and follows the plan and architecture of a contemporary Buddhist temple. In fact, much Islamic art and architecture was—and still is—created through a synthesis of local traditions and more global ideas.



Figure 6.1.2.7: View of the Great Mosque of Xi'an (photo: **chensiyuan**)

Islamic Art is not a monolithic style or movement; it spans 1,300 years of history and has incredible geographic diversity—Islamic empires and dynasties controlled territory from Spain to western China at various points in history. However, few if any of these various countries or Muslim empires would have referred to their art as Islamic. An artisan in Damascus thought of his work as Syrian or Damascene—not as Islamic.

As a result of thinking about the problems of calling such art Islamic, certain scholars and major museums, like the Metropolitan Museum of Art, have decided to omit the term Islamic when they renamed their new galleries of Islamic art. Instead, they are called "Galleries for the Art of the Arab Lands, Turkey, Iran, Central Asia, and Later South Asia," thereby stressing the regional styles and individual cultures. Thus, when using the phrase, Islamic Art, one should know that it is a useful, but artificial, concept.

In some ways, Islamic Art is a bit like referring to the Italian Renaissance. During the Renaissance, there was no unified Italy; it was a land of independent city-states. No one would have thought of one's self as an Italian, or of the art they produced as Italian, rather one conceived of one's self as a Roman, a Florentine, or a Venetian. Each city developed a highly local, remarkable style. At the same time, there are certain underlying themes or similarities that unify the art and architecture of these cities and allow scholars to speak of an Italian Renaissance.

Themes

Similarly, there are themes and types of objects that link the arts of the Islamic World together. Calligraphy is a very important art form in the Islamic World. The Qur'an, written in elegant scripts, represents Allah's (or God's) divine word, which

Muhammad received directly from Allah during his visions. Quranic verses, executed in calligraphy, are found on many different forms of art and architecture. Likewise, poetry can be found on everything from ceramic bowls to the walls of houses. Calligraphy's omnipresence underscores the value that is placed on language, specifically Arabic.

Geometric and vegetative motifs are very popular throughout the lands where Islam was once or still is a major religion and cultural force, appearing in the private palaces of buildings such as the Alhambra (in Spain) as well as in the detailed metal work of Safavid Iran. Likewise, certain building types appear throughout the Muslim world: mosques with their minarets, mausolea, gardens, and madrasas (religious schools) are all common. However, their forms vary greatly.



Figure 6.1.2.8: View of the minarets of the Blue Mosque, Istanbul (photo: Graham Bould)

One of the most common misconceptions about the art of the Islamic World is that it is aniconic; that is, the art does not contain representations of humans or animals. Religious art and architecture, almost from the earliest examples, such as the Dome of the Rock, the Aqsa Mosque (both in Jerusalem), and the Great Mosque of Damascus, built under the Umayyad rulers, did not include human figures and animals. However, the private residences of sovereigns, such as Qasr 'Amra or Khirbat Mafjar, were filled with vast figurative paintings, mosaics, and sculpture.



Figure 6.1.2.9: Minarets of Al-Azhar Mosque, Cairo, Egypt (photo: Ahmed Al.Badawy)

The study of the arts of the Islamic World has also lagged behind other fields in Art History. There are several reasons for this. First, many scholars are not familiar with Arabic or Farsi (the dominant language in Iran). Calligraphy, particularly Arabic calligraphy, as noted above, is a major art form and appears on almost all types of architecture and arts. Second, the art forms and objects prized in the Islamic world do not correspond to those traditionally valued by art historians and collectors in the Western world. The so-called decorative arts—carpets, ceramics, metalwork, and books—are types of art that Western scholars have traditionally valued less than painting and sculpture. However, the last fifty years has seen a flourishing of scholarship on the arts of the Islamic World.

Arts of the Islamic World

Here, we have decided to use the phrase "Arts of the Islamic World" to emphasize the art that was created in a world where Islam was a dominant religion or a major cultural force, but was not necessarily religious art. Often when the word "Islamic" is used today, it is used to describe something religious; thus using the phrase, Islamic Art, potentially implies, mistakenly, that all of this art is religious in nature. The phrase, "Arts of the Islamic World," also acknowledges that not all of the work produced in the "Islamic World" was for Muslims or was created by Muslims.

Note on organization from the Smarthistory contributing editor

Smarthistory has organized material on Islamic art into three chronological periods: Early, Medieval and Late. When starting to learn about a new area of art, chronological organization often enables students to grasp the material and its fundamentals before going on to more complex analysis, like comparing building types or styles. Within each of these chronological groups, they have focused on creating geographic groups or

groupings to organize the material further. The Islamic World was only unified very briefly in its history under the Umayyads (661-750 CE) and the early Abbasids (750-932 CE). Soon various dynasties or rulers simultaneously commanded sections of territory, many of which had no cultural commonalities, aside from their religion.

Arabic, Persian and Turkish are complex languages whose transcription from their respective scripts to English has changed considerably over time. For the sake of ease, Smarthistory has used the most common forms today, omitting the vocalizations. While they have aimed for consistency, they have also tried to use the simplest forms for those who are new to the arts of the Islamic World.

Additional resources:

Bloom, Jonathan, and Sheila Blair. *Islamic Arts*. London: Phaidon Press, 1997.

The Nature of Islamic Art on The Metropolitan Museum of Art's Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History

Archnet, a resource focused on architecture, urbanism, environmental and landscape design, visual culture, and conservation issues related to the Muslim world

Islamic Art reading list from the Victoria and Albert Museum

Arts of the Islamic world: The later period

by GLENNA BARLOW

What does the Taj Mahal have to do with the Tamerlane? What do Persian carpets have to do with Turkish tiles? Quite a bit, as it turns out. By the fourteenth century, Islam had spread as far East as India and Islamic rulers had solidified their power by establishing prosperous cities and a robust trade in decorative arts along the all-important Silk Road. This complex period from approximately **c. 1517 - 1924 C.E.** is characterized by competing and overlapping cultures and empires. Read below for an introduction to the later Islamic dynasties.

Ottoman (1300-1924)

At its earliest stages, the Ottoman state was little more than a group formed as a result of the dissolution of the Anatolian Seljuq sultanate. However, in 1453, the Ottomans captured the great Byzantine capital, Constantinople, and in 1517, they defeated the Mamluks and took control of the most significant state in the Islamic world.



Figure 6.1.2.1: Mimar Sinan, Süleymaniye Mosque built for the Sultan Süleyman the Lawgiver, 1558 (Istanbul)

While the Ottomans ruled for many centuries, the height of the empire's cultural and economic prosperity was achieved during Süleyman the Magnificent's reign (r. 1520-1566), a period often referred to as the Ottoman's 'golden age.' In addition to large-scale architectural projects, the decorative arts flourished, chief among them, ceramics, particularly tiles. Iznik tiles, named for the city in Anatolia where they were produced, developed a trademark style of curling vines and flowers rendered in beautiful shades of blue and turquoise. These designs were informed by the blue and white floral patterns found in Chinese porcelain—similar to earlier Mamluk tiles, and Timurid art to the East. In addition to Iznik, other artistic hubs developed, such as Bursa, known for its silks, and Cairo for its carpets. The capital, Istanbul (formerly Constantinople), became a great center for all matters of cultural importance from manuscript illumination to architecture.



Figure 6.1.2.2: Iznik tiles in Sinan, Rüstem Pasha Mosque, 1561-63 (Istanbul)

The architecture of the period, both sacred and secular, incorporates these decorative arts, from the dazzling blue tiles and monumental calligraphy that adorn the walls of Topkapi Palace (begun 1459) to the carpets that line the floors of the Süleymaniye Mosque (1550-1558). Ottoman mosque architecture itself is marked by the use of domes, widely used

earlier in Byzantium, and towering minarets. The Byzantine influence draws primarily from Hagia Sophia, a former church that was **converted into a mosque** (and is now a museum).

Timurid (1369-1502)

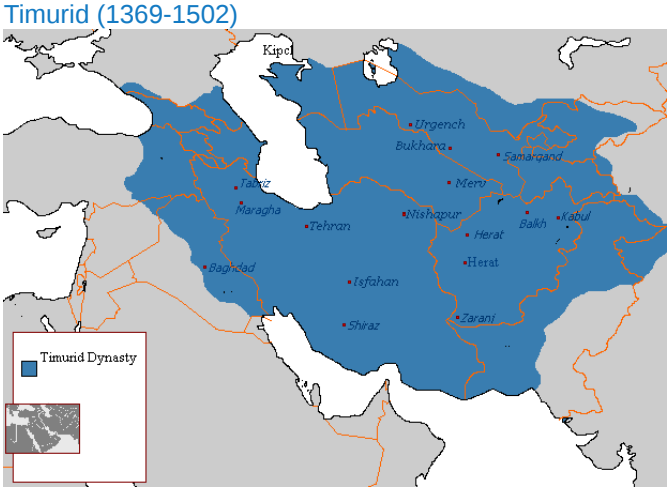


Figure 6.1.2.3: Timurid Dynasty at its greatest extent

This powerful Central Asian dynasty was named for its founder, Tamerlane (ruled 1370-1405), which is derived from Timur the Lame. Despite his rather pathetic epithet, he claimed to be a descendent of Genghis Khan and demonstrated some of his supposed ancestor's ruthlessness in conquering neighboring territories.

After establishing a vast empire, Timur developed a monumental architecture befitting his power, and sought to make Samarkand the "pearl of the world." Because the capital was situated at a major crossroads of the Silk Road (the crucial trade route linking the Middle East, Central Asia, and China), and because Timur had conquered so widely, the Timurids acquired a myriad of artisans and craftspeople from distinct artistic traditions. The resulting style synthesized aesthetic and design principles from as far away as India (then Hindustan) and the lands in between.



Figure 6.1.2.4: Registan, Samarkand, Uzbekistan, 15th-17th centuries

The result can be seen in cities filled with buildings created on a lavish scale that exhibited tall, bulbous domes and the finest ceramic tiles. The structures and even the cities themselves are often described foremost by the overwhelming use of blues and golds. While the Timurid dynasty itself was short-lived, its legacy survives not only in the grand architecture that it left behind but in its descendants who went on to play significant roles in the Ottoman, Safavid and Mughal empires.

Safavid (1502-1736)

The Safavids, a group with roots in the Sufic tradition (a mystical branch of Islam), came to power in Persia, modern-day Iran and Azerbaijan. In 1501 the Safavid rulers declared Shi'a Islam as its state religion; and in just ten years the empire came to include all of Iran.

The art of manuscript illumination was highly prized in the Safavid courts, and royal patrons made many large-scale commissions. Perhaps the most notable of these is the *Shahnama* (or 'Book of Kings,' a compilation of stories about earlier rulers of Iran) from the 1520s. While painting in this context did not have the same prominent and longstanding tradition as it does in Western art, the illustrations exhibit masterful workmanship and an incredible attention to detail.



Figure 6.1.2.5: The Ardabil Carpet, Maqsud of Kashan, Persian: Safavid dynasty, silk warps and wefts with wool pile (25 million knots, 340 per sq. inch), 1539-40 C.E., Tabriz, Kashan, Isfahan or Kirman, Iran (Victoria & Albert Museum)

Trade in carpets was also important, and even today, people understand the appeal of Persian carpets. These large-scale, high-quality pieces were created as luxurious furnishings for royal courts. The most famous—perhaps of all time—is a pair known as the Ardabil Carpets, created in 1539-1540. The carpets were nearly identical, perfectly symmetrical and enormous. Every inch of space was filled with flowers, scrolling vines, and medallions.

The empire began to struggle financially and militarily until the rule of Shah Abbas (r. 1587-1629). He moved the capital to Isfahan where he built a magnificent new city and established state workshops for textiles, which, along with silk and other goods, were increasingly exported to Europe. The mosque architecture made use of earlier Persian elements, like the four-iwan plan and building materials of brick and glazed tiles reminiscent of Timurid architecture, with its blues and greens and bulbous domes. Even in such far-removed lands, the

connections between these dynasties are evident in the art they created.

Mughal (1526-1858)

Though Islam had been introduced in India centuries before, the Mughals were responsible for some of the greatest works of art produced in the canons of both Indian and Islamic art. The empire established itself when Babur, himself a Timurid prince of Turkish and Central Asian descent, came to Hindustan and defeated the existing Islamic sultanate in Delhi.

Tracing their roots to Central Asia, the Mughals produced art, music and poetry that was highly influenced by Persian and Central Asian aesthetics. This is evident in the style and importance given to miniature paintings, created to illustrate manuscripts. The most grandiose of these was the Akbarnama, created to record the conquests of Akbar, widely regarded as the greatest Mughal emperor. The art and architecture created during his reign demonstrate a synthesis of indigenous Indian temple architecture with structural and design elements derived from Islamic sources farther West. The Mughals developed a unique architectural style which, in the years after Akbar's reign, began to feature scalloped arches and stylized floral designs in white marble. The most famous example is the Taj Mahal, constructed by Shah Jahan from 1632-1653.



Figure 6.1.2.6: Taj Mahal, Agra, India, 1632-53 (photo: **Mathew Knott**, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

The Mughal dynasty left a lasting mark on the landscape of India, and remained in power until the British completed their conquest of India in the nineteenth century.

Although historians generally agree that the major Islamic dynasties end in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Islamic art and culture have continued to flourish. Muslim artists and Muslim countries are still producing art. Some art historians consider such work as simply modern or contemporary art while others see it within the continuity of Islamic art.

Additional resources:

The Art of the Ottomans before 1600 at The Metropolitan Museum of Art's Timeline of Art History

The Art of the Safavids before 1600 at The Metropolitan Museum of Art's Timeline of Art History

The Art of the Mughals before 1600 at The Metropolitan Museum of Art's Timeline of Art History

Introduction to the Mughal Empire from the BBC

Introduction to the court carpets of the Ottoman, Safavid, and Mughal empires

by KENDRA WEISBIN



Figure 6.1.2.27: Detail, Medallion Carpet, *The Ardabil Carpet*, Maqsud of Kashan, Persian: Safavid Dynasty, silk warps and wefts with wool pile, 1539-40 C.E., Tabriz, Kashan, Isfahan or Kirman, Iran (Victoria & Albert, London)

Carpet weaving in the Islamic world

Carpets are woven works of art that were produced at every level of society in the Islamic world. Women have been weaving for centuries in villages and nomadic encampments all over the Middle East, Anatolia, and Central Asia, each woman passing down her techniques and designs to her daughters. These women created carpets both for sale and for their own personal use, and this tradition continues today.



Figure 6.1.2.28: Carpet (Ottoman) with cintamani motif, c. 1550, Cairo, Egypt, wool, 79 x 48″ (Metropolitan Museum of Art)

Carpets were also made in the royal courts of the Islamic world. These carpets were not just functional floor coverings, they were ornate works of art that indicated the status and wealth of their owners. Court carpets were used on the floors in reception halls, audience chambers, and at court-supported religious institutions. They were also presented as impressive gifts to other rulers. Manuscript paintings of the 16th and 17th centuries suggest smaller rugs were often layered on top of larger carpets and also show that many carpets were used in outdoor pleasure pavilions and palatial parks.

Rulers had access to expensive materials, such as silk and metal-wrapped threads, and employed the most highly skilled designers and weavers in their empires to create enormous and luxurious carpets. Because of their quality, design, and skilled execution, court carpets are among the finest examples of art from the Islamic world. Court carpets are often very different from the carpets made in commercial workshops or villages. Rather than solely utilizing centuries-old traditional motifs, court carpets often share designs found on a range of media, such as bookbinding and manuscript painting.

Although carpets were made in many royal courts, the Ottoman (1281–1924), the Safavid (1501–1732), and the Mughal (1526–1858) Empires provide some of the richest examples of royally produced carpets.



Figure 6.1.2.29: Cintamani motif detail



Figure 6.1.2.30: Border detail

Ottoman court carpets



Figure 6.1.2.31: Prayer Carpet (Ottoman), 1575-90, likely Istanbul, silk (warp and weft), wool (pile), cotton (pile), 68 x 50″ (Metropolitan Museum of Art)

The Ottoman Empire originated in Anatolia (modern-day Turkey), and was one of the largest and longest lived in the Islamic world. It controlled territories that reached from North Africa to Eastern Europe from 1299 until 1923. Anatolia has a long tradition of carpet weaving, but from the 16th century onward Ottoman court carpets utilized a set of specific designs created by the artists of the Ottoman court workshops, designs that were also used on the court ceramics, paintings, bookbindings, and textiles.

Among the most popular of these was the “saz style,” which is characterized by long sinuous leaves, and stylized flowers (see below). Court artists also developed the “floral style,” where we see more naturalistic depictions of flowers such as tulips, roses, carnations, and hyacinths, among others. The floral and saz styles were sometimes used alone and sometimes used together, along with other motifs like the cintamani pattern (usually a

combination of pearl-like circles accompanied by wavy lines sometimes called “tiger stripes”), on a huge variety of objects designed by the court, including ceramics, silks, carpets, and manuscripts.



Figure 6.1.2.32: Border detail (note the long curving saz style leaves, a pair of white tulips facing downward, and branches of small white hyacinth blossoms



Figure 6.1.2.33: Floral style detail showing carnations and tulips

Both the saz and floral styles appear on this rare Ottoman court prayer rug. The jagged-edged saz leaves gracefully undulate in the border amongst carnations, tulips, and other flowers. The arch at the center of the carpet identifies this as a prayer rug, and symbolizes both a mihrab (from mosque architecture) and a gateway to paradise. Such rugs were, and are, used by Muslims during the five daily prayers prescribed in Islam. Though one can go to mosque during the prayer times, prayer can take place anywhere so long as there is a clean surface (provided by the rug) and water for ritual cleansing. A luxurious prayer rug like this would have belonged to a very wealthy court patron.

The design of this remarkable carpet, the prototype for later designs, may be based on the slender-columned architecture of Muslim Spain. When Muslims and Jews were expelled from Spain in 1492, many exiles settled in the Ottoman Empire, bringing with them their own visual culture, which, in turn, influenced Ottoman art. This dual-columned design spawned an entire genre of architecturally-inspired prayer rugs across Anatolia.



Figure 6.1.2.34: Ottoman miniature showing a Safavid dignitary before Ottoman sultan, Sultan Murad III, n.d. (Topkapi Museum, photo: Walter Denny)

One of the most remarkable aspects of Ottoman court carpets is their unusual structure. Unlike all other Turkish carpets, Ottoman court carpets use S-spun wool, which is typical only of carpets woven in Egypt. Scholars attribute this unusual feature to the Ottoman conquest of Egypt in 1517, after which the Ottoman court commissioned carpets from Egyptian workshops and had Egyptian weavers and Egyptian wool sent to Turkey for their own use.

Contemporaneous manuscript illustrations shed light on how carpets were used at the court. Though we must remember that paintings are not photographs, and that artists may have invented much in their scenes, paintings like this can nevertheless tell us about the status of carpets in the court. In this painting, ordered by Sultan Murad III, a Safavid dignitary is presented to the Ottoman sultan against the backdrop of a magnificent red and blue Ushak medallion carpet. The painting shows how carpets were used as decorative and symbolic backdrops to Ottoman court rituals. Not only does the carpet provide a sumptuous setting for the ceremony, it also sends a message to the Safavids (political rivals of the Ottomans) about the wealth of the Ottoman court. We can imagine how such a carpet was used to demonstrate to visitors the power, culture, and artistic accomplishments of the Ottomans.

Safavid court carpets

The Safavids ruled Greater Iran from the early 16th to the 18th century and were avid patrons of the arts. Safavid court carpets are noted for their detailed precision, sumptuous materials, and ornate designs.



Figure 6.1.2.35: Carpet (Safavid), 16th century, Iran, probably Kashan (depicts animals, some invented and of Chinese origin), silk, 94-7/8 x 70″ (Metropolitan Museum of Art)

Carpets intended for religious settings, like the **Ardabil carpet**, display non-figural decoration such as scrolling vines, flower motifs, calligraphy, and shamsas (sunbursts). Carpets made for secular settings, like the court's palaces and pleasure pavilions, display a wider range of motifs, encompassing the designs found on carpets like the Ardabil, but also sometimes including animals, hunting scenes, human figures, and even angels.

The carpet left is a remarkable example of a secular Safavid court carpet. It was woven entirely of silk, and its bright field is filled with animals—some real, like lions and rams, and others entirely fantastical. The animals, some of which are engaged in intense combat, are set amoungst a lush backdrop of stylized flowers and trees. The popularity of animal and hunting scenes was well established in Iran; hunting was considered a princely pastime in Iran even before the advent of Islam, and continued as a widely used subject in Safavid art.



Figure 6.1.2.36: Detail of animals fighting



Figure 6.1.2.37: Detail, Safavid court carpet with animals and hunting scenes (Musée des arts décoratifs, Paris)



Figure 6.1.2.38: "Zal Expounds the Mysteries of the Magi," Folio from the *Shahnama (Book of Kings) of Shah Tahmasp Abu'l Qasim Firdausi*, attributed to Qadimi, c. 1525, Tabriz, Iran, opaque watercolor, ink, silver, and gold on paper, 18-1/2 x 12-9/16″ (The Metropolitan Museum of Art)

Large scale carpets were produced by court workshops, often with similar subjects and motifs. The fragment left displays the type of central medallion seen in the Ardabil carpet, but its field and borders are filled with birds, roaming animals, and naturalistic landscape elements. Carpets like this fragment are appropriately called "paradise carpets," reflecting their lush designs and fantastical subjects.

As with Ottoman paintings, Safavid manuscript illustrations provide insight into the use of carpets at court. In this illustration from the *Shahnama* (Book of Kings) of Shah Tahmasp, a ruler is depicted seated atop a small but luxurious carpet in an outdoor pleasure pavilion. Court carpets would be used for outdoor gatherings like this, as well as within the palaces of the Safavid shahs.

Mughal court carpets



Figure 6.1.2.39: Carpet with bird couples in a landscape, Lahore, c. 1600, cotton, wool, 233 x 158 cm (The Museum of Applied Arts, Vienna)

The Mughals controlled much of the Indian subcontinent from 1526 to 1858, ruling a largely Hindu population with cultural traditions foreign to their own.

It is likely India had no indigenous carpet weaving tradition prior to the arrival of Muslim conquerors. The Mughals, who traced their lineage to the Mongol dynasties in Iran and Central Asia, soon established weaving workshops at their courts.

The early Mughals employed Persian artisans, and for this reason early Mughal carpets utilize largely Persian designs. Eventually, a uniquely Mughal visual repertoire emerged in the court carpets, as well as in miniature painting and other arts.

This pictorial carpet depicts a variety of bird species in a botanically lush and naturalistic setting. The scene has direct parallels in manuscript illustration, such as the margin illumination from the album page shown above. Detailed depictions of plants and animals appear widely in Mughal art, reflecting the Mughal emperors' interest in the natural world.



Figure 6.1.2.40: Border detail, *Shah Jahan Album*, c. 1620, India Ink, watercolor, and gold on paper, Mughal, period of Jahangir (Metropolitan Museum of Art)

Other Mughal carpets favor an all-over flower and lattice pattern as well as other floral designs. Botanically naturalistic floral designs can be found on a wide range of media from the Mughal court, peaking in popularity during the reign of the Shah Jahan who is best known as the patron of the Taj Mahal mausoleum which incorporates similar floral designs into its architectural decoration.

Additional resources:

Conserving the Emperor's Carpet (video from The Metropolitan Museum of Art)

Carol Bier, ed. Woven from the Soul, Spun from the Heart: Textile Arts of Safavid and Qajar Iran, 16th–19th Centuries (Exhibition catalogue. Washington, D.C.: Textile Museum, 1987).

Walter Denny, "Islamic Carpets in European Paintings," Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History, Metropolitan Museum of Art

Marika Sardar, "Carpets from the Islamic World, 1600-1800," Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History, Metropolitan Museum of Art

Jon Thompson, *Oriental Carpets from the Tents, Cottages and Workshops of Asia* (New York: Dutton, 1993).

Daniel Walker, *Flowers Underfoot: Indian Carpets of the Mughal Era* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1997)

Ottoman Carpet: "Woven Cultures"

by DR. ARIEL FEIN and DR. LAUREN KILROY-EWBANK

The following video further describes the Ottoman carpet mentioned in the article above, featuring evidence of its "woven cultures."



Cite this page as: Dr. Ariel Fein and Dr. Lauren Kilroy-Ewbank, "Ottoman prayer carpet with triple-arch design," in *Smarthistory*, October 11, 2022, accessed November 15, 2025, https://smarthistory.org/ottoman-prayer-carpet-with-triple-arch-design/.

Transcription of "Woven Cultures" video

[0:00] [music]

Dr. Lauren Kilroy-Ewbank: [0:04] We're at The Metropolitan Museum of Art, and we're looking at an Ottoman prayer carpet from the 16th century. And while we might be tempted to see this simply as a beautiful carpet used in prayer, this carpet actually reveals a far more complex story of cultural connections.

Dr. Ariel Fein: [0:22] This is a specific type of a prayer carpet called a sajjadah carpet, meaning a prostration carpet. It would have been used by a Muslim for worship.

Dr. Kilroy-Ewbank: [0:30] We're seeing this detailed floral border framing paired columns with niches that are topped by arches.

Dr. Fein: [0:39] We see two different kinds of floral patterns. We have saz-style floral ornament as well as stylized flowers. But we also see more naturalistic style, the floral style, where can identify some of the flowers, carnations and tulips.

[0:56] Much of this imagery represents the gateway to paradise. At the center of the carpet, we see a hanging lamp. This recalls Qur'anic verses, which liken Allah, which liken God, to a glass lamp hanging in a niche.

Dr. Kilroy-Ewbank: [1:14] But when we consider why this carpet looks the way it does, a different facet of the story reveals itself to us.

Dr. Fein: [1:22] The slender paired columns are entirely absent from an Ottoman architectural vocabulary. These columns, in fact, are most closely related to the columns that we find in a 14th-century palace, the Alhambra.

Dr. Kilroy-Ewbank: [1:41] The Alhambra is in what is today Spain. In 1492, the Catholic monarchs Isabel and Ferdinand defeat the Nasrids, and in the same year, you have them expelling Jews from the Iberian Peninsula.

Dr. Fein: [1:54] Some Jews chose to look south, towards North Africa. Others moved into Italy and other parts of Europe, while a large group of Spanish Jews opted to travel all the way across the Mediterranean to the Ottoman Empire, where they hoped they might find a better life and better opportunities under the new Muslim Ottoman dynasty.

Dr. Kilroy-Ewbank: [2:18] So Jewish carpet weavers who are now working, probably in Ottoman workshops, are emulating and adapting forms that they were already using from time in Spain.

Dr. Fein: [2:29] This carpet is, in fact, the earliest example of this motif that survives from the Ottoman Empire. This is really the prototype, the earliest example of this motif from which so many variations developed.

[2:43] The Jewish Museum has in its collection a carpet that is remarkably similar to this one that was made in 1608 to be donated to the Seville Synagogue in Istanbul. This carpet was not used on the floor for worship. It was used as a parokhet, a curtain that was placed before the Torah ark.

Dr. Kilroy-Ewbank: [3:07] We're also seeing an inscription in Hebrew, which we do not see in the Ottoman carpet that we're looking at here in the gallery.

Dr. Fein: [3:15] The inscription refers to the arch as a gate of the Lord, which is very similar to the arched niche as a gateway to paradise. The hanging lamp includes an inscribed name of God. It suggests an understanding of the Muslim use of the mosque lamp within a niche as a representation of Allah.

[3:40] It is equally a precious object that is used to create a sacred space.

Dr. Kilroy-Ewbank: [3:45] You have one carpet produced for a Muslim audience, another for a Jewish audience, and yet we're seeing this visual conversation between the two of them.

Dr. Fein: [3:53] This carpet represents this unique moment in time when Ottoman court culture meets with Spanish traditions carried by Jewish intermediaries.

[4:03] [music]

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6.2: Interiors of Ottoman Syria

Learning Objectives

- Describe key characteristics of interior design of the Ottoman Syria, identifying motifs repeated across various architectural finishing techniques.
- Analyze motives for cultural fusion in interior design of the Ottoman Syria.
- Evaluate the extent to which motifs and characteristics of interior design during the Ottoman period are a reflection of religious or culturally geographic values.

Iznik tilework at the Topkapi Palace

by DR. ELIZABETH MACAULAY and DR. BETH HARRIS

Previously in this chapter you examined decorative motifs used on carpets from the Ottoman, Mughal, and Safavid empires. You will find that these motifs were also used in various other artforms of these regions and periods, including ceramics. Iznik tilework is a specific kind of ceramics that have these motifs in common. The following video explains more about Iznik tiles and features examples from the Ottoman Topkapi Palace in Istanbul, built by Süleyman the Magnificent in the 16th century.



Dr. Elizabeth Macaulay and Dr. Beth Harris, "Topkapı Palace tiles," in *Smarthistory*, June 3, 2022, https://smarthistory.org/topkapi-palace-tiles/

Transcription of "Topkapi Palace tiles" video

[0:00] [music]

Dr. Harris: [0:04] We're at the Topkapı Palace in Istanbul, in front of a room built by Suleiman the Magnificent in the 16th century.

Dr. Elizabeth Macaulay: [0:13] This room here is in an isolated part of the palace. The palace was not only the residence of the sultan, his family, his harem, but also the administrative center of the Ottoman Empire. Its position is beautiful, but what also makes it important for us is the fantastic tile work that we see both on the interior and on the exterior.

Dr. Beth Harris: [0:31] We've come to know these tiles by seeing them in mosques around Istanbul, and we know these as Iznik tileware, and that name comes from the city of Iznik, which was a center for creating tiles.

Dr. Macaulay: [0:43] What we're looking at here is one of five tiles, four of which are absolutely identical. It is a large panel. It's over a meter tall, which means it's over about 40 inches tall. It's big, and it's a single tile, which is rather exceptional.

Dr. Beth Harris: [0:55] I see motifs that remind me of Chinese vase painting, like the cloud scrolls in the spandrels.

Dr. Macaulay: [1:02] That's not surprising that it should take us to China and Central Asia. Scholars have called this style the international Timurid style. Timurid refers to Timur, who was the great Timurid leader. One thing that did happen under his reign was a tremendous flourishing of the arts, which we can see the Ottomans engaging with here.

Dr. Beth Harris: [1:20] For example, the serrated leaf patterns that we see here that art historians call the Saz style.

Dr. Macaulay: [1:25] It's called the Saz style or the Hatayi style, which means from China, which really comes later on as it's developed under the Ottomans to be a quintessential Ottoman design that we will also see in textile design, in calligraphy, and in manuscripts.

Dr. Beth Harris: [1:39] Here, we're seeing the beginnings of a tradition that the Ottomans are going to make their own.

Dr. Macaulay: [1:43] The other thing that we see are these flowers, which to me look very much like peonies.

Dr. Beth Harris: [1:48] And we see birds here, and those look like dragons.

Dr. Macaulay: [1:51] They do have a dragon-like quality. They also seem to have these almost flames coming off of their head, and again something that we have seen in a lot of Chinese manuscripts and Chinese art. Through the filter of Central Asia, some of these motifs are moving towards the Ottoman world.

[2:05] The other thing we can see here and something that we have to note as well is the colors. In a sense, it's somewhat monochromatic in that we have white and we have variants of blues and turquoises. We don't have greens yet. We're also missing red, one of the other quintessential colors.

Dr. Beth Harris: [2:19] Inside and also around this are tiles with many more colors that come from a later date, so we know we're at an early moment. We can really imagine this enormous flowering of patronage of Suleiman the Magnificent in the mid-16th century.

[2:33] [music]

Iznik ewer

by Ortal Bensky



Iznik ewer, 2nd half of the 16th century (Ottoman), fritware, painted in black, cobalt blue, green, red under transparent glaze, 45.4 x 39.4 cm (Brooklyn Museum)

Iznik ceramics give us a wonderful opportunity to glimpse into both the thriving Iznik ceramic industry and a 16th century Ottoman home. The ewer shown is a type of jug that is shaped like a vase. It was a common utensil used daily for carrying water from the kitchen to the dining area, and for serving family and guests. This particular ewer was made in Iznik, the Ottoman center of ceramic production.

Iznik ware



Similar Iznik ewer with hyacinths and carnations, 16th century, underglaze-painted, 23.7cm (photo: Sotheby's)

The town of Iznik was an important production center during the fifteenth, sixteenth, and part of the seventeenth centuries that manufactured ceramics for both the court in the capital, Istanbul, and for the open market. The ewer was only one form of ceramic kitchenware that was produced in Iznik workshops. Other products included dishes, bowls, tankards, and bottles.

Due to the absence of petuntse (a variety of feldspar rock), used in Chinese porcelain, true porcelain did not come to West Asia until the modern era. Nevertheless, twelfth-century Islamic potters in Persia were able to produce a strong white clay that in many respects resembled Chinese porcelain. This mixture of potter's clay, ground quartz, and glassy frit, is called fritware. This porcelain substitute, together with the under-glaze painting technique used to decorate the ceramics, was used for centuries. It is not only seen in surviving kitchenware, but also in beautiful tiles covering the interior and exterior of important Ottoman buildings.

Color, iconography, shape

Iznik ceramic production initially used blue-and-white decoration. However, by the second half of the sixteenth century, Iznik pottery saw the gradual addition of new colors as pigments were developed. The ewer at the Brooklyn Museum is painted in black, cobalt blue, green, and red under a transparent glaze.



Left: Dragon-handled ewer with inscription, late 15th–first quarter 16th century (present-day Afghanistan, probably Herat), metal, 14.3 x 15.6 x 8.6 cm (The Metropolitan Museum of Art); right: Tankard with a dragon-shaped handle, 1403–24, Ming Dynasty, blue-and-white porcelain, 14 cm high (© Trustees of the British Museum)

The ewer's round body shape with the narrow neck and the round handle is similar to the shape of metal jugs from the Islamic world of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. It was also influenced by blue-and-white ceramic pot-bellied jugs produced by Chinese potters of the Ming period. This form became especially popular in Central and Western Asia after the Mongol conquests and under the Timurid and Safavid dynasties.



Left: Iznik ewer, 2nd half of the 16th century (Ottoman), fritware, painted in black, cobalt blue, green, red under transparent glaze, 45.4 x 39.4 cm (Brooklyn Museum); right: Similar Iznik ewer, last quarter of 16th century, fritware, underglaze-painted, 21.59 x 13.34 cm (Los Angeles County Musuem of Art)

Metalsmiths of this period often used bands to separate areas of their vessels—the base from the body and the body from the neck. Similarly, the potter that created the ewer above employed decorative patterns to give an effect of visual separation similar to the metal bands. The simplicity of these bands, as opposed to the more complex motifs found on the metal jug, is repeated in the decorative floral imagery found on the larger surfaces—the body and neck of the ceramic ewer. The patterns that form the "bands" are common in Iznik ewers from the second half of the sixteenth century.

The base is decorated with black hatched lines, and at the neck, there are leaves alternating blue and green. An additional band of black lines separates this surface from the neck of the vessel. A black spiral called "the snail" is repeated just below the mouth of the ewer.



Detail, Iznik ewer, 2nd half of the 16th century (Ottoman), fritware, painted in black, cobalt blue, green, red under transparent glaze, 45.4 x 39.4 cm (Brooklyn Museum)

The body is decorated in the saz style. This style was introduced to the Ottoman court by the sixteenth century Iranian painter, Shah Qulu, who moved to Istanbul at the beginning of the century. He and his followers created the saz style, a name that derives both from the Ottoman term for the marsh reed out of which the artists' pens were crafted and from the enchanted forest of Turkic mythology. Another name for this style, hatayi, recognizes the Chinese origins of many of its elements, such as the lotus flower and the Chinese-style dragon. The saz style was adapted to many different media for the Ottoman court. Tiles with saz style drawings, for example, were used for the restorations to Istanbul's Topkapı Palace after 1574. Note how the long, serrated, saz style leaf on this tile resembles the leaf on the ewer in both shape and color—blue with a narrow red line in the center.



Left: Saz leaf (detail), Iznik ewer, 2nd half of the 16th century (Ottoman), fritware, painted in black, cobalt blue, green, red under transparent glaze, 45.4 x 39.4 cm (Brooklyn Museum); right: Tile with floral and cloud-band design, c. 1578 (Ottoman, Iznik), stonepaste; polychrome painted under transparent glaze 24.9 x 25.1 x 1.7 cm (The Metropolitan Museum of Art)

One of Shah Qulu's pupils in the *nakkashane* (royal atelier), the Anatolian Kara Memi, developed another popular style seen on the ewer. Shortly after the middle of the sixteenth century, Kara Memi introduced a set of motifs that is a virtual garden of stylized flowers, but most emblematic is the long, elegant tulips. These flowers constitute one of the most distinctive and familiar aspects of Ottoman style art, and we can identify them as well as leaves and additional garden flowers on the body and neck of the ewer.

Adopting the aesthetics of the aristocracy

The fading, bleeding colors on the vessel indicate that it was not made for the royal court though it was produced from fine materials, and its drawing imitates the court style. It was most likely made for the merchant class, subjects of the empire who were not aristocracy but were not enslaved individuals. The owners of the ewer adopted the aesthetics of the aristocracy and purchased their own ceramics in a style similar to that found in the royal court.

The Ottomans themselves accepted the influence of various cultures in to their art. Their artistic strength comes from

adaptation of influences such as Chinese and Iranian, together with local innovations to create what was eventually identified as an Ottoman style.

Cite this page as: Ortal Bensky, "Iznik ewer," in *Smarthistory*, August 9, 2015, accessed January 29, 2026, https://smarthistory.org/iznik-ewer/.

Qa'a: A Muslim room in Damascus, Syria

by DR. ELIZABETH MACAULAY and DR. STEVEN ZUCKER

Now you're ready to take a look at the interior design of rooms in their entirety! This first example is a period room exhibit at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. This residential winter reception chamber (qa'a) is typical of the late Ottoman period in Damascus, Syria.



Dr. Elizabeth Macaulay and Dr. Steven Zucker, "Qa'a (The Damascus room)," in *Smarthistory*, December 18, 2015, https://smarthistory.org/qaa-the-damascus-room/

Transcription of "Qa'a (The Damascus room)" video

[0:00] [music]

Dr. Steven Zucker: [0:08] There's this fabulous sound of water, on this low fountain in this lush, beautiful room.

Dr. Elizabeth Macaulay-Lewis: [0:17] That's one of the sounds that would have welcomed anyone into a Damascene house, the sound of the fountain. It would escort you into one of the reception rooms.

[0:25] We're standing in a qa'a, which is one of the winter reception rooms from a house from Damascus from the early 18th century that is now in The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Dr. Zucker: [0:35] It is filled with cut stone [and] wooden panels, which are decoratively carved in complex patterns. There are cushions and the room's shelves are filled with ceramics and books. It feels as if we're in a very prosperous environment.

Dr. Macaulay-Lewis: [0:52] We are in a very prosperous environment, actually. This was a house that probably belonged to somebody who was affluent. This is where a merchant or a local political figure would be meeting and greeting his guests.

Dr. Zucker: [1:03] I love this, because so often when we think about history, when we think about religious spaces, historical spaces, but this is allowing us into the private life of a person in Damascus in the early 1700s.

Dr. Macaulay-Lewis: [1:17] Well, and that's what makes it so extraordinary, we get a sense of how people lived. You have to imagine that you are coming to call on the great man of this house. So you come in, hopefully you are important enough that as you are ushered in from the courtyard, and you come into this qa'a, you enter into the space around the fountain called the 'ataba, like a threshold.

[1:35] If you are important, you take off your shoes and you are escorted to sit on the diwan in the other part of the room that is called the tazar, this is this kind of raised platform. If you are not so important, you get stuck in the 'ataba which, while it's beautiful — it has inlaid stone — it's a big insult to be left there, you're with people's shoes.

[1:52] [laughs]

Dr. Zucker: [1:52] All right, we don't want to stay down here. So we ascend up this step and we sit on the cushions and perhaps the servants come in, they might serve us some fruit, they might serve us some refreshing drinks.

Dr. Macaulay-Lewis: [2:05] They might serve us coffee. One of the Arab saints called coffee a gift from God.

Dr. Zucker: [2:08] I'm there.

Dr. Macaulay-Lewis: [2:09] You could also be given a water pipe, a nargila or a hookah as they are often called, so you could smoke apple tobacco. If they were in season, pomegranate juice is something you get in September in Damascus.

[2:19] You would be seated, depending on how important you were, towards the central part of the rear wall, and from there you'd be able to admire the glory of this room, which is decorated in the 'ajami style. 'Ajami means "foreign" or "Persian" in Arabic. We don't know where this type of technique comes from, but it was around in Egypt and other parts of the central Arab lands before it came to Damascus.

[2:42] What it means and what it is is this gorgeous technique that we see on the walls. It was a treatment for wood panels. What you do is you take your bit of wood. You would put a gypsum mixture down on it. You would…

Dr. Zucker: [2:52] That's like plaster.

Dr. Macaulay-Lewis: [2:53] Yeah, you'd create a raised and textured surface which you would then stencil, giving yourself a pattern. On top of that, you would put down a type of metal leaf.

[3:00] You could put down gold leaf, or you could put down silver leaf. We even get examples of tin leaf, where the tin seems to be from England and was imported. On top of that, it would then be painted.

Dr. Zucker: [3:09] So originally, this room was not as dim as it is now, but pretty vibrant.

Dr. Macaulay-Lewis: [3:14] Incredibly vibrant. You have to think in full technicolor. Now, many of the different houses in Damascus that are still extant today, we have pink. We have light green. We have vibrant blues, fuchsias, purples.

[3:26] We have every gorgeous vibrant color you can think of, but a lot of these rooms have been revarnished, and that varnish then cannot always be removed.

Dr. Zucker: [3:34] There's really an attempt to create a sense of liveliness for the eye, just like the fountain creates liveliness for the ear.

Dr. Macaulay-Lewis: [3:41] I think that's exactly right, and you can also see that in one of the most dominant features in the room, the masab, the niche. This is not a prayer niche, it's just a decorative niche.

Dr. Zucker: [3:49] I notice that it's aligned on the axis of the entry so that this would have been the first thing you would have seen.

Dr. Macaulay-Lewis: [3:55] Exactly. While you have to imagine out the Turkish tiles that are there in the center, it would have been a spectacular structure. You can see at the top, you see the hood and the muqarnas.

Dr. Zucker: [4:05] Now, those are the little fragments of a dome that create this geometric multiplication, beautifully complex.

Dr. Macaulay-Lewis: [4:13] They are a fundamental element of Islamic art. We see them not only in decorative capacities, but they also are great ways to get from a square base to a dome. We see them in a lot of mosques. Whenever you see a muqarnas, you know you are somewhere where Islam has been.

Dr. Zucker: [4:27] Within those shelves, within that niche, I see some precious objects. In fact, I see that throughout the room. And so this was a way of showing off.

Dr. Macaulay-Lewis: [4:34] You would show fantastic ewers, carved metalwork, bowls, ceramics, so people could see your affluence. It was a place in which you could show off your knowledge, your wealth. And we can see the learning and the knowledge and your culture also on the walls when we look at the inscriptions.

[4:48] That calligraphy is the other thing that dominates in this room. We can see that the cornice, both of the ceiling and of the top of the wainscoting of this wooden whole piece has got cartouches with calligraphy. Then we can see them over most of the niches on the walls. There are three poems here. Poetry is a dominant art form in the Islamic world.

Dr. Zucker: [5:04] So there is this aesthetic quality that exists not only in an auditory sense, not only visually but also linguistically here.

Dr. Macaulay-Lewis: [5:11] You are meant to be able to look, understand, and engage on different levels. All of your senses are being stimulated.

Dr. Zucker: [5:18] I'm interested in the fact that the room doesn't have any fixed furniture and that it was also seasonal. This would have been off the north side of the courtyard so that it could have taken advantage of the sun's direct rays during the winter.

Dr. Macaulay-Lewis: [5:29] We are in the world before air conditioning. You need to move to where it's either warmest or coolest, depending on the weather. The qa'a might be your winter reception room because it gets the most sun. It's in the interior.

[5:40] In the summer, you would go to the iwan, which was usually located on the south side, so it was north-facing, which would be much more pleasant in the summer.

[5:47] Originally on the rear wall here, this small niche wasn't there. It was a larger niche. In there would have been bedding rolls, carpets, things that you would use for sleeping, and you'd bring them down and put them and sleep in here.

Dr. Zucker: [5:56] So you wouldn't have had a dedicated bedroom like we have now. This would have been a space that would have had multiple purposes, depending on the season.

Dr. Macaulay-Lewis: [6:03] And depending on the time of day. If I could, I would certainly take up residence in this house or any of the different houses in Damascus, because there is something so ethereal and gorgeous about them.

[6:14] It's one of the things that has attracted travelers to Damascus. People who come to these houses, whether it's Isabel Burton or Frederick Leighton, they are so touched by them that they cannot say how meaningful they are, other than that they always long to return.

[6:27] [music]

Qa'a Images

The following high-resolution images are a selection available from the Metropolitan Museum of Art for further study of the Qa'a (Damscus Room).

> ***Virtual Museum Visit***
>
> Go to the Metropolitain Museum of Art website for more images of the Damascus Room and to zoom in to examine detail

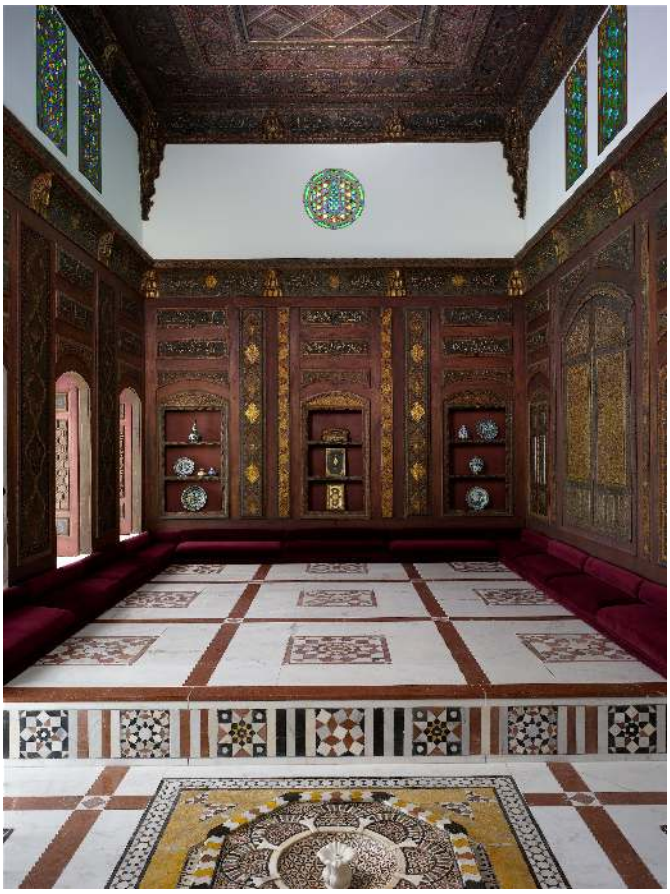


Figure 6.2.1: Damascus Room, 1707 CE (Public Domain; Metropolitan Museum of Art)



Figure 6.2.2: Damascus Room, north wall, 1707 CE (Public Domain; Metropolitan Museum of Art)

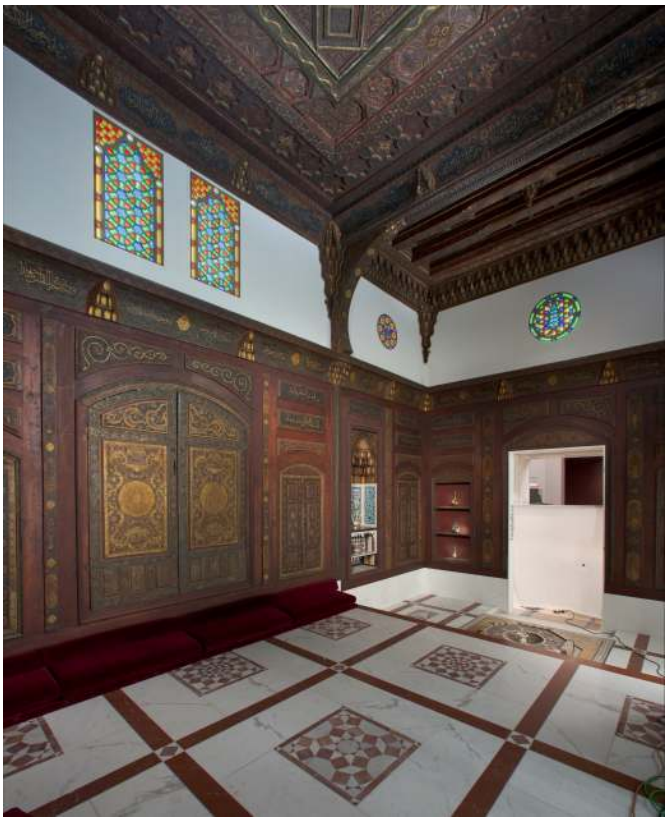


Figure 6.2.3: Damascus Room from SW wall, 1707 CE (Public Domain; Metropolitan Museum of Art)



Figure 6.2.4: Damascus Room, fountain detail, 1707 CE (Public Domain; Metropolitan Museum of Art)



Figure 6.2.5: Damascus Room, south wall, 1707 CE (Public Domain; **Metropolitan Museum of Art**)



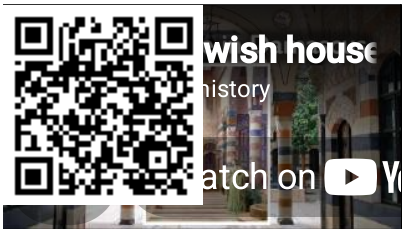
Figure 6.2.6: Damascus Room, ceiling, 1707 CE (Public Domain; **Metropolitan Museum of Art**)



Figure 6.2.7: Damascus Room, ceiling panel detail, 1707 CE (Public Domain; **Metropolitan Museum of Art**)

A Jewish house in Damascus, Syria

As covered in a previous section on Cultural Exchange in Islamic Art, "Islamic art" is not exclusively religious, nor is it exclusively created by or for Muslims. This next interior example has many characteristics in common with the previous qa'a in a Muslim residence, though this one is from a Jewish house. Both homes were contemporary with each other in Damascus, Syria. From studying this example and comparing it with the previous one, you will find important similarities carried across all Islamic art during this Ottoman period, regardless of the users' religion.



Transcription of "A Jewish house in Damascus, Bayt Farhi" video

[0:00] [music]

Dr. Elizabeth Macaulay-Lewis: [0:06] Frederic Leighton, who was President of the Royal Academy and one of the British Empire's most famous painters, spent a lot of time traveling. He went to southern Italy, he went to North Africa, and he went to Damascus. In Damascus, he was captivated by the houses.

[0:22] In a letter that he wrote to his father, he said he couldn't actually capture [them], because they were so beautiful, they had such color, so that he was having some photographs made. Fortunately for us, he in fact did sit down and paint two paintings of what is one of the most important and spectacular houses, Bayt Farhi.

Dr. Steven Zucker: [0:37] Those paintings become important evidence for us as we try to understand the evolution of this house through time.

Macaulay-Lewis: [0:44] This is a house that is located within the Old City within Damascus.

Zucker: [0:48] This is the area that was designated by UNESCO as a World Heritage Site.

Macaulay-Lewis: [0:52] It is a place that right now is very inaccessible. So, trying to study the house, we need to look to documentary evidence like this painting, also to historical photographs. Likewise, we have a lot of different travelers' accounts. It gives us a model of how we can study and understand buildings and sites that we can't study due to war and conflict.

Zucker: [1:11] This house is especially complicated, because although we might assume that it was a house that was owned by a wealthy Ottoman — the Ottoman Turks were then in control of Syria — it was in fact a Jewish house.

Macaulay-Lewis: [1:23] It belonged to one of the most prominent Jewish families in all of Damascus and actually,

arguably, this whole part of Syria within the Ottoman Empire; it belonged to the Farhi family. The Farhi family were Sephardic Jews.

[1:35] They had come from the Iberian Peninsula after 1492, when they had been expelled. Many Jews came to the Ottoman Empire because it was a place of opportunity for them, where there were many more limited opportunities for them in Europe.

Zucker: [1:47] The Farhi family flourished, and they're an important reminder of the ways in which Christians, Jews, and Muslims coexisted in the Ottoman Empire. The patriarch of the Farhi family, a man named Haim, was able to amass significant political and economic power.

[2:03] Although the Farhi family really did prosper, there were moments of crisis that were often precipitated by politics and exacerbated by their religious identity.

Macaulay-Lewis: [2:11] We start to hear about the Farhi family and Haim in the late 18th century. He clearly amassed enough money, and the family did as a whole, to build this remarkable, enormous house in the heart of the Old City within the walls.

Zucker: [2:25] This house is a reflection, not simply of Jewish traditions, but of the cosmopolitan nature of Damascus at this moment.

Macaulay-Lewis: [2:31] We see this across houses both in the standing buildings in Damascus, but also in some of the museum collections in Europe and the United States.

[2:40] The Damascus Room in the Metropolitan Museum of Art allows us to see a house from a Muslim family with its inscriptions, and the Aleppo Room in Berlin allows us to see how a Christian family might express their identity.

[2:51] So when we look at this house in comparison to those, we can see a really interesting conversation that's going on in which Jews, Christians, and Muslims are all using the same artistic languages to convey their faith, their affluence, and their lives.

Zucker: [3:05] When you approach the house from the street, there's nothing grand about it. In fact, it would be quite easy to walk right by it.

Macaulay-Lewis: [3:10] That is a strategy that is used by most grand houses in many parts of the Arab world, and this is a security issue.

Dr. Steven: [3:17] Once you begin to walk into the house, you have to take a sharp right turn, so that there is no direct sight line into the beauty within. These are known as courtyard houses, and this is a commonality between Christian, Jewish, and Muslim houses. In essence, the house surrounds a large interior courtyard.

Macaulay-Lewis: [3:34] That courtyard supplies light, it can have a well, it can have plants. If the family is more affluent, then you have two, three, even four or five courtyards. In this case, we have five. Also, who you were made a difference on what you got to see and where you got to go.

Zucker: [3:48] If you were a trusted visitor, you'd be allowed into the barrani, that is, the outer courtyard.

Macaulay-Lewis: [3:53] It was decorated with what we call ablaq work, the very famous stripes, and you would look directly across to the northern wall. Above the entrance to the main reception room was a stone-cut inscription. The stone-cut inscription would have been gilded, with a blue background and gold.

[4:08] What would have told you were not in a Christian house and not in a Muslim house was the fact that it was in Hebrew. It is in fact what is called the house blessing, which comes from Deuteronomy 28:6, "Blessed shall you be in your comings, and blessed shall you be in your goings."

[4:22] Then the line continues, and this is not from Deuteronomy. "Through this portal, pain shall not come. Not to the elderly, and not to the child, and not to the youngster. May it be His will. Amen."

[4:32] What you would go into was this extraordinary room. This is one of the places that the family would greet some of its most important visitors, depending on the weather. These houses functioned seasonally. You move from room to room, depending on what time of day it is and what season it is.

Zucker: [4:46] These rooms were multipurpose. You did not sit in a room where the sun was beating in in the hot Damascus summer.

Macaulay-Lewis: [4:52] And when it was cold, you wouldn't want to be in a big room that couldn't be heated well. You'd be in a smaller, more intimate room that you could put carpets up to cover the windows so it was warmer and intimate, but on a beautiful day that wasn't too hot, you would go into this northern room. In there, you would be greeted by, again, a symphony of colors and of decoration.

Zucker: [5:10] Damascus houses from the late 18th and early 19th century are especially noted for their decorative programs. In addition to the pastework, one that is most striking is the woodwork.

Macaulay-Lewis: [5:21] This is painted wood with raised surfaces. Often, the focal point of these rooms are inscriptions. This reminds us that we are in a cultural world where poetry is still the highest art form, and that is something of the Islamic world. In the case of the Farhi family, they use Hebrew and Aramaic to do it.

[5:38] The story that they are telling, particularly in one room which we call the Pink Room, tells us about the Farhi family. It says, "May the family grow and be fertile. May there be lots of offspring." But also, they are very deserving of all of their success and wealth because they are pious before God.

[5:52] We see this same type of language in the Damascus room in the Met. People want to have wealth. They want to have lots of descendants, but also, that they are pious and so they are deserving of God's blessings.

[6:02] While we think of these houses as beautiful and glorious and when we want to live in them, by the beginning part of the 20th century, no one does. They don't have modern conveniences. These houses are less and less desirable and they fall into disrepair. That is consistent for all of these houses in Damascus.

Zucker: [6:17] But there was a revival. In the 1990s and the early 2000s; there was an increasing interest in the Old City and in its long-neglected architecture. And there was some reinvestment in that area.

Macaulay-Lewis: [6:28] In the late 1990s, there was an awakening of an Arab identity and wanting not to look to Europe as a model for cultural identity. People started buying the old houses and renovating them.

Zucker: [6:39] Including a Paris-based Syrian architect.

Macaulay-Lewis: [6:41] Who bought Bayt Farhi and wanted to try and renovate it and then turn it into a hotel. One of the tensions we always have with historical buildings is, how do you preserve them?

Zucker: [6:50] The most serious challenge is the civil war that's been raging across Syria for years now.

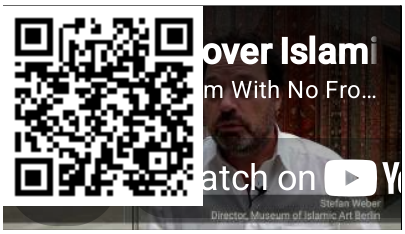
Macaulay-Lewis: [6:55] By all accounts, the building is largely intact, but much of Syria's cultural heritage has not survived.

Zucker: [7:01] A reminder of how precious our cultural heritage is and how critical it is for us to undertake research and conservation when we can.

[7:09] [music]

A Christian room in Aleppo, Syria

Here we have yet another example of Islamic art created for and used by non-Muslims. Aleppo, Syria was also part of the Ottoman empire during this time period. The following video from Museum with No Fronteirs offers another comparison of interior design of the Islamic world during this time period and in this region.



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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

7: Catholic Churches 1400s-1700s

7.1: Renaissance Rome

7.1.1: Introduction to Italian Renaissance Art

7.1.2: Domestic Furniture of the Renaissance

7.1.3: Catholic Churches of Renaissance Rome

7.2: Baroque Churches

7.3: South American Baroque

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7.1: Renaissance Rome

Learning Objectives

- Explain why Renaissance art is considered "humanistic" within the context of western art history, providing examples of various artforms such as painting and sculpture.
- Evaluate the extent to which Catholic values and Renaissance artistic principles impacted church architecture and interiors of the period.
- Compare key characteristics and features of furniture from the Renaissance period with examples from the preceding European middle ages.

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7.1.1: Introduction to Italian Renaissance Art

A primer for Italian renaissance art

by Dr. Heather Graham



Figure 7.1.1.1: Raphael, *School of Athens*, fresco, 1509–11 (Stanza della Segnatura, Papal Palace, Vatican; photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 4.0)

Why study Italian renaissance art?

Even if you are not a student of art history, you are likely familiar with the names Donatello, Leonardo da Vinci, Raffaello Sanzio (Raphael), and Michelangelo Buonarotti. There is a reason these names continue to be part of our contemporary popular culture (and it's not just because these are the names of everyone's favorite martial arts mutant Turtles). These artists were central to what we today call the Renaissance—a period in European history (c. 1400–1600) when some of our current ideas about society, politics, and art took form.

> ***"The past is a foreign country; they do things differently there."***
>
> *L.P. Hartley, The Go-Between*

Navigating the art of the past requires a different set of tools than those required for understanding art produced in our contemporary world. This introduction will orient you to some important, basic information as you begin to study Italian renaissance art. Within each section below you will find links to essays and videos that flesh out the themes introduced.



Figure 7.1.1.2: Michelangelo's famous nudes on the Sistine Chapel ceiling borrow from ancient Roman art forms, such as the so-called Belvedere torso. Left: *Apollonios, Belvedere Torso*, a copy from the 1st century B.C.E. or C.E. of an earlier sculpture from the first half of the 2nd century B.C.E., marble, 159 cm (Museo Pio-Clementino, Vatican; photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0); right: Michelangelo, Ignudo (detail), ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, Vatican City, Rome, 1508–12, fresco

The term "renaissance" is often used to designate a rebirth of interest in the ancient Greek and Roman worlds (often referred to as "classical antiquity") that arose in Europe in the later Middle Ages.

While engagement with the Greco-Roman past was not new, it took on a new urgency in Italy beginning in the 14th century and was eventually felt throughout the European continent. This interest prompted new intellectual investigations (humanism) that had a profound influence on European culture, affecting all realms of life including the visual arts.

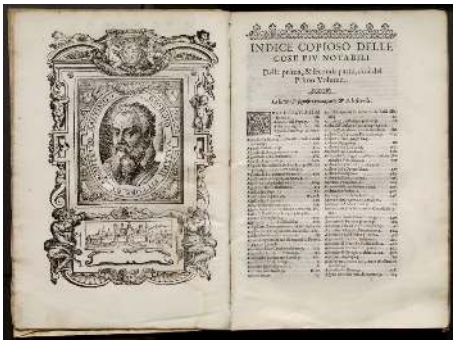


Figure 7.1.1.3: Giorgio Vasari, *Le vite de' piu eccellenti pittori scultori e architettori* (Florence, 1568) (National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.)

Many of the artistic traditions originating or maturing in this context informed the direction of European art for the next

several centuries. Linear perspective, volumetric figures rendered with anatomical precision, emotionally charged expression, and visual naturalism are formal elements popularized in the Renaissance. This was especially true of art in Italy where ancient Roman art demonstrating many of these traits was abundant (such as Roman relief sculpture and architecture).

This was also the period when artistic theory and the European discipline of art history began to develop. Leon Battista Alberti's treatise, *On Painting* (1435/36), was the first theoretical text written on visual art in Europe and Giorgio Vasari's *Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects* (1550, 2nd edition 1568) was the first critical history of European art. Many of the ideas originating in the writings of these men and their contemporaries are still fundamental to artistic theory and practice today. In fact, Vasari's categories of artists, including his privileging of Florentines, and standards for evaluation of their work have dominated the discipline. For several centuries after his text's publication, the artists and visual approaches that he celebrated were seen as the "gold standard" in art, the foundation for what we call the European canon. Contemporary scholars striving for a more inclusive art history have worked to unpack and complicate Vasari's ideas. His construction of the artist as a born genius, for example, an idea epitomized in his life of Michelangelo, has been repeatedly challenged in feminist scholarship. Privileges of sex, race, and social status enabled the artistic success that Vasari presented as inevitable.

Who?

To understand the art of the Italian renaissance, we need to consider the values, social mores, and the religious and political interests of the people who made, paid for, and first looked at the art. Unfortunately, our knowledge of these people is limited and skewed. History is most often written by those in positions of privilege and power who generally leave behind the most evidence of their lives and ideas. This means that we have quite a bit of information about some people—primarily Christian men who were wealthy merchants, educated elites, or members of the Church—and little to none from other social groups, including most women, the peasantry, non-Christians, and non-Europeans.



Figure 7.1.1.4: Raphael's serene and pensive sitter is a far cry from the reality of the man depicted: the fiery Warrior Pope, Julius II. Even Raphael, the artistic darling of early 16th-century Rome, was far removed from his powerful patron's exalted status. Raphael, *Portrait of Pope Julius II*, 1511, oil on poplar, 108.7 x 81 cm (National Gallery, London; photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 4.0)

With few exceptions, artists did not enjoy the status of intellectuals or social elites. Because they made things by hand that they then sold for profit, they were deemed of lower social stature than the wealthy merchants and aristocrats who bought their work. Art making was traditionally seen as a Mechanical, and not a Liberal Art (art of the mind). While the status of the artist did improve over the course of the Renaissance—thanks in part to our Ninja Turtles' namesakes—it was a slow and uneven process. Most artists came from what we might call urban, middle-class roots and trained for a long period in a workshop, learning their craft rather than receiving the kind of Liberal Arts education available to members of the upper classes. Even though art theorists like Alberti argued for an artist's education in a range of subjects including philosophy (which included "natural philosophy" or science), poetry, mathematics, medicine, and geometry (to name just a few), access to this education was limited. This changed somewhat in the 16th century with the rise of the first art academies, although the extent to which an artist could receive the kind of extensive education deemed ideal was still limited. Such advanced training was reserved for the sons of the elite. Even Leonardo da Vinci, the so-called universal genius (perhaps one of the few figures in history to whom that problematic title may justly be applied), was outside the world of highest learning, never having mastered Latin.

Despite the challenges facing Italian artists in participating directly in renaissance intellectual culture, many fought vigorously to elevate the status of their profession and their own corresponding social standing. Some artists, like Leonardo, sought to elevate visual art by drawing comparisons to philosophy or poetry. As he noted:

> ***"Painting is mute poetry and poetry is blind painting."***
>
> *Leonardo da Vinci, Paragone [2]*

They argued that despite making objects by hand, the renaissance artist's practice was guided first by the intellect—like a poet or a philosopher. Such arguments were modeled on the writings of ancient Roman authors like Pliny, Lucian, and Cicero, another example of humanism at work.

As humanist-inspired tastes in art developed over the course of the early renaissance, so too did requirements for artists' skills. Art making became increasingly professionalized. To develop the mathematically defined spaces populated by anatomically correct figures enacting complex narrative scenes from religious and classical history that were in vogue, artists needed to study geometry and anatomy. They had to read ancient texts in translation and consult with learned advisors, develop sophisticated preparatory studies, and negotiate business contracts. They also needed to navigate complex social relationships requiring savvy interpersonal skills.

As in most occupations at the time, it was not only social class, but also gender that determined artistic identity: artists were almost entirely men and art making was thought to be a male prerogative. The professionalization of artistic practice that helped raise the social status of art making had the negative effect of excluding women who, particularly in mercantile cities like Florence, were increasingly regulated to the domestic sphere. Although some female artists did achieve renown (such as Sofonisba Anguissola), their numbers were few until well into the 17th century.



Figure 7.1.1.5: This dazzling altarpiece reflected the magnificence of its patron, Palla Strozzi, the wealthiest man in Florence at the time of its creation. Gentile da Fabriano, *Adoration of the Magi*, 1423, tempera on panel, 283 x 300 cm (Galeria degli Uffizi, Florence; photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 4.0)

You have likely run across the name Michelangelo, but are perhaps less familiar with his great patron, Pope Julius II. This tells us more about our present-day fascination with artists than it does about the realities of the renaissance past. In this world, the patrons—the people who paid for (commissioned) the art work—were more socially privileged than the artists who worked for them and received much of the credit for the artwork they sponsored. Again, men were the primary patrons although some women in positions of special privilege like Isabella d'Este (marchioness of Mantua, a small but glamorous principality in northern Italy) commissioned art as well. There were many reasons for commissioning art. Art could advertise an individual's learning and taste, wealth, and position, and even political loyalties and religious faith. Patronage ranged across media and genres and was commissioned for a variety of contexts including public piazzas, private homes and palaces, private chapels and tombs in public churches, and other sacred spaces.



Figure 7.1.1.6: Giovanni Bellini, *San Zaccaria Altarpiece*, 1505, oil on wood transferred to canvas, 16 feet 5–1/2 inches x 7 feet 9 inches (San Zaccaria, Venice; photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 4.0)

What?

I have repeatedly used the word "art" so far in this essay. To us, the paintings, sculptures, buildings, tapestries, prints, and other aesthetic objects created during this time are considered "art," but this was not the case for people living during the Renaissance. The objects and images that we study as renaissance art were understood to be functional aspects of visual culture. The primary goal was not aesthetic appreciation or art for the sake of art, which is a category of experience that is a 19th-century invention. An altarpiece that may be viewed in an art museum today originally functioned as an object of devotion; it would have been the centerpiece of Christian religious practice in a sacred setting and was first and foremost a didactic tool guiding Christians in their worship. A portrait was a form of commemoration, a way to manifest a sitter's presence when absent or to communicate family connections.

Scenes drawn from ancient poetry or heroic tales were methods of communicating virtue, demonstrating erudition, and encouraging learned discourse. Were these images and objects appreciated as aesthetically interesting, even "beautiful"? Absolutely. But it's important to note that this was not the primary goal.



Figure 7.1.1.7: Sandro Botticelli, *The Birth of Venus*, 1483–85, tempera on panel, 172.5 x 278.5 cm (Galeria degli Uffizi, Florence; photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 4.0)

In renaissance art you will confront two main categories of iconography, or subject matter: secular (non-religious) and religious. Both types fulfilled different functions, but they also sometimes overlapped. Sandro Botticelli's *Birth of Venus*, for example, exemplifies secular iconography and borrows from ancient tradition. At the same time, Venus was associated with ideas about divine love circulating in late 15th century Neoplatonic philosophy, which (among other things) sought to reconcile ancient philosophy with Christianity.



Figure 7.1.1.8: Donatello, *David*, c. 1440, bronze, 158 cm (Museo Nazionale de Bargello, Florence; photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

We also have two main categories of audience: public and private, which also often overlapped. Donatello's bronze *David* was both a private artwork, placed within the powerful Medici family's palace courtyard, and a public statement of their power, wealth, and faith—the work was visible from the street.



Figure 7.1.1.9: The Gathering of Manna, 1595–96 (Florence), designed by Alessandro Allori, Woven in Medici workshop under the direction of Guasparri di Bartolomeo Papini, wool and silk, 426.7 x 447 cm (The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York)

It is also helpful to be conscious of how the present-day media hierarchy is skewed to our own interests. While we tend to prioritize the arts of painting, sculpture, and architecture, what was valued in the past was different from what we emphasize in our current patterns of collection and display. Tapestries, for example, are not often on view in museums in significant numbers nor are they foregrounded in histories of art, in part because of the fragile nature of their medium (silk and wool thread does not survive the ravages of time as well as marble or brick), but also because the art form went out of style in the modern era. During the Renaissance, however, tapestries were one of the most prized forms of visual art. These spectacular creations were amongst the most sought after and costly objects, adorning the walls of palaces, churches, and government buildings across Europe. When learning about renaissance art you will encounter painting, large-scale sculpture, and architecture, but it's important to note that this visual world also included—and sometimes more importantly—tapestries, vestments, liturgical objects, small-scale sculptures, prints, ceramics, embroidery, and other works. Our modern interests have shaped what we consider to be "great" art, or what is even considered worthy of study. These biases towards certain media, genres, and artists are our own—or those that we have been taught—not necessarily those of people throughout history, and it is helpful to be conscious of the distorted views of the past that they can sometimes create. Recent scholarship has worked to be more inclusive, increasingly exploring visual production in

various media and broadening our definitions of just what constitutes “art.”

When?

When trying to delineate the period known as the “renaissance” scholars generally designate the years 1400–1600. I say “generally” because life doesn’t unfold in tidy demarcated centuries. Starting points are hard to determine. Developments in art and culture in the 1400s come out of those in the preceding centuries, including historical crises like the Black Death. Many surveys of so-called renaissance art, for example, start with the innovative creations of Giotto di Bondone who lived c. 1267–1337, which is often called the Late Middle Ages by us today. Would we have Beyonce without Aretha Franklin? The operas of Lin Manuel Miranda without Mozart? Similarly, why end at 1600? In a certain sense, all such delineations are arbitrary (did 5th-century Romans know that Rome fell?). We go by broad patterns and general trends. The European political, social, and religious landscape changed dramatically in the last few decades of the 16th century, due in no small part to the rise of Protestantism, and art changed with it making this a viable, if imperfect, end point.

From Petrarch, renaissance Italians inherited the notion of three distinct ages of man: what he saw as the glorious ancient past, the “dark ages” after the decline of the Roman empire, and his own modern age where the glories of antiquity were reborn. While this periodization of history is deeply problematic—we no longer recognize the period after the decline of Rome as a “dark age”—we still borrow this general framework, using terms like “antiquity,” the “middle ages,” and “the renaissance.” The following general—and admittedly imperfect—breakdown of historical periods is what most people mean when they designate these eras:

1. 600 B.C.E.–400 C.E. Ancient Greece and Rome (also known as the classical past or classical antiquity, this 1,000 year span of time is itself broken by historians and art historians into smaller designations, such as archaic, high classical, hellenistic, etc.)
2. 400–c. 1400 the Middle Ages (c. 1200–1400 is often called the Late Middle Ages)
3. 1400–1600 the Renaissance

Where?



Figure 7.1.1.10: Map of Italy in 1494 (underlying map © Google)

Italian renaissance art was made in Italy, right? Well, sort of. It was made on the peninsula in southern Europe that we call Italy today. But it wasn’t “Italy” then. The country was not united as we know it until the 19th century. During the renaissance, the Italian peninsula was organized into independent city-states with distinct political and social formations as well as unique dialects and cultural traditions. Some states, like Florence, Venice, and Genoa, functioned as republics where members of the urban elite governed by election. Others, like Milan, Ferrara, and Urbino, were governed by a sovereign, a ruler who had almost absolute hereditary authority. These *Signorie* or Lordships were usually under the leadership of a Marquis or a Duke and technically owed their allegiance to a superior political power—some were granted authority by the Holy Roman Emperor, some from the Church. In practice, however, these ruling princes (a catch-all term used throughout the Renaissance to designate a ruler), enjoyed virtual independence. There was also a massive swath of central Italy that came under the direct rule of the Catholic Church—led by the Pope—a region known as the Papal States. The southernmost part of the peninsula was divided into the Kingdoms of Naples and Sicily which were ruled by a series of dynasties throughout the Middle Ages until finally unified under a single king (ranking just below an Emperor), in the 15th century by the Spanish House of Aragon. Throughout the renaissance period, Spanish and French royal families vied for power in this territory. While we may discuss “Italian renaissance” art broadly, and there were certainly shared religious and social values as well as a shared ancestry with the ancient Roman past across the peninsula, it is important to understand that this was not a unified state in our modern sense. In fact, these various territories were often at war with one another.



Figure 7.1.1.11: Some of the territories of the Republic of Venice c. 1500 (underlying map © Google)



Figure 7.1.1.12: Gentile Bellini, *Portrait of Sultan Mehmet II*, 1480, oil on canvas, 69.9 x 52.1 cm (National Gallery, London)

This was a permeable and highly international world. Contacts with different peoples and cultures were common. This was an age of international trade (including the slave trade), exploration, rising colonial enterprises, and war, all of which required deft diplomacy. Venice, for example, was a maritime trading power that held vast territories in the north Italian mainland and throughout the Mediterranean world, and as a result had large populations of foreigners. Greek influence was particularly strong there due to the city's colonies in Crete, Cyprus, and Rhodes, and became more so with the influx of Greek immigrants to the region after the fall of Constantinople to the Ottomans in 1453. Italian artists traveled throughout the Italian peninsula working for different patrons and in variable contexts; as they moved about so too did the various indigenous visual traditions in which they were trained.

Artists also went beyond Italy, finding work in the urban centers and courts of other European states and beyond. The painter Gentile Bellini spent fifteen months at the court of the Ottoman Sultan, Mehmed II as representative of the Venetian Republic. Likewise, artists from other parts of the world came to Italy. Some, like Albrecht Dürer and Alonso Berruguete, helped transform art across the continent by introducing new approaches that fused Italian traditions with those developing elsewhere. Other Italian artists even relocated to the Americas or Asia, such as those associated with the Jesuit missionary order.

But still, why do renaissance art history surveys so often start here in *this* region that wasn't Italy but we all call Italy? It was in this region that many of the developments that are understood to have informed the rise of something new—what we call a "renaissance"—first emerged. The Italian city-states were early to urbanize and enjoyed relative political and economic stability, key ingredients to the creation of vast amounts of art and architecture. That literary and visual forms emerge reflecting new "renaissance" styles in these states was also a direct function of the force of the visible presence of the ancient Roman past—in Italy Rome was everywhere, in texts preserved in monasteries and libraries of the Middle Ages, and in the copious remains of visual art and architecture.

Footnotes

[1] See for instance the art historian Linda Nochlin's canonical essay, "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" *ARTNews*, volume 69, number 9 (1971), pp. 22–39, 67–71.

[2] Quoted in André Chastel, *The Genius of Leonardo da Vinci: Leonardo da Vinci on Art and the Artist*, translated by Ellen Callmann (New York: Orion Press, 1961), p. 38. Leonardo was looking to Plutarch: "Painting is mute poetry and poetry a speaking picture," in Plutarch, *Moralia* (1819), p. 346.

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Islamic influence on the Renaissance

The previous chapter 7: Cultural Confluence in Art from the Late Islamic Period provided a survey of late Islamic art, a period concurrent with the Renaissance. As emphasized above, "[t]his was a permeable and highly international world" with many cross-cultural influences, not simply an "age where the glories of antiquity were reborn" after the "dark ages," as Petrarch described. In fact, the "glories" of the Renaissance can be attributed to much more than classicism, such as continued influences from Islamic art or relatively new (to Europe) influences from contact with the American continents.

Below is a conversation with Dr. Lauren Kilroy-Ewbank and Dr. Steven Zucker below a *mudéjar*-style ceiling, 16th century, carved, painted, and gilded wood, 28 x 33 ft., Spain (The Metropolitan Museum of Art). Note that 1492 marked the fall of the last Muslim stronghold in Granada. It was also the year that Jews were expelled from the Iberian Peninsula. The video notes that this was also the year that Muslims were expelled, but this is incorrect. What did begin to occur after 1492 was the

outlawing of Islam, and with it there were forced conversions of Muslims. In 1609, *moriscos* (former Muslims and their descendants) were expelled.



Cite this page as: Dr. Lauren Kilroy-Ewbank and Dr. Steven Zucker, "Sacred geometry in a mudéjar-style ceiling," in *Smarthistory*, November 9, 2020, accessed February 6, 2026, https://smarthistory.org/mudejar-ceiling/.

Transcript of "Sacred geometry in a Renaissance ceiling from Spain"

[0:00] [music]

Dr. Steven Zucker: [0:05] We're in the Islamic Galleries in The Metropolitan Museum of Art, and my neck is starting to get sore because we've spent a good deal of time looking up at this magnificent ceiling.

Dr. Lauren Kilroy-Ewbank: [0:17] We're looking at what's called an artesonado ceiling from Spain in the 16th century. It's a type of ceiling that combines sculpture and painting and woodworking to create this beautiful geometrically designed ceiling.

Dr. Zucker: [0:30] It's like a three-dimensional carpet. It's incredibly complex. It's a geometry that's gone wild.

Dr. Kilroy-Ewbank: [0:36] This artesonado ceiling was common in late medieval and Renaissance Spain.

Dr. Zucker: [0:42] It's important to remember that when the ceiling was new, it would have been much brighter than it is now. We're in a room with subdued lighting, but the paint itself has faded.

Dr. Kilroy-Ewbank: [0:51] Now, this ceiling is sometimes called the mudéjar ceiling. That word, "mudéjar," can mean two different things. It can refer to artists, or it can refer to the style. When it's referring to the artists, it's referring to Muslim artists who remained in Spain after the Christian reconquest and who never convert to Christianity but who continue to work as carvers, as painters, as other types of artisans.

[1:15] The other meaning of the term "mudéjar" is referring to the style of the ceiling, this Islamic-inspired style that becomes so prevalent across the Iberian Peninsula, where we see things like vegetal forms and complex geometric patterning.

Dr. Zucker: [1:30] It's worth remembering that in 1492 Ferdinand and Isabella exiled Jews and Muslims from Spain. Before that, there had been a long campaign by Christians to push Muslims out of the peninsula.

Dr. Kilroy-Ewbank: [1:43] In 711, you have the takeover of much of the Iberian Peninsula by Muslim forces. This also then kicks off what's known as the Reconquest, which was Christian kingdoms trying to reconquer the Iberian Peninsula from Muslims. And so from 711 until 1492, you have many different campaigns as the Iberian Peninsula is constantly shifting in terms of who's in control.

Dr. Zucker: [2:06] What's fascinating is that we're seeing a ceiling that is clearly coming out of the Islamic tradition but is then adopted within a Christian context. In fact, ceilings like this were common in churches.

Dr. Kilroy-Ewbank: [2:17] Ceilings like this were incredibly common across medieval and Renaissance Spain. So much so that, when the Spaniards go to the Americas and conquer much of what we today call Latin America, it's very common to see this type of ceiling brought and put into churches there as well.

Dr. Zucker: [2:32] Because its geometry is so overwhelming and so beautiful, but also so complex that it requires careful looking.

[2:38] The principle motif seems to be a starburst, but when you look closely, those starbursts are actually constructed by laths, that is, planks of wood, which are woven together, creating an unexpected sense of depth since one piece of the lath might go over and then under other sections.

Dr. Kilroy-Ewbank: [2:54] We don't know where this was originally installed, but we do know that when it was created, it would've had perfect mathematical harmony. All of this complex geometric patterning was actually done in a way where mathematically it was so precise so as to create not just a beautiful and intricate abstract pattern, but this sense of sacred geometry.

Dr. Zucker: [3:14] Well, we are looking up at a ceiling and we're reminded of the ideal geometry of the heavens.

Dr. Kilroy-Ewbank: [3:20] This is not just carved, as I mentioned earlier, but we also have elements of the wood that have been painted. We are seeing blues and reds, and we also have gilding, so gold that's applied to the wood as well.

Dr. Zucker: [3:33] It reminds us of the kind of geometries that we would see in tile work or in carpets. The ceiling should not be seen in isolation, but just one part of a larger architectural ensemble.

Dr. Kilroy-Ewbank: [3:43] Something that's so remarkable about this ceiling is it's a great reminder that the Renaissance world was this incredibly complex and dynamic transcultural world where we have cross-cultural exchanges happening all the time. Because this is not something that relates to Renaissance naturalism, this is not oil painting on a canvas, this is something that's unexpected.

Dr. Zucker: [4:03] One of the aspects of the ceiling that is most obviously coming out of the Islamic tradition can be found in the four corners. This is a motif which is known as “muqarnas.” It’s an architectural motif that is commonly found in the Islamic world and is made of the repetition of a single unit that cascades down and creates a transition from the complex geometry of the ceiling to the corner of the room.

Dr. Kilroy-Ewbank: [4:25] This is such a complex ceiling, that’s already a feast for the eyes, that it could be easy to overlook the frieze that’s at the bottom of the ceiling. Here we have a very different type of ornamentation.

[4:35] We have scrolling vines, we have animals. It looks very different than the mathematical harmony that we’re finding on the ceiling itself.

Dr. Zucker: [4:45] Because the ceiling is pitched, almost as if we were looking at the top of a tent, there is an emphasis on the dimensionality of that space, but also of the intricacy of the carving, because the light is reaching each of these panels at different angles, almost like the facets of a gem.

Dr. Kilroy-Ewbank: [5:02] I mentioned earlier the issue of transculturalism here. Where that issue becomes important again is this ceiling was actually purchased from somewhere in Spain by William Randolph Hearst for Hearst Castle in San Simeon in California.

[5:15] Hearst was a very wealthy newspaper magnate. When it was purchased, it was actually expanded. So parts of the ceiling are original and parts of it were actually extensions that were created to look like the original so that it would fit into one of the ceilings at Hearst Castle.

Dr. Zucker: [5:31] We don’t think the ceiling was ever actually installed in Hearst Castle, but we are really lucky to have it installed here in New York, in the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

[5:41] [music]

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7.1.2: Domestic Furniture of the Renaissance

Though much of this chapter's focus is on art for religious purposes, the humanistic principles of the Renaissance also gave way to secular art. These furniture examples provide an opportunity to see how Renaissance principles were applied to decorative art of the period. Consider the aesthetic, ergonomic, and functional design of these examples compared with those from Chapter 5.2: Furniture in the European Middle Ages.

Italian Cassone ca. 1550-60

Adapted from *Global Traditions and Technological Innovations in Clay, Fiber, Glass, Metal, and Wood - Volume VI: Rebirth to Revolution*, Carol Ventura, CC BY-NC-SA 2025

This cassone was inspired by Roman sarcophagi (carved stone coffins) but served a different purpose. Cassone means “chest” and “accasare” means “marry” in Italian, so the hope chest was appropriately named. The groom would send one or more pairs of cassoni to the bride's house to be filled with her dowry. The heavy chests would then join the formal procession to the bridegroom's residence. This cassone is one of a pair features the family coat of arms in the center of a symmetrical arrangement of caryatids, acanthus leaves, satyrs, stallions, and dolphins inspired by the classical past and the work of contemporary artists like Michelangelo. The decorative frieze of acanthus volutes below the lid serves as handles.

Virtual Museum Visit

Go to the Metropolitain Museum of Art website for a more thorough explanation and analysis of this cassone and to examine enlargements the images.



Figure 7.1.2.1: Cassone (one of a pair), carved and partially gilded walnut, 34 x 71 5/8 x 26 ½ in / 86.4 x 181.9 x 67.3 cm, Rome, Italy, ca. 1550-1560 (The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of Stanley Mortimer, 1954, CC0)



Figure 7.1.2.2: cassone detail showing coat of arms in the form of strapwork cartouches, surrounded by satyr figures, with acanthus volutes in the frieze below the lid that function as handles (The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of Stanley Mortimer, 1954, CC0)



Figure 7.1.2.3: cassone detail showing rinceaux relief with stallion torsos protruding from acanthus tendrils (The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of Stanley Mortimer, 1954, CC0)



Figure 7.1.2.4: cassone corner detail showing caryatids riding dolphins at the base (The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of Stanley Mortimer, 1954, CC0)

Sgabello-type chair, 16th century

By The Walters Art Museum

"Sgabello" is the Italian word for a type of simple chair that is basically a stool with a back support. This was a common type of easily moved seating in affluent Italian (and subsequently French) homes. Chairs only started to become comfortable in the 1600s. The chair appears to be at least partially reconstructed at a later period, possibly the in the 1800s.



Figure 7.1.2.5: "sgabello"-type chair with scrolls, 16th c., wood (walnut), H: 39 3/8 in. (The Walters Art Museum, CC0)

Strozzi chair, 1489-91

This well-known sgabello chair has been described as "a masterwork of charming beauty, one of the most beautiful Florentine pieces of furniture around" (Hans Stegmann. Die Holzmöbel der Sammlung Figdor. 2nd ed. Vienna, 1909).

> ***Virtual Museum Visit***
>
> Go to the Metropolitain Museum of Art website for a comprehensive explanation the form of the sgabello chair, using the Stozzi chair as an example.



Figure 7.1.2.6: chair (sgabello), attributed to the workshop of Giuliano da Maiano (1432-1490) and Benedetto da Maiano (1442-1497), ca. 1489-91, Florence, walnut, maple, ebony; ebonized wood, and fruitwood; traces of gilding and red paint, H. 58 x W. 16-3/4 x D. 16-1/2 in. (The Metropolitan Museum of Art, CC0)

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7.1.3: Catholic Churches of Renaissance Rome

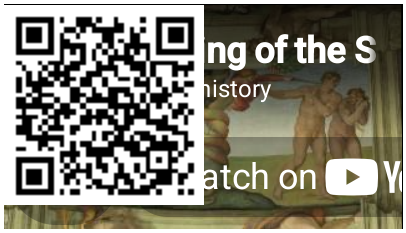
Contextual Background

Certainly the most well-known Renaissance interiors are Christian religious spaces. This chapter describes the Sistine Chapel and Saint Peter's Basilica, both located in the Vacatin City and some of the most famous Catholic (Christian) interiors to this day, as well as a few domestic furniture examples demonstrative of the humanistic principles of the Renaissance found across both secular and religious art.

Michelangelo, Ceiling of the Sistine Chapel

by Christine Zappella

God created the world in seven days, but it took Michelangelo four years to depict it on this remarkable ceiling.



Michelangelo, Ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, 1508–12, fresco (Vatican, Rome). Speakers: Dr. Beth Harris and Dr. Steven Zucker

Transcription of "Ceiling of the Sistine Chapel" video

[0:00] [music]

Dr. Steven Zucker: [0:04] We're in the Sistine Chapel in the Vatican, which has tremendous importance to Catholicism. This is were the pope will lead mass, but perhaps most famously, this is the room that the College of Cardinals uses to decide the next pope.

Dr. Beth Harris: [0:19] Every surface of this space is decorated, from the beautiful mosaics on the floor, the walls are painted with frescoes by early Renaissance artists, the wall behind the altar was painted by Michelangelo later in his life, and then of course, the ceiling.

Dr. Zucker: [0:36] Everybody is looking up. Their necks are craned, and of course, it's magnificent. We're here in the late afternoon on a day in early July. The light is diffuse, and it makes those frescoed figures feel so dimensional, they feel like sculpture.

Dr. Harris: [0:53] You can imagine what it was like when this was unveiled in 1512 after Michelangelo had worked on it for years. How different, how revolutionary Michelangelo's figures seemed.

Dr. Zucker: [1:04] He was, first and foremost, a sculptor, and it wasn't actually until a relatively recent cleaning that we knew his brilliance as a colorist. For him, line and drawing and the act of carving figures out of paint was primary and you have this extraordinary ability to render both strength and elegance simultaneously.

Dr. Harris: [1:28] They have a massiveness and a presence that is charismatic, but there's also a sense of elegance and ideal beauty. Let's describe what we're looking at.

Dr. Zucker: [1:40] Probably the most important are the series of nine scenes that move across the central panels.

Dr. Harris: [1:47] Those are framed by a painted architectural framework that looks real. It doesn't look like paint. We start with the creation of the world. God separating light from darkness.

Dr. Zucker: [2:00] I love that scene. This primordial God, light on one side of His body and the darkness of night on the other. This initial separation and division to create order in the universe.

Dr. Harris: [2:11] Then we move through to the creation of Adam, the creation of Eve…

Dr. Zucker: [2:15] Or the separation of the sexes.

Dr. Harris: [2:17] …and the creation of God's most perfect creature, human beings, and then the fall of human beings.

Dr. Zucker: [2:23] In a sense, the separation of good and evil.

Dr. Harris: [2:26] Man and woman disobeying God, causing the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden. Then, [at] the far end by the entrance, we see the scenes of Noah.

Dr. Zucker: [2:37] These are all scenes from the first book of the Bible, from the Book of Genesis. It's so interesting because, of course, this is a Catholic church, and yet we don't see images of Christ, but these Old Testament scenes lay the foundation for the coming of Christ.

Dr. Harris: [2:53] Christ is present in other ways. Not only does the disobedience of Adam and Eve make the coming of Christ necessary, but when we look on either side of those central scenes, we see the prophets and the sibyls who predicted the coming of a savior for mankind.

Dr. Zucker: [3:12] The image of the Libyan sibyl that we're sitting directly across from is spectacularly beautiful. Sibyls are these ancient pagan soothsayers who can foresee the future, and according to the Catholic tradition foretell the coming of Christ. Look at the Libyan sibyl, look at the power of her body, and look at the elegance with which she twists and turns.

[3:36] There is that sense of potential in the way that her toe just reaches down and touches the ground, but seems as if she is in the act of moving and possibly of standing.

Dr. Harris: [3:47] There's a presence and drama to these figures, to the Libyan sibyl especially. She twists her body in an almost impossible way. We can see Michelangelo has articulated every muscle in the back, and in fact we know that he used a male model for that figure.

Dr. Zucker: [4:04] I'm so taken with the color here. When I first studied Michelangelo, we spoke only of line, of sculptural form, but of course after the dramatic cleaning of the Sistine Chapel, those original colors, their brilliance, their delicacy, came out.

Dr. Harris: [4:19] We see purples and golds and oranges and blues and greens.

Dr. Zucker: [4:24] She, of course, is reaching back, and presumably that's a book of prophecy that she holds, and there's a look of confidence and knowing on her face. The absolute clarity with which she knows that Christ will come.

Dr. Harris: [4:37] Sitting on the architecture framework on the four corners of all of the central scenes are male nude figures that we refer to as "ignudi."

Dr. Zucker: [4:47] I think this is really important because Michelangelo is not painting simply sacred paintings, but is creating this enormously complex stage set, with which to create levels of reality. For example, the Libyan sibyl seems as if she is seated amongst the architecture.

[5:06] Then set next to her are bronze figures, and then in the spandrels, as you mentioned, other scenes that seem to recede into a illusionistic distance.

Dr. Harris: [5:14] Then relief sculptures on the architecture on either side of her, and then seated above those, the ignudi. It's so clear that we're at this moment at the rediscovery of ancient Greek and Roman sculpture. Michelangelo is in Rome, he's in the Vatican.

Dr. Zucker: [5:31] This is the High Renaissance. It's so interesting to compare the optimism, the elegance, the nobility of the figures on the ceiling with the far darker and more pessimistic view that Michelangelo will paint decades later on the back wall, the "Last Judgment".

Dr. Harris: [5:48] That's right. There's a big difference between 1512 when Michelangelo completes the ceiling and when he begins the "Last Judgment." The Protestant Reformation has begun and the church is under attack.

Dr. Zucker: [6:01] Michelangelo's world had been shattered, but when you look at the ceiling you see instead all of the optimism, all of the intellectual and emotional power that characterizes the High Renaissance in all of its newfound appreciation for the ancient world. This was a moment of incredible promise, and all of that comes shining through these figures.

Dr. Harris: [6:25] Let's not forget that just a few doors away, simultaneously, Raphael is painting the frescoes in the Papal Palace. What a moment in Rome.

[6:35] [music]

Visiting the Chapel

To any visitor of Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel, two features become immediately and undeniably apparent: 1) the ceiling is really high up, and 2) there are a lot of paintings up there. Because of this, the centuries have handed down to us an image of Michelangelo lying on his back, wiping sweat and plaster from his eyes as he toiled away year after year, suspended hundreds of feet in the air, begrudgingly completing a commission that he never wanted to accept in the first place.



Figure 7.1.3.1: Michelangelo, Ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, 1508–12, fresco (Vatican City, Rome) (photo: Jörg Bittner Unna, CC BY 3.0)

Fortunately for Michelangelo, this is probably not true. But that does nothing to lessen the fact that the frescoes, which take up the entirety of the vault, are among the most important paintings in the world.



Figure 7.1.3.2: Michelangelo, Ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, 1508–12, fresco (Vatican City, Rome)

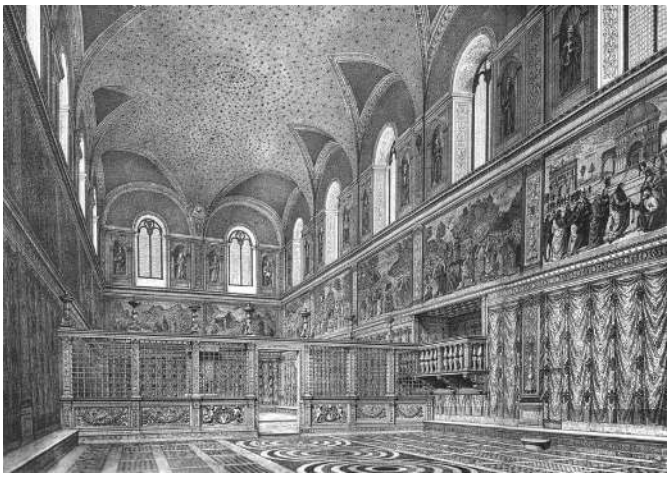


Figure 7.1.3.3: Reconstruction of the Sistine Chapel prior to Michelangelo's frescoes

For Pope Julius II

Michelangelo began to work on the frescoes for Pope Julius II in 1508, replacing a blue ceiling dotted with stars. Originally, the pope asked Michelangelo to paint the ceiling with a geometric ornament, and place the twelve apostles in spandrels around the decoration. Michelangelo proposed instead to paint the Old Testament scenes now found on the vault, divided by the fictive architecture that he uses to organize the composition.

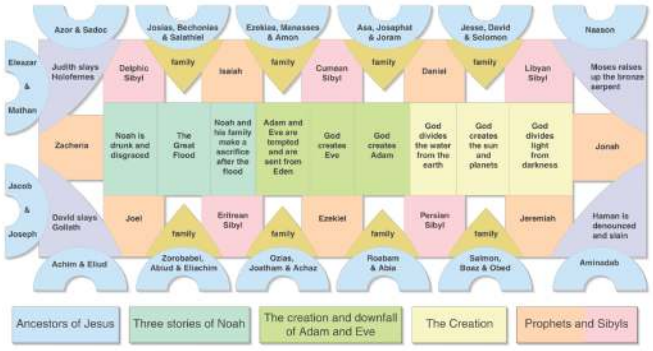


Figure 7.1.3.4: Diagram of the subjects of the Sistine Chapel [1] (photo: Begoon, CC BY-SA 3.0)

The subject of the frescoes

The narrative begins at the altar and is divided into three sections. In the first three paintings, Michelangelo tells the story of *The Creation of the Heavens and Earth*; this is followed by *The Creation of Adam and Eve* and the *Expulsion from the Garden of Eden*; finally is the story of *Noah and the Great Flood*.

Ignudi, or nude youths, sit in fictive architecture around these frescoes, and they are accompanied by prophets and sibyls (ancient seers who, according to tradition, foretold the coming of Christ) in the spandrels. In the four corners of the room, in the pendentives, one finds scenes depicting the Salvation of Israel.



Figure 7.1.3.5: Michelangelo, *The Creation of Adam*, Ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, 1508–12, fresco (Vatican City, Rome; photo: Jörg Bittner Unna, CC BY 3.0)

The Deluge

Although the most famous of these frescoes is without a doubt, *The Creation of Adam*, reproductions of which have become ubiquitous in modern culture for its dramatic positioning of the two monumental figures reaching towards each other, not all of the frescoes are painted in this style. In fact, the first frescoes Michelangelo painted contain multiple figures, much smaller in size, engaged in complex narratives. This can best be exemplified by his painting of *The Deluge*.



Figure 7.1.3.6: Michelangelo, *The Deluge*, Ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, 1508–12, fresco (Vatican City, Rome)



Figure 7.1.3.7: Michelangelo, *The Deluge* (detail), Ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, 1508–12, fresco (Vatican City, Rome)

In this fresco, Michelangelo has used the physical space of the water and the sky to separate four distinct parts of the narrative. On the right side of the painting, a cluster of people seeks sanctuary from the rain under a makeshift shelter. On the left, even more people climb up the side of a mountain to escape the rising water. Centrally, a small boat is about to capsize because of the unending downpour. And in the background, a team of men work on building the arc—the only hope of salvation.



Figure 7.1.3.8: Michelangelo, Creation scenes, Sistine Chapel Ceiling, 1508–12, fresco (Vatican City, Rome; photo: Dennis Jarvis, CC BY-SA 2.0)

Up close, this painting confronts the viewer with the desperation of those about to perish in the flood and makes one question God's justice in wiping out the entire population of the earth, save Noah and his family, because of the sins of the wicked. Unfortunately, from the floor of the chapel, the use of small, tightly grouped figures undermines the emotional content and makes the story harder to follow.

A shift in style

In 1510, Michelangelo took a yearlong break from painting the Sistine Chapel. The frescoes painted after this break are characteristically different from the ones he painted before it, and are emblematic of what we think of when we envision the Sistine Chapel paintings. These are the paintings, like *The Creation of Adam*, where the narratives have been pared down to only the essential figures depicted on a monumental scale. Because of these changes, Michelangelo is able to convey a strong sense of emotionality that can be perceived from the floor of the chapel. Indeed, the imposing figure of God in the three frescoes illustrating the separation of darkness from light and the creation of the heavens and the earth radiates power throughout his body, and his dramatic gesticulations help to tell the story of Genesis without the addition of extraneous detail.

The Sibyls



Figure 7.1.3.9: Michelangelo, *Delphic Sibyl*, Sistine Chapel Ceiling, 1508–12, fresco (Vatican City, Rome; photo: Jörg Bittner Unna, CC BY 3.0)

This new monumentality can also be felt in the figures of the sibyls and prophets in the spandrels surrounding the vault, which some believe are all based on the *Belvedere Torso*, an ancient sculpture that was then, and remains, in the Vatican's collection. One of the most celebrated of these figures is the *Delphic Sibyl*.

The overall circular composition of the body, which echoes the contours of her fictive architectural setting, adds to the sense of the sculptural weight of the figure.

Her arms are powerful, the heft of her body imposing, and both her left elbow and knee come into the viewer's space. At the same time, Michelangelo imbued the Delphic Sibyl with grace and harmony of proportion, and her watchful expression, as well as the position of the left arm and right hand, is reminiscent of the artist's *David*.

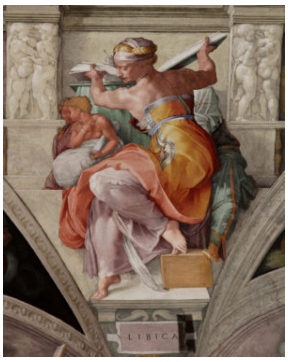


Figure 7.1.3.10: Michelangelo, *Libyan Sibyl*, c. 1511, fresco, part of the Sistine Chapel ceiling (Vatican Museums; photo: Jörg Bittner Unna, CC BY 3.0)

The Libyan Sibyl is also exemplary. Although she is in a contorted position that would be nearly impossible for an actual person to hold, Michelangelo nonetheless executes her with a *sprezzatura* (a deceptive ease) that will become typical of the Mannerists who closely modelled their work on his.

It is no wonder that Raphael, struck by the genius of the Sistine Chapel, rushed back to his *School of Athens* in the Vatican Stanze and inserted Michelangelo's weighty, monumental likeness sitting at the bottom of the steps of the school.



Figure 7.1.3.11: Heraclitus, whose features are based on Michelangelo's and his seated pose is based on the prophets and sibyls from Michelangelo's frescoes on the Sistine Chapel Ceiling (detail), Raphael, School of Athens, 1509–11, Stanza della Segnatura (Vatican City, Rome; photo: Darafsh, CC BY-SA 3.0)

Legacy

Michelangelo completed the Sistine Chapel in 1512. Its importance in the history of art cannot be overstated. It turned into a veritable academy for young painters, a position that was cemented when Michelangelo returned to the chapel twenty years later to execute the Last Judgment fresco on the altar wall.

The chapel recently underwent a controversial cleaning, which has once again brought to light Michelangelo's jewel-like palette, his mastery of chiaroscuro, and additional iconological details which continue to captivate modern viewers even five hundred years after the frescoes' original completion. Not bad for an artist who insisted he was not a painter.

Interactive View of the Sistine Chapel

Explore an interactive view of the Sistine Chapel interior on Google Maps

Footnotes

[1] The diagram neglects the subject of the four corner paintings indicated in lavender. The four scenes represent the salvation of the Jewish people.

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Saint Peter's Basilica

by Dr. Beth Harris and Dr. Steven Zucker

The greatest minds of the High Renaissance worked on this vast church. Construction took more than a century.



Saint Peter's Basilica (Basilica Sancti Petri), Vatican City, begun 1506, completed 1626. Speakers: Dr. Beth Harris and Dr. Steven Zucker

Architects and designers included: Donato Bramante (whose design won Julius II's competition); Antonio da Sangallo, a student of Bramante (the Pauline Chapel); Fra Giocondo (strengthening of the foundation); Raphael and Fra Giocondo (whose redesigned building plan was not executed); Michelangelo (design of the dome, crossing, and exterior excluding the nave and facade); Giacomo della Porta (design of the cupola); Carlo Maderno (extension of Michelangelo's plan, adding a nave and grand facade); Gian Lorenzo Bernini (addition of the piazza, the Cathedra Petri, and the Baldacchino)

Transcription of "Bramante, et.al., Saint Peter's Basilica" video

[0:00] [music]

Dr. Steven Zucker: [0:04] We're standing in Saint Peter's Basilica in Vatican City in Rome, and it is one of the largest, most ornate spaces I've ever been in. I shouldn't say one of the most.

Dr. Beth Harris: [0:13] It is the most.

Dr. Zucker: [0:14] It is the most.

Dr. Harris: [0:14] That was the idea. Pope Julius II, who commissioned the rebuilding of this church in the early 16th century, said to Bramante, the first architect, [he] said, "Make me the most magnificent, biggest church in all of Christendom." And so that's what he did.

Dr. Zucker: [0:29] Ultimately, yes, that's what we have, but that's not what this place was originally. If you go back to the ancient Roman era, this was Nero's Circus, a place where games were performed, sporting events were performed. This was a place where Nero himself apparently actually rode a chariot.

Dr. Harris: [0:44] It was also a place where there was an ancient necropolis — burial ground — and by tradition, the place where Saint Peter himself was crucified and then buried. The early Christians created a monument on that site.

Dr. Zucker: [0:59] Apparently quite small and humble.

Dr. Harris: [1:01] Then Constantine builds a church on this site, because after all, Saint Peter is the first pope, the first leader of the church, given that job by Christ himself.

Dr. Zucker: [1:11] That would have been the 4th century, so actually very early. That church, Constantine's Saint Peter's, lasted for a thousand years, a little more.

Dr. Harris: [1:20] Early 1500s, Pope Julius II, a very ambitious pope.

Dr. Zucker: [1:24] Julius had this extraordinary vision and he brought together some of the most talented artists to develop this extraordinary space.

Dr. Harris: [1:32] Beginning with the great High Renaissance artist Bramante, who did the initial plans for the rebuilding of Saint Peter's, through the great artists Raphael and Michelangelo of the High Renaissance; as you said, the greatest minds of the Renaissance and then later the Baroque in the early and mid-1600s worked on this building.

Dr. Zucker: [1:52] Bramante understood this church as distinct from the way most churches had been built. That is, borrowing from the ancient Roman basilica plan.

Dr. Harris: [2:00] Most churches that anyone probably knows are basilica plan. It's a very practical kind of plan for a church. It's got a long central area. It allows for an easy passage of large numbers of people. It focuses on the altar.

Dr. Zucker: [2:14] It just worked well.

Dr. Harris: [2:16] It works really well.

Dr. Zucker: [2:17] That's not what Bramante wanted.

Dr. Harris: [2:18] No, and that makes sense, if you understand the mindset of the High Renaissance, where there was an enormous interest in mathematics and in ideal perfect beauty and finding perfect proportions. Bramante's first design for Saint Peter's was very much based on those ideas.

[2:38] It was a Greek cross with equal arms instead of one longer arm, and it was inscribed within a square, with this dome over the center, and smaller domes.

Dr. Zucker: [2:48] In essence, it really was a series of perfect circles and perfect squares, but Bramante's design didn't survive.

Dr. Harris: [2:54] No. People went back and forth to it. Ultimately, what we ended up with in the end is an extension of one of the arms of the cross, and so the plan ultimately does follow a basilica format. That perfect geometric form gave way to the practical needs of the church to hold large numbers of people and to focus attention on the altar.

Dr. Zucker: [3:18] After Bramante, Raphael has a hand in the design, and ultimately it passes to Michelangelo. What Michelangelo was able to do before the later Baroque additions was to expand on, simplify, and clarify Bramante's original ideas.

[3:34] His work can be seen in the dome and on the exterior of the three sides of the church that were not extended. Then, of course, Maderno will add his Baroque facade.

Dr. Harris: [3:46] And Bernini will decorate the interior of the church during the Baroque era as well with the Baldacchino [and] the Cathedra Petri, and will also extend the front of the church creating the piazza, the Saint Peter's Square.

Dr. Zucker: [4:00] That's right. Those extraordinary arms, that double colonnade.

Dr. Harris: [4:03] There's a century and a half or so of work on this church. A series of great architects and sculptors who work on it. It all works in the end.

Dr. Zucker: [4:13] It really comes together. It is one of the most magnificent spaces on the face of the earth.

[4:17] [music]

Background of St. Peter's Basilica

Pope Julius II commissioned Bramante to build a new basilica —this involved demolishing the Old St Peter's Basilica that had been erected by Constantine in the 4th century. This ancient church was in disrepair. But tearing it down was a bold maneuver that gives us a sense of the enormous ambition of Pope Julius II, both for the papacy as well as for himself.



Figure 7.1.3.12: Numerous architects, Saint Peter's Basilica, Vatican City, begun 1506, completed 1626 (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)



Figure 7.1.3.13: H.W. Brewer, *Drawing of Old Saint Peter's Basilica as it appeared between 1475 and 1483*, 1891

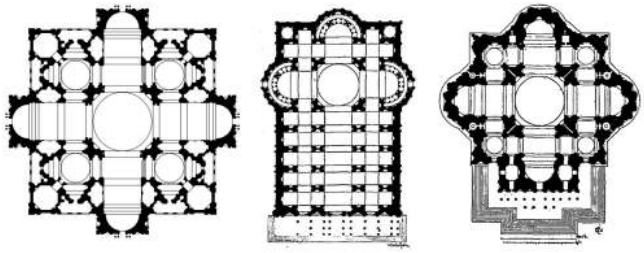


Figure 7.1.3.14: Left to right: Bramante, plan for Saint Peter's Basilica, 1506; Raphael, plan for Saint Peter's Basilica, 1513; Michelangelo, plan for Saint Peter's Basilica, 1547

Burial site of Saint Peter

The site is a very holy one—it is (according to the Catholic Church) the site of the burial of Saint Peter. Bramante did the first plan for the new church. He proposed an enormous centrally planned church in the shape of a Greek cross enclosed within a square with an enormous dome over the center, and smaller domes and half-domes radiating out. When Bramante died, Raphael took over as chief architect for Saint Peter's, and when Raphael died, Michelangelo took over. Both Michelangelo and Raphael made substantial changes to Bramante's original plan. Nevertheless, the experience of being inside Saint Peter's is awe-inspiring.



Figure 7.1.3.15: Nave, numerous architects, Saint Peter's Basilica, Vatican City, begun 1506, completed 1626 (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Basilica and central plan

The two basic types of churches are the basilica and the central plan. The basilica, with its long axis that focuses attention on the altar, has been the most popular type of church plan because of its practicality.

The other popular type of church plan is a central plan that is usually based either on the shape of a circle or on a Greek cross. These are called central plans because the measurements are all equidistant from a center. This type of church, influenced by Classical architecture (think of the Pantheon), was very popular among High Renaissance architects. Besides the influence of ancient Roman architecture, the circle had spiritual associations. The circle, which has no beginning and no end, symbolized the perfection and eternal nature of God. For some thinkers in antiquity and the Renaissance, the universe itself was constructed in the form of concentric circles with the sun, moon, and stars moving in circular orbits around the earth.

Bramante's original design was for a central plan, however—as built—the church combines elements of a central plan with the longer nave of a basilica.

Interactive View of St. Peter's Basilica

Explore an interactive view of St. Peter's Basilica on Google Maps

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7.2: Baroque Churches

Learning Objectives

- Identify key artistic characteristics that define baroque art and architecture, providing examples and discussing their symbolic meaning
- Differentiate between renaissance and baroque design characteristics, comparing examples of Catholic churches from each movement
- Evaluate the alignment of baroque aesthetics with motives of the 17th-18th century Catholic church

The global Baroque, an introduction

by Dr. Carmen Ripollés

The tremendous diversity of Baroque art

A small sample of artworks showcases the astonishing diversity that characterizes what we now know as "Baroque" art.



Figure 7.2.1: Left: Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio, *Calling of St. Matthew*, oil on canvas, c. 1599–1600 (Contarelli Chapel, San Luigi dei Francesi, Rome; photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0); center: Miguel Cabrera, *The Virgin of the Apocalypse*, 1760, oil on canvas, 352.7 x 340 cm (Museo Nacional de Arte, INBA; photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0); right: Luisa Roldán, *Jesus of Nazareth*, 1692–1700, polychromed wood, 159 cm (Convento de Madres Clarisas (Nazarenas), Sisante)

A beam of light falls dramatically over a group of dashing rogues in Caravaggio's *Calling of Saint Matthew*. In Miguel Cabrera's *Virgin of the Apocalypse*, an oversized Virgin Mary steps triumphantly over a dragon, creating a dynamic diagonal effect. Luisa Roldán's *Jesus of Nazareth* awes the viewer with its astoundingly realistic likeness.



Figure 7.2.2: Left: Gian Lorenzo Bernini, Ecstasy of Saint Teresa, 1647–52, Cornaro Chapel, Santa Maria della Vittoria, Rome (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0); center: Louis le Vau, André le Nôtre, and Charles le Brun, Palace of Versailles, 1664–1710 (photo: Jean-Christophe BENOIST, CC BY 3.0); right: Church of Our Lady of the Rosary of the Blacks, 18th century, Ouro Preto, Brazil (photo: Juliana Bruder, CC BY-SA 4.0)

The ecstasy of Bernini's *Saint Teresa* unravels theatrically in a rapture of folds and ascending movement. A façade of symmetrical, repetitive elements imposes with its restrained classicism at Versailles. Two connected ovals and their undulating walls test the limits of formal experimentation at José Pereira dos Santos's *Church of Our Lady of the Rosary of the Blacks* in Ouro Preto (Brazil).



Figure 7.2.3: Giovanni Battista Gaulli, also known as il Baciccio, *The Triumph of the Name of Jesus*, ceiling fresco, 1672–85, Church of Il Gesù, Rome (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0); Main altar inside Santa Prisca y San Sebastián, Taxco, Guerrero, Mexico (photo: Javier Castañón, CC BY-NC-ND 2.0)

The ceiling of the Church of the Gesù in Rome opens up into an apotheosis of limitless otherworldly heavens, and the altar of the *Church of Santa Prisca and San Sebastian* in Mexico compulsively merges disparate forms into a *horror vacui* of "ornamental fervor." [1]



Figure 7.2.4: Rembrandt, *Aristotle with a Bust of Homer*, 1653, oil on canvas, 143.5 x 136.5 cm (The Metropolitan Museum of Art); Judith Leyster, *Self-Portrait*, c. 1633, oil on canvas, 74.6 x 65.1 cm (National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C.); Diego Rodríguez de Silva y Velázquez, Las Meninas, c. 1656, oil on

canvas, 125 1/4 x 108 5/8″ / 318 x 276 cm (Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid)

While the Greek philosopher Aristotle introspectively contemplates a bust of Homer in Rembrandt's *Aristotle*, the likeness of Dutch painter Judith Leyster greets the viewer with vibrant immediacy in her self-portrait. Members of the Spanish court make reality enter fiction in Velázquez's *Las Meninas*.

"Baroque" is here understood as the art produced through the 17th and much of the 18th centuries in a broad range of geographies across the globe. But what do all these disparate works have in common? What does "Baroque" mean? And can we speak of it as being global?

Baroque: limitations and possibilities of an art historical concept

The "Baroque" is one of the most disputed styles of art history, and the history of the term is just as convoluted as the art that it describes. The origins of the term are not entirely clear, but the most accepted (and evocative) theory is that it originated from a term (*barrôco* in Portuguese, *barrueca* in Spanish) describing a specific type of irregular pearl: in other words, a natural but artificial-looking, precious but misshapen object. As you probably guessed, when applied to art, the word "Baroque" can connote a certain measure of distortion and imperfection. But this is an inaccurate characterization that assumes a unified style. As shown in the examples above, there are many versions of the so-called Baroque.



Figure 7.2.5: An example of Baroque realism (left) contrasted with an example of Baroque classicism (right). Left: Jusepe de Ribera, *Sense of Taste*, 1613–16, oil on canvas, 117 x 88 cm (Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford); right: Nicolas Poussin, Et in Arcadia Ego, 1637–38, oil on canvas, 87 x 120 cm (Musée du Louvre, Paris, photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Consider the ordinary figures, stark realism, and dramatic tenebrism of Diego Velázquez's *The Waterseller of Seville* or Jusepe de Ribera's *Allegory of Taste*—prime examples of what is sometimes referred to as "Baroque realism" alongside the "Baroque classicism" of Nicolas Poussin's *Et in Arcadia Ego*, an image set in ancient Greece with quasi-archaeological accuracy.



Figure 7.2.6: Gian Lorenzo Bernini, *Cathedra Petri (or Chair of St. Peter)*, gilded bronze, gold, wood, stained glass, 1647–53 (apse of Saint Peter's Basilica, Vatican City, Rome, photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

And now consider the stage quality of Gian Lorenzo Bernini's *Cathedra Petri*—a chair (that of Saint Peter) that appears to float in the air through a combination of painting, sculpture, architecture, glass, and light. It characterizes yet another mode, Bernini's "Theatrical Baroque" (Bernini was in fact a stage designer). To complicate matters, consider how many works conjoin these various Baroque modes at once: Juan Sánchez Cotán's *Quince, Cabbage, Melon and Cucumber* combines the hyper-realistic depiction of fruits and vegetables with the theatricality of staging these objects under dramatic lighting against a dark background, as well as an erudite classical reference: like most Baroque still life painters, Cotán was probably emulating the ancient Greek painter Zeuxis, who was known through written accounts for the deceptively illusionistic powers of his paintings.



Figure 7.2.7: Juan Sánchez Cotán, *Still Life with Quince, Cabbage, Melon, and Cucumber*, c. 1602, oil on canvas, 68.9 cm x 84.46 cm (The San Diego Museum of Art)

Like other art historical categories such as Gothic or Romanesque, the notion that there was a Baroque style originated from unsympathetic critics of a later period. More precisely, in the second half of the 18th century, when it started to refer to art of the previous century, the term "Baroque" designated art which was "not in accord with the rules of proportions." [2] In the 19th century, it was associated with notions of bizarreness, and then finally became associated with a distorted and degenerate version of Renaissance (or more precisely of Italian Renaissance) art.

For these reasons, some scholars reject the use of Baroque as a valid artistic category: it is anachronistic—people at the time didn't refer to art of the period as being "Baroque"—and it can carry pejorative connotations. Ultimately, as with almost all such examples of a period style—a label created artificially and after the fact to refer to the defining characteristics of art from a particular historical period—"Baroque" is necessarily reductive.

So, why are we using it here?

Despite its flaws, most scholars have embraced the "Baroque" as a useful category to give coherence to the striking variety of artworks from this period. The most influential scholar was Heinrich Wölfflin, who offered the first positive assessment of the Baroque in his *Principles of Art History* (1915), though he considered it primarily in the Italian context. To demonstrate that the Baroque was distinct from and just as valuable as the Renaissance, Wölfflin devised an influential comparative formal analysis—much like you might see in an art history class today, with images side-by-side. By closely looking at examples of Renaissance and Baroque art, he concluded that Baroque works were characterized by:

- painterliness—loose brushwork, blurred contours, and color over line;
- expansiveness—the impression that the artwork continues beyond its borders, oftentimes through the use of diagonals; and
- uncertainty—the emphasis on how things appear instead of how they actually are, that is the prioritizing of pictorial effects over legibility of form.

In highlighting these Baroque traits, Wölfflin was implying that tension, contradiction, and even imperfection were valuable forms of artistic expression. To him, this was in opposition to Renaissance linearity (the preference for clearly distinct forms perfectly defined by line), self-containment (the way a work is contained within its frame), and clarity (allows one to clearly distinguish each element in a work at once).



Figure 7.2.8: Left: Raphael, *Madonna of the Goldfinch*, 1505–6, oil on panel, 107 x 77 cm (Uffizi, Florence); right: Peter Paul Rubens, *Assumption of the Virgin Mary*, 1626, oil on panel, 490 cm x 325 cm, High Altar of the Cathedral of Our Lady, Antwerp, Province of Antwerp, Flanders, Belgium (photo: Rolf Kranz, CC BY-SA 4.0)

A comparison between Raphael's *Madonna of the Goldfinch* from the Renaissance and Peter Paul Rubens's *The Assumption of the Virgin* from the Baroque illustrates Wölfflin's categories. Raphael's painting emphasizes defining lines, self-contained figures—notice how through her gaze and posture, the Virgin draws the composition inward rather than expanding it beyond the borders of the canvas—and spatial clarity. Rubens's *Assumption*, on the other hand, displays painterly brushwork, prominent color, the blurring of contours, dynamic diagonals, and dramatic contrast of light and shadow. It also seems to project outward into the space of the viewer.



Figure 7.2.9: Annibale Carracci, *Christ Appearing to Saint Peter on the Appian Way* (also known as *Domine quo vadis*), 1601–

02, oil on wood, 77.4 x 56.3 cm (The National Gallery, photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Wölfflin's analysis was far from perfect—for example, he excluded the more restrained and classically inspired works of artists such as Annibale Carracci or Nicolas Poussin because they didn't fit his idea of the Baroque. More importantly, he was so focused on visual elements that he didn't pay enough attention to social and cultural factors. Many scholars after Wölfflin addressed these issues: from Erwin Panofsky's view of the Baroque as a phenomenon unique to Counter-Reformation Italy (the Catholic response to the Protestant Reformation), to John Rupert Martin's definition of the Baroque as a mentality with shared attitudes towards the world.



Figure 7.2.10: Artemisia Gentileschi, *Judith and Holofernes*, c. 1612–13, oil on canvas, 199 x 162.9 cm (Museo e Real Bosco di Capodimonte, Naples, photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

In Martin's view, features as distinctive of the Baroque as Naturalism (the imitation of nature) and Psychology (the interest in human passions) are related to developments in science (the direct observation of nature promoted by thinkers such as Francis Bacon and Johannes Kepler) and philosophy (the study of emotions of philosophers such as René Descartes) such as they appear, for example, in Artemisia Gentileschi's *Judith Slaying Holofernes*.



Figure 7.2.11: San Pedro Apóstol de Andahuaylillas, Peru, 17th century (photo: courtesy World Monuments Fund)

What about art outside of Europe?

However, in their discussions, none of these earlier critics considered art produced outside of Europe. By contrast, in the past few decades, scholars have started to recognize the Baroque as a global phenomenon—some even considering it the first truly global style. Scholars of Latin American art and culture have pointed out that Wölfflin's recognition of difference and paradox—the tensions, contradictions, and imperfections discussed above—as essential features of Baroque aesthetic is useful to think about the Baroque in all its global diversity and complexity (even though applying a European category to the rest of the world is also problematic). For example, consider the church of *San Pedro Apóstol de Andahuaylillas* in Peru, which features a combination of European, Islamic, and Indigenous Andean elements. In a way, such a work defies categorization. But it also embodies quite neatly the Baroque elements of difference and paradox singled out by Wölfflin.

Some scholars have even embraced the Baroque ahistorically—that is, suggesting that we can find a Baroque aesthetic across any time and space—but most recognize it as an array of styles that developed around the globe in a specific time period (c. 1585–1750) from very specific historical conditions—including the Counter-Reformation, the Scientific Revolution, the consolidation of absolutism, the rise of capitalism, the expansion of colonization—through which European countries exerted control over Indigenous populations—and globalization.



Figure 7.2.12: São Paulo, founded 1610, Diu, India (photo: Shakti, CC BY-SA 3.0)

What did it mean to be global in the Baroque?

In the 17th and 18th centuries, globalization meant connectedness across distant geographies, but not that every part of the globe was connected to each other. Rather, there were specific pathways shaped by the contours of religion, colonization, and trade, which themselves were closely linked. For example, the establishment of Portuguese colonies in India since the early 16th century facilitated the presence of religious missionaries such as the Jesuits, who in turn employed Hindu carvers to build extraordinary churches such as São Paulo in Diu, India.

The Jesuits were also largely responsible for the dissemination of European prints that were used as models for religious images in colonial contexts. But those who were forced into religious and artistic models were by no means passive receptors. Rather, they were active contributors who creatively transformed those models, forging, in turn, completely new and original versions of the Baroque.



Figure 7.2.13: Left: Schelte à Bolswert, *The Assumption of the Virgin*, 1630–90, engraving, 27.3 x 17.2 cm, after the painting by Rubens (The British Museum, CC BY-NC-SA 4.0); right: Miguel González and/or Juan González, The *Assumption of the Virgin*, c. 1700, oil on panel with inlaid mother-of-pearl, 93 x 74 cm (private collection, Monterrey, Mexico)

For example, consider how Miguel González and/or Juan González's *The Assumption of the Virgin*, one of the many Latin American works related to prints after the painting by Rubens of the same subject, transforms the European model into something distinct and unexpected through the use of mother-of-pearl inlay *enconchado*, an artistic technique which reflects both a longstanding tradition of Indigenous peoples in Mexico and Japanese *namban* lacquer work, and that through its shimmering effect emphasizes the divinity of the subject. [3]



Figure 7.2.14: One of pair of tulip vases as triumphal arches, from Greek A Factory (Adriaen Kocks, proprietor) attributed, c. 1690–1705 (Delft), tin-glazed earthenware, 29.5 x 30.5 x 7.6 cm (Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

In case you are wondering, knowledge of Japanese traditions such as lacquerware in Mexico was possible through the effect of global trade. Although wide geographical networks had existed before, what made the Baroque truly globe-encompassing was not only the inclusion of new continents such

as the Americas to the mix, but also the establishment of trade routes and chartered companies in which imperial powers systematically promoted and monopolized the exchange of goods.

These included:

1. the India Run (the voyage made by the Portuguese between Lisbon and Goa, on the southwestern coast of India. from the 16th to the 19th centuries)
2. the Manila Galleon (maintained by Spain between 1565–1815 to bring Asian goods—including the Japanese lacquer works that Mexican artists embraced in *enconchado* paintings such as the one mentioned above—across the North Pacific from Manila in the Philippines to Acapulco in New Spain, now Mexico),
3. and the Dutch East and West India Companies (VOC and GWC), which monopolized trade with Eurasia and Southern Africa and with West Africa and the Americas, respectively, during much of the 17th and 18th centuries.

These routes and companies moved exotic luxury objects such as Indian and Chinese fabrics, lacquer furniture, ivory figurines, porcelain, and spices across all the known continents. But most were also involved in the slave trade, adding a brutal aspect to this early modern globalization in the thousands of Africans who were forced into slavery in Europe and the Americas.



Figure 7.2.15: Johannes Vermeer, *Girl with Pearl Necklace*, 1664, oil on canvas, 55 x 45 cm (Staatliche Museen)

The wealth of materials, techniques, and especially the countless artists, artisans, and craftsmen of various origins who contributed to the creation of this global Baroque can't be overestimated. Think about how the desire for Chinese porcelain in the Dutch Republic drove the production of *delftware* (illustrated earlier), a domestic version of the coveted ware (and in turn how the Chinese created new types of ceramics for European markets), or how the "perfect red" attained with American cochineal dye became the color of royalty and nobility across Europe and the Americas.



Figure 7.2.16: Antonio de Pereda, Still Life with Ebony Chest, detail, 1652, oil on canvas, 80 x 94 cm (The State Hermitage Museum, Saint Petersburg)

Now consider the painstakingly rendered reflections bouncing off the Chinese vase in Jan Vermeer's *Girl with Pearl Necklace* (shown earlier), the objects from across the globe set on display in Antonio de Pereda's *Still Life with Ebony Chest*; or the diaphanous muslins from Cambay (India) in Josefa de Óbidos' *Christ Child as Salvator Mundi*.



Figure 7.2.17: Josefa de Ayala, *Christ Child as Salvator Mundi*, signed and dated "Josepha em Obidos 1680," oil on canvas, Third Penitential Order of Saint Francis, Coimbra

Even more, think about objects as uniquely global as the *Biombo with the Siege of Belgrade (front) and Hunting Scene (reverse)* (known as the Brooklyn Biombo, shown below), created in the circle of the González family. This luxurious object, commissioned in Mexico City by the viceroy of New Spain and probably displayed in the viceregal palace, is a reinterpretation of the Japanese folding screen or *byōbu*, with designs based on various European sources–including Dutch etchings and tapestry designs, and inlaid mother-of-pearl *enconchado* inspired by pre-contact Mexican and Japanese techniques.



Figure 7.2.18: Folding Screen (biombo) with the Siege of Belgrade (front), c. 1697–1701, Mexico, oil on wood, inlaid with mother-of-pearl, 229.9 x 275.8 cm (Brooklyn Museum, photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Repressive or liberating?



Figure 7.2.19: Folding Screen (biombo) with Hunting Scene (reverse), c. 1697–1701, Mexico, oil on wood, inlaid with mother-of-pearl, 229.9 x 275.8 cm (Brooklyn Museum)

The inlaid mother-of-pearl of the Brooklyn Biombo painting leads us back to the Baroque pearl metaphor mentioned earlier. The infamous pearl is particularly poignant to discussions of the global Baroque when we consider what these jewels meant in the early modern world and the many frictions involved in their transatlantic trade. Although pearls had been available and treasured as jewels in Europe for thousands of years, it was after Christopher Columbus's voyages into the Caribbean (between 1492 and 1502), sponsored by the Spanish Catholic Monarchs, that pearls became emblematic of overseas imperial wealth. Such wealth involved the exploitation of pearl fisheries in the region through an enslaved labor force—first of Indigenous peoples, and later of Africans forcibly brought to the continent for that purpose. To twist the metaphor of the baroque pearl even further, we should add that the wonder, exuberance, and opulence that characterizes so many examples of the global Baroque often originated from violence, force, and coercion. Paradoxically, this violent global world witnessed artists of African descent, such as the painters Juan de Pareja and Juan Correa and the architect Antonio Francisco Lisboa (known as Aleijadinho), thriving as professional artists in Spain, Mexico, and Brazil, respectively.

We can't deny that one strand of the global Baroque is its Catholic, monarchical, and colonizing nature, but this doesn't mean that there wasn't room for artistic individuality, experimentation, or even dissent. Like the beautiful, unconventional, mutable forms and porous surfaces of the Baroque pearl, the forms and surfaces of Baroque artworks from across the globe reflect the Baroque styles' countless permutations, as well as the overlapping histories and cultural encounters of those who created and enjoyed them.

Footnotes

[1] Robert Harbison, *Reflections on Baroque* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), p. 127.

[2] Helen Hills, "The Baroque: The Grit in the Oyster of Art History," in Helen Hills, ed. *Rethinking the Baroque* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011), p. 12.

[3] As Aaron Hyman has recently noted, while bearing an unmistakable resemblance to Rubens' "original" painting, we should also consider how such a work may have been in dialogue with the many other colonial versions of the Rubens that already existed, forcing us to reconsider the primacy of the European model and the meaning of (baroque) originality. *Rubens in Repeat: The Logic of the Copy in Colonial Latin America* (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2021), pp. 6–10.

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San Carlo alle Quattro Fontane

by Dr. Beth Harris and Dr. Steven Zucker

A quintessential exhibit of Baroque geometry and motion, Historian Mark Hinchman describes the church San Carlo alle Quattro Fontane (1634), designed by Francesco Borromini (1599-1667), as "a seminal work of Baroque architecture" in his textbook *History of Furniture: a global view* (Bloomsbury, 2009, pp.214).



Francesco Borromini, San Carlo alle Quattro Fontane ("Carlino"), Rome. Commissioned by Cardinal Francesco Barberini in 1634 for the Holy Order of the Trinity; construction began in 1638 and the church was consecrated in 1646.

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Transcription of "Geometry and motion in Borromini's San Carlo" video

[0:00] [music]

Dr. Steven Zucker: [0:04] We're in San Carlino, San Carlo at the Four Fountains, in Rome, this magnificent tiny church designed by the Baroque architect Borromini.

Dr. Beth Harris: [0:14] This church is so unexpected. When you walk inside, the walls move in and out, they undulate.

Dr. Zucker: [0:22] Everything is about movement in this church. Every architectural form seems to move. The rhythms created by the columns seem at such odds with the sense of stability that architecture generally tries to express.

Dr. Harris: [0:35] You have these engaged columns alternating with niches, and we see curving rectangular panels and arches. All of this draws our eye up to this amazing dome, but it's not the kind of dome we expect. It's not a perfect hemisphere. It's an oval. The church itself is based on an oval, which you don't immediately recognize when you walk in.

Dr. Zucker: [1:00] Borromini received this commission from the Trinitarian Order, an order that was dedicated to ransoming Christians that had been taken in war or by pirates.

Dr. Harris: [1:10] The Trinitarians had very little money, and most of this church is made out of very inexpensive materials. It's made out of stucco.

Dr. Zucker: [1:18] Which is a little bit like plaster. It's a soft cement that's easy to carve.

Dr. Harris: [1:22] As we're standing here, the door opens and closes. You can hear the traffic of the city of Rome right outside the door.

Dr. Zucker: [1:28] It's a reminder of just how small a plot Borromini had to work with in designing this church. Now, for all its musicality, for all of its movement, for all of its energy, the church is actually based on a careful geometric structure.

Dr. Harris: [1:42] There are two triangles that share one side, and within each of those triangles are circles. Those circles are inscribed within an oval, and that oval is the primary shape of the floor plan and the dome above.

Dr. Zucker: [1:58] The two triangles together form a diamond. The opposite points of that diamond define the ends of the lobes. On one side, the apse. On the other side, the entrance.

Dr. Harris: [2:07] We have this feeling of movement, of a space that is difficult to understand.

Dr. Zucker: [2:13] The importance of geometry becomes apparent when we look up to this marvelous lobed entablature. Above that, we see these arches that stretch and deform as they span this complicated shape. Above that is dome.

Dr. Harris: [2:28] We see hexagons, octagons, crosses, and at the very center, another oval.

Dr. Zucker: [2:35] At the very top, we see a dove within a triangle, a symbol of the Holy Spirit, part of the three-part nature of God, which couldn't be clearer set within that triangle.

Dr. Harris: [2:45] Of course, the order that commissioned this, the Trinitarians, focus their devotion on the Holy Trinity. The light in that lantern reads as supernatural light. When you stand in the center of the church, you don't see those windows, but it looks as though light is pouring down to the earthly below from the spiritual, divine, miraculous source.

Dr. Zucker: [3:07] The whole church is a metaphor, the complexity in the lower section of the church reaching a clarity and perfection as we look up towards the heavens.

Dr. Harris: [3:16] Well, this idea that a divine geometry underlies what seems like a kind of chaos of the earthly, the idea of God as the divine geometer, and just before this church was built, Johannes Kepler wrote about how the universe was structured by the laws of geometry.

[3:38] And so, we get a sense of the movement, the chaos of the earthly, but underlying that, an order that is created by God.

Dr. Zucker: [3:47] One recent art historical study sees a relationship between the complex lobing of the church and the medieval use of the mandorla — that is, a kind of full-body halo — in which Christ is often represented.

Dr. Harris: [3:59] Although when we look around the church, we recognize the forms of classical architecture — attached columns, coffers with rosettes, an entablature, a dome — underlying this are important theological ideas. Let's go outside and look at the exterior.

Dr. Zucker: [4:16] We've stepped outside, into the heavy traffic of Rome, looking at the outside of San Carlino. It could use a cleaning. Just like the inside, every architectural element on the exterior is in motion. Four large columns stand in front of a surface that undulates inward and then outward, and then inward again.

[4:33] So you have this concave, convex, concave undulation.

Dr. Harris: [4:37] And above that we see three concave spaces, although the central space projects outward because of the medallion held aloft by angels in the center.

Dr. Zucker: [4:48] Just look at the entablature and the cornice above it. It's as if it's the waves of the ocean, and the columns function almost like pivot points that allow the building to move in and out.

Dr. Harris: [4:58] We think about representing movement in sculpture with something like Bernini's "David," but here Borromini takes on movement in architecture.

[5:07] [music]

Il Gesù, Rome

by Dr. Beth Harris and Dr. Steven Zucker

Created at a dramatic moment in European history and exhibiting exhibiting the period's political context, the church of Il Gesù in Rome (1584) is a quintessential example of religious Baroque architecture and interior design, with an explosive ceiling fresco celebrates the triumph of Jesus.



Giacomo Barozzi da Vignola and Giacomo della Porta, Church of Il Gesù, Rome (consecrated 1584, ceiling fresco, *The Triumph of the Name of Jesus*, by il Baciccio, also known as Giovanni Battista Gaulli, 1672–85)

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Transcription of "Approching the devine, Il Gesù, Rome" video

[0:00] [music]

Dr. Steven Zucker: [0:06] We've just walked into Il Gesù, the mother church of the Society of Jesus, commonly known as the Jesuits. This order was founded by Ignatius of Loyola, a Spanish noble focused on preaching and converting the peoples of the world to Catholicism.

Dr. Beth Harris: [0:21] Especially in Asia and Latin America. In the late 16th century, there was a need for a new kind of church architecture. The Protestant Reformation had occurred, [with] Protestants challenging the authority of the church in Rome, of the pope. The Counter-Reformation had begun, the Catholic Church's efforts to fight back against Martin Luther.

[0:41] The Jesuits were the main allies of the pope in this response to Martin Luther and the Protestant Reformation.

Dr. Zucker: [0:49] And the effort to reassert the supremacy of the Catholic Church.

Dr. Harris: [0:52] This is the Church Triumphant. When you walk in here, there's no doubt that the Church has a sense that it has triumphed and will triumph over the challenge of Protestantism.

Dr. Zucker: [1:04] The focus, as soon as you walk into the church, is on the altar and the performance of the Eucharist that takes place there.

Dr. Harris: [1:11] Transubstantiation, the changing of the bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ. More Masses were performed during this period. More preaching took place. There was an engagement of the laity that was critical in this Counter-Reformation period.

Dr. Zucker: [1:27] The church is enormous, in order to hold the great numbers of faithful.

Dr. Harris: [1:32] What makes this church different than what came before? The architects of the High Renaissance favored the centrally planned church, that is, a church that was based on a circle or a Greek cross, that is, a cross with equal arms. They moved away from the traditional cruciform shape of a basilica.

Dr. Zucker: [1:50] In sharp contrast, this church is responding to the ideas that were set forth in the Council of Trent.

Dr. Harris: [1:56] It was at the Council of Trent that the Catholic Church determined their response to Martin Luther and the Protestants. After the Council of Trent, we see a new interest in clarity in art, in making the message very direct.

Dr. Zucker: [2:10] This church is designed to make the miraculous as accessible as possible.

Dr. Harris: [2:15] As soon as you walk in, you're struck by the breadth of the nave. We don't have side aisles.

Dr. Zucker: [2:21] Instead, we have side chapels, and despite the immensity of the church, the focus on the altar. One of the things that Vignola did was to shorten the church in back of the crossing, so that the altar is pushed forward much more than in any comparable church of this size that came previously.

Dr. Harris: [2:38] The transepts are also shortened.

Dr. Zucker: [2:40] In fact, the transepts do not move laterally past the footprint of the chapels, so that the church really does function as a rectangle.

Dr. Harris: [2:48] This focus on the altar, on holding large numbers of people who would come to hear sermons, this is what was important. What we have is a return to the basilica.

Dr. Zucker: [2:59] So far, we've been talking about this church in relationship to the Counter-Reformation, but this church remains deeply indebted to Renaissance architecture, specifically the work of Alberti.

[3:10] The breadth of the barrel vault recalls the Church of Sant' Andrea in Mantua, and the facade unites the first and second stories with the use of these beautiful scrolls that are a direct reference back to Alberti's facade for Santa Maria Novella in Florence. This architecture derives authority from those precedents.

Dr. Harris: [3:29] In fact, we see classical references if we look at the nave walls, where we see pairs of fluted pilasters with Corinthian capitals, above that a frieze, then finally a cornice, the barrel vault, the dome over the crossing. These are all elements derived from ancient Roman architecture. We could think about the Pantheon just a few blocks away.

Dr. Zucker: [3:51] Or the ancient Basilica of Maxentius and Constantine. This is the ancient vocabulary of the city of Rome being brought to bear in this new era, when the Jesuits are celebrating the Catholic church as the universal church, as the triumphant church.

Dr. Harris: [4:05] Now, the decoration of the ceiling dates to about 100 years after the architecture itself and was done by the great Baroque painter Gaulli.

Dr. Zucker: [4:14] This is one of the great ceiling paintings in the city of Rome. We have at its center the initials "IHS." We see that everywhere in this church. This monogram symbolizes the name of Jesus.

Dr. Harris: [4:26] St. Paul wrote that in the name of Jesus, every knee should bow, of those that are in heaven, on earth, and under the earth.

Dr. Zucker: [4:34] Of course, the name of this church, Il Gesù, is the name Jesus itself.

Dr. Harris: [4:39] The power of the name of Jesus to help us achieve salvation. Now, barrel vaults are heavy things, but here it opens to the heavens, where we see the name of Jesus with a cross on top, surrounded by golden light. Everywhere we look, angels [are] alighting on cornices, seeming to fly through the air.

Dr. Zucker: [5:00] But then slightly lower down, we see a number of figures suspended on clouds, creating a kind of arc across the barrel-vaulted ceiling. These figures are painted in wonderful foreshortening.

Dr. Harris: [5:11] These are the elect. We see them floating from where we are on earth up toward heaven, up toward that name of Jesus. The illusion is so convincing because the artist is breaking the frame of the main area of the fresco. Carrying the painting around it using paintings on wooden panels that cover the architecture of the vaulted ceiling.

Dr. Zucker: [5:36] And are slightly lifted off the ceiling, creating an even greater sense of dimensionality. As if that wasn't enough, what the artist has done is to paint shadow on the ceiling itself.

[5:47] Creating this incredibly convincing illusion that those figures exist in three dimensions above us and are casting shadows on the actual architecture.

Dr. Harris: [5:56] This must have made you feel, in your body, a sense of the miraculous.

Dr. Zucker: [6:02] That's not to say that people in the 17th century believed these paintings to be real.

Dr. Harris: [6:07] We don't believe everything we watch in a movie. While we're watching it, we feel as though it's real.

Dr. Zucker: [6:12] There's one painted group that we haven't spoken about. They're largely in shadow. If the arc were the elect, those rising to heaven. These are the damned being cast down into hell.

[6:22] One of favorite aspects of this part of the painting is the figure holding a book. He comes out of the ceiling in such a convincing manner. If we were to measure him, he would be so much larger than life.

Dr. Harris: [6:33] It's using that technique of foreshortening to move these figures in and out of the viewer's space that makes this so compelling. Boundaries dissolve in this church; the boundary between the earthly and the heavenly.

[6:48] [music]

Mexican Baroque

by Dr. Lauren Kilroy-Ewbank and Dr. Steven Zucker

Europeans spread Catholicism as well as baroque styles through colonialism in the 17th-18th centuries. The Metropolitan Cathedral of the Assumption of the Most Blessed Virgin Mary in Mexico City (consecrated 1656) displays a magnificent baroque altar the features European as well as Mexican details.



Jerónimo de Balbás, *Altar of the Kings (Altar de los Reyes)*, 1718-37, Metropolitan Cathedral of the Assumption of the Most Blessed Virgin Mary (Mexico City)

Cite this page as: Dr. Lauren Kilroy-Ewbank and Dr. Steven Zucker, "Jerónimo de Balbás, *Altar of the Kings (Altar de los Reyes)*," in *Smarthistory*, December 17, 2015, accessed November 16, 2025, https://smarthistory.org/jeronimo-de-balbas-altar-of-the-kings-altar-de-los-reyes/.

Transcription of "Jerónimo de Balbás, Altar of the Kings (Altar de los Reyes)" video

[0:00] [music]

Dr. Steven Zucker: [0:04] We're in the main cathedral of Mexico City, the largest cathedral in the Americas. We've walked all the way down the side aisle, to the very back of the church, and we are presented with the most opulent architecture that I have ever seen.

Dr. Lauren Kilroy-Ewbank: [0:19] What we're looking at is what's called the Altar of the Kings. There was nothing like it until its creation.

Dr. Zucker: [0:25] This would set a precedent for architecture across Mexico.

Dr. Kilroy-Ewbank: [0:28] It's begun in 1718, but it's not finished until 1737, and that's in part because of its enormous size and the numerous people who had to work on this altarpiece.

Dr. Zucker: [0:40] The woodworking alone took seven years, and then it took a dozen years to gild it all.

Dr. Kilroy-Ewbank: [0:44] It's orchestrated and designed by the artist Jerónimo de Balbás, who comes from Spain. He's from Sevilla, or Seville. He's thought to have been either working in the circle of the Churriguera family or to have at least been familiar with his architecture, which is a really sumptuous architecture dominated by what's called an estípite column.

Dr. Zucker: [1:06] We're in an artistic era which we call the Baroque, and magnificent sumptuous religious structures are being built throughout Catholic Europe.

[1:13] One of the dominant forms of architecture at this time [is] what is known as the Solomonic column, which is a spiral column, probably most famously seen in Saint Peter's in the Vatican.

[1:23] But the estípite is a very different kind of form. It is rectilinear, but it is just as dynamic as the Solomonic.

Dr. Kilroy-Ewbank: [1:31] The use of the estípite column is important here. What it approximates is the ideal male body, where you get the sense of the neck, the broad shoulders, and then tapering to the feet. It also looks like an inverted obelisk.

Dr. Zucker: [1:45] Unlike a traditional Greek column, which tends to be wider at the bottom and to taper upward, this tapers downward. The result is complex and fascinating. You have placed the mass — that is, the heaviest part of the column — upward, so there is this inherent instability.

[2:01] What a perfect way of understanding the Baroque interest in dynamism, because when we look at the Altar of the Kings, it seems as if it is absolutely in motion, undulating, shifting. It is this ideal representation of the Baroque.

Dr. Kilroy-Ewbank: [2:15] Of course, we have to imagine the candlelight flickering over the surfaces that are primarily gilded.

Dr. Zucker: [2:20] On a scale that is almost hard to comprehend.

Dr. Kilroy-Ewbank: [2:22] You don't have clear-cut registers where you're displaying sculpture and painting.

Dr. Zucker: [2:28] Instead, there's this very sophisticated mix of painting, architecture, and sculpture. In fact, the architecture is gilded. The sculptures are painted. The paintings are completely framed by both the sculpture and the architecture. You really lose those kinds of clear distinctions.

Dr. Kilroy-Ewbank: [2:43] Even though at first glance it might seem that there isn't any order here, there actually is.

Dr. Zucker: [2:48] It's probably easiest to see the structure by focusing on the four largest columns. There are two columns that frame the paintings in the center and then two columns beyond those.

Dr. Kilroy-Ewbank: [2:59] If we're starting at the bottom and we look horizontally, we see a row of women who are queens and princesses. If we go to the middle level, we see Christian kings, and then we see God the Father crowning the entire scene before us, and figures of the Holy Family.

Dr. Zucker: [3:16] The two largest paintings in the center, which today are fairly dark, represent at the bottom the Three Kings, and then the Assumption of the Virgin Mary, which is appropriate given the name of this church.

Dr. Kilroy-Ewbank: [3:26] If we look between these two estípite columns on either side, you see what's called a niche pilaster. It's basically a broken-up pilaster that has a niche with some of these fabulous sculptures of kings that are, again, all polychromed wood, painted wood.

[3:42] This pairing of the estípite column and the niche pilaster is something that you continue to see when this style is

employed after this point.

Dr. Zucker: [3:49] This was a major commission. It was supported by the crown and locally by the viceroy. It was meant to assert the authority of the king.

Dr. Kilroy-Ewbank: [3:58] I think it's important to keep in mind that instead of using local artists, you have an immigrant artist from Spain.

Dr. Zucker: [4:05] To underscore that point, the contract forbade the use of estofado, the local style of gilding with stamping and carving.

Dr. Kilroy-Ewbank: [4:12] Instead, it stipulated sculptures in the Roman style, that are just polychromed wooden sculptures. What's fascinating about this is even though Balbás, the designer of this altarpiece, did employ some local artists, there was this distancing of some of these local traditions.

Dr. Zucker: [4:31] This is, after all, the most privileged place within the most important church in Mexico, so it's no surprise that the viceroy and the king are going to assert their power here.

Dr. Kilroy-Ewbank: [4:41] What's wonderful about this is even though there is this alienation of some of the local population, particularly the creoles, or pure-blooded Spaniards born on American soil, after the completion of this altarpiece, it begins to influence architecture that is seen as expressing this new patriotism, or, let's say, creole nationalism.

Dr. Zucker: [5:02] Which comes to be known as Ultra Baroque.

[5:04] [music]

Church of Our Lady of the Rosary of the Blacks, Ouro Preto, Brazil

by Dr. Miguel A. Valerio

In eighteenth-century Brazil, people of African descent founded and joined Catholic brotherhoods (lay associations dedicated to Marian and saintly devotions, and charitable work). In a world that provided no safety net for Afrodescendants, brotherhoods allowed Afro-Brazilians to pool resources to care for each other, especially when members fell ill or died. Black brotherhoods included free-born, freed (or manumitted), and enslaved members who paid a small fee to join and to stay active. These fees and other financial activities (such as loan programs and real estate investments) allowed Afro-Brazilian brotherhoods to care for members. The discovery of gold in Brazil during the 1690s also brought wealth to Afro-Brazilian brotherhoods, as members mined for a share of the profit or had their own mines (like the legendary Chico Rey—a mine owner who is said to have financed the construction of his brotherhood's church, St. Iphigenia).



Church of Our Lady of the Rosary of the Blacks, 18th century, Ouro Preto, Brazil (photo: Juliana Bruder, CC BY-SA 4.0)

Afro-Brazilian brotherhoods

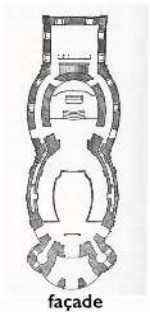
While Catholic brotherhoods were found all over the Spanish and Portuguese empires, only in Brazil did brotherhoods for people of African descent manage to build their own churches. Some of these churches are among colonial Brazil's most beautiful and include work by the best architects and painters of the period, many of whom were black, such as Aleijadinho or Mestre Valentim. Studying these churches allows us to see how people of African descent expressed themselves through religion, art, and architecture.



Map of showing the location of Ouro Preto, Brazil (underlying map © Google)

Although designed by a white architect, the Church of Our Lady of the Rosary of the Blacks in Ouro Preto is among the most famous of these Black brotherhood churches. In fifteenth-century Portugal, the Dominican Order founded Rosary brotherhoods (brotherhoods dedicated to praying the Rosary and Our Lady of the Rosary) for Blacks as a means of integrating newly arrived Africans into Catholicism. As a result, most Afro-Brazilian brotherhoods were Rosary brotherhoods and many of their churches are dedicated to Our Lady of the Rosary (a Marian advocation that originates with a 12th-century vision of Saint Dominic receiving a rosary from the Virgin Mary to fight heretics).

An unusual design



Plan of Church of Our Lady of the Rosary, Ouro Preto, Brazil

The brotherhood of Our Lady of the Rosary of the Blacks obtained their first chapel in 1716, later replacing the small chapel with the present church in 1764. The brotherhood used the church as their place of worship and, as with many black brotherhood churches in Brazil, continue to do so today.

José Pereira dos Santos designed the current plan of two connected ovals shortly before his death in 1764. Only two churches from the period, both designed by Pereira, have this shape: the Rosary of the Blacks and St. Peter in Mariana. This uncommon shape allowed the church to stand out from the customary rectangular structures, thereby indicating the elevated socioeconomic status of its members.



Left: Church of Our Lady of the Rosary of the Blacks, 18th century, Ouro Preto, Brazil (photo: Juliana Bruder, CC BY-SA 4.0); right: Church of São Francisco de Assis, Ouro Preto, Brazil (photo: svenwerk, CC BY-NC-ND 2.0)

In 1785, the brotherhood commissioned local architect Manuel Francisco de Araújo to update the façade according to prevailing tastes in Brazil. Araújo revised the church's exterior and added the bell towers. The church's façade, like its interior, is in the iconic Mineiro Rococo style. This style was common in this region and is characterized by its whitewashed walls and elaborate stone moldings, its towers resembling those of the nearby Church of Saint Francis (designed and executed by Aleijadinho).



Saint Iphigenia, inside the Church of Our Lady of the Rosary, Ouro Preto, Brazil. The present church was completed in 1793, and its interior was finished by Manuel Ribeiro Rosa and José Gervásio de Sousa. This region was home to Black, white, and mixed-race artists but records do not mention a racial designation for Manuel Ribeiro Rosa and José Gervásio de Sousa. In addition to these named artists, extensive building projects such as this one depended on a large workforce that may have included members of the brotherhood. (photo: Giuliano Orlando)

Expressing agency with Black saints

Black brotherhoods made churches their own through devotion to black saints, like the legendary St. Iphigenia (a 1st-century Ethiopian princess), St. Kaleb of Axum (a 6th-century Ethiopian king), and Benedict the Moor and Anthony of Carthage—the latter two lived in Renaissance Italy, first as slaves then as freed, religious men.



Saints Benedict and Anthony, inside the Church of Our Lady of the Rosary, Ouro Preto, Brazil (photo: Ricardo André Frantz, CC BY 3.0)

The Church of Our Lady of the Rosary of the Blacks contains six side altars with niches ornamented with painted and carved *rocaille* (elaborate ornamentation with pebbles and shells) frames. Inside the niches are statues of the black saints Iphigenia, Kaleb, Benedict, and Anthony. The last two niches (across from one another, and nearest the church's entrance) are dedicated to white saints, namely the Virgin and Child and St. Helena of Constantinople. The rounded walls with these side altars direct the gaze forward toward a painted wooden arch framing the main altar, and calling attention to the statue of Our Lady of the Rosary at its center.



Saint Helena, inside the Church of Our Lady of the Rosary, Ouro Preto, Brazil (photo: Giuliano Orlando)

St. Helena and the importance of conversion

The inclusion of St. Helena, the mother of the Roman Emperor Constantine, among these black saints may initially seem surprising. According to the early Christian father Eusebius of Caesarea, Helena converted to Christianity soon after Constantine became Emperor of Rome in 306 C.E. She convinced her son to convert to Christianity and made it the official religion of the Empire. Later in life, she traveled to Palestine to recover the cross on which Jesus had been crucified, which she brought back to Rome with her. She is shown holding the cross in the sculpture. Her presence in the church speaks to the brotherhood's devotion to the Cross and commitment to spreading Christianity following her example, but through the Rosary rather than the cross.



Painting of Saint Benedict receiving a rosary from an angel at the entrance to the Church of Our Lady of the Rosary of the Blacks, 18th century, Ouro Preto, Brazil (photo: Ricardo André Frantz, CC BY 3.0)

St. Benedict

A ceiling painting of St. Benedict at the entrance of the church includes another reference to St. Helena. The painting shows the black saint receiving a Rosary from an angel. The angel offering Benedict the rosary tells him *In hoc signo vinces* ("by this sign you will conquer"), the same phrase that appeared to Constantine in Greek before the Battle of the Milvian Bridge. Here, the brotherhood members put their stamp on Christian iconography in two ways:

First, by creating a new narrative of St. Benedict receiving a Rosary on behalf of the black race. Normally St. Dominic of Guzman, the founder of the Dominican Order, is depicted receiving the Rosary from the Virgin Mary, which he then teaches to others. Here a black saint receives it directly from an angel, creating an uninterrupted link between his race and heaven. This is significant because blackness had been seen as evil from the Middle Ages and only whitened through

conversion. Here a black saint is given a new instrument of conversion and salvation.

Second, the brotherhood members reshape an existing Christian narrative by replacing the Cross with the Rosary as the symbol of salvation. Thus, the painting declares that the brotherhood members will win admission to heaven through praying the Rosary. In other words, by constantly praying the Rosary, Mary will intercede so God can reward them with eternal life in paradise.

Another message of the painting is that the brotherhood members are charged with converting and catechizing new African arrivals through the Rosary, because the Rosary is a meditation on the principal tenets (beliefs) of Catholicism. Ouro Preto was a new town (originating in the late 17th century) where the black population was predominantly recently enslaved Africans. The membership of the brotherhood was not necessarily made up of African-born members, but the brotherhood made Christianizing newly arrived Africans part of their mission. While colonial Afro-Latin Americans have been generally viewed as the target of conversion efforts by white missionaries, this painting shows Afrodescendants doing lay missionary work themselves.

Afro-Brazilian agency

Ouro Preto's Church of Our Lady of the Rosary of the Blacks speaks to the kind of artistic and socioeconomic agency Afro-Brazilians, whether enslaved, free, or freed, wielded in the eighteenth century. It shows the ways in which Afro-Brazilian brotherhoods manipulated Catholic imagery to give their temples an Afro-centric iconography that expressed their group, Catholic, and racial identity. Beyond that, the Church invites us to think about the ways early modern Afrodescendants expressed themselves through art and other objects.

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7.3: South American Baroque

Learning Objectives

- List common characteristics of baroque architecture and interiors in Europe and colonial Latin America.
- Identify adaptations of indigenous motifs and techniques in Catholic baroque art and architecture in colonial Latin America and analyze their cultural and political implications.
- Evaluate the role of baroque art and architecture in global European imperialism of the 16th-18th centuries.

The Sistine Chapel of the Americas

by Dr. Ananda Cohen-Aponte

Cite this page as: Dr. Ananda Cohen-Aponte, "Luis de Riaño and Indigenous collaborators, *The Paths to Heaven and Hell*, Church of San Pedro de Andahuaylillas," in *Smarthistory*, October 22, 2019, accessed February 5, 2026, https://smarthistory.org/luis-de-riano-paths-heaven-hell-san-pedro-andahuaylillas/.



Figure 7.3.1: **San Pedro Apóstol de Andahuaylillas, Peru, 16th century (photo: Bex Walton, CC BY 2.0)**

The Church of San Pedro de Andahuaylillas located outside of Cuzco contains an expressive decorative program that has earned it the title of the "Sistine Chapel of the Americas." Filled with canvas paintings, statues, and an extensive mural program, the level of artistry and extravagance afforded to this church certainly rivals its counterparts in Renaissance Italy.



Figure 7.3.2: Nave looking toward the mural depicting *The Paths to Heaven and Hell*, San Pedro Apóstol de Andahuaylillas, Peru (photo: courtesy World Monuments Fund)

One of the church's most well-known images is the mural painted on the interior entrance wall depicting an allegory of good and bad faith.



Figure 7.3.3: Luis de Riaño and Indigenous collaborators, *The Paths to Heaven and Hell*, c. 1626, San Pedro Apóstol de Andahuaylillas, Peru (photo: courtesy World Monuments Fund)

The subject matter

Painted by the criollo artist Luis de Riaño and Indigenous assistants, *The Paths to Heaven and Hell* transmits an important message to parishioners as they exit the church of the moral

decisions they will confront on their spiritual journey. The two paths refer directly to a biblical passage which states,

> ***Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it / But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it.***
>
> *Matthew 7:13–14*



Figure 7.3.4: Luis de Riaño and Indigenous collaborators, *The Paths to Heaven and Hell.* RIght: detail of the Devil holding a rope, and an allegorical female figure guiding a young man; right: the soul on the righteous path to the heavenly Jerusalem, c. 1626 (San Pedro Apóstol de Andahuaylillas, Peru)

A nude figure wearing nothing but a white sheet around his waist walks cautiously down the narrow and thorny path to the Heavenly Jerusalem, with three lines emanating from his head that lead to a representation of the Holy Trinity as three identical male figures. A thick rope also connects his back to the composition on the left of the doorway, where the Devil attempts to pull him over to the left side.



Figure 7.3.5: Luis de Riaño and Indigenous collaborators, *The Paths to Heaven and Hell*, detail of the feast, c. 1626 (San Pedro Apóstol de Andahuaylillas, Peru)



Figure 7.3.6: Luis de Riaño and Indigenous collaborators, *The Paths to Heaven and Hell*, detail of the Hell mouth, c. 1626 (San Pedro Apóstol de Andahuaylillas, Peru)

At the foreground of the scene is a banquet attended by four individuals feasting on wine, fish, bread, pie, and fruits. A mouth of Hell rears its head to the left of the path to Hell, its mouth agape with a naked sinner falling into his maw.

At the forefront of the scene is an allegorical female figure guiding a young man standing directly below the rope held by the devil. The path culminates at a castle engulfed in flames guarded by deer poised on the roof with bows and arrows.

The paths to Heaven and Hell were familiar tropes in medieval Christianity, with frequent representations in paintings, manuscript illuminations, and stage sets. Despite its decline in popularity in Europe by the Renaissance, this type of allegorical imagery carried great import in the colonial Andes.

The didactic iconography, painstakingly labeled with relevant biblical passages, was ideal for preaching Catholic doctrine to Andean parishioners. In fact, it is highly likely that Juan Pérez Bocanegra, the parish priest who commissioned the murals and accompanying decorative program, would have conducted his sermons using the murals as a focal point.

A New Jerusalem in the Andes



Figure 7.3.7: Hieronymus Wierix, *The Narrow and Wide Path*, c. 1600, engraving, 18.3 × 10.9 cm

The mural is based on a print by Hieronymus Wierix entitled *The Narrow and Wide Path*, which Riaño copies relatively faithfully. One significant modification, however, can be found in the depiction of the path to Heaven. In the mural version, Riaño has added an additional figure at the doorway to the Heavenly Jerusalem holding a key. This individual likely represents Saint Peter the Apostle, the patron saint of Andahuaylillas. As the universal head of the church, Saint Peter held the keys to the kingdom of Heaven. Parishioners were thus given the implicit message that the church of their very community constituted a New Jerusalem on Andean soil. Indeed, the act of entering and exiting the church left congregations with a palpable reminder of the spiritual pilgrimage necessary for attaining salvation—and one that could be understood within the immediate parameters of their existence rather than as a place only to be visualized and imagined.

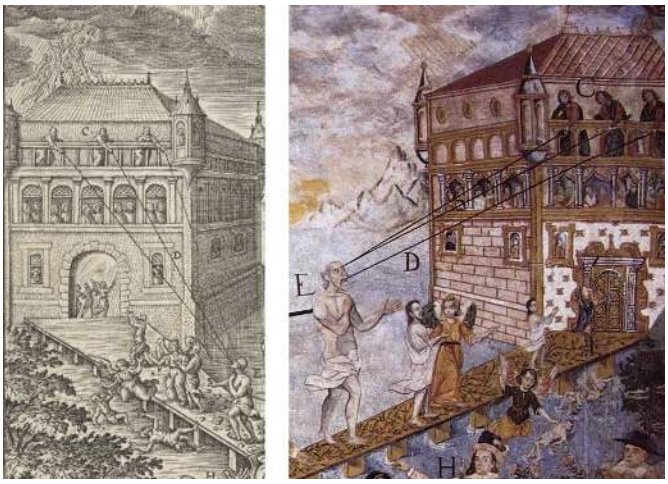


Figure 7.3.8: Left: Hieronymus Wierix, *The Narrow and Wide Path*, detail of the Heavenly Jerusalem, c. 1600; right: Luis de Riaño and Indigenous collaborators, *The Paths to Heaven and Hell*, detail of the Heavenly Jerusalem, c. 1626 (San Pedro Apóstol de Andahuaylillas, Peru)

The path to Hell also contains an intriguing detail that is only visible upon close inspection of the mural. Three barely visible figures are seated in a devil-driven canoe beneath the mouth of Hell. The central figure wears an Inka-style tunic with a checkerboard pattern around the collar. Such regalia would have been worn by curacas, or local Indigenous leaders. Another nearby Indigenous figure ingests liquid from an Inka-style aryballos vessel called an urpu, probably filled with chicha. The figures differ dramatically from the rest of the mural in both content and style. They are painted using rougher strokes, indicating the hand of an assistant to Riaño. Moreover, the cultural specificity of the figures, linking them directly to the Inka past through objects and regalia, suggest that the assistant was of Indigenous background.

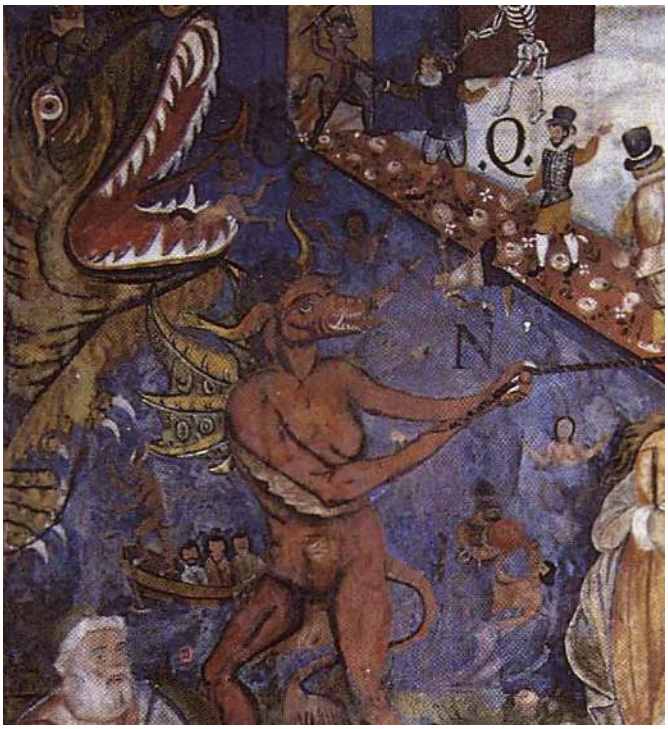
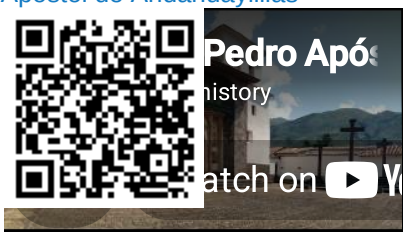


Figure 7.3.9: Luis de Riaño and Indigenous collaborators, *The Paths to Heaven and Hell*, detail of Indigenous figures behind the Devil, c. 1626 (San Pedro Apóstol de Andahuaylillas, Peru)

Despite the obvious visual conflation of Andean ritual practices in association with the Christian concept of Hell, these figures were granted visibility in a religious arena that sought to eradicate Andean ancestral cultures. *The Paths to Heaven and Hell* infuses Christian iconography with local referents to facilitate a more personalized and culturally meaningful point of access for the seventeenth-century parishioners of Andahuaylillas.

San Pedro Apóstol de Andahuaylillas



The Church of San Pedro Apóstol de Andahuaylillas, 1570–1606, stone, adobe, kur-kur, Andahuaylillas (Peru). Speakers: Norma Barbacci, World Monuments Fund, and Steven Zucker

Transcription of "San Pedro Apóstol de Andahuaylillas" video

[0:00] [music]

Dr. Steven Zucker: [0:11] We're in the Offices of the World Monuments Fund in New York City, in the Empire State building. We're talking about a really important project that WMF oversaw in Peru that has to do with these extraordinary early Baroque churches.

[0:20] The geography of Peru is incredibly varied. There are stark deserts and jungles, but it also incorporates one of the highest mountain ranges on Earth, the Andes.

Norma Barbacci: [0:31] We're going to be talking about the Church of San Pedro de Andahuaylillas, located in the Andes.

Dr. Zucker: [0:37] Before the Spanish arrived, this area had been controlled by the Inca Empire. This was an extremely sophisticated empire that had conquered a series of empires even before it.

[0:47] Primarily what the Spanish were interested in was increasing their wealth through the labor that could be gotten from the Indigenous populations, but also from raw materials that could be brought back to Spain, especially and most famously, gold.

[0:59] The Spanish would claim an enormous amount of land that stretches from what is now northern California all the way to the southern tip of South America.

Norma: [1:07] When the Spanish came, most of this region, especially in South America, was connected by a network of roads known as the Inca Road or the Qhapaq Ñan. These churches were built, stretching all the way from Cuzco to the jungle of Peru. They were known as missionary churches, designed to convert.

Dr. Zucker: [1:30] There was a religious aspect to conversion, but there was also a political aspect, which is [that] you could, in that way, control the population.

Norma: [1:38] The Jesuits, in this particular case, were considered as the more educated of the religious orders.

Dr. Zucker: [1:43] It's important also to think about the Jesuits as soldiers of the pope that were to go out into the world to combat heresy and to convert as many souls around the world as possible. When you go into the church of the Jesuits in Rome, you see very explicit references to going to the four great continents to bring those souls to the church.

Norma: [2:04] One of the most important products of this whole Counter-Reformation movement was the Baroque, but when it came to America, it became infused with some original techniques and aesthetic preferences. What we call the Andean Baroque became a new, independent style.

[2:16] As you can see, the facade has got Renaissance elements, but then once you go through the portal, it's an explosion of Baroque.

Dr. Zucker: [2:28] When we look closely at the facade, we see this brilliantly-colored entrance, with a porch above that would have been used to preach from. Even from the outside, we can

see this wonderfully complex mix of cultures that is informing the architecture.

[2:38] You had mentioned the classical. You can see that especially in the pediment. You can see that in the triumphal arch of the entranceway and, of course, the classicizing pilasters. All of this is coming from the Greco-Roman tradition.

Norma: [2:54] Then right above, you see an element that is what we would consider mudéjar architecture from Spain.

Dr. Zucker: [3:00] What we're talking about is the architectural style that was developed by the Muslims when they occupied Spain. What happens is that the Spanish Christians will reconquer the Spanish peninsula. This is a visual vocabulary that refers to conquest, the conquest and the triumphalism of Christianity. Let's go inside.

Norma: [3:20] Now, you see the stark contrast between the more classical facade into this explosion of Baroque, where every square inch of wall is covered with some kind of decoration.

Dr. Zucker: [3:25] It must have been so impressive when this was first painted. The ceiling is a kaleidoscope. We see this emphasis on pattern that really does remind me of the Islamic traditions. We see that especially in the very fine coffering.

Norma: [3:40] The local techniques of construction were used. For example, instead of wood, the artesonado ceiling was built of this technique called "kur-kur." Kur-kur consists of a combination of cane and mud that was then shaped to look like wood and then painted over with decorative motifs.

Dr. Zucker: [4:03] This wonderful example of this local building technology, which actually goes back in Andean history for thousands of years, being incorporated into this modern Christian environment and made to look like the ceilings that we would expect to see in Europe.

[4:16] It's important to remember that the artisans responsible for the building itself would have been local Indigenous peoples. The entire space feels so sculptural and so colorful.

Norma: [4:27] That's probably the reason why this church has been known in Peru as the Sistine Chapel of the Americas.

Dr. Zucker: [4:28] There's so much that we could look at. The altar is magnificent. But let's look at one particular painting of the Last Judgment, because that subject became quite common at this moment in colonial South America, in colonial Peru.

[4:41] We're looking at a mural — fresco — that is known as "secco fresco." That is, it's painting that's been done directly on a dry wall.

Norma: [4:48] The purpose of all these paintings was propaganda. The people that lived here, they didn't know how to read. This is how the indoctrination happened, through visual means. This painting by Luis de Riaño, done in the early 17th century, depicts how people that were good would go to heaven.

Dr. Zucker: [5:06] We have this fabulous feast laid out before us, but the soul that is especially good has ignored that bounty. It is willing to do the hard work of salvation. He walks along a path that is hard, that people fall off of, but his eyes are fixed on those that inhabit heaven. We see a representation of this city of the Heavenly Jerusalem just beyond.

Norma: [5:28] And then we could see the mural on the opposite side, then.

Dr. Zucker: [5:31] So here we have a pathway that looks easier, it's strewn with flowers, but of course, it leads to doom, it leads to hell. We see the mouth of hell, we see the devil, who seems to be pulling at people even on the other side.

[5:44] What's interesting is that this is a variant on a traditional Last Judgment scene, but there you generally see souls that are being awoken from the dead who have already made their choices, but here it's much more immediate. It's as if the Indigenous peoples who are being brought into this church are being faced with this immediate choice, "What path are you going to take?"

[6:10] This was especially important for the Jesuits, who were doing their best to stamp out what they saw as the idols of the Indigenous peoples.

[6:15] Even as these paintings were being made, there would still have been plenty of references not only to the religion of the Incas, but the religion of the cultures that had come before the Incas.

[6:24] In fact, the foundation is built of stone, including stone that's been repurposed from older Inca structures, but above that, we actually have what is primarily an adobe building — mud mixed with some straw to help bind it.

Norma: [6:39] In the last four or five years, World Monuments Fund has been carrying a conservation campaign in the Church of Andahuaylillas. They started with the conservation of the artesonado ceiling, but then we realized that was not enough. We had to address the structure of the whole church and then we started thinking that if we protect the church, we have to also secure the whole town.

Dr. Zucker: [7:02] We generally think of the work of art in isolation, but your project exposes the way in which a painting is part of a building, and a building is part of a community.

Norma: [7:15] That's why part of our conservation and restoration work included a training program for 15 young people, who were given the tools that they needed to actually become stewards of their own cultural heritage and their own patrimony.

Dr. Zucker: [0:00] This is especially critical because development is forcing change on these communities.

Norma: [7:30] Even though Andahuaylillas is a relatively well-preserved town, you see these new constructions that they are built [with] concrete block and blue glass, and bathroom tile on the facade, and those are not part of the tradition and the aesthetic integrity of the town, but they're also very bad environmentally.

[7:49] Adobe is a thermal material, it actually collects heat during the day and so the interiors are cool, and at night they release heat.

Dr. Zucker: [7:57] And if the local community is really a part of the conversation about maintaining its heritage, really thoughtful and considered decisions can be made about development going forward.

Norma: [8:06] So having a community that is on your side in terms of preservation is much better than just setting up laws and regulations. We're not proposing to freeze this town. Obviously this town is going to develop and grow, but without losing the important aspects of what is part of their cultural heritage.

[music]

Textiles in the colonial Andes

by Dr. Ananda Cohen-Aponte

In a previous chapter you were introduced to the long history of Andean textile arts, dating back much earlier than European colonialism. Like in San Pedro Apóstol de Andahuaylillas, indigenous Andean techniques and motifs were fused with European styles for political and religious motives.



Figure 7.3.10: All-T'oqapu Tunic, Inka, 1450–1540, camelid fiber and cotton, 90.2 x 77.15 cm (Dumbarton Oaks, Washington D.C.)

> ***As in the sacred temples of the Christians, and in the Apostolic Palace of the Pope of Rome, the royal or imperial palaces [of the Inkas] were commonly whitewashed with gesso or lime, and during solemn festivals they were accustomed to adorning them with beautiful and rich tapestries, and for those of the greatest solemnity they would add brocades and fabrics of gold.***
>
> *Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo, Historia general y natural de las Indias (General and Natural History of the Indies), 1492–1549*

This statement, made by the Spanish naturalist and historian Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo, describes the public use of textiles among the Inka in his *Historia general y natural de las Indias* (*General and Natural History of the Indies*), written between 1492–1549. Textiles were important in Inka culture,

with the highest quality examples worth more than gold or any other luxury item.



Figure 7.3.11: *Atahualpa, Fourteenth Inka*, c. mid-18th century, oil on canvas, 23 ½ x 21 11/16″ (Brooklyn Museum of Art, New York)

Textiles remained important items after the Spanish conquest in the Viceroyalty of Peru. In general, non-religious art enjoyed widespread consumption among the Viceroyalty of Peru's diverse populace. Clothing, tapestries, drinking cups, and portraits helped express social identities as well as the negotiation of cultural boundaries. Many pre-Columbian artistic traditions continued into the colonial period and became invigorated with new materials and systems of manufacture. This was certainly true of textiles.



Figure 7.3.12: Tunic (Uncu), c. 17th century. Camelid fiber, silk, metallic thread, 67.9 x 78.7 cm (Brooklyn Museum of Art, New York)

Unkus

Although indigenous men were expected to adopt European-style dress, specialized weavers continued to produce *uncus*, or tunics, for special ceremonial occasions. A man's tunic (above) dating to the seventeenth century features a colonial reinterpretation of a pre-Columbian weaving tradition. The tunic contains a band of *tocapu* along the bottom edge, which may symbolize the wearer's geographical or ethnic affiliation.



Figure 7.3.13: Tunic (Uncu), detail, ca. 17th century. Camelid fiber, silk, metallic thread, 67.9 x 78.7 cm (Brooklyn Museum of Art, New York)

Some of the colonial *tocapu* seem to lack any specific meanings and appear somewhat generic, leading some scholars to suggest that *tocapu* became associated with a generalized notion of "Inkaness" used as a way to assert elite indigenous status. A set of rampant lions with raised paws is embroidered along the bottom edge of the backside of the tunic, betraying its colonial manufacture. Lions are animals commonly used in European art whose iconography circulated throughout the Americas after the Spanish conquest.

This type of tunic would have been commissioned by members of the indigenous elite and worn during ceremonial occasions such as civic processions and religious festivals including the feast of Corpus Christi. We see individuals wearing specialized tunics in paintings showing the procession during this feast. Tunics woven in an Inka style allowed native Andean elites to reenact and reinvent Inka power within a new colonial context.



Figure 7.3.14: Tapestry with Pelican, late 17th-early 18th century (Textile Museum, Washington, DC)

Tapestries

Tapestries also reveal a great deal about artistic cross-fertilization in the colonial Andes. Inka tunics belonged to a small segment of the population who claimed ties to the indigenous elite, while tapestries were enjoyed by a broader cross-section of the population (albeit the wealthy who could afford luxury goods). Textiles such as *Tapestry with Pelican* adorned the interiors of private residences as wall hangings or served as backdrops for religious and civic processions. The tapestry, which dates to the late seventeenth or early eighteenth century, attests to the robust trans-Pacific Manila galleon trade with which the Viceroyalty of Peru was engaged.



Figure 7.3.15: Tapestry with Pelican, detail, late 17th-early 18th century (Textile Museum, Washington, DC)

The iconography of the tapestry derives, in part, from embroidered Chinese silks that arrived in the Americas in large numbers after the fall of the Ming Dynasty in 1644. The pelican is depicted feeding her young with droplets of her own blood. As art historian Elena Phipps points out, this represents the Pelican in Her Piety, a common symbol employed by missionaries to represent Christ's sacrifice. This serves as a reminder of the frequent presence of Christian themes even among artworks intended for private, non-religious consumption. The colorful tapestry also contains dogs, rabbits, parrots, horses, and Chinese mythological animals nestled among flowers and foliage giving it the appearance of a supernatural forest.



Figure 7.3.16: Mural painting imitating the appearance of textiles, 17th century, Chapel of Canincunca, Peru (Photo: Ananda Cohen-Aponte)

Textile murals

Tapestries figured so prominently in colonial Andean life that artists adapted their designs to a variety of artistic media. By the late seventeenth century, a number of rural churches throughout the Cuzco diocese featured "textile murals" that mimicked expensive brocades, laces, and tapestries but depicted with tempera paint applied to the walls in *fresco secco* (mural painting on dry plaster) technique.

One of the most impressive examples of a textile mural can be found at the chapel of Canincunca dedicated to Nuestra Señora de la Candelaria in the Quispicanchi Province just twenty miles southeast of the city of Cuzco. The entire interior of the chapel appears to be "draped" with sumptuous wall hangings, which upon closer inspection are in fact *trompe l'oeil* paintings that imitate the design and texture of cloth. The textile patterns consist of urns with flowering bouquets and counterposed s-shaped curves with leafy appendages. The patterns and color scheme resemble surviving examples of colonial textiles with interlaced vegetal motifs and floral ornamentation.



Figure 7.3.17: Mural painting imitating the appearance of textiles, detail, 17th century, Chapel of Canincunca, Peru (Photo: Ananda Cohen-Aponte)

Although the textile murals at Canincunca are in the religious context of a church setting, the designs themselves are abstract and contain no explicit references to Christianity. Textile murals hovered at the intersection of religious and secular art, endowed with sacredness by virtue of their location within religious spaces. The notion of "clothing" a church with painted simulations of cloth may have also participated in the personification of the church as a living, bodily entity, whose resonances with Andean beliefs around the animated quality of the natural world would have been especially palpable.

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Early viceregal architecture and art in Colombia

by Dr. Maya Jiménez

In 1499, Alonso de Ojeda became the first Spaniard to step on what is today Colombian (as well as Venezuelan) soil. Often credited with circulating the myth of El Dorado, Ojeda's expedition prompted that of later conquistadors, among them Jiménez de Quesada and Sebastián de Benalcázar. In 1525, the Caribbean coastal city of Santa Marta was established as the first Spanish settlement in Colombia, however it was the cities of Bogotá, Cartagena de Indias (commonly known as Cartagena), Tunja, and Popayán that would eventually rise to prominence.



Map indicating the locations mentioned in this essay (image: ©Google Earth)

Popayán, for instance, was a highly profitable city as a result of its reliance on mining and slavery, which ensured substantial wealth for the city, and thus permitted the commissioning of impressive religious monuments. Before Bogotá was proclaimed the capital of the Viceroyalty of New Granada (the name given to the jurisdiction of the Spanish Empire in northern South America) in 1717, the city was home to the President of the *Audiencia* of Santa Fé, whose job was to oversee the Colombian provinces and report to the Viceroy in Lima.

An early colonial church in Bogotá



Church of San Francisco, Bogotá, 1556 (photo: Kamilokardona, CC BY-SA 3.0)

In Bogotá, the oldest surviving colonial church (1556) bears a modest façade in comparison to what is found inside. Featuring one bell tower and a single nave interior, the Church of San Francisco features an elaborate *retablo* (altarpiece) that invades the entire area of the apse (the semi-circular at one end of the church).



Altarpiece, Church of San Francisco (photo: Felipe Restrepo Acosta, CC BY-SA 3.0)

The *retablo* is gilded, and adorned with biblical sculptures (such as St. John writing the Apocalypse), spiral fluted columns, and indigenous plants like coconut and chontaduro palm trees (chontaduro is the fruit of a palm tree that is native to the Pacific rim of Colombia). Not only does this demonstrate that the convergence of local and foreign iconography (symbolism) was a widespread practice in the colonies, but also that it was a trademark of early colonial churches, when the process of evangelization was in its early stages.

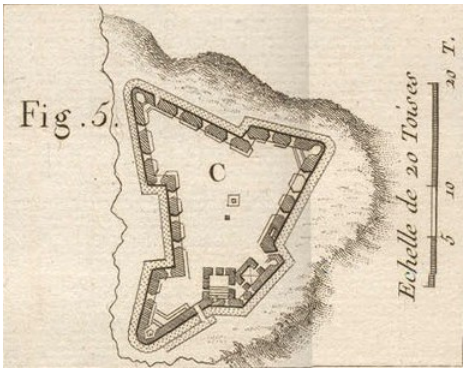


Diagram of the Fortress of San Felipe

The Fortified City of Cartagena

Cartagena, founded in 1533, is located on the Caribbean coastline of Colombia. The city played an influential role in the dissemination of enslaved Africans throughout the viceroyalty. Due to its strategic position, Cartagena was not only an important trading post, but also a prime target for invaders, explaining the overwhelming presence of fortresses throughout the city. Starting in 1610, it also served as the seat of the Spanish Inquisition (founded in 1478 by Ferdinand and Isabel — King and Queen of Spain — to maintain Catholic orthodoxy in their kingdoms), which established only three Holy Offices in Latin America, one of which was Cartagena.

The city of Cartagena served as an important entry point into the Viceroyalty. Much like Veracruz, Cartagena was — and still is — an active port city. Enslaved people, gold, and silver were stored, exchanged, and shipped from Cartagena, which became wealthy and powerful during the colonial era. As a result, Cartagena, like other port cities in the Caribbean, such as La Habana and San Juan, was surrounded by thick and crenellated walls, hence its Spanish name as "*la ciudad amurallada*" ("the walled city"). This colonial city, contained within more than six miles of fortified walls, is unique in Latin America.



The Fortress of San Felipe (photo: KenWalker, CC-BY-SA-3.0)

The Fortress of San Felipe, begun in 1630, was Cartagena's main defense against French, Dutch, and English explorers, among them Sir Francis Drake, whose invasion of Cartagena in 1586 was known as the Caribbean Raid. These attacks continued into the eighteenth century, prompting various enlargements and renovations to the fortress. Located on a hilltop, the fortress provides a strategic view of both the city and port. Its thick walls (with foundations as thick as 65 feet), triangular design, and exterior ramp system make the fortress impenetrable, while a complex maze of underground tunnels connects this stronghold with the walled city.

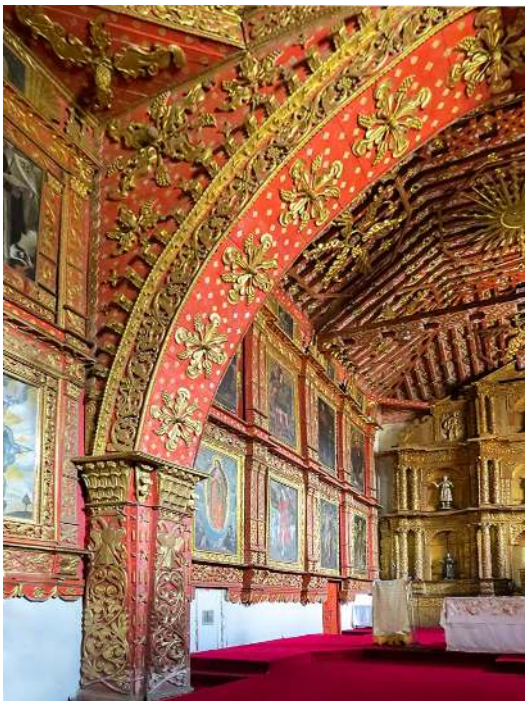


Detail of the Fortress of San Felipe (photo: Nelsonc, CC BY-SA 3.0)

Early religious architecture in Tunja

Tunja, founded by Jiménez de Quesada in 1539, and Popayán, founded by Benalcázar in 1537, are also located in vastly different regions of Colombia. Through the efforts of important

art patrons (such as Juan de Vargas, Gonzalo Suárez Rendón, and Juan de Castellanos), Tunja emerged as an intellectual and humanist center.



Nave of the Church of Santa Clara, Tunja, founded1571 (photo: Brad Fanta, CC BY-NC-ND 4.0)



Decoration in the Church of Santa Clara, Tunja, founded 1571

In Tunja, the Church of Santa Clara was the first convent of colonial Colombia. Its interior features, like at the Church of San Francisco in Bogotá, includes indigenous iconography. The golden sun, located prominently above the apse, held special significance for the Chibcha, who considered it their principal god, as well as life giving force.

Surrounding the golden sun, and throughout the interior of the church, bodiless angels appear to float aimlessly. With their heads located at center and surrounded by six wings, these seraphim recall the golden sun.

The fact that these solar symbols were made explicit both on the walls of the church, as well as on liturgical pieces, demonstrates the importance of hybrid iconography in the evangelization process, while their repetition might suggest insistency and forcefulness.



Nave of the Church of Santa Clara, detail of the sun (photo: Brad Fanta, CC BY-NC-ND 4.0)

The House of the Scribe in Tunja

Iconography also played an important role in domestic architecture, particularly that of the renowned scribe Juan de Vargas. Commonly known as the House of the Scribe, it served as the home of the Vargas family, who arrived to New Granada in 1564. Under the patronage of Vargas, as well as that of the Spanish priest Juan de Castellanos and the founder of Tunja, Gonzalo Suárez Rendón, a humanist tradition began to brew in Tunja.



A ceiling in the House of the Scribe, Tunja, late 16th century (photo: Stefanrevollo, CC BY-SA 4.0)

Similar to what had occurred in Renaissance Europe, the teachings of the Church were combined with the ideas of classical philosophy, creating a culture that was as much

intellectual as it was religious. This was reflected not only in the private libraries of Vargas and Castellanos, which contained books, prints, and manuals (many of them from Europe), but also in their art collection. At the home of Juan de Vargas for instance, an extensive mural program features a unique conflation of Roman mythology, Christian iconography, and European painting.



Detail of the Roman goddess Diana, murals in the House of the Scribe, Tunja, late 16th century (photo: Stefanrevollo, CC BY-SA 4.0)

The mural features an iconography unlike any other in New Granada, and less common across the American continent at the time. It includes depictions of the Roman Goddess of Wisdom, Minerva, and the Goddess of Hunt, Diana, combined with religious symbols such as the Latin cross.

Even more interesting is the fact that these recognizable icons are set in a landscape of exotic flora and fauna, including a rhinoceros, which is not indigenous to Colombia. It is believed to have been copied from either an Albrecht Dürer print or from a copy of Dürer's print by the Spanish engraver Juan de Arfe, published in *De Varia Commensuración para la Escultura y Architectura* (1587).



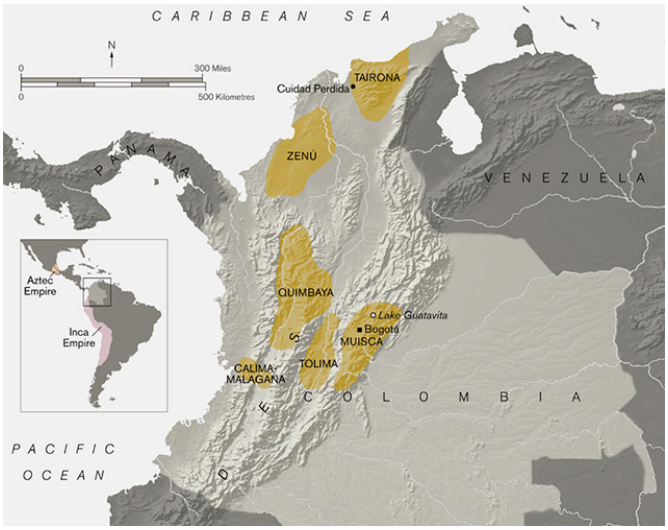
Left: detail of the rhinoceros, mural in the House of the Scribe, Tunja, late 16th century (photo: Stefanrevollo, CC BY-SA 4.0); right: Albrecht Dürer, *Rhinoceros*, woodcut, 1515.

The end result is an eclectic combination of mythological and religious narratives set against a landscape of exotic figures, animals, and plants—revealing the cultural convergence that characterized the art of Spanish America.

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Ancient Colombian goldmaking

by The British Museum



Archaeological regions of Colombia © Trustees of the British Museum

El Dorado



***Mask with Nose Ornament*, c. 500 B.C.E.–1600 C.E., gold alloy, 15.5 x 18 cm, Quimbaya © The Trustees of the British Museum. This spectacular hammered mask with a dangling nose ornament would probably have been placed on top of the face of a funerary bundle – the wrapped body of the deceased—transforming him into an ancestor and semi-divine figure.**

For centuries Europeans were dazzled by the legend of a lost city of gold in South America. The truth behind this myth is fascinating. El Dorado–literally “the golden one”–actually refers to the ritual that took place at Lake Guatavita, near modern Bogotá. The newly elected leader, covered in powdered gold, dived into the lake and emerged as the new chief of the Muisca people who lived in the central highlands of present-day Colombia’s Eastern Range.

The Muisca, Quimbaya, Calima, Tairona, Tolima and Zenú chiefdoms in ancient Colombia used gold to fashion some of the most visually dramatic and sophisticated works of art found anywhere in the Americas before European contact. Although gold was not valued as currency in pre-Hispanic Colombia, it had great symbolic meaning. It was one way the elite could publicly assert their rank and semi-divine status, both in life and in death.

More than just gold

Objects that seem at first glance made of gold are more complex and are in fact made of metal alloys. In most instances they combine, in different degrees, gold, some natural occurring silver, and copper, a combination known as tumbaga. These metals were symbolically charged in pre-Hispanic times, being associated with the sun and the moon respectively. Their combination produced a microcosm, a balance between opposites in the rendering of each object.



***Anthropomorphic Bat Pectoral*, 900–1600 C.E., gold alloy, Tairona © Museo del Oro—Banco de la República, Colombia**

The creation of alloys also allowed for differences in color, ranging from reddish to golden tones. Each object had its own particular color, shine and finish thanks to the mastery and skills of the artists that produced them. Some even show contrasting colors in the same object, producing beautiful patterns and details.

Hammering and casting

Small ingots of tumbaga, in the shape of round buttons, were crafted into unique objects either by hammering or casting them (or by a combination of both techniques). Ancient Colombian artists mastered both techniques to an unprecedented degree, creating exceptional works of art.

Hammering metal was a delicate process. Metal becomes easily brittle when hammered and they have to be repeatedly cooled and dipped in water before the final form is achieved. The thin sheets of gold were then cut, decorated (for example by repoussé) or joined by clipping or folding several sheets together.



Hands up close (detail), *Seated Female Poporo*, c. 500 B.C.E. – 700 C.E. Early Quimbaya, tumbaga (gold alloy), Colombia © The Trustees of the British Museum. This lime-flask was cast by the lost-wax method. The head, lower legs and stool were cast separately and then soldered to the body. Flasks held lime obtained from burning and grinding seashells. The alkaline lime was chewed with coca leaves to release their active stimulant and enhance clear, contemplative thinking.

However, it was the casting of metals that was developed most in ancient Colombia. Using the lost wax technique, artist modeled the final piece they wanted to achieve in beeswax (from stingless bees). Once the wax figure was finished it was covered in fine clay and charcoal, leaving pouring channels. The whole mould was fired and the melted wax poured out. Its place would be taken by molten metal, which cooled slowly as it solidified inside the mould. The mould was then broken and the final metal piece polished and finished.

Ancient Colombian artists even created hollow objects following this technique, for example flasks and containers. Great skill was needed to produce them. The figure was modeled in clay and charcoal, and a thin layer of wax was applied to cover the final result. Over this another layer of clay would be added, and wooden pegs were inserted to fix the inner mould to the outer one to keep them in place when the wax melted. Controlling the flow of the metal to every single detail of the piece, its slow solidification, and then freeing the figure without damaging it was challenge that could only be achieved by the most experienced hands.

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

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8.1: Commodities and Resources of Global Trade

Learning Objectives

- Analyze representations of power in 18th and 19th century global commodities and resources.
- Provide examples of commodities traded in New Spain, identifying the origin of various cultural influences within one object.
- Discuss the symbolism represented by stools, gold, kente, and other designs of the Asante of the 17th-19th centuries and make comparisons with other comtemporary empires as well as present-day meaning in West Africa and elsewhere.

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8.1.1: Viceroyalty of New Spain

Plaza Mayor of Mexico City: An Ideal Projection in the painting of Cristóbal de Villalpando

by Dr. Lauren Kilroy-Ewbank

In Mexico City's main plaza, a bustling scene unfolds before our eyes. Horse-drawn carriages carry the city's elite. Most people are on foot, and some can be seen promenading in a line at the canvas's bottom edge. Other people congregate before the city's massive cathedral on the left. Temporary tents are pitched in the furthest portion of the plaza, with people selling their goods. A more permanent structure made of stone surrounds even more shops in the foreground. Looking at the hundreds of individuals depicted here, we see a kaleidoscope of dress and accoutrements. We also see an artist attempting to represent the diverse ethnic makeup of the Spanish viceroyalty of New Spain.



Cristóbal de Villalpando, *View of the Plaza Mayor (Zócalo) of Mexico City*, c. 1695, oil on canvas (Corsham Court Collection, Wiltshire)

This painting, by the famous artist Cristóbal de Villalpando from about 1695, is well-known for its subject. It shows the large market (called the Parián) in the Plaza Mayor (or Zócalo) of Mexico City, which existed until the 19th century when it was demolished (you won't see it in the Zócalo today). Its name was borrowed from its counterpart in Manila (in the Philippines, which was also controlled by Spain at this time). Merchants brought goods from across oceans to sell to the residents of the city in the Parián. Mexico City, and the broader territory of New Spain, were at the center of a large network of global trade.



Routes of the Manila Galleon trade

Goods, people, and ideas travelled from Manila (having themselves come from many parts of Asia) to the port city of Acapulco via galleons (sailing ships often called Manila Galleons). From Acapulco, these goods either made their way to Mexico City or were carried to Veracruz on the Gulf Coast, at which point they'd be shipped across the Atlantic to Europe. Goods flowed likewise from Europe to New Spain. What makes this center even more complex and fascinating is that it did not just receive goods from Europe and Asia, but likewise sent finished goods and natural resources across the Atlantic and Pacific, and even down the coasts to the viceroyalty of Peru. Silver was among the most popular materials to travel to Asia from the Americas. The constant flow of objects, ideas, raw materials, and people added to the dynamic character of New Spain, and especially in a city like Mexico City which had a worldwide reputation as a beautiful, wealthy city energized by the constant influx of things.

Transpacific trade and cosmopolitanism

Lacquerwares, folding screens, ivories, spices, silks, Chinese porcelain—these are but some of the many objects and natural resources that traveled across the Pacific from Asia to New Spain. Goods were often labeled as "*de China*" or "from China —a reference to something coming from what we call Asia today, and not paying close attention to where things originated specifically in Asia. In Villalpando's painting, in the stone Parián enclosure it seems that some merchants are selling cloth, possibly silk, indicated by the multicolored lengths of fabric hanging from individual stalls.



Biombo with the *Conquest of Mexico and View of Mexico City*, New Spain, late 17th century (Museo Franz Mayer, Mexico City; photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Artists in New Spain began to adapt the forms and visual modes they encountered in these foreign goods, developing new art forms or modifying older ones. Japanese folding screens were popular trade items that stimulated Novohispanic artists to adapt the Japanese *byobu* (folding screens) into biombos. Many paintings, prints, sculptures, and furniture also incorporate representations of things that made their way to New Spain via trade networks.



José Manuel de la Cerda, Writing cabinet on table, c. 1750, Wood, Mexican lacquer, gilding, and silver drawer pulls, 102 x 155 cm (The Hispanic Society)

For example, we find Chinese blue-and-white porcelains represented on altars with sculptures of Christ, or locally produced ceramics adapting Chinese motifs, such as with *talavera poblana* (local ceramic production in Puebla). Clearly, the flow of goods through places like the Parian, that Villalpando so dynamically captures in paint, affected many different aspects of Novohispanic culture.

The transpacific trade also resulted in Asian peoples coming to new Spain, where they or their descendants worked in cities like Acapulco, but also Puebla and Mexico City. While some were enslaved, others worked in many different trades and occupations—adding yet again to the diverse society of the Spanish viceroyalty that Villalpando represents here.



Cristóbal de Villalpando, detail of the lower edge of the *View of the Plaza Mayor of Mexico City*, c. 1695, oil on canvas (Corsham Court Collection, Wiltshire)

A history painting?

Adding to the lively scene are details like dogs running or playing, children, people engaged in conversation, and people on the canal (that no longer remains today). This is an idealized view of daily life in Mexico City, where all peoples seem to exist in relative harmony.



Cristóbal de Villalpando, detail of the viceroy's palace and volcanoes, *View of the Plaza Mayor of Mexico City*, c. 1695, oil on canvas (Corsham Court Collection, Wiltshire)

Villalpando crafts a painting that gives the impression of a snapshot, or a realistic portrayal of Mexico City's main plaza. Nevertheless, he took certain liberties. The Parian was under construction when he painted the scene, and here it looks more majestic than it likely did (and even more symmetrical than it actually was). One account describes it as "horrible," in reference to its unsightliness. [1] The entrance to the viceroy's palace is also larger than it was, perhaps a way to elevate the dignity of the viceroy himself.

The painting shows identifiable structures, many of which still stand today. Villalpando took great care to detail fabrics and faces, animals and spaces, almost creating a visual argument that this really *is* what the Zocalo looked like. The painting also references a recent important event in New Spain's history: the burning and partial destruction of the viceroy's palace after uprisings in 1692 over food shortages. The large horizontal palace in the back of the painting shows the partially destroyed structure. Villalpando also includes clear topographic features in his painting to situate the scene in Mexico City. In the far background we see the snow capped volcanoes of Popocatepetl and Iztaccihuatl—still famous today for their appearance above the skyline of Mexico City. Even the angle that Villalpando chose to depict the city is considered correct; he possibly observed the Zocalo from the top of one of the houses from the western side of the plaza.



Cristóbal de Villalpando, detail of the Parián, *View of the Plaza Mayor of Mexico City,* c. 1695, oil on canvas (Corsham Court Collection, Wiltshire)

Shopping



Francisco Clapera, two paintings from a set of sixteen casta paintings, c. 1775, 51.1 x 39.6 cm (Denver Art Museum; photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

The painting's focus on shopping and material consumerism reinforces the wealth of many *criollo* (Spaniards born in the Americas) and *peninsulare* (Spaniards from the Iberian Peninsula) residents of Mexico City and New Spain more broadly who had amassed fortunes from silver mining and other means. Villalpando's portrayal of the residents of Mexico City as active consumers extends beyond the upper levels of society, but this is an idealized vision of the Zócalo and the city's inhabitants. In reality, anxieties over ethnic mixing and blurred social divisions existed, as the later genre of casta paintings so explicitly communicate. Sumptuary laws tried to restrict not only what people could wear in public, but *who* could wear them. In Villalpando's painting, people of many different social stations wear luxurious clothes and jewelry.

The cosmopolitan nature of Mexico City, with its steady influx of luxury goods from afar, meant that there was a desire to own and wear fanciful things. But there was also the fear that those of lower social status could give an impression of being above their station by wearing nice things. Travelers passing through Mexico City comment on how even servants were seen in pearls —to them an oddity and a social transgression.

An ideal projection

For all of its attention to detail, Villalpando's painting should not be read as an accurate image of what life was actually like in its lived experience for everyone in the capital of New Spain. The painting celebrates the city, the viceroyalty, its wealth, and its cosmopolitanism—but it is an ideal projection. It was commissioned by the viceroy Gaspar de Silva, Count of Gelves, who had been responsible for the food shortages in the 1690s. He apparently paid for the painting, and returned to Spain with it. The vision that Villalpando projects undoubtedly appealed to the viceroy who wished to believe that he had brought prosperity to the Spanish colony.

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Talavera poblana

by Dr. Lauren Kilroy-Ewbank

A global story

A 17th-century painting by Cristóbal del Villalpando shows the bustling El Parián market in the main plaza of Mexico City filled with shops and people. Here, goods from across the globe would be bought and sold, helping to transform the city into a fantastically wealthy, cosmopolitan one in the Spanish viceroyalty of New Spain (c. 1521–1821). Chinese porcelains traded across the Pacific Ocean were one of many items that filled the Parián, and once there, they might stay in the city or travel across land or sea networks to be bought and sold elsewhere. They were even dispersed to the northern frontier of New Spain—to what is today the state of New Mexico in the United States—and throughout other viceroyalties in South America, attesting to the demand for blue-and-white porcelain throughout areas then controlled by Spain.

It is perhaps not surprising then that local potters in New Spain found inspiration in imported ceramics, like highly coveted Chinese porcelains, to create something unique.



Jar depicting figure in exotic landscape, c. 1675–1700, tin-glazed earthenware, Puebla, Mexico, 46 cm high (Art Institute of Chicago)

Ceramics have a long, complex history in the country now known as Mexico, and among the most well-known today is *talavera poblana*, made beginning in the 17th century. It is a type of tin-enameled earthenware recognizable for its blue-and-white color but also made with a wider range of colors in later years. A white glaze forms the background of the ceramics, on which enameled designs could be painted. They were made in many different shapes and sizes, including cups, basins, vases, plates, urns, tiles, jardinières, and chocolate jars.



Map showing the location of Puebla and Talavera de la Reina (underlying map © Google)

Talavera (known elsewhere as maiolica) is named after the Spanish city of Talavera de la Reina that was famous for its ceramic production. *Poblana* indicates that it was made in the city of Puebla de los Ángeles, the second largest city in the viceroyalty of New Spain after Mexico City. Puebla became especially famous for its blue-and-white ceramics that, at least initially, adapted the appearance and forms of ceramics imported from elsewhere, including blue-and-white Chinese porcelain, and ceramics from Talavera de la Reina in Spain and elsewhere. For this reason, talavera poblana's history and development connects Mexico not only to Spain's own complex history, but also to different parts of Asia. In a nutshell—it's complicated!

After the city of Puebla was founded in the years after the Spanish Conquest of 1521, Spanish artists, including ceramists, began to migrate to the Spanish colony, bringing with them new types of ceramic technology (such as the potter's wheel) that diverged from longstanding local traditions among Indigenous groups.



Map showing some places in Europe and Asia that adapted China's blue-and-white ceramics (such as the porcelain made in Jingdezhen, China) (underlying map © Google)

These immigrant artists in Puebla also brought knowledge of tin-glazed earthenware that had long been popular in areas with prominent Muslim populations (especially in West Asia). Much of the Iberian Peninsula (Spain and Portugal) was controlled by different Muslim kingdoms after 711 C.E., facilitating the importation of ceramics from across Asia, including tin-glazed earthenware, that would be adapted in Iberia. These traditions were then adapted by artists in New Spain.

To examine this interesting web of transpacific and transatlantic connections, let's look closely at one example of talavera poblana made in Mexico.



***Talavera poblana* albarello, 17th century (New Spain), earthenware (Franz Mayer Museum, Mexico City; photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)**

An albarello from Puebla



Covered Jar (Albarello), second half 13th–14th century (Ilkhanid), stonepaste; overglaze painted and leaf gilded (lajvardina), attributed to Iran, 37.5 cm high (The Metropolitan Museum of Art)

On one side of a tall, slender blue-and-white jar made in New Spain, a bird appears on the banks of a pond, with a cactus rising from it; the jar's other side shows flowers and a stylized landscape (not shown here). This jar is an *albarello*, which would have been placed on a shelf in a pharmacy to store herbs and other materials for medicinal purposes. In the 17th century, pharmacies were often associated with religious monasteries but were sometimes owned privately. [1] The lid is missing, but would have likely been made of an organic material (such as leather).

The albarello shape itself has a longer history, originating in Iran hundreds of years earlier. In one example from the 13th–14th century Ilkhanid period in Iran, we see a covered albarello, with the jar and lid glazed in a deep blue with gold designs. This type of albarello was known as *lajvardina*, for the lavish use of lapis lazuli (*lajvard* is the Persian word for lapis). Through trade, conquest, and itinerant artists and technologies, the albarello shape would become common on the Iberian Peninsula and eventually the shape was introduced to New Spain after the Spanish invasions of the Americas began in the late 15th century.



Detail of *Talavera poblana* albarello, 17th century, earthenware (Franz Mayer Museum, Mexico City; photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)



***Gourd-Shaped Bottle with Deer and Crane in Landscape*, mid-16th century, Ming dynasty, porcelain painted in cobalt blue under clear glaze (Jingdezhen ware), China, 45.7 cm high, 24.8 cm in diameter (The Metropolitan Museum of Art)**

Each of the two decorative scenes fill most of the surface on the albarello's two faces. On the side with the pond, the bird stands on the pond's bank, its body gracefully curving in a serpentine shape. Its slender legs and long neck suggest it is a crane—a bird not native to Mexico. Yet in the pond we also have a cactus, locating us in Mexico. Other plant life is difficult to identify, but bushes and tall flowering plants grow on the sloping bank of the pond behind the bird. Three tiny birds fly in formation above the cactus. Stylized clouds appear in the sky above. On the upper rim of the jar, as well as the lower band of decoration, the artist has painted repeated abstract pattern to further animate the surface. Organic, tendril-like designs cover the remaining surface in between each of the scenes on either side. On the opposite side (not pictured) are chrysanthemum flowers, also not local to Mexico but commonly represented in Chinese ceramics.

The imagery and patterns on this albarello point to the varied sources that were adapted by artists in New Spain to suit the tastes of their clients. Decorative lobed bands that surround the two scenes are similar to those found on Ming dynasty ceramics from China. The bird also parallels cranes on Ming dynasty ceramics or even Japanese examples. Ming ceramics were a popular export item to New Spain on the Manila galleons, and so artists in Puebla would have had many examples from which to adapt motifs and decorative elements.



Pharmacy jar, c. 1400–50, tin-glazed earthenware, probably made in Manises, Valencia, Spain, 33.2 x diam. 15.6 cm (The Metropolitan Museum of Art)

Between 1573 and 1815, Manila galleons arrived in Acapulco laden with Asian foreign imports, including Chinese porcelain; in return, resources from the Spanish Americas—silver the most important among them—would make their way to Manila, where they would be used to pay Chinese merchants for goods. As noted earlier, numerous Chinese blue-and-white wares decorated elite New Spanish homes and served as inspiration for local artists making talavera poblana. Acapulco was also the port at which Chinese porcelain would be transported overland to Veracruz, from where it would be shipped to Seville in Spain. On two of the earliest galleons to arrive, there were reputedly 712 pieces of silk and 22,300 porcelains. [2]

The decoration in the band at the bottom of the albarello is also similar to the *alafia* motif on lusterware pottery made in Spain. Lusterware looks different from tin-glazed earthenware because a metallic glaze gives it a shimmering, lustrous appearance. In one example—a lusterware pharmacy jar from Valencia—we can see the *alafia* motif in two bands, picked out in a brilliant blue. *Alafia* was actually a highly stylized inscription of "health and happiness" in Arabic, and was especially common on talavera poblana in the first half of the 18th century, demonstrating the adaptation of ceramics imported from the Iberian Peninsula.



Routes of the Manila Galleon trade

A global story

The city of Puebla was an ideal center for the development of the ceramic tradition after which it was named (talavera poblana)—good local clay beds provided the material to manufacture vessels. Talavera poblana became especially popular after 1653, when a potters' guild was established in Puebla by the Spanish emigré potter Antonio de Vega y Córdova and others. Some scholars have claimed, though, that talavera poblana was made even earlier.



Talavera poblana at The Metropolitan Museum of Art

Talavera flourished in the late 17th and 18th centuries, as the demand for blue-and-white ceramics continued to grow around the globe. The Puebla potters' guild regulated the creation of wares, and even categorized them into different groups: yellow ware for cooking (*loza amarilla*), common ware (*loza común*), fine ware (*loza fina*), and later, refined ware (*loza refina*) notable for its Chinese porcelain inspiration. Along with the regulations in production, the guild only permitted membership for people of Spanish descent, though in reality rules were often bent.

Talavera poblana could be costly because of the excessive use of cobalt used to achieve the brilliant blues—cobalt was expensive and not local to Mexico. Cobalt had long been used in ceramics in Central and West Asia, and then in East Asia. Eventually it would be used in Spain beginning in the 13th century. Cobalt would have been imported to New Spain either from China or Spain (where it likely came from Central Asia or even North Africa by the 17th century). Still, despite the possible challenges with acquiring cobalt from afar, the interest in blueness among the New Spanish population remained constant.



Talavera poblana over time, from c. 1650 to 1875, all tin-glazed earthenware, made in Puebla, Mexico. Far left: Master Potter A, Basin, c. 1650, 52.7 cm in diameter (The Metropolitan Museum of Art); left: Jardinière, c.1700–75, 44 × 41.9 cm (The Art Institute of Chicago); right: Basin Depicting a Cistern, Tower and Domed Building, c.1775–1825, 50 cm in diameter (The Art Institute of Chicago); far right: Two-Handled Jardinière, c.1825–75, dimensions unknown (The Art Institute of Chicago)

Changes in taste

There are noticeable changes in the design elements of talavera poblana likely due to the result of shifts in taste over time. Earlier on there was a preference for more abstract, geometric, stylized forms. By the 18th century, there is a greater interest in scenes with flora, fauna, and figures as well decorative scenes. The decoration on the New Spanish albarello described above covers its entire surface, which was common of talavera poblana into the 18th century.

Polychromed ceramics became more popular by the early 19th century, as did new types of subject matter and motifs. It's possible that this shift is the result of the Manila galleons ending in 1815, encouraging artists to seek out new ways of decorating ceramics.



Church of San Francisco de Acatepec, Puebla, 18th century (photo: Luis Alvaz, CC BY-SA 4.0)

A city of colorful tiles



Chocolate jar, c. 1700, tin-glazed earthenware, iron, made in Puebla, Mexico (The Metropolitan Museum of Art; photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Talavera poblana is an important part of the city of Puebla's cultural heritage. It wasn't just portable vessels that formed the tradition, but also the use of tiles to decorate architecture around the city and its surrounding environs. A façade might have blue-and-white or colorful tiles with abstract or floral designs creating patterns across the surface. There might be figural or narrative panels made of tiles as well. Talavera in all its forms became a distinct part of Puebla's identity, and remains so today.

The talavera poblana industry experienced difficult moments in its history, almost completely collapsing at points, but those invested in seeing the industry prosper continued to find ways of maintaining it. Anyone visiting Puebla today is sure to come across the many workshops and stores selling it, or to encounter the numerous buildings that still include it. What might not be as obvious today as in the past is the complex web that connects its development to many other parts of the world.

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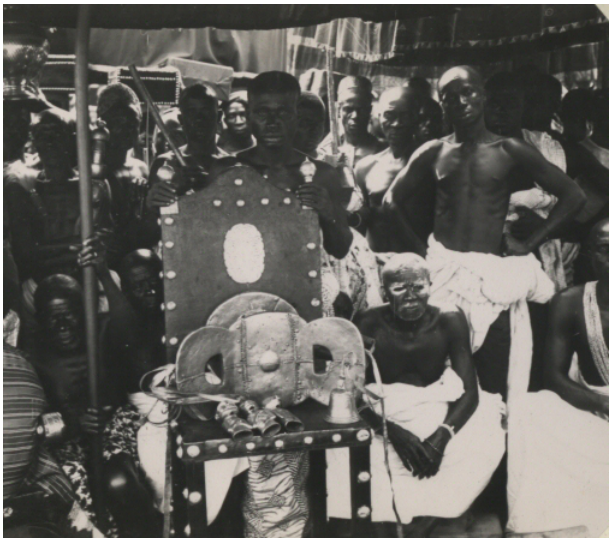
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8.1.2: Asante Gold

Abridged and adapted from "Chapter 4.6: Kingdom-based art" in *The Bright Continent- African Art History* by Kathy Curnow

Birth of Asanteman (the Asante State)

The Asante had one of the best-known empires in West Africa, with art that was primarily made to support the state and an individual's status within its hierarchy. Unlike art of many neighboring West African states, figurative sculpture was limited, consisting primarily of wooden fertility figures, combs, and occasional maternity images, as well as funerary terracotta portraits.



The Golden Stool with its immediate caretaker. Asante, Kumase, Ghana, 1935. The National Archives UK, part of CO 1069/44. No known copyright restrictions.

In the year 1600, southern and central Ghana was occupied by numerous ethnic groups, as it is today. Many of these peoples–especially those living in the central or western areas of the coast and inland, shared a common language (Twi), and many traditions as Akan peoples. In the late 1600s, one of the Asante leaders, Osei Tutu, had the close support of a powerful ritual specialist, Okomfo (priest) Anokye, who is said to have come from another region. All the Asante clans and those of neighboring groups met to decide on a leader and plan how they might defeat the Denkyira. To avoid internal discord, Okomfo Anokye announced that leadership would come from the heavens, and that a Golden Stool would descend onto the lap of the destined paramount ruler. It appeared and settled on Osei Tutu's lap, confirming divine will, and he became the first Asantehene, or monarch.

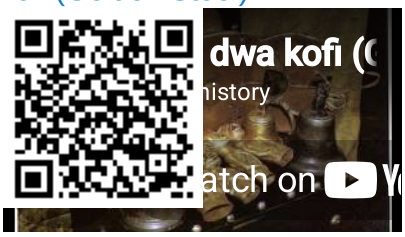
To empower the stool and ensure that it represented the united state, Okomfo Anokye is said to have sacrificed a man and seven pythons who disappeared into the stool, then applied a concoction made from the attendant chiefs' hair and nail clippings, binding their vows of loyalty to it. Stools are felt to absorb part of their owners' souls; the Golden Stool represents the soul of the Asante nation, and is its most sacred symbol. No one sits on it; it has its own throne and is rarely seen, creating a powerful mystique (above). Its symbolic supremacy is still expressed through textiles, paintings, and sculpture.

In 1701, Osei Tutu I and Okomfo Anokye defeated the Denkyira and thereby gained control over the coastal town of Elmina, an international trade outlet with the Dutch. This expansion of the state through acquiescence and conquest quickly expanded the kingdom's borders beyond those of the Asante until they controlled much of inland Ghana and part of its coast. The byproduct of expansion was the enslavement of those who fought the kingdom, a factor that saw many 18th-century Akan sent to Brazil, Surinam, Jamaica, the United States, and other destinations in the Americas. Some populations, such as the Baule, fled in advance of Asante growth, migrating into what is now Côte d'Ivoire.

Foreign interest in the region was centered on gold, and the Asante controlled its alluvial extraction, preventing European penetration from the coast for centuries. While considerable raw gold was exported to Europe, the Asante retained and worked gold in the form of cast jewelry and gold foil-covered wooden objects, its possession and display governed by rank. Badawi (2024) summarizes:

"Between the eleventh and early seventeenth centuries, West Africa provided the international community with its biggest supply of gold, and at its peak during the seventeenth century it accounted for almost two-thirds of world production, around 1.2 tons a year. The Asante not only traded gold, but also accumulated vast reserves of it in their treasury, giving them the means to buy substantial quantities of European weapons and ammunition from coastal traders. This, along with their military acumen gave them a decisive edge over their rivals, the Aowin and Denkyira, so that by the seventeeth century the Asante kingdom was firmly dominant."

Sika dwa kofi (Golden Stool)



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Transcript of "Golden Stool (Sika dwa kofi)"

[0:00] [music]

Dr. Peri Klemm: [0:04] We're at the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, talking about the Golden Stool. We're actually going to be looking at several different objects to make sense of this very important object that we don't have in a collection. It still exists in the Asante nation in Ghana.

Dr. Beth Harris: [0:21] It was incredibly important to the Asante people that that object remained in their possession, but that's a story we'll come back to. Let's talk about its origin.

Dr. Klemm: [0:30] In the early 1700s, a man named Osei Tutu, an important king, was able to unify all the surrounding lands.

Dr. Harris: [0:38] He created the nation of the Asante people.

Dr. Klemm: [0:42] The Golden Stool falls from the sky and lands in the lap of Osei Tutu.

Dr. Harris: [0:47] So this is a miracle.

Dr. Klemm: [0:48] Absolutely. This is a wooden stool covered in gold, which was said to have been made in the heavens, said to be the soul of the Asante nation. It takes on the essence of the entire group in the same way that we'll see a man's stool or a woman's stool can take on the essence of that person.

Dr. Harris: [1:05] In a way, the stool is more important than any single king of the Asante people.

Dr. Klemm: [1:10] It is far more sacred than the Asantehene himself. In fact, the golden stool is always given its own stool or its own chair on which to sit next to the Asantehene, like we see in this picture.

Dr. Harris: [1:22] This is an area that is rich in gold, and the gold comes to symbolize royalty for the Asante people.

Dr. Klemm: [1:29] They were in charge of the gold trade through North Africa. This was long before Europeans were even there. Also, gold is the color of royalty. Whether it's gold in the form of a textile color or it's the material of gold, it was reserved for royal use.

Dr. Harris: [1:44] Let's look at the objects in this case that relate to the trading of gold.

Dr. Klemm: [1:49] We have a scale, which shows how gold would have been weighed, and it would have been weighed with brass.

Dr. Harris: [1:56] You would use these on one side of a scale and measure out the gold on the other, so that you knew you were measuring the accurate amount of gold.

Dr. Klemm: [2:05] What we find is a whole host of brass weights fashioned into very elaborate figures that depict almost every activity in every part of daily life.

Dr. Harris: [2:15] It's a really wonderful way to learn about the Asante people. We see two here that show images of the Asante king.

Dr. Klemm: [2:22] Both of these depict a group of figures gathered around a central umbrella. That umbrella is really important, because underneath it we know is the Asantehene or an important chief.

Dr. Harris: [2:34] The umbrella was a way that you could identify the king in a crowd.

Dr. Klemm: [2:39] The king would also be wearing sandals, and we have a brass weight of just sandals depicted. In that sense, we understand that the king is divine. In other words, he is seen as an intermediary between the everyday lives of his people and the supernatural realm. He's there to harness the good powers of the supernatural to help his people.

Dr. Harris: [2:59] He's between the heavens, below the umbrella, but he's above the earth, symbolized by the sandals that he wears.

Dr. Klemm: [3:06] He's always sandwiched between the two.

Dr. Harris: [3:08] In one of these gold weights, we see the king surrounded by his retinue, under an umbrella, being carried in a palanquin.

Dr. Klemm: [3:16] And surrounding him are his sword bearers. Swords are very important symbols of rule, and they would have had gold handles.

Dr. Harris: [3:23] Then we see next to it another image of the king, this time with his wife, with the queen.

Dr. Klemm: [3:28] Could be the queen mother, it could be his wife. There's an umbrella, and then two sword bearers in front of him. We also have other brass weights that just depict one figure, and these relate to particular proverbs or stories about virtues.

[3:42] Here we get at this important part about Asante modes of communication. That is, that you don't speak directly. If you can, you let art speak for you.

Dr. Harris: [3:51] And you often speak in proverbs.

Dr. Klemm: [3:54] Each one of these have messages. If you understand this language, if you can decode it, you can know what the messages are.

Dr. Harris: [4:00] One of the ones in the case shows two crocodiles sharing one stomach.

Dr. Klemm: [4:04] This double-headed crocodile has to do with the idea of family sharing a stomach. In other words, your connection, your essence, your belly is connected to your family. That's who nurtures you. If you go off on your own, you're really not going to get very far in life.

Dr. Harris: [4:19] Then we have a goat.

Dr. Klemm: [4:20] Or a ram, with these curved horns. One proverb states that rams move back before they charge. The idea is that you have thoughtful contemplation. You move away from what you're about to do to make sure it's the right path.

Dr. Harris: [4:34] We're looking at these gold weights and that brings us to another important part of the history of the Asante people, the continuing involvement of the British.

Dr. Klemm: [4:44] The British, certainly since the early 19th century, were interested in securing a way to control gold in this area. They named this area the Gold Coast. The Asante, obviously, were not wanting to give up their control of this precious material, which had this royal significance.

Dr. Harris: [5:01] In 1874, the British destroyed the Asante capital, took lots back to England. Much of it remains in the British Museum collection today.

Dr. Klemm: [5:10] One of the objects, of course, that they really wanted to get their hands on was the Golden Stool. They first exiled Prempeh I — that was the Asantehene in the late 1800s.

Dr. Harris: [5:20] The Asante people hid the Golden Stool.

Dr. Klemm: [5:22] The Golden Stool, which was obviously very important, in fact, more sacred than Prempeh I himself, was in danger and the British really tried hard to hunt it down.

Dr. Harris: [5:31] The British governor said — I'm reading here from a record of what happened — "Where is the Golden Stool? I am the representative of the Paramount Power. Why have you relegated me to this ordinary chair? Why did you not take the opportunity of my coming to bring the Golden Stool for me to sit upon?"

Dr. Klemm: [5:49] This was so offensive to the people of Ghana that a foreigner would come and demand their most precious and sacred object to sit on. This is not a stool anyone was allowed to sit on. In fact, it sat on its own stool. Yaa Asantewaa, a queen mother, assembled all the soldiers she could find to fight against the British.

Dr. Harris: [6:10] Now, the Asante people were defeated, but the Stool remained hidden.

Dr. Klemm: [6:14] The Asante were pretty successful in that they were allowed some autonomy.

[6:18] By the 1920s, the British even agreed to allow Prempeh I to return, and there was a promise made that the Golden Stool would not be taken, and the Golden Stool was allowed to come out of hiding. Men and women are gifted stools by their parents when they come of age, and the idea of stools is really central, not just to kingship, but to everyday people.

[6:38] This brass weight in this case is a replica of what a man or woman would sit on, but made of wood. A man and woman's everyday stool, used for things like sitting and socializing, sitting and eating, sitting and working, sounds very ordinary to us. But stools that one uses often take on their sunsum.

[6:58] Sunsum is an Asante concept, a traditional idea that your energy…it's like an aura that touches the things that you use a lot. In order to keep your sunsum intact, when you leave the room, traditionally you would tip over your stool so that no one else would sit on it, they would know that was not intended for you. In that sense, the Golden Stool is also kept turned on its side as we see in this photograph.

Dr. Harris: [7:23] The gold weight tells us something about the importance of stools in the Asante culture, but also about a personal energy that over the course of our lives the objects that we use become imbued with.

Dr. Klemm: [7:38] That helps us to understand why the Asante people say the Golden Stool is the soul of the Asante nation.

[7:44] [music]

Seats of Power

The Asante, like most other Akan groups, consider stools to be something beyond places to sit, although most can also fulfill that basic function at one point in time. Domestic stools belong to an individual and are identified with that individual. When an Akan person sits on their stool, it is believed to absorb something of their essence (*sumsum*), a phenomenon that increases with every use. When not occupied, stools are turned on their side so that malevolence cannot seat itself.



This is a standard type of stool that husbands presented to their brides to mark the solidity of their relationship. W 16 5/8″. Akan male artist (probably Asante), Ghana, ca. 1900-1930. Houston Museum of Fine Arts, 97.1357. Gift of Alfred C. Glassell, Jr. Public domain.

The intimacy between a stool and its owner is palpable. Ordinary citizens–men, women, and children–used to receive stools at key points in their life: at the point they began to crawl, demonstrating they survived the vulnerable stage of infancy, at the time of a girl's puberty rites, at the time of marriage. The basic shape–a monoxyl structure with a flat base, intervening support element, and a slightly curved, rectangular seat–is fairly consistent, but supporting elements have varied from the abstract to representations of persons, animals, and inanimate objects. Particular shapes and decoration once gave some

indication of ownership and occasion. Although some stools could be used by either gender, a husband usually gave his new bride a stool with a perforated cylindrical support and pillars at the edges (above). Size and other salient details differentiated these from others that might belong to specialized officials, priests or chiefs.



This stool variety, called *kotoko* (porcupine), was named after the Asante symbol and was meant for royal council members only. W 13.98″. Asante, Ghana, before 1927. © Trustees of the British Museum, Af1927; 0308.12. Donated by the Gold Coast Commercial Intelligence Bureau. Creative Commons CC BY-NC-SA 4.0.

Chiefs', rulers', and queen mothers' stools differ from those of ordinary citizens in type, purpose, and potential decorations. Most of all, they differ in intent, taking on a significance beyond that of the individual. Title stools represent a titled position and serve not only as a throne but as a rallying point for community constituents. They embody the state, not just the titleholder. The Asantehene and other major rulers and their mothers own multiple stools of varying complexity, often carried before them in processions. Some monarchs and queen mothers have stools decorated with gold or silver repoussé bands; others bear attached bells and ornaments. A select few are more thoroughly metal-plated or bear figurative or proverbial supports. While most restrictions regarding sumptuary regulations are no longer in operation, state stools that appear to copy famous state stools would still be problematic, unlike those owned by ordinary people from once-forbidden designs.



This stool may have belonged to a Queen Mother, and depicts a turtle and snail, cannon, a gun, and a drum–symbols that mix martial and peaceful activities. Akan (perhaps Asante) male artist, Ghana, 1940-1965. Photo by Wendy Kaveney. The Children's Museum of Indianapolis, 67.459.1. Creative Commons CC BY-SA 3.0.

The Splendor of Gold and its Place in the Hierarchy

The foundation of Asante wealth was the gold whose extraction they controlled. Goldweights were in existence throughout Akan territory since at least the 15th century. They were made to set measurements, and encompassed a greater range of subject matter than most African traditional art, ranging from the strictly geometric patterns that seem to have been the earliest type to objects from daily or palace life to complex, almost anecdotal depictions of individuals or animals in action.

Gold served as foreign exchange, but much of it was used for regalia at the royal courts of both smaller Asante states and at the capital Kumase. Goldsmiths were expert at working the soft metal, flattening it into thin sheets that could be applied over wood or casting it in the lost wax method.

Its prestige enhanced a multitude of items. Nineteenth century British diplomat Thomas Bowditch referred to some of the window frames of Kumase aristocrats being rimmed with gold, while even the humble calabash could become ennobled by flattened gold wire decoration. State objects either included gold ornaments–rifles often had gold additions on their stocks–or were made of wood covered with sheet metal. These included both objects assigned to key courtiers or those used for the ruler. Often these decorations were visual versions of proverbs meant to remind rulers or the public of certain realities, admonitions, or desired behavior.

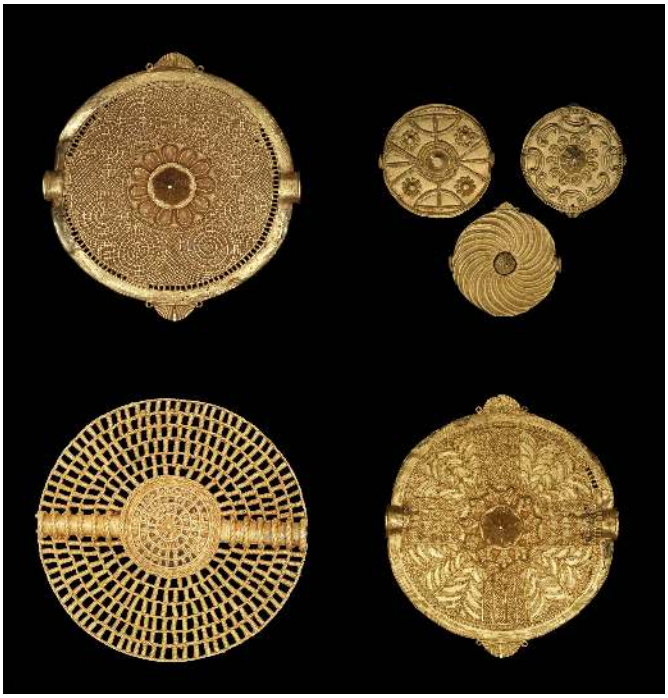


Finial of a linguist staff, carved from wood and covered with gold leaf. H 12.5″. Akan (probably Asante), Ghana, late 19th or early 20th century. Brooklyn Museum, 1993.182.3. Gift of Bill and Gale Simmons. Creative Commons-BY.

A set of officials (*okyeame*) found at both the Asantehene's court and lesser Asante courts are responsible for both the implementation of proper protocol and the diplomatic relaying of messages between the ruler and supplicants. Wooden staffs topped by proverbial imagery–again, carved from wood and usually covered with sheet gold–act as their badge of office at public ceremonies (above). This example, once attached to a long wooden rod, includes a common image still found on many staffs. It depicts two men seated on Akan stools seated at a table that bears a bowl of food; one reaches to eat, the other looks at him thoughtfully. This illustrates the aphorism "Food is for the owner, not the hungry man." This is an admonition to those who coveted the kingship. The Asante do not inherit from father to son; as a matrilineal society, titles pass from uncle to a maternal nephew, but there is no automatic choice through seniority. The Queen Mother–who may be the actual mother of the late ruler, or a relative on his mother's side that he appoints to that position after his actual mother's death–plays a vital role in the choice of the next ruler, and plays a vital advisory role during her reign. The finial's figures show head-to-body proportions that are close to 1:7, but still elongate the neck to an unrealistic length. The neck is creased–an attractive trait here, as it is in Sierra Leone and many parts of West Africa.

One expression of the goldsmith's skill was the so-called soul washer's badge (*akrafokonmu*), a circular pendant suspended on the chest from a cord. Sun-like, its decoration took many directions (below). Individuals who wear it are particularly associated with the *okra* ("soul washers"), good-looking young people who were born on the same day as the ruler, offered him some spiritual protection, and were charged with the duty of renewing his soul through specific rites.

All *akrafokonmu* discs, which can be smithed or cast, exhibit a multitude of types of decoration (below). Their techniques vary–some are cast, while others are repoussé sheet gold Some are purely geometric in their motifs, while others incorporate references to ornate European patterns of the late 18th and early 19th century, a period when a desire for trade brought many luxury imports to the court.



These akrafokonmu vary significantly in decoration. **Top Left**: Lost wax casting whose spiral motifs symbolize regeneration. Asante male goldsmith, Kumase, Ghana, 19th century. © The Trustees of the British Museum, Af1900,0427.23. Creative Commons CC BY-NC-SA 4.0. **Top Right**: upper left: This sheet gold disc is decorated with repoussé work. D 3.74″. © The Trustees of the British Museum, Af1900,0427.25. Creative Commons CC BY-NC-SA 4.0; upper right: Cast gold disc pendant. D 3.42″. © The Trustees of the British Museum, Af1942,09.1. Creative Commons CC BY-NC-SA 4.0; lower: This akrafokonmu is made of sheet gold that has been worked from the back into spiral ridges, but its central projecting boss was cast and soldered on. D 3.62″. Asante male goldsmith, Kumase, Ghana, 19th century. © The Trustees of the British Museum, Af1900,0427.11. Creative Commons CC BY-NC-SA 4.0. **Lower Left**: Cast gold openworked disc. D 2.36″. Asante male goldsmith, Kumase, Ghana, before 1817. © The Trustees of the British Museum, Af1818,1114.5. Creative Commons CC BY-NC-SA 4.0. Lower Right: Sheet gold disc exquisitely worked in repousé designs from the back. The fern that appears here is symbolic of defiance. D 3.9″. Asante goldsmith, Kumase, Ghana, 19th century. © The Trustees of the British Museum, Af1900,0427.24. Creative Commons CC BY-NC-SA 4.0.

Jewelry is not the only status marker that distinguished the dress of the ordinary Asante person from that of the nobility. Sandals,

for example, are an everyday item for many today, though in centuries past many individuals walked barefoot. They are still worn at ceremonial occasions by rulers–whose feet are forbidden to touch the ground–and their chiefs, usually bearing cast gold ornaments or those made from wood but gold-foil covered (below). At palace occasions, one removes one's sandals before approaching an individual of higher rank as a mark of respect.



This pair of leather crocodile-shaped sandals has had its leather uppers completely covered in gold leaf. L 14.5″. Akan male artist (possibly Asante), Ghana, 1900-1910. Houston Museum of Fine Arts, 97.1349.A,.B. Gift of Alfred C. Glassell, Jr. Public domain.

Swathed in Substance and Meaning: Textiles

The Asante are known for their exquisite narrow-strip weaves, known as *kente* (below). These include some of the most complex patterns in Africa, and are commonly made of cotton. Some, however, are made from silk, a practice that began centuries ago when imported silks were picked apart thread by thread in order to redye them and create textiles more satisfying to local tastes. In centuries past, the royal weavers produced certain cloths that were exclusively for the Asantehene, as well as others for royal family members and the nobility (below).



This silk and cotton *kente* cloth is known as *adweneasa*, or "my strength is exhausted," because it incorporates a tremendous variety of patterns united by the same color scheme. It was formerly worn exclusively by the Asantehene and other members of the royal family. L 9.79′. Asante, Ghana, late 19th/early 20th century. Detroit Institute of Arts, 2002.195. Gift of Dr. Nii O. Quarcoopome.

Each pattern has a name and symbolic associations, and over 300 exist. Since the early 20th century, *kente*'s use has been democratized, and new patterns and color combinations continue to develop (below).



Woman's silk *kente* shawl. 7.9′. Asante male weaver, Bonwire, Ghana, 20th century. Photo by Claudia Obrocki. Ethnological Museum | Africa; © Photo: Ethnological Museum of the National Museums in Berlin – Preußischer Kulturbesitz, III C 40744. Collected by Brigitte Menzel. Creative Commons CC BY-NC-SA 3.0 DE.

The proportions of finished cloths differ for men and women. Men's cloths, worn by aristocrats like a toga over the left shoulder (below), are generally about 8′ wide and 12' long, while women can wear the traditional cloth tied above the breasts and falling to the ankles (sometimes with a shawl), as a waist-tied wrapper with a blouse or shirt, or tailored into a blouse and skirt. *Kente* has become internationally known as not only a Ghanaian symbol, but more generally as a representation of Africa and African heritage internationally. This journey began as early as 1960, when head-of-state Kwame Nkrumah

wore it in New York to address the United Nations, an event widely covered by the press.



Figure xxx. Male and female dignitaries at the Adae Ese festival at the Kumase palace. Asante male weavers, Ghana, 2016. Single frame from jaderoo2's video, "Adae Festival – Kumasi – Ghana."

That year Ghana also gifted the U.N. with an oversized *kente* wall hanging, its pattern known as *tikoronkoagyina*, or "one head does not constitute a council." The world-wide craze for *kente* peaked in the United States in the 1990s, when demand was so high that some Asante women at Bonwire defied tradition and began to weave like their brothers and fathers. Most abandoned this within a decade, due to social pressure and the production of printed imitation cloths.



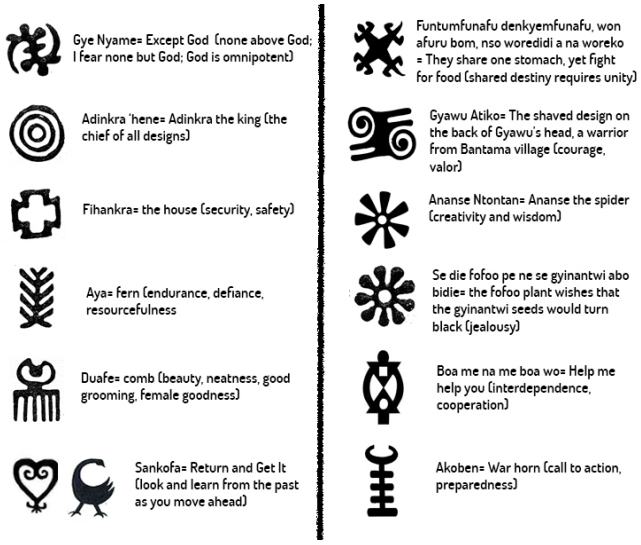
Calabash stamps for *adinkra* are carved in relief; a tripod handle made from reeds is attached to the back. Asante male artists, Ntonso, Ghana, 21st century. Photo by Kathy Curnow

A second type of valued cloth is *adinkra*, a cloth whose symbolic decoration is traditionally stamped onto a plain-colored cloth, which may be hand-woven or imported. *Adinkra*'s origins are said to lie in the state of Gyaman, in what is now Côte d'Ivoire. Their ruler's name was Nana Kofi Adinkra, and the Asante viewed his attempt to copy the Golden Stool an outrage. They conquered and annexed his state, bringing him to Kumase for execution, where his patterned cloth drew interest and is said to have developed into a new Asante textile form in the early 19th century.



Several individuals wearing the popular large-motif *adinkra* clothes at the thanksgiving service for the Ohemaa's funeral; at the funeral itself, red or black *adinkra* would have been worn. Single from from KINGs Tv. GH"s 2017 video "At Manhyia Palace Thanksgiving Service in Honour of Omemaa Funeral Rites – Kumasi."

While there are several hundred *adinkra* motifs, those in common use are more limited in number (below). Each has a name and, like other Akan arts, an associated proverbial meaning. They form a symbolic vocabulary that allows dress to communicate, as does the background color of the chosen cloth. Black or red *adinkra* cloths are used for funerals, while white or bright colors are used for celebratory purposes, including festivals and Sunday church services (above). Because of their technique, even the most complex of these cloths are far less costly than *kente*.



A small selection of common *adinkra* patterns. Chart by Kathy Curnow.

Architecture in Kumasi

Badawi (2024) emphasizes that "Kumasi in the nineteenth century was a masterpiece of urban planning, its wide streets swept regularly and always kept clean and tidy." Made from earth-filled and finished reed constructions, houses were white-washed with chalk, composed of courts without windows on

their outward exteriors, which provided privacy. Many aristocrats occupied two-story homes, which were unusual in pre-colonial Africa, requiring reinforcement through interior pillars. Only the nobility had open rooms on the street side of their houses (below). These semi-public spaces allowed them to be accessible to clients and observe the activities of the neighborhood. Wealthy homes included relief decoration on their surface, formed by packing reeds into the mud of the wall when it was wet, then using more clay to plaster over the form.



View of Adum Street, near the palace. Relief decorations decorate the surfaces of the buildings; the base is left the natural red of the clay, so splashing in the rainy season won't change its color, while the rest of the house is painted with "chalk"–white kaolin clay. Watercolor from Thomas Edward Bowdich's *Mission from Cape Coast Castle to Ashantee* (London: John Murray, 1819), plate 9. Public domain.

The palace in Kumasi covered five acres, consisting of multiple courts composed of the standard four rooms placed around a central courtyard. It differed from ordinary homes by its scope, functions, and decoration, not its design. Some palace courtyards could hold 300 people, and British diplomat Thomas Bowdich noted the presence of the "King's garden, an area equal to one of the large squares in London."



Private royal audience hall at Adum Palace, Kumase, between 1888-1896. The
The pillar supports display multiple symbols, some of which still appear on *adinkra* stamped cloth and contemporary architecture. The leafy form at the extreme left is known as *asaya* or fern, and is variously interpreted as a symbol of endurance or defiance. National Archive, UK. CO 1069-34-122. Public domain.

Adinkra symbols have a life that has expanded throughout the Akan world, and appear on both historic (above) and modern architecture, architectural features, jewelry, plastic chairs (below), and other domestic items.



Molded plastic chairs with the *Nyame* symbol are in use throughout much of Ghana. Kumase, Ghana. Photo by Kathy Curnow, 2017.

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Badawi, Zeinab. (2024). *An African History of Africa: From the Dawn of Humanity to Independence* (1st ed.). HarperCollins Publishers LLC.

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8.2: Palace of Versailles

Learning Objectives

- Analyze the use of domestic interiors for court ritual in the Palace of Versailles, comparing programming with present day domestic and political interiors.
- Compare French baroque furniture with previous periods of European furniture such as the Renaissance and Middle Ages.
- Enumerate the variety of technology and materials employed in furnishings and finishes for the Palace of Versailles, acknowledging significant historic designers and fabricators.

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8.2.1: The Baroque style

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The Baroque is a highly ornate and elaborate style of architecture, art and design that flourished in Europe in the 17th and first half of the 18th century. Originating in Italy, its influence quickly spread across Europe and it became the first visual style to have a significant worldwide impact.

A defining characteristic of the Baroque style was the way in which the visual arts of painting, sculpture and architecture were brought together, into a complete whole, to convey a single message or meaning.

Baroque art and design addressed the viewer's senses directly, appealing to the emotions as well as the intellect. It reflected the hierarchical and patriarchal society of the time, developing through and being used by those in power – the church, absolute rulers and the aristocracy – to persuade as well as impress, to be both rich and meaningful. Compared to the control and carefully balanced proportions associated with the Renaissance, Baroque is known for its movement and drama.

The first global style

Baroque's influence extended from Italy and France to the rest of Europe, and then travelled via European colonial initiatives, trade and missionary activity to Africa, Asia, and South and Central America (See 7.2: Baroque Churches). Its global spread saw Chinese carvers working in Indonesia, French silversmiths in Sweden and Italian hardstone specialists in France. Sculpture was sent from the Philippines to Mexico and Spain, whilst London-made chairs went all over Europe and across the Atlantic, and French royal workshops turned out luxury products that were both desired and imitated by fashionable society across Europe. However, as a style, Baroque also changed as it crossed the world, being adapted to new needs and local tastes, materials and contexts.



Print, after Yi Lantai, 1781 – 86, China. Museum no. 29452:9. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London

In China, the European pavilions were the grandest expressions of the Qing rulers' interest in the arts of Europe. These European-style palaces were part of the Yuanming Yuan or Old Summer Palace in Beijing, the Emperor Qianlong's summer residence. Designed by Jesuit priests, the pavilions – most of which were completed between 1756 and 1766 – were based on Baroque models and included grand fountains and statues. In the 1780s, a set of copperplate engravings depicting the European pavilions was commissioned. This album, a copy of which is in our collection, is an important visual record of the pavilions as they were destroyed by English and French troops in 1860.

A sense of drama

An important feature of Baroque art and design is its use of human figures. Represented as allegorical, sacred or mythological, these figures helped turn the work into a drama to convey particular messages and to engage the emotions of the viewer. They have a sense of realistic immediacy, as if they had been stopped in mid-action. Facial expression, pose, gesture and drapery were all used to add dramatic details.

A bust of King Charles II of England in our collection perfectly captures the drama of Baroque portraiture. Portrayed in an animated fashion, his head is turned to one side and an elaborate wig cascades down over his lace cravat and billowing drapery. Such grand Baroque images of monarchs and powerful aristocrats were more common in 17th-century France than in England but Charles had spent much of his youth in mainland Europe and favoured European artists. The bust is in the tradition of flamboyant and imposing portraits of monarchs, and would have unambiguously asserted the King's status.



Charles II portrait bust, Honoré Pelle, 1684, Italy. Museum no. 239-1881. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London

The performance of architecture

Baroque buildings were also dynamic and dramatic, both using and breaking the rules of classical architecture. Inside, the architecture echoed theatrical techniques – painted ceilings made rooms appear as if they were open to the sky and hidden windows were used to illuminate domes and altars.

Again, the design was used to convey specific meanings and emotions. Papal Rome became a key site for religious Baroque

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architecture. An example of the Baroque's theatricality can be found in Gianlorenzo Bernini's (1598 – 1680) design for St Peter's Square. Its grand, imposing curved colonnades, centred on an obelisk, are used to both overwhelm the visitor and to bring them into the church's embrace.

Baroque architecture also shaped the way the public spaces of the city appeared. Public celebrations played an important role in the political life of a nation. Typically, such events took place out of doors and were elaborately designed spectacles. Urban squares such as Piazza Navona in Rome and Place Louis-le-Grand (now Place Vendôme) in Paris were the backdrop for firework displays, lavish theatrical performances and processions in elaborate and expensive costumes.

Imposing architecture was also used to reinforce the power of absolute rulers, such as with the Palace of Versailles, in France – the most imitated building of the 17th century. In 1717, the Swedish architect Nicodemus Tessin the Younger compiled a "treatise on the decoration of interiors, for all kinds of royal residences, and others of distinction in both town and country", based on his own travel notes. One of the most expensive, recent innovations he recorded was the presence of mirrors so large they covered entire walls. He also noted the use of glass over the chimneypiece in the King's Chamber at Versailles.



Painted mirror, probably by Antoine Monnoyer, 1710 – 20, England. Museum no. W.36:1-3-1934. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London

Marvellous materials

A fascination with physical materials was central to the Baroque style. Virtuoso art objects made of rare and precious materials had long been valued and kept in special rooms or cabinets, alongside natural history specimens, scientific instruments, books, documents and works of art. However, during the Baroque period, the birth of modern science and the opening up of the world beyond Europe brought an increasingly serious interest in the nature and meaning of these exotic materials. Rarities such as porcelain and lacquer from East Asia became fashionable and were imitated in Europe. New techniques, such as marquetry (the laying of veneers of differently coloured woods onto the surface of furniture), developed by French and Dutch cabinet-makers and learned from them elsewhere, were also developed.

The value attached to such materials can be seen in a porcelain cup from our collection. Made between 1630 and 1650 in China originally as a writing-brush jar, it later had extravagant silver-gilt mounts added in London, which transformed the brush jar into a luxurious, decorative two-handled cup and cover.



Porcelain cup, probably Wolfgang Howzer, 1660 – 70, England. Museum no. M.308-1962. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London

Baroque ornament

Representations of the natural world, as well as motifs derived from human and animal forms, were popular decorative features. The most widespread form of Baroque floral decoration was a running scroll, often combined with acanthus – a stylised version of a real plant of the same name. A late 17th-century tankard in our collection features lavish floral decoration. The leaves of the flowers have been turned into scrolling foliage, while the flowers themselves have striped petals, likely to represent a tulip, another key motif of Baroque art.

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Peg tankard, maker unknown, about 1690, probably Denmark. Museum no. LOAN:GILBERT.603-2008. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London

The auricular style, which featured soft, fleshy abstract shapes, also emerged in the early 17th century, creating an effect that was ambiguous, suggestive and bizarre. In fact, the term 'Baroque' was a later invention – 'bizarre' was one of the words used at the time for the style we associate as Baroque today.

Theatre

The theatre was a setting for magnificent productions of drama, ballet and opera – a new art form at that time. With their ornate costumes, complex stage sets and ingenious machinery, these performances created wonder and awe. Theatre was popular both with the public and at court. Written by Jean-Baptiste Lully for the French court of Louis XIV (reigned 1643 – 1715), the opera *Atys* was such a favourite with the King that it became known as "The King's Opera". Our collection includes a pen and ink design for the costume of the character Hercules in *Atys*. He is shown in a ballet pose, wearing a Roman-style costume, and identified by his club and lion skin.



Costume design, Jean Berain the Elder, 1676, France. Museum no. S.1108-1982. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London

Theatre also played a role in the power struggles between European courts. Rulers vied to outdo each other in the magnificence of their productions. In France, theatre and opera also became a key element of Louis XIV's cultural policy, which was used to control the nobility and express his power and magnificence. In the early 18th century, the theatre building itself acquired new importance as proof of courtly, civic or technological power. The resulting new buildings across Europe established the theatre in the form we know today.

However, by the mid-18th century, the Baroque style seemed increasingly out of step with the mood of the time, which placed increasing emphasis on reason and scientific enquiry. Baroque was criticised as an "immoral" style and art and design turned away from its use of emotion, drama and illusion, returning to a simpler style inspired by classical antiquity. It was only in the late 19th century that the style began to be critically reappraised once more.

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8.2.2: Inside the Baroque palace

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The mid-17th century saw the beginning of a 100-year-long surge in palace-building, unmatched before or since. All over Europe, from Russia to Portugal, monarchs and other important rulers built or renovated palaces as their main centres of power, while lesser rulers and noblemen imitated them with their great houses. These Baroque creations, with their seemingly endless sequences of impressive rooms and vast formal gardens, have established the blueprint of what a palace should be.

The most famous and influential of all palaces was the Château de Versailles, near Paris, France. Its huge buildings and their landscape settings were planned to glorify King Louis XIV (reigned 1643 – 1715) and to accommodate the pomp and ceremony that revolved around him. Rulers across Europe took note and soon began to emulate Versailles and other French royal palaces, first in northern Europe and Scandinavia and later, after 1700, in central, eastern and southern Europe.

Many Baroque palaces included features such as grand staircases and a carefully codified arrangement of rooms that symbolised and reinforced power structures. Most of all, however, they were united by a shared richness and opulence. Their decor utilised luxurious materials and exquisite craftsmanship, as seen in a tapestry in our collection. From a series representing Louis XIV's royal residences, the foreground demonstrates the luxury of court life, with its display of textiles and other precious objects.



Vincennes or July, Charles le Brun of the Gobelins workshops, 1670 – 1700, France. Museum no. T.371-1977. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London

Staircases

Baroque palace staircases were also used as statements of power. Combining imposing architecture with symbolic imagery, they were intended to make a tremendous impact on the visitor. The most famous example was the *Ambassadors' Staircase* at Versailles, designed by the architect Louis Le Vau and built by François d'Orbay and Charles Le Brun between 1672 and 1679.



View of the Staircase of the Ambassadors, Louis de Surugue de Sergis after a drawing by Jean Michel Chevotet, about 1720, France. Museum no. E.93-1901. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London

Richly decorated in marble, gilt bronze and paintings, the staircase celebrates the victory of Louis XIV in the Franco-Dutch War (1672 – 78). Painted panels can be seen on the first floor: one of these panels survives today in the collections of Versailles and gives an indication of the scale and magnificence of the staircase. Two of the panels imitated tapestries depicting Louis' military victories, while two more represented people from all over the world, appearing to lean over and admire the palace – suggesting that the visitor should be taking that same attitude. The bust of the King was positioned at the very centre of the staircase, just as he was at the centre of court life.

The scale and design of the Versailles staircase inspired many others across Europe, including at the palaces of Caserta in Italy, Würzburg in Germany and the Royal Palace in Stockholm, Sweden.

The *Ambassadors' Staircase* was demolished in 1752 to make way for new developments, so an engraving in our collection is an important record of the staircase's grandeur.

Galleries

In some of the greatest Baroque palaces, the gallery was the principal room, the supreme symbol of the owner's dynastic, political and cultural aspirations. The most famous example is the *Galerie des Glaces*, or Hall of Mirrors, at Versailles, completed in 1684. On one side, great windows overlook the gardens. They are reflected on the opposite wall by mirrored recesses of equal size – a stupendous and extremely expensive innovation.

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Stereograph of the Palais des Versailles, an interior view of the 'Galerie des Glaces' (Hall of Mirrors), unknown maker, late 19th century, France. Museum no. E.1523-1992. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London

Galleries were multi-purpose spaces. Sometimes they were used to display collections of art. At Versailles, the whole court assembled in the *Galerie des Glaces* every day to see the King pass through to the chapel. The *Galerie* could also be dressed up as a setting for diplomatic or ceremonial events, featuring Louis XIV's famous silver throne.

Throne rooms and audience chambers

All palaces and great houses were divided into apartments: suites of rooms for particular individuals. The most important of these was the state apartment. As most of the daily ceremonies of court life occurred here, its design was determined by a carefully controlled system of etiquette. The interconnected rooms were arranged in a line (*en enfilade*), and a visitor's rank was indicated by how far through the rooms he was admitted. Most apartments began with a guards' hall and concluded with a state bedchamber and a closet with other, more private rooms, beyond. In between, there were antechambers used for eating and rooms for holding audiences.

A gilded table in our collection, such as those that furnished apartments of Roman palazzi, indicates the opulence of such apartments. In addition to its lavish gilding, it is richly carved with dramatic leafy scrolls and a grotesque mask at its centre.



Console table, about 1700, Italy. Museum no. W.35-1977. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London

Dining in the Baroque palace

In the Baroque palace, the ruler ate ceremonially in public attended by the court. Eating was a movable event, although larger meals usually took place in a special room near the entrance to the apartment. At Versailles, Louis XIV ate supper in public, in his bedchamber. The ancient tradition of public feasting continued for special occasions. Tables were often decorated with elaborate sculptures made from folded linen or cast sugar and the buffet was piled high with huge silver dishes and vessels. Every detail proclaimed the power and wealth of the host.

Developing concepts of civility and decorum, and the introduction by the French court of new types of food and service, prompted the invention of new forms of tableware, such as soup tureens, wine coolers, condiment sets and sauce boats. A personal plate, knife, fork and spoon became normal when recommended by the French diplomat and civil servant Antoine de Courtin, the author of popular etiquette manuals for the upwardly mobile, in 1672.



Knife, fork and spoon set, 1670 – 75, England. Museum no. M.325-1962. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London

These grand occasions – and their corresponding tableware – were echoed in the homes of noblemen, as can be seen in the Macclesfield wine set in our collection. It consists of a wine fountain, cistern and cooler made for Thomas Parker, 1st Earl of Macclesfield, and exemplifies the grandeur and drama of the Baroque style.

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Macclesfield wine set, Anthony Nelme, 1719 – 20, England. Museum no. M.25:1 to 3-1998. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London

The cooler was placed on the floor, while the fountain and cistern sat on shelves above. Water from the fountain was used for rinsing glasses, while the cistern standing beneath the fountain tap caught the tipped-out water. Finally, the wine cooler, filled with ice, was used to chill white and red wines. The set was designed to be seen together and to create a strong visual impact. It formed part of a buffet display in the new dining room at Macclesfield's Oxfordshire home, Shirburn Castle, which had marble shelves made specifically for displaying silver. Only the extremely wealthy could afford a set of such magnificence and this set would have cost around £1,200 – the kind of grandeur usually associated with official ambassadorial entertaining.

Bedchambers

At the terminus of the state apartment was the bedchamber – the most richly furnished room of the Baroque palace. State bedchambers were often just symbolic of the royal presence, the ruler sleeping elsewhere. At Versailles, Louis XIV's actual sleeping chamber was the setting for elaborate court ceremonies, including the daily rising (the *lever*) and going to bed (the *coucher*), as well as special public occasions. The state bed was the most expensive piece of furniture in the building and, in a custom that began in France, it was given a throne-like setting, raised on a platform or placed behind a balustrade. The silver fire equipment and upholstered furniture found in the Baroque bedchamber were marks of high status. For women, the daily ceremony of the toilette prompted the creation of elaborate toilette or dressing sets, equipped with mirrors, brushes and small pots and vessels, often in silver. French-style bedchambers and furnishings were adopted all over Europe, though not all courts used their bedchambers in the French manner.



Desk, about 1700, France. Museum no. 372-1901. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London

Cabinets and closets: rooms beyond the bedchamber

The rooms beyond the bedchamber were open only to the select few. A level of furnishing and luxury unseen outside was packed into the inner sanctum of small rooms such as the dressing room and closet. The exclusivity of these rooms and their relative lack of ceremonial function also made them the setting for influential innovations in furniture and interior decoration. For example, small rooms (closets) of cabinets were sometimes entirely and expensively decorated with walls of mirror and lacquer. Sometimes containing cabinets on stands, closets also introduced types of furniture still used today, including desks and upholstered sofas and easy chairs. These small rooms were also naturally suited to the display of collections of precious objects and, in central Europe, china rooms became glittering treasure boxes, as much a display of mirrorwork and inlay as they were of porcelain.

Our collection includes an exceptionally delicate version of a cabinet on a stand, a form that became the pre-eminent type of luxury furniture throughout Europe in the 17th century. This cabinet was almost certainly made for the household of the duc d'Orléans, brother of King Louis XIV of France. Measuring only 126 centimetres in height, it is one of only two known French cabinets of this period made on this small scale. Ivory's expense frequently limited its use to details of decoration, making this cabinet's lavish use of the material unique in French cabinetmaking.

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Cabinet on a stand, possibly by Pierre Gole, 1660 – 71, France. Museum no. W.38-1983. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London

Gardens

While there wasn't a unified style of Baroque garden, there were common, shared features. The gardens were, for example, conceived on a grand scale. Like the palaces themselves, they were expressions of power – particularly demonstrating power over nature. André Mollet's 1651 Le Jardin de Plaisir is an indispensable guide to the main features of Baroque garden design, describing key features of a "perfect pleasure garden" such as a grand *alleé* (avenue) of elms or lime trees, *bosquets* (artificial woods) and *palissades* (hedges). He also recommends that each *alleé* should terminate in a statue or fountain. This pattern is found in important gardens of the period, such as Versailles, Het Loo, in Apeldoorn, Netherlands and the palace of Caserta Palace in Italy.



Apollo flaying Marsyas, Antonio Corradini, 1710 – 50, Italy. Museum no. A.6-1967. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London

Antonio Corradini's statue *Apollo flaying Marsyas* belongs to a series of garden sculptures made for Augustus the Strong, King of Poland and Elector of Saxony, for his gardens in Dresden. It shows a subject from classical mythology – the god Apollo slaying and skinning the satyr Marsyas, after beating him in a musical contest. Carved in Corradini's Venetian studio and exported to Saxony to be placed in the French-style gardens of the Holländisches Palais in Dresden, it also demonstrates the international nature of Baroque.

8.2.2: Inside the Baroque palace is shared under a All Rights Reserved (used with permission) license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by LibreTexts.

8.2.3: Glorifying the Sun King

Adapted from "Louis le Vau, André le Nôtre, and Charles le Brun, Château de Versailles" (August 8, 2015) by Rachel Ropeik in *Smarthistory*

When the King of France, Louis XIV, first decided to build a new palace and move his court out of Paris, there was nothing on his chosen site at Versailles but a smallish hunting lodge. Today, the palace stands as a prime example of the over-the-top excesses of the French nobility that led to the French Revolution.

Thanks to the team of Louis le Vau (architect to the aristocracy), André le Nôtre (landscape designer extraordinaire), and Charles le Brun (über-fashionable interior decorator and painter), Louis XIV's (reigned 1643 – 1715) enormous and stylish palace was completed 21 years after it was begun in 1661 allowing Louis (and his closest friends, family, courtiers, servants and soldiers —all 20,000 of them) to officially set up court there (by that point, the next superstar architect, Jules Hardouin Mansart, had taken up the design reins). Enormous is no joke. The place has 700 rooms, 2,153 windows, and takes up 67,000 square meters of floor space (for those of you keeping track at home, that's over 12 American football fields or a bit more than 9 soccer pitches).



Figure 8.2.3.1:
Aerial view of the Palace of Versailles, 1664–1710 (photo: ToucanWings, CC BY-SA 3.0)

Over and above anything else, Versailles was meant to emphasize Louis's importance. After all, this is the guy that called himself The Sun King; as in, everything revolves around me. "L'état, c'est moi" (I am the state), he said, famously and oh-so-modestly. By building Versailles, Louis shifted the seat of French government away from the feuding, gossiping, trouble-making noble families in Paris. He had the whole palace and its massive gardens built along an east/west axis so the sun would rise and set in alignment with his home. Its huge buildings and their landscape settings were planned to glorify King Louis XIV and to accommodate the pomp and ceremony that revolved around him. And he filled both the palace and its gardens with sculpture, painting, and fountains that all focused on…you guessed it…himself.

When you walk through the palace at Versailles, you're bombarded with room after room of marble and gold and paintings: ceilings painted to place Louis in the company of the Greek gods, busts of him in a huge formal curly wig staring at you wherever you go, and gold gold gold, so you never lose sight of how wealthy the King of France was. To give you just a hint, we're talking about a man who spent the equivalent of $5,000,000 on buttons over the 54 years of his reign. That's an average of almost $100,000 a year. On buttons.

The most famous room is the Hall of Mirrors, which runs along the entire length of the central building. One wall contains a row of giant windows looking out over the gardens (almost 2,000 acres of manicured lawns, fountains and paths arranged in the formal garden style that André le Nôtre was known for), and the other wall is covered with 357 mirrors that catch the setting sun's rays inside the palace and remind us yet again (as if we could forget) of Louis XIV's power.

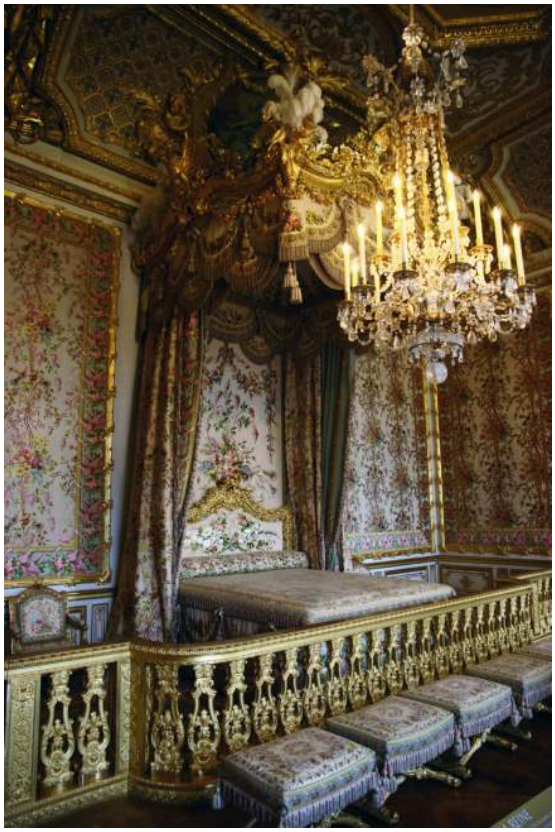


Figure 8.2.3.2: Queen's bed chamber, Versailles (photo: Scott SM, CC BY-NC 2.0)

Of the 700 rooms inside the palace, there are a few notable ones that served very particular functions. The queens of France who lived at Versailles were the focus of a similar ritual (the Toilette) in the queen's main bedchamber, a room where they also gave

birth in public. The symmetrical Salon of War and Salon of Peace are decorated with paintings highlighting, unsurprisingly, France's military might and the benefits of living calmly under a tranquil ruling government.



Figure 8.2.3.3: Antoine Coysevox, Equestrian Relief of King Louis XIV as a Roman Emperor, Salon de la guerre, 1715 (photo: Mario Sánchez Prada, CC BY-SA 2.0)

Louis, ever modest, especially liked linking himself directly to the Greek god Apollo (Sun King = Sun God… subtle wasn't Louis's middle name). The Apollo Fountain and Apollo Salon remain two of the major highlights of a visit to Versailles. Not content with the restraint of pure classical design, which is emphasized more on the architectural exterior, he had his team create a palace that used classical structures to contain the elaborate grandeur building upon Italian Baroque art and architecture, the then-predominant fashion in Paris and throughout much of Europe in the mid-seventeenth century. He wanted to make the biggest possible statement and what he ended up with was Versailles: a palace designed to glorify the French monarch by incorporating both ornate Baroque decoration that amply demonstrates his wealth and glory and the stricter rules of classicism that express his intellectual and cultural stature.



Figure 8.2.3.4:
Left: statue of Zeus, Neoclassical exterior architecture by Louis le Vau and André le Nôtre, Palace of Versailles, 1664–1710 (photo: Marc Vassal, CC BY-SA 2.0); Right: Jean-Baptiste Tuby after a drawing by Charles Le Brun, Apollo Fountain, Palace of Versailles, installed 1671

This is epitomized in the designs of furniture and other decorative arts commissioned by Louis XIV during his reign (1654-1715), still recognized to this day as symbols of opulence and power and underscored by his own words in the 1663 letter of appointment for the supervisor for the royal furniture: "There is nothing that indicates more clearly the magnificence of great princes than their superb palaces and their precious furniture."



Figure 8.2.3.5: Commode for the Grand Trianon (ca. 1710-20), André Charles Boulle (French, Paris 1642–1732 Paris), Walnut veneered with ebony, marquetry of engraved brass and tortoiseshell, gilt-bronze mounts, verd antique marble, public domain, photo: Metropolitan Museum of Art

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8.3: Rococo Interiors

Learning Objectives

- Explain why the Rococo salon is considered a "total work of art."
- Differentiate between Rococo period furniture and others such as the Baroque by identifying key design characteristics and forms.
- Analyze the relationship between Rococo aesthetic preferences and Enlightenment philosophy and values, such as gender roles and chinoiserie.

Rococo Art and Salons

Adapted from "Rococo art, an introduction" (January 7, 2016) by Dr. Steven Zucker and Dr. Beth Harris in *Smarthistory*; "2.17: The Rococo and Neoclassicism" in *Introduction to Art* by Muffet Jones; and "3.3: Rococo (1715-1789)" in *A World Perpective of Art History: 1400CE to the 21st Century* by Deborah Gustlin and Zoe Gustlin

In the early years of the 1700s, at the end of the reign of Louis XIV, there was a shift away from the classicism and "Grand Manner" (based on the art of Nicolas Poussin) that had governed the art of the preceding 50 years in France, toward a new style that we call Rococo. The Palace of Versailles (a royal chateau that was the center of political power) was abandoned by the aristocracy, who once again took up residence in Paris. A shift away from the monarchy, toward the aristocracy characterizes the art of this period.

What kind of lifestyle did the aristocracy lead? Remember that the aristocracy had enormous political power as well as enormous wealth. Many chose leisure as a pursuit and became involved themselves in romantic intrigues. Indeed, they created a culture of luxury and excess that formed a stark contrast to the lives of most people in France. The aristocracy—only a small percentage of the population of France—owned over 90% of its wealth. A small, but growing middle class would not sit still with this for long (remember the French Revolution of 1789).

A reaction to the rigidity of Baroque style, the frivolous and playful Rococo first manifested itself in the total art work of the salon. Rococo salons are characterized by their elaborate detail, intricate patterns, serpentine design work, asymmetry, and a predisposition to lighter, pastel, and gold-based color palettes. In French, the word salon simply means living room or parlor, and Rococo salons refer to central rooms that are designed in the Rococo style. In addition, the notion of the 'salon' is an Enlightenment era ideal that transformed the living room into the central space for aristocracy to entertain guests and engage in intellectual conversation. The idea that one's architectural surroundings should encourage a way of life, or reflect one's values, was the philosophy of the time.

Rococo salons often employed the use of asymmetry in design, which was termed *contraste*. Interior ornament included the use of sculpted forms on ceilings and walls, often somewhat abstract or employing leafy or shell-like textures. The word "rococo" is derived from the French word *rocaille*, meaning "rock work," implying scrolling lines, curves, and counter curves in changing directions. Though Rococo is the term we use now for this period of design, in the 18th century "rocaille" was used derogatorily, as these relative excesses came out of style with the rise of populist revolutions.

As another means of reflecting status, furniture rose to new heights during the Rococo period, emphasizing the lighthearted frivolity that was prized by the style. Furniture design became physically lighter and upholstered for the first time; comfort became an important issue as well as furniture that was free-standing allowing for it to be easily moved around for gatherings. Furniture in the Rococo period moved away from the wall in order to accentuate the lighthearted and versatile atmosphere that was desired by the aristocracy. Mahogany became the most widely used medium due to its strength, and mirrors also became increasingly popular.

The chest of drawers (below), made by Charles Cressent, exhibits the Rococo furniture, complex sculptured forms, gilded and applied to the chest. Small cherubs, a standard feature, languish on the tree branches with vines and flowers intertwined.



Figure : Chest of drawers (CA 1730, veneered with gilt-bronze mounts and marble top, 91.1 x 158.1 x 66.0 cm) CC BY-SA 4.0

During this period, the Salon grew from Paris to become the prestigious and official arbiter of acceptable art, holding the most prominent annual shows in the Western art world. To be considered a successful artist by the early 1700s meant acceptance into the Salon. By 1725, the performances were held in the Louvre, and paintings hung in every space. The printed catalogs provide accurate records of the works of the day, and the descriptions of the paintings mark the start of the art critic. Other salons were organized and held exhibits; to be worthy of

acceptance into the salon, the artists had their work juried following the standards of acceptable art.

Rococo painting was playful, full of mythical scenes and extravagant landscapes or interiors, ornate with pastel colors, celebrating love, and life outside of mythology. Light in the paintings was scattered with images of a frolicking society in pastures or forests and frequently hidden sexual innuendos. As with most Rococo paintings, the subject of Jean-Honoré Fragonard's *The Swing* is not very complicated. Two lovers have conspired to get an older fellow to push the young lady in the swing while her lover hides in the bushes. Their idea is that —as she goes up in the swing, she can part her legs, and her lover can get a tantalizing view up her skirt.





Figure 8.3.1: Left:
Jean-Honoré Fragonard,
The Swing,
1767, oil on canvas, 81 x 64.2 cm (
Wallace Collection
, London); Right: Hyacinthe Rigaud,
Louis XIV,
1701, oil on canvas, 289.6 x 159.1 cm (
J. Paul Getty Museum
, Los Angeles)

The figures are surrounded by a lush, overgrown garden. A sculptured figure to the left puts his fingers to his mouth, as though saying "hush," while another sculpture in the background shows two cupid figures cuddled together. The colors are pastel pale pinks and greens, and although we have a sense of movement and a prominent diagonal line—the painting lacks the seriousness of a Baroque painting, such as in the portrait of Louis XIV.

If you look closely you can see the loose brushstrokes in the pink silk dress—and as she opens her legs, we get a glimpse of her stockings and garter belt. Though Rococo salons were settings for Enlightenment discussions, it was precisely this kind of painting that the philosophers of the Enlightenment were soon to condemn. They demanded a new style of art, one that showed an example of moral behavior, of human beings at their most noble, leading to Romanticism in painting.

Writing table, Bernard II van Risenburgh

by Dianne Pierce

The style of the French nobility

Encased in the curving frame and delicate decorative scheme of this writing table are clever innovations, technological and artistic brilliance, and a representation of completely new ways of living in the period beginning c. 1755.

After the formality and grandeur of Louis XIV's Versailles, French aristocrats, including the king himself, were ready for spaces, furniture, clothing, and etiquette that allowed them to turn to matters other than the glorification of France. Beginning before the turn of the eighteenth century, but accelerated by the opportunity opened by the death of the Sun King in 1715, nobles set up their own homes after decades of living under the king's enormous roof at Versailles, and created a radically different domestic life. Although it was only seven years until Louis XIV's great-grandson was old enough to take the throne to reign as Louis XV, by 1722 new ideas of privacy, comfort, and intimate home life led to a new design language, the Rococo. All of the elements that are the basis for domesticity as we know it today were developed in this period.



Bernard II van Risenburgh, Writing table (Table à écrire), c. 1755, oak veneered with tulipwood, kingwood, amaranth, mahogany, ebony, mother-of-pearl, stained horn; gilt-bronze mounts and modern velvet, 78.1 x 96.5 x 57.5 cm (The Metropolitan Museum of Art)

A move away from Baroque grandeur and classicism



Cabriole legs (detail), Bernard II van Risenburgh, Writing table (Table à écrire), c. 1755, oak veneered with tulipwood, kingwood, amaranth, mahogany, ebony, mother-of-pearl, stained horn; gilt-bronze mounts and modern velvet, 78.1 x 96.5 x 57.5 cm (The Metropolitan Museum of Art)

Louis XIV, during his long reign, had established France as a major European economic and political power, not least by the use of design as a strategic propaganda tool. Where the grandeur, drama, and theatricality of the Baroque, as Louis imported it from Rome, had been the perfect tool for portraying the King and his country as supremely powerful, by the early eighteenth century, the Baroque was starting to seem exhaustingly sumptuous. Baroque design was based on the classical language, which the earlier Renaissance artists had delighted in rediscovering, augmenting, and modifying. But by the early decades of the eighteenth century, designers were increasingly turning away from bombastic classicism to other sources, notably the natural world. They began playing with un-classical ideas like asymmetry, movement, linearity, sinuous curves, and realistic natural ornament. The Rococo, as it developed in design, was a sharp turn away from everything the Baroque had become.



Jean François de Troy, *Reading from Molière*, around 1728, oil on canvas, 72.4 x 90.8 cm (Collection of late Marchioness of Cholmondeley, Houghton)

Elegance, intimacy, delicacy and curves

Where Baroque spaces had been opulent, Rococo rooms were elegant. Grandeur became intimate delicacy. No less carefully designed or meticulously crafted, Rococo was light, fresh, and whimsical, to replace the heavy, fleshy Baroque. The lines of this writing table, as well as its applied ornament and its iconography, all express perfectly the Rococo sensibility. The piece is all curves, more vital and organic than architectural, with cabriole legs (with two curves) that seem to dance, and marquetry of ribbons, leaves and flowers. There's no message here, no story told or idea conveyed, only pleasure and delight in an object for its own sake. Louis XV's reign, like the man himself, was a time of lighthearted pursuit of beauty and sensual *joie de vivre*.

The artist

This table was designed by Bernard II van Risenburgh, one of a group of furniture makers working for Louis XV and his nobles. They produced new types of objects for new lifestyles, in the new Rococo design language, and using new technologies. Everything about this table is a fresh approach. Van Risenburgh was part of a relatively new guild of furniture specialists called ébénistes, who were responsible for the veneered skin of the piece only; the frame was built by a menusier. While many of the finest craftsmen of the eighteenth century worked only in the royal workshops, Van Risenburgh was unusual in having his own enterprise and selling primarily through retail middle-men known as marchand-merciers, a new-fangled concept. Furthermore, he signed his pieces (BVRB). In keeping with Enlightenment ideas of the eighteenth century which celebrated individuality and personal achievement, increasingly craftsmen were identifying themselves with their work. Van Risenburgh also designed his own gilt-bronze mounts, which created a distinct personal style and help to identify his work.



Ornate decoration and compartment (detail), Bernard II van Risenburgh, Writing table (Table à écrire), c. 1755, oak veneered with tulipwood, kingwood, amaranth, mahogany, ebony, mother-of-pearl, stained horn; gilt-bronze mounts and modern velvet, 78.1 x 96.5 x 57.5 cm (The Metropolitan Museum of Art)

Tables were "in" (especially for women)

Tables were the delight of the new Rococo interior. Tiny moveable tables for ladies' sewing, tables for playing cards, exquisite tables (bonheurs du jour) with porcelain plaques from the royal Sevres factory: an explosion of types and expressions. Writing, playing cards, correspondence were all fashionable amusements for the new world of the eighteenth century. Furthermore, small, highly detailed tables served as props for a particular kind of intimate domestic theater. Women especially used these objects in their expressions of themselves as cultured and sophisticated, skilled in the arts of polite society and seduction. A slender lace-clad wrist, lightly touching a hidden spring in a table, could reveal a drawer or a secret compartment, a book-rest, or in some pieces, all of these—in a series of carefully orchestrated steps. In the intimate aristocratic world of the early eighteenth century, women were the gatekeepers to the rooms where important men gathered, and thereby exercised great social and political power. For the first time, women chose and controlled their interiors, had their own objects, and interacted with them in a most self-conscious but seemingly insouciant way.

How it was used

This writing table gives the user some clues about how to employ it: first, there is an opening in the gilt-bronze (or ormolu) gallery (the little fence around the edge of the top) that tells where to sit. In accord with this positioning, one finds a pull-out flat writing surface with a leather inset, just below the table top. A drawer for storage slides out of one short end, and another flat surface pulls out of the other to create a place to put accessories such as ink and paper.

Not merely a piece of furniture, this writing table from the golden era of French design, is an indicator of great social

changes, including changing women's roles, stylistic shifts, and a personal relationship with objects that presaged the modern world as we know it today.

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Architecture in 18th-century Germany

Adapted from "Architecture in 18th-century Germany" by Marlise Brown in *Smarthistory*, October 14, 2020, accessed February 9, 2026, https://smarthistory.org/architecture-18th-century-germany/.

On a bright summer day, when sunlight pours through the windows of Vierzehnheiligen Church at just the right angle, the interior glows with dazzling warmth. Joyful painted and sculpted putti fly overhead, while sculpted foliage and leafy cartouches seem to organically grow over the marble columns and the rippling curvature of the white walls. The architecture appears to dematerialize in this radiant light, and—just for a moment—space, light, and three-dimensional ornament becomes the true substance of this interior. This level of grandeur, spectacle, and rich decoration was not exclusively reserved for Vierzehnheiligen Church, but typifies many of the religious spaces, noble palaces, and theaters built in Germany during the 18th century.



View of the nave, Balthasar Neumann, Vierzehnheiligen (Fourteen Holy Helpers) Church (Germany), 1742–1744 (photo: Reinhold Müller, CC BY-SA 4.0) (Google Street View of the interior)

In the 18th century, Germany was not a politically unified country as we know it today. Instead, this region was a collection of territories governed by different ruling families, many of whom were avid patrons of architecture who transformed their principalities into major centers of artistic production.



Map showing German States (center), 1742. L'Allemagne, dressee sur les observations de Tycho-Brahe, de Kepler, de Snellius sur celles de Messieurs de l'Academie Royale des Sciences &c, sur Zeiller et autres auteurs anciens ou modernes. Par G. de l'Isle, Geographe. A Amsterdam, Chez J. Covens et C. Mortier. J. Condet schulpsit (David Rumsey Map Collection)

Hundreds of new buildings dotted the landscape, many with elaborate interiors designed to overwhelm all who stepped inside. Scholars have had difficulty characterizing 18th-century German architecture, viewing it as a superficial (or even exaggerated) imitation of the French Rococo and Italian Baroque styles. However, artists in German-speaking territories transformed Rococo ornament into three-dimensional sculptural forms. They manipulated space and masked architectural structure, and never clearly adopted a single style. Germany's superior woodworking and stuccowork traditions also aided in refashioning the imported Baroque and Rococo styles.

Vierzehnheiligen: light, location, space

Scholars estimate that, between 1700 and 1780, more than 200 architecturally significant churches were erected throughout southern Germany. At this time, many Central European monasteries had the financial resources and sufficient landholdings to commission ambitious structures to communicate the ideas of their faith and accommodate the growing influx of pilgrims. Some churches, like Vierzehnheiligen, had become important pilgrimage sites by the 16th century. Pilgrims journeying to these churches also helped to fund their construction.



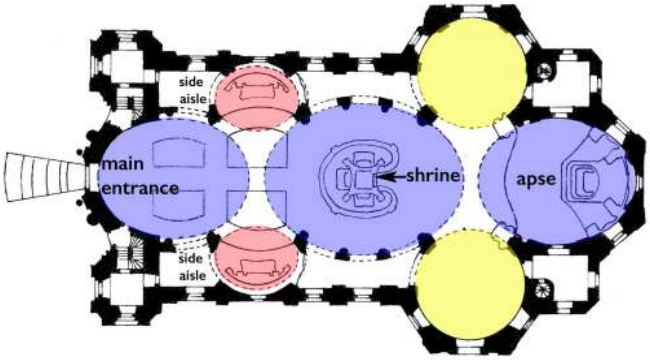
Balthasar Neumann, Vierzehnheiligen (Fourteen Holy Helpers) Church, 1742–1744 (photo: karaian, CC BY 2.0)

In 1735, a Cistercian monastery held a competition to design a larger more magnificent basilica and shrine for Vierzehnheiligen to mark the site where a shepherd had spiritual visions of the "Fourteen Holy Helpers" in the 15th century. The Fourteen Holy Helpers were viewed as healing intercessors who helped with a range of ailments (headaches, fever, and plague to name a few). With the encouragement of indulgences and as news of the Fourteen Holy Helpers spread, thousands of pilgrims flocked to Vierzehnheiligen every year.



Balthasar Neumann, central altar, the Shrine of the Fourteen Holy Helpers, Vierzehnheiligen Church, 1742–1744, Bad Staffelstein, Germany (photo: Aarp65, CC BY-SA 3.0)

Friedrich Karl von Schönborn, the Prince-Bishop of Würzburg and Bamberg, selected Balthasar Neumann's design and Gottfried Heinrich Krohne supervised. The noble Schönborn family had considerable power in the 17th and 18th centuries, and the Schönborns were enthusiastic patrons (and students) of architecture. While Friedrich Karl von Schönborn was not necessarily the financial backer of the project, without the Prince-Bishops's involvement in the project, Neumann would not have been selected to design the space.



Vierzehnheiligen Plan, from *Geschichte der Deutschen Kunst von frühesten Zeiten bis zur Gegenwart von Wilhelm Lübke*, Stuttgart, Verlag von Ebner & Seubert (Paul Neff) 1890, p. 794, fig. 624. Here the blue ovals define the nave and the yellow circles define the extent of the transept.

Viewed from the exterior, it appears that Neumann constructed a traditional Latin-cross basilica, however, once inside, the walls seem to ripple and almost disappear. Neumann's architectural plan is a complex arrangement of five ovals, vaulted ceilings, and large windows. Neumann used a sequence of three longitudinal ovals in the nave (the central aisle of a basilica), with the largest oval centered above the shrine of the Fourteen Holy Helpers. Two domed ovals, on either side of the nave, form a transept (a hall that crosses the nave at a right angle — in the plan above the space with domes indicated in yellow). Two smaller ovals define the side aisles. The effect, when standing in the nave, is of an undulating arcade.



View in the nave, looking to the entrance, Balthasar Neumann, Vierzehnheiligen Church, 1742–1744 (photo: ErwinMeier, CC BY-SA 3.0)

The nave's masonry (stone) walls feature large windows, which flood the interior with light. Neumann's design makes the interior appear more open and airy, like a delicate frame covered

in jubilant rocaille forms. The central altar, designed by Johann Jakob Michael Küchel, is a baldachin (ceremonial canopy over an altar) composed of sinuous C- and S- curve shapes, which complement the sculptural nature of Neumann's interior.



Cosmas Damian and Egid Quirin Asam, Abbey Church of Weltenburg on the Danube (Kloster Weltenburg an der Donau), 1716–1735, Bad Staffelstein, Germany (photo: Mattana, CC BY-SA 3.0)

Staging sacred dramas

The locations of 18th-century German churches can be just as picturesque as the buildings themselves. Vierzehnheiligen overlooks the River Main. The Benedictine abbey church of Weltenburg, designed by the Asam brothers in 1721, is set idyllically on the Danube River. The Asam brothers were not only highly trained architects, but also Cosmas Damian Asam was a talented painter and Egid Quirin Asam specialized in sculpture and stuccowork.



Left: Cosmas Damian and Egid Quirin Asam, main altar with St. George slaying a dragon, framed by Solomonic (spiral) columns, Abbey Church of Weltenburg on the Danube (Kloster Weltenburg an der Donau), 1716–1735, Bad Staffelstein, Germany (photo: Allie_Caulfield, CC BY 2.0); right: detail of Saint George (photo: Mattana, CC BY-SA 3.0)

Unlike Neumann's Vierzehnheiligen, the Asam brothers used windows sparingly at Weltenburg abbey to heighten the theater of the sacred dramas unfolding at the main altar and in the oval dome. On the high altar, Egid Quirin created a stage set of sorts where Solomonic (twisting) columns frame a sculptural group of Saint George slaying a dragon, as he defends a princess to the side. This sculptural group displays such dramatic movements that it almost appears like a *tableaux vivant* or "living picture," in which groups of costumed actors present static, posed scenes. Behind this, concealed windows seem to flood this miraculous scene with heavenly light.



Cosmas Damian and Egid Quirin Asam; View of ceiling (Church Triumphant) at Kloster Weltenburg, 1716-1735 (fresco ca. 1721), Bad Staffelstein, Germany (photo: Allie_Caulfield, CC BY 2.0)

On the ceiling, Cosmas Damian's illusionistic fresco in the dome represents the *Church Triumphant*. There are other concealed windows which illuminate the domed ceiling and otherwise dark church. The combined effects of theatrical light, illusionistic paintings, and expressive gestural sculptures blur the boundaries between earthly and heavenly space.

The Asam brothers' stuccowork, painterly approach, and brilliant use of color represent the German Rococo style, but the architectural and spatial illusionism of Weltenburg was likely inspired by their knowledge of Italian Baroque artists like Andrea Pozzo and Giovanni Battista Gaulli. Likewise, their ability to seamlessly unify architecture, painting, and sculpture into one coherent religious spectacle is reminiscent of Gian Lorenzo Bernini's work.



Frederick II, "The Great," King of Prussia, Sketch of the terrace complex with Sanssouci Palace's floor plan, 1744, pen, 35 x 18.5 cm, original now lost (Bildarchiv Foto Marburg)

Sanssouci palace: a palace retreat fit for a Prussian king



Georg W. von Knobelsdorff (architect) and Friedrich Christian Glume (sculptor), Sanssouci, 1745–1747; Potsdam, Germany ((photo: Tobias Nordhausen, CC BY 2.0) (Google Street View of the interior)

By the second half of the 18th century, Prussia was the most dominant political power in Germany. Frederick "The Great," King of Prussia, supported a vital period of artistic and architectural activity to commemorate the enlightened absolutism of his reign. Frederick was closely involved in most of his architectural projects, including his vineyard palace, Sanssouci (French for "carefree"), as seen from some of his sketches.



Aerial view of Sanssouci, showing the terraced vineyard (photo: noxoss, CC0 1.0)

Frederick the Great designed the initial concept for Sanssouci palace, its terraced vineyard, and *cour d'honneur* (the monumental courtyard, partially enclosed by a curved double-colonnade). It was up to his court architect, Georg Wenzeslaus von Knobelsdorff, and a team of stuccoists, sculptors, painters, and landscape engineers to realize his vision.

Like Amalienburg, Sanssouci is a single-story *petite maison*, however, Frederick's palace is located on top of a series of six terraces. These terraces, executed by Friedrich Wilhelm Diterich, contains numerous gardens and greenhouses that are designed to grow grapes (for the king's wine!) and other local and exotic fruits. These terraces curve inward slightly to trap the maximum amount of sunlight.



Caryatids and the name SANS SOUCI. Georg W. von Knobelsdorff (architect) and Friedrich Christian Glume (sculptor), Sanssouci, 1745–1747; Potsdam, Germany (photo: Suse, CC BY-SA 3.0)

On the exterior of the palace, sandstone caryatids of lively male and female followers of Bacchus (the Roman god of wine), support the entablature where the name "SANS SOUCI" is carved. The jovial Bacchic-themed caryatids, sculpted by Friedrich Christian Glume, harmonize with the palace's vineyards setting and embody the enlightened yet lighthearted environment that the king sought to establish at this palace retreat. However, because Sanssouci Palace was used as Frederick the Great's official residence in the summer, it was important that the ornament also convey the building's importance and Frederick's role as King of Prussia. For this reason, Corinthian columns were used in the *cour d'honneur* at the main entrance because the richly ornamented column capitals are associated with kings and emperors.



Georg W. von Knobelsdorff (lead designer/court architect), Carl Joseph Sartori and Johann Peter Benkert (stuccoists), Marble Hall, Sanssouci, 1745–1747, Potsdam, Germany (photo: Marlise G. Brown) (Google Street View of the room)

The "Marble Hall," is the focal point of Sanssouci Palace; it embodies Frederick the Great's idea of enlightened absolutism through its emphasis on the arts and sciences. Inside the Marble Hall, the oval dome is decorated with gilded stucco ornaments.



Allegory of music, Marble Hall, Sanssouci, 1745–1747, Potsdam, Germany (photo: Marlise G. Brown)

Groups of putti and female figures portraying the allegories of architecture, music, painting, sculpture, and astronomy are seated along the cornice. Around the curved walls, there are sixteen Corinthian columns and sixteen Corinthian pilasters; the column capitals are gilded to complement the splendor of the richly ornamented ceiling and the column shafts are a soft white-grey marble.



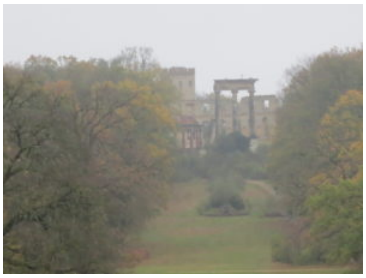
Marble Hall, Sanssouci, 1745-1747; Potsdam, Germany (photo: Marlise G. Brown)

The columns, walls, and intricate floor of the "Marble Hall" are made of Carrara (from Italy) and Silesian (from Prussia) marble. This is the only application of real marble at Sanssouci (elsewhere, less costly sandstone and faux marble were used). The materials used in the Marble Hall underscore the importance of this space, where King Frederick the Great would host dinners with his elite circle of scholarly friends, including the French writer and philosopher Voltaire, where they could speak freely about literature, politics, philosophy, religion, the arts, and more.

The artworks made during this period, dubbed "Frederican Rococo," exhibit King Frederick the Great's predilection for the French painter, Antoine Watteau; however, his architectural commissions convey a sense of stylistic eclecticism, pulling inspiration from architectural sources in Germany, Austria, Italy, England, China, and beyond. For example, the name Sanssouci and the architectural type of the *petite maison* clearly connect Frederick's palace to France, but his design also drew inspiration from other Central European palaces and ancient Rome. The lively sculpted caryatids on Sanssouci's façade are strikingly similar to those found on the Dresden Zwinger (discussed next). The interior of the rotunda-like "Marble Hall" located in the center of Sanssouci was inspired by the ancient Roman Pantheon.



Dragon House, Sanssouci, 1745–1747, Potsdam, Germany (photo: Marek Śliwecki, CC BY-SA 4.0) (Google Street View of the Dragon House)



Hill of Ruins, Sanssouci Palace, Potsdam (photo: Pat M2007, CC BY-NC-ND 2.0)

In addition to the main palace, King Frederick the Great also commissioned several other monuments at Sanssouci Park that clearly showcase his interest in Greco-Roman antiquity (for example the "Hill of Ruins," seen in the distance from Sanssouci's main entrance) and chinoiserie-inspired architecture (such as the "Dragon House" and the "Chinese House"). However, many have argued that this type of eclecticism at Sanssouci, coupled with the uniquely constructed terraced vineyard, is distinctly 'Frederican'.

The Dresden Zwinger and Margravial Opera House: courtly entertainment

The development of permanent spaces for courtly entertainment was an important feature of 18th-century court architecture. The Dresden Zwinger, designed by the architect Matthias Daniel Pöppelmann and sculptor Balthasar Permoser, was initially constructed as a splendid framing element around a large court used to host festivals, tournaments, ballets, and other forms of entertainment.



Guiseppe and Carlo Galli-Bibiena (interior) Joseph Saint-Pierre (exterior), view of stage at Margravial Opera House, 1744–1748, Bayreuth, Germany (photo: Marlise G. Brown)

In the 18th century, several German rulers constructed theaters and opera houses to aesthetically promote their reign. Opera was considered an art form that combined all of the "sister arts" (painting, sculpture, theater, music, and literature) into one coherent spectacle. One of the most important and well-preserved examples of this building type is the Margravial Opera House in Bayreuth.

To commemorate the occasion of their daughter's wedding in 1748, Margraves Friedrich and Wilhelmine of Brandenburg-Bayreuth (a princess of Prussia and King Frederick the Great's older sister), commissioned the most celebrated dynasty of theater architects—the Galli-Bibiena family—to design the Margravial Opera House. Royal weddings signified the unification and empowerment of two dynasties, so these events were usually marked by elaborate displays that lasted for days and sometimes weeks. For this particular wedding in Bayreuth, the most important events—like ballets, plays, operas, and banquets—took place at the Margravial Opera House.



Guiseppe and Carlo Galli-Bibiena, view of illusionistic ceiling with scene of Apollo and the Muses at Margravial Opera House, 1744–1748, Bayreuth, Germany (photo: Marlise G. Brown)

The interior of this bell-shaped auditorium is entirely constructed from wood that has been painted or covered in painted canvas. Most of the wooden elements—like the balusters, columns, rails, and so on—were prefabricated and painted off-site and later installed at the opera house. Court artists were usually responsible for constructing temporary festival architecture and decorations for royal weddings; many of these traditional ornaments have been incorporated into the permanent decoration of the theater.

Theater architects Giuseppe and Carlo Galli-Bibiena used heraldic emblems of the houses of Brandenburg and Hohenzollern to decorate the interior as well as classical love stories from mythology, flower garlands, rocaille forms, cartouches, and a large ceiling painting of Apollo (the god of music) and the Muses (the Greco-Roman goddesses of the arts, literature, and science). Above the two trumpeter's loges (private boxes in a theater), flanking both sides of the stage, are the Margravial couple's monograms accompanied by gilded statues representing the allegories of Justice, Generosity, Providentia, and Wisdom—which were qualities that Margravine Wilhelmine and Margrave Friedrich wanted to associate with their reign in Bayreuth.

Amalienburg: The *petite maison* of Munich

Amalienburg is a small hunting retreat in Munich, commissioned by Elector Karl Albrecht for his wife. François Cuvilliés was the head architect and designer for Amalienburg; he studied architecture in Paris and was known as one of the most talented designers of Rococo ornament in Germany. At Amalienburg, Cuvilliés introduced the *petite maison* ("little house") to southern Germany, which was already a popular architectural type among wealthy French patrons who commissioned these small palaces as luxurious retreats away from the formalities of court society.



François Cuvilliés (lead designer/court architect), Amalienburg (exterior), 1734–1739; Nymphenburg Park, Munich, Germany (photo: Digital Cat, CC BY-SA 4.0)

When compared to the rich complexity and splendor of Amalienburg's gilded and stuccoed interiors, the exterior of this building is rather understated. Painted pale pink and white, Cuvilliés plays with elements of classical architecture—Ionic pilasters (rectangular attached columns) and a broken pediment (here, the triangular form above a doorway which is interrupted —broken—by an arch)—but in true Rococo fashion, they are pure surface ornamentation without any structural function.



François Cuvilliés (lead designer/court architect), Johann Baptist Zimmermann (stuccoist), Johann Joachim Dietrich (woodcarver), and Lauro Bigarello (gilder); Hall of Mirrors (Spiegelsaal) of Amalienburg, 1734–1739; Nymphenburg

Park, Munich, Germany (photo: Allie_Caulfield, CC BY 2.0) (Google Street View of the interior)

Johann Baptist Zimmermann's stuccowork inside the Hall of Mirrors at Amalienburg is considered the zenith of Rococo interior ornament and is a highpoint of Amalienburg. Situated at the center of the palace, the Hall of Mirrors is a circular room decorated with pale-blue wood paneling, monumental mirrors and windows, and three-dimensional silver-gilt stuccowork on the walls and ceiling.

Although "mirror-rooms" became a staple feature of palaces after Louis XIV's Baroque-style hall at Versailles, Amalienburg's room is a distinctly Rococo creation. The mirrors at Amalienburg amplify the richly ornamented walls and dissolve architectural forms. The combined effect of the mirrors, windows (which provide views of the gardens), and silver-gilt ornament of flora and fauna, create endless reflections of the environment, blurring boundaries between nature and man-made forms. Bringing reflections of the outside in unites the rooms' inhabitants with nature.



Amphitrite and Diana (detail), François Cuvilliés (lead designer/court architect), Johann Baptist Zimmermann (stuccoist), Johann Joachim Dietrich (woodcarver), and Lauro Bigarello (gilder); Spiegelsaal of Amalienburg, 1734–1739; Nymphenburg Park, Munich, Germany (photo: Marlise Brown)

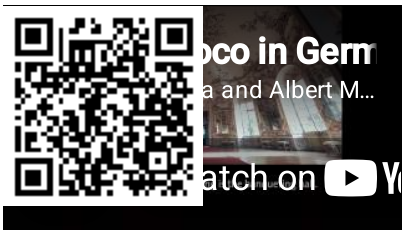
There are no history paintings on the walls, instead, Amalienburg's sculpted ornament becomes the primary focus. Since Amalienburg was a hunting lodge—complete with a rooftop stand for shooting pheasants—much of the interior decoration references hunting, abundant harvests, the four seasons, or untamed nature. In the Hall of Mirrors, artists sculpted asymmetrical C-scrolls, natural springs, cartouches, shell-forms, hunting trophies, musical instruments, trees, and uncultivated vines that seem to grow over the framed mirrors. Above the cornice, there are four groups of sculpted forms from ancient Greco-Roman mythology representing Diana, the goddess of the hunt; Amphitrite, a sea goddess; Pomona, the goddess of fruit; and Ceres, the goddess of agriculture.

Although these asymmetrical patterns, untamed foliage, imaginative shellwork, and sinuous designs appeared in France first, Rococo ornament undoubtedly reached its fullest three-dimensional form in Germany. Woodcarvers, stuccoists, gilders, painters, and other artisans transformed the two-dimensional Rococo designs found in French ornamental prints into three-dimensional sculpted forms in German architecture. By working collaboratively to treat each structure as a coherent decorative whole, the splendor and spectacle of 18th-century German architecture continue to delight and intrigue visitors today.

Amalienburg: Design Details

Rococo interiors are greatly appreciated in the history of interior design as each room was seen as a total work of art, even when they were first completed in the eighteenth century. Though "the whole is greater than the sum of its parts" we must still examine individual design elements in relation to the whole room to understand their spatial, aesthetic, and symbolic significance.

The following video gives a tour of some rooms of the Amalienburg, displaying the overall space as well as detailed enlargements of ornamentation.



"Rococo in Germany" (December 1, 2015) © Victoria & Albert Museum

Compared with Baroque motifs, Rococo designs arguably drew less from classical antiquity and more from the natural world. Nevertheless, the expression of natural motifs in Rococo design can often be aligned to chinoiserie. The Victoria and Albert Museum summarizes: "[Europeans] had long been fascinated by the exotic nature of luxury products, such as porcelain, silk and lacquerware, that had been flowing into Europe from East Asia since the early 16th century. These imports stimulated Rococo designers of the mid-18th century to imitate and adapt oriental motifs and ornaments for a wide variety of objects. They didn't distinguish between what was Chinese, Japanese or Indian, but combined motifs to create an exotic fantasy world" ("Chinoiserie - an introduction"). A significant repository for European decorative arts, the Victoria and Albert Museum holds many examples of Chinoiserie in its collection, including a panel of thirty-six tiles very similar to those adorning the kitchen walls in Amaliënburg.



Amalienburg in the Garden of Nymphenburg Palace in Munich: kitchen. (CC BY-SA 3.0; Massimop)

The Victoria and Albert Museum summarizes a description of the "Tile panel, 1710-1750 (made)" from their collection:

Although Delft's factories did not solely specialise in making tiles, often combining tile production with functional wares, they created some of the most lavish 18th-century polychrome tile pictures. Groups of tile panels were used to decorate the walls of European royal residences, such as the Château de Rambouillet, near Paris, built in 1715-30, and Schloss Amaliënburg near Munich, built in 1734-9. Tile panels at Amaliënburg, inlcuding a number in Chinoiserie style, seem to have originally been intended for the Residenz-Schloss in Munich, which suffered an extensive fire in 1729.

This fine panel is similarly notable for its Chinese theme, expressed through the asymmetry of the flowering plant, and the presence of a qilin - a Chinese mythical creature with the head of a dragon, a scaly body, and a lion's tail - upon which the vase is set.



Tile panel, Delft, Netherlands, 1710-50. Tin-glazed earthenware, painted in colours. (© Victoria and Albert Museum, London)

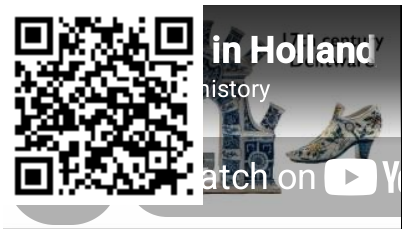
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Asia in Holland, 17th-century Delftware

by Courtney Harris and Dr. Steven Zucker



Adriaen Kocks, proprietor, The Greek A Factory (attributed), one of a pair of tulip vases as triumphal arches, c. 1690–1705, tin-glazed earthenware, 29.5 x 30.5 x 7.6 cm (Museum of Fine Arts, Boston); Lambertus van Eenhoorn, proprietor, De Metaalen Pot Factory (attributed), Tea canister, c. 1695–1720, lacquer imitation black glaze, tin-glazed earthenware, 14 cm high (Museum of Fine Arts, Boston); Jacob Wemmersz Hoppesteijn, proprietor, Het

Moriaenshooft factory (attributed), Miniature shoe, c. 1685, tin-glazed earthenware, polychrome enamel decoration, 10.5 x 18 cm (Museum of Fine Arts, Boston)

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Transcript of "Asia in Holland, 17th century Delftware

Dr. Steven Zucker: [0:11] We're in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, looking at three Delft objects that are completely different from each other and help to give us a sense of why Delft ceramics were so important.

Courtney Harris: [0:17] In the city of Delft, starting from about 1620 onwards, we see this explosion of factories that are all making tin-glazed earthenware, a type of ceramic. At the height in the 1660s and 1670s there were over 30 factories that were constantly innovating to outdo each other and to outdo the Chinese porcelain that they were trying to imitate.

Dr. Zucker: [0:38] When Chinese porcelain was first introduced to Europe by the Portuguese, it was seen as a kind of miracle. The walls could be extremely thin, it was hard, and it had a translucency that was unlike anything that had been seen in Europe.

Courtney: [0:51] Throughout the 16th and 17th centuries you see many factories trying to compete with imported Chinese and, to a lesser extent, Japanese porcelain. You see the Medici in Florence try and fail, and it's not until the early 18th century when a German factory, Meissen, manages to crack the code of porcelain.

[1:09] Delft embraces the fact they couldn't make porcelain and specializes in earthenware, which becomes this domestic product that they excel at. And this constant competition between different factories, they're always one-upping each other and trying to find a new way to innovate new glazes, new techniques, and new forms.

Dr. Zucker: [1:29] Let's look first at this multi-unit vase. This is blue and white, so it traces its origins to China as a visual type, but this is a purely European design.

Courtney: [1:42] The Delft potters were so good at taking inspiration from the Chinese porcelain, particularly in terms of blue and white, and then finding unique and innovative ways to make new forms, to work with their domestic market.

[1:55] This is one of a pair of two vases in the form of a triumphal arch. You can see that it has seven individual holes that would have held single tulip flowers. On one side, you can see that all of the stonework is intact. On the other side, it's in disrepair. The masonry is broken. It's tumbling down.

Dr. Zucker: [2:15] This was a moment where there was an interest in the ruin, and to see it here replicated for a tabletop is spectacular. The next object on this table is a little tea caddy, that is, a vessel that's meant to keep your tea fresh.

Courtney: [2:27] This is a really rare surviving example of something called black Delft. It's a type of ceramic that's made in Delft, but the entire body has been painted with a black enamel glaze. It's fired, and then it's painted again with the colors of the yellow and the green and fired again.

[2:46] This was so technically difficult that only two of the factories in Delft even attempted to make this, and what makes it really special is that it's trying to imitate another luxury good, Japanese lacquer.

[2:59] The Dutch East India Company had thought that Japanese lacquer would be just as popular as Chinese ceramics, but it actually was too expensive. The cost was prohibitive, but a piece like this is trying to imitate that Japanese lacquer with less expensive materials.

Dr. Zucker: [3:14] We see the influence of the East not only in that imitation lacquer, but also in its shape and in its purpose.

Courtney: [3:22] This is a tea caddy or canister. It's a vessel that's made to hold the loose-leaf tea that would have been used to make cups and pots of tea in wealthy households.

Dr. Zucker: [3:31] It's so interesting to see one type of material mimic another, but this is especially successful because the smooth surface of the black lacquer-like glaze is so akin to what lacquer actually looks like when it is finished. It's hard, it's smooth, and it's shiny.

Courtney: [3:47] The period of time when the Delft ceramicists were making this material coincided with an interest in trompe-l'oeil, or this idea of different materials pretending to be other materials.

Dr. Zucker: [3:59] The first object was blue and white, the tea caddy is this luscious black and yellow and green, and then we have this little shoe, which is multicolored.

Courtney: [4:09] This is another great example of how the Delft potters had to innovate. Blue and white was very popular, but there were also porcelain pieces coming from Japan which were made in Imari, and they had lots of different colors, and so they had to find a way to create multiple colors on their own earthenware ceramics at home.

[4:30] It involved a lot of technical experimentation with different glazes. The different metallic oxides need to be identified to create the different colors, and after a number of years of experimentation, a few factories determined that what they actually had to do was fire it at a lower temperature. We have a term for that that comes from the French, "petit feu," "little fire."

[4:51] After all of this experimentation and finding the different oxides, they were able to produce pieces that combined both the white background, the blue that we've come to know, and then you can also see yellow and green and red, and even in a few instances there's some gold, but really a technical feat.

Dr. Zucker: [5:07] What's so interesting to me is that you have this beautiful European-style shoe, but at the same time you have imagery that's clearly coming from China.

Courtney: [5:15] I think you can see so many influences in an object like this. The form is European, the decoration is to some extent Chinese, and you can see that they're trying to create something new from many different influences. Porcelain is an object that moves easily around the world. Ceramics are durable. They're easy to put on a ship and take with you somewhere else, so you see this exchange of ideas within the ceramic-making world.

[5:40] I think that's part of why they are always competing. There's always new things coming from abroad, something that you have to respond to, react to. It's a really fascinating market that begets competition and innovation.

Dr. Zucker: [5:50] Now, the first two objects that we looked at have a clear purpose. One is to hold tulips, another is to hold tea. The shoe is a little bit different. It could have held something, but it seems as if it is just an object that is meant to be admired.

Courtney: [6:03] Decorative arts objects sometimes don't tell us everything, and we yearn to know more. We're not actually sure if it had a purpose. There are some ideas that it might have related to betrothal gifts for women. Another theory suggests that it may just have been for decoration on the table or on a sideboard.

[6:18] All we can know when we look at it is that it's beautiful and that anyone who had it in their home would likely have admired it and prized it.

[0:00] [music]

Different places: Japanese porcelain with English gilt-bronze mounts

by Jeffrey Weaver

A pair of lidded bowls in the J. Paul Getty Museum have had quite an exciting existence. Though they are inanimate, we know much about the bowls' history from research, comparison with similar objects, and visual clues on the works themselves.



One of a pair of lidded and mounted bowls, late seventeenth century. Japanese porcelain and English gilt-bronze mounts, 13 9/16 x 15 x 10 1/16 in. The J. Paul Getty Museum, 85.DI.178.1. Digital image courtesy of the Getty's Open Content Program

The large porcelain bowls and matching lids were most likely produced at a kiln in or around the Japanese town of Arita, on the southern island of Kyushu, between about 1660 and 1680. They would not have been made for the domestic market, but were produced for export to meet the demand at the end of the seventeenth century for blue-and-white porcelain in Southeast Asia, the Near East, and markets as far away as Western Europe and the Americas.

In Japan, this period corresponded with the flourishing of the local porcelain industry during the first century of the Edo Period, which began in 1615. In the Dutch Republic (modern Netherlands), it corresponded with the height of the Golden Age of Dutch painting; Rembrandt died in 1669. In England, it corresponded with the reign of Charles II (1660–1685); the rebuilding of Saint Paul's Cathedral, supervised by Christopher Wren, began in 1675. And, in North America, it corresponded with the establishment of the English crown colonies of New York, New Jersey, and Delaware in 1664, and the founding of Charles Town (modern Charleston) in the Carolina territory.



A similar work of Japanese porcelain at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. It shows how the bowls at the Getty would have appeared when they were made, before being shipped to Europe. Tureen with Landscape, late 1600s, Japanese. Diameter 10 inches. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2002.447.47a,b. Bequest of Dr. and Mrs. Roger G. Gerry, 2000.

A Yearlong Voyage

From Arita, the bowls would have been manually transported to Imari, a nearby port in the north of Kyushu for shipment to Nagasaki, the large harbor on the west coast of the island. At the time, Japan had instituted a policy of national seclusion, and only Chinese or Dutch tradesmen were granted access to the port. There, each had a small trading settlement ("factory") from which they were able to exchange goods. The bowls would have been part of a Chinese or Dutch cargo that was then sailed across the East China Sea, past the northern end of the Philippines, and across the South China Sea to Indonesia, most likely to Batavia (modern Jakarta) or to the nearby former harbor of Bantam, both on the island of Java. It was a journey of about 3,700 miles (5,950 kilometers).

Batavia had been established by the Dutch East India Company (V.O.C.) in 1619 and, by the 1660s, was a busy harbor with traders from all continents. Goods from throughout Southeast Asia were brought there and exchanged for transport to different countries. The bowls would then have been taken by Dutch or English traders on the staggeringly long voyage from Java—across the Indian Ocean, around the southern tip of Africa, up the expanse of the Atlantic Ocean to reach the North Sea via the English Channel, finally ending at either Amsterdam or London. The entire trip halfway around the world from Japan, of about 20,000 miles (32,000 kilometers), would have taken over a year.



Detail of one of the gilt-bronze handles with a greyhound on one of the bowls at the Getty. One of a pair of lidded bowls (detail), late seventeenth century. Japanese porcelain and English gilt-bronze mounts, 13 9/16 x 15 x 10 1/16 in. The J. Paul Getty Museum, 85.DI.178.1. Digital image courtesy of the Getty's Open Content Program

From Exports to Collectors' Treasures

If the bowls were indeed shipped to Amsterdam, they were soon transported the relatively short distance to London. It is in that city that they were most likely transformed into their present appearance with the addition of elaborately designed gilt-bronze mounts. Like Batavia, London was a large and vibrant commercial center with an international community of merchants and craftsmen. The decorative handles in the form of greyhounds are similar in form to works in silver gilt made by a Swiss goldsmith named Wolfgang Howzer who was active in London between about 1660 and 1688. It is possible that the mounts on the bowls were made in Howzer's studio, or by a contemporary metalsmith working in his style, though we don't know for sure.

The addition of the gilt-bronze mounts transformed the relatively simple silhouette of the Japanese lidded bowls into a more complex European profile with a broad foot, elaborate handles, and a decorative finial. The mounts were also meant to highlight the importance of the bowls as items to be treasured and collected. As picturesque objects from the Far East, these porcelains would have been acquired by a wealthy collector and placed on a cabinet, table, or shelf as interior decoration. Such pieces strongly influenced the taste for all things "Chinese" that was a significant aspect of European design for the next century.



A seventeenth-century Dutch painting showing a contemporary interior with Asian porcelain displayed on top of a cabinet. *Family Group in an Interior*, about 1658–60, attributed to Quiringh Gerritsz. van Brekelenkam. Oil on canvas, 22 5/8 x 28 3/8 in. The J. Paul Getty Museum, 70.PA.20. Digital image courtesy of the Getty's Open Content Program

To New York, Paris, and Los Angeles

The bowls' owners and whereabouts from the late 1600s until the mid-1900s are, for now, secrets known only to them. At some point during those 250 or more years, the pair of mounted bowls made their way from England, across the Atlantic, and ended up in the United States in the possession of Joseph Downs, an eminent museum curator and specialist of American decorative arts. They were in his possession at the time of his death in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, in 1954.

Downs was born in Massachusetts in 1895 and began his museum career at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts. Then he was a curator of decorative arts at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, and later at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City, where he became curator of the American Wing. In 1949, he became the curator at Winterthur in Delaware, the premier museum of American decorative arts, where he remained until his death five years later at the age of 59.

We don't know when or where Downs acquired the mounted bowls. He had studied in Europe during the 1920s and was a scholar of European as well as American decorative arts. These bowls and their intriguing history must have appealed to him both aesthetically and professionally. In 1941, he organized the exhibition The China Trade and Its Influences at the Met. In one of his two catalogue essays for that show, *The Chinese Style in Europe*, he wrote, "The fantastic quality of the European chinoiserie is also reflected in the superb furniture sheathed in lacquer or marquetry and the swirling gilt-bronze mounts made for real oriental porcelain."

The mounted bowls passed to William Heer, a friend of Downs's and executor of his estate. Heer died in 1983, and the bowls were then auctioned at Christie, Manson & Woods at 502 Park Avenue in New York City on October 29, 1983. They were acquired at the sale by the French antiques firm Galerie Aveline and sent to their shop in Paris, then at 20 rue du Cirque, just off the exclusive Rue du Faubourg Saint-Honoré and one block from the Elysée Palace.



Pair of lidded and mounted bowls (on display at the J. Paul Getty Museum at the Getty Center in 2012), late seventeenth century. Japanese porcelain and English gilt-bronze mounts, each 13 9/16 x 15 x 10 1/16 in. The J. Paul Getty Museum, 85.DI.178

Two years later, the pair of mounted bowls were presented for acquisition from the Galerie Aveline to the J. Paul Getty Museum by Gillian Wilson, the museum's founding curator of decorative arts. They were purchased and moved back to America to the Getty Museum in Malibu (the current Getty Villa), where they were put on display on the second floor with the rest of the Museum's collection of fine and decorative arts. The mounted bowls remained in Malibu until they were transferred to the new museum at the Getty Center in West Los Angeles in 1997 and installed in one of the galleries devoted to the decorative arts. In 2013, they were temporarily split—one of the pair was included in the focus exhibition The Life of Art: Context, Collecting, and Display, where it remains today.

A Slice of History at Home

The life story of this pair of mounted bowls has particular resonance for me, another curator of decorative arts. A favorite object of mine at home is a small Chinese blue-and-white porcelain bowl and dish that, like the large pair of mounted bowls at the Getty once owned by Joseph Downs, were created in East Asia at end of the seventeenth century and are now—after a rather extraordinary journey—residing in Los Angeles.

My bowl and dish were made at a kiln in southern China around 1690 for the export market. They were included in the cargo of a Chinese ship that sailed from southern China and across the South China Sea before sinking off the coast of Vietnam between about 1690 and 1700, possibly as a result of a fire on board. There the remains of the ship and its cargo sat for 300 years before the wreck was discovered in the 1980s, and the surviving items salvaged in 1991.

The ship, referred to as the Vung Tau cargo, was probably bound for Indonesia, possibly Batavia, where its contents could be acquired by other merchants for transport further afield. It never made it, and of the more than 48,000 pieces of Chinese porcelain that were recovered, 28,000 of these were sent to Amsterdam and auctioned there by Christie's in April 1992. My bowl and dish were subsequently with an English dealer of ceramics from which I acquired them a few years later at the Fine Art and Antiques Fair at Olympia, London.



A Chinese blue-and-white porcelain bowl and dish of about 1690 belonging to Jeffrey Weaver. Bowl: 2 3/8 x 4 9/16 in. Dish: 6 1/16 in. diam. Photo: Jeffrey Weaver

Today the bowl and dish are in a cabinet in my dining room in the Mid-Wilshire neighborhood of L.A. There they sit between a modern Wedgwood sugar bowl I purchased at Peter Jones, a department store in Sloane Square, London, and a creamer, made in 1936 by Taylor, Smith & Taylor in Chester, West Virginia, bought at a consignment store in Palm Springs.

Knowing the history of two sets of objects that intrigue me—one at work, one at home—opens a window into their past and helps me appreciate them all the more. Next time you look at an heirloom you inherited, a piece of art you collected, or any object you encounter in a museum, I hope you'll think of the different places it may have been and the fascinating stories that lie behind it.

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8.4: Historical Revivals

Learning Objectives

- Evaluate the extent to which eighteenth and nineteenth century European historical revivals drew from European and non-European heritage designs.
- Compare and contrast the form and aesthetics as well as social and political motives of historical references in French, British, and American interior design of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.
- Discuss the meaning of "style" as it relates to interior design and decorative arts from the period of the Enlightenment until today.

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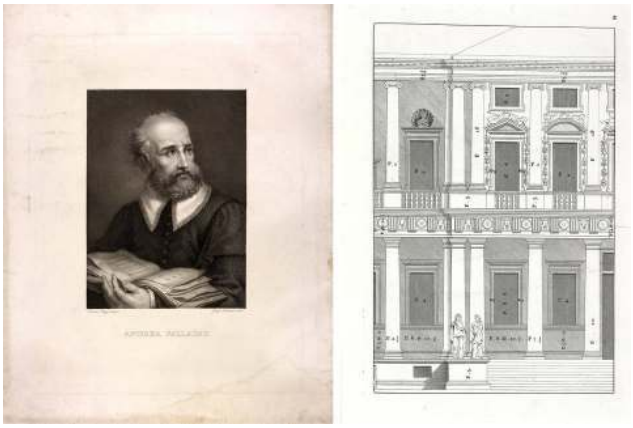
8.4.1: Palladiansim - an introduction

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Last updated: 17 April 2024

Palladianism was an architectural style fashionable in Britain between 1715 and 1760. It was based on the designs of the 16th-century Venetian architect Andrea Palladio (1508 – 80), widely considered to be one of the most influential individuals in the history of architecture. Palladio was inspired by Roman and Greek architecture, primarily by Marcus Vitruvius Pollio (about 80–70 BC – about 15 BC) and his ideas on perfect proportion. In turn, British designers drew on Palladio's work to create a classical British style characterised by plain exteriors based on rules of symmetry, perspective and proportion.

A key means by which Palladio's ideas spread was through his 1570 publication *I quattro libri dell'architettura* (*The Four Books of Architecture*), a treatise on architecture that contained illustrations and descriptions of his own architecture, together with the Roman buildings that he admired.



Left to right: Portrait of Andrea Palladio, print by Vincenzo Raggio and Jacopo Bernardi, before 20th century, Britain. Museum no. S.462-2009. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London; Page from English translation of 'The four books of Andrea Palladio's Architecture', Andrea Palladio, 1738, London. Museum no. 38041800160228. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London

Palladianism first emerged in Britain in the work of the Scottish architect Colen Campbell (1676 – 1729). His book *Vitruvius Britannicus, or The British Architect* (1715) was a catalogue of contemporary British buildings. It featured a design for his pioneering house at Wanstead, Essex, which incorporated all the key Palladian features: a focus on symmetry, proportion and balance, with one side of the building a mirror image of the other; the use of temple fronts (a pediment supported by Corinthian columns or pilasters) and large tripartite Venetian windows. It also featured a rusticated basement – a lower floor which contained masonry blocks with a rough, rustic appearance that contrasted with the smooth finish of the building at a higher level. Above all, the composition relied for its effect on the careful balance between the blank, untextured wall surface and the window openings, giving it a sense of combined grandeur and repose.



Wansted House, plate from Vitruvius Britannicus; or, The British architect, Vol. 1, by Colen Campbell, 1731, London. Museum no. L.4058-1961. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London

It would be another 15 years though before a similar great Palladian house was to be designed in Britain. In that time Palladianism acquired a much more persuasive champion – the architect Richard Boyle, 3rd Earl of Burlington (1694 – 1753).



Portrait of Richard Boyle, 3rd Earl of Burlington, engraved by John Faber, after Sir Godfrey Kneller, 1734, London. Museum no. E.430-1898. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London

Lord Burlington had studied the buildings of Andrea Palladio at first-hand in Italy and had a collection of designs by both him and the 17th century architect, Inigo Jones (1573 – 1652), who was also a keen admirer of Palladio. Burlington was an enthusiastic promoter of Palladianism (he had sponsored the English translation of Palladio's *The Four Books of Architecture*) and from combining Italian and Jonesian sources,

he formed a classically correct style that was uniquely British. It was as applicable to the smallest terraced house as it was to the grandest mansion, setting the pattern for British architecture for the next 100 years. For Burlington's followers, Palladianism also had a special meaning, signalling a link between the virtues and power of ancient Rome and the culture of Italy, and the culture, political systems and power of the burgeoning British nation.

Burlington's own designs were mainly for small buildings, the most characteristic being the extension to his own house at Chiswick in London. Begun in 1725, it was based partly on Palladio's Villa Rotonda at Vicenza, Italy.



Architectural model of Lord Burlington's villa at Chiswick, designed and made by George Rome-Innes, 2001, London. Museum no. E.3838-2004. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London

As with many Palladian buildings, the plain exterior contrasted with its richly decorated interiors. These were not based on Palladio's own designs, but on details taken from ancient Roman buildings that were combined with fireplaces, ceilings and other details taken from Inigo Jones. While the walls of most of the rooms were hung with woven textiles, the central saloon was plastered, painted and decorated with sober sculptural ornament, a pioneering and highly influential concept.



Preliminary design for Lord Burlington's house at Chiswick, from 'The Designs of Inigo Jones Consisting of Plans and Elevations for Publick [sic] and Private Buildings', plate 72, drawn by William Kent, 1727, London. Museum no. 12957:33. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London

The interior of Chiswick House was designed by Burlington's assistant and protégé, William Kent (1685 – 1748), who was also responsible for designing furniture and other items for subsequent Palladian interiors. Again, there were no examples provided by Palladio, so Kent, who was trained as a painter but had a brilliant and poetic imagination in a number of design fields, devised new models derived equally from Italian Baroque examples and ancient Roman sculptural ideas.



Console table for Chiswick House, designed by William Kent, carved by John Boson, about 1727 – 32. England. Museum no. W.14 to :2-1971. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London

Palladian buildings were intimately linked to the gardens that surrounded them. At first, gardens (like those at Lord Burlington's villa at Chiswick), filled with small classical buildings and complicated paths, were designed to recall the gardens described in the great literary works of classical antiquity. As no examples of these ancient gardens survived, the models used were often taken from more recent Italian examples. These gardens, marked by their asymmetry, were in marked contrast to the grand symmetrical gardens of the Baroque period, aligning them instead with a trend towards the natural in British gardening, which began about 1700.



Plan du Jardin & Vue des Maisons de Chiswick, designed and engraved by Jean Rocque, 1736, London. Museum no. E.352-1944. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London

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8.4.2: Georgian Interiors

Robert Adam

Neoclassical Palladianism was already becoming popular in the late eighteenth century when architect Robert Adam (1728 - 92) made his contributions. Nevertheless, "Adam developed a distinctive and highly individual style which was applied to all elements of interior decoration, from ceilings, walls and floors to furniture, silver and ceramics. The 'Adam Style', as it became known, was enormously popular and had a lasting influence on British architecture and interior design" ("Robert Adam: Neoclassical architect and designer").

Designed by Robert Adam and completed in 1768 for Lord Shelburne, the Lansdowne House still stands in Berkeley Square, London, while the dining room was acquired by the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1931 and is still on view as one of their period rooms; the sculptures (all originally authentic ancient marble) are set in niches crowned by Roman arches symmetrically centering a marble chimneypiece. Ceiling ornamentation was carried out in plaster by Joseph Rose while all other carvings (columns, chair rail, door frames, etc.) are painted wood by John Gilbert ("Dining room from Lansdowne House).



Figure 8.4.2.1: Dining room from Lansdowne House, 1766-69, wood, plaster, stone, after a design by Robert Adam (British, Kirkcaldy, Scotland 1728–1792 London) (public domain; Metropolitan Museum of Art)

This dining room is an example of Palladianism that "spread rapidly and was favored by wealthy patrons as an expression of their rank and judgment" (Gontar, 2003). The Metropolitan Museum of Art contextualizes this exhibited room:

> Shelburne was a vocal advocate for American Independence, the one to help negotiate an end to the very war that created the United States of America. This room, constructed steps away from Parliament, was a hive of consequential debate by exalted and controversial thinkers, including the novelist Charles Dickens, poet Thomas Moore, and the radical political philosopher Jeremy Bentham.
>
> If Shelburne wanted to honor liberal and democratic values in this space, the catalyst might lie in the Earl's foreign adventures: what was known as "The Grand Tour." For Britain's elite, studying the art and architecture of southern Europe was considered a social responsibility, a life-changing education. Visiting Rome in particular: there were newly-excavated artifacts from the Roman empire on view that offered a deeper understanding of the classical world and it's democratic philosophy. Travelers returned home with inspiration—and sometimes, actual artifacts!—whether for government, or for how to design and decorate their dining room.

Georgian Interiors

Abridged and adapted from Hannah Greig, Giorgio Riello, Eighteenth-Century Interiors—Redesigning the Georgian: Introduction, *Journal of Design History*, Volume 20, Issue 4, Winter 2007, Pages 273–289, https://doi.org/10.1093/jdh/epm025

One of the most pronounced narratives in eighteenth-century studies is that which identifies the century as witnessing the birth of the modern British 'consumer society'. The multiplication of new products and new markets has been well documented, and the intersections between the things that people owned and the new social and cultural ideals of the period have become mainstream in historical literature [1]. For example, whether as chimney pieces or as portrait busts in libraries, sculpture figured prominently in many Georgian elite interiors, as evidenced in the dining room from the Lansdowne house designed by Robert Adam (1766-69), above. Reproduced as multiples on a smaller scale in relatively inexpensive materials, such objects were newly available to a wider market for personal consumption and display in the home.

In a broad historiographical context, the eighteenth century has long been highlighted as a time of profound economic, social and political change in Britain. Often approached as the 'long' eighteenth century, spanning the period from the Glorious Revolution in 1688/9 to the Reform Act in 1832, the changes routinely cited by historians include (in no particular order) the following: the engineered succession of a new royal dynasty; the creation of new financial institutions; the development of new political practices and ideologies; the discovery of new worlds and immensely profitable trade routes; the rise of commercial leisure; urban growth and an urban 'renaissance'; the development of a 'public sphere' of political awareness;

revisions to the social order which, in theory at least, promoted social criteria over inherited rank, and a 'consumer revolution' in which a new diversity of goods were available to a much more diverse section of the population. It is argued that such changes affected Britain (and specifically England) more than any other part of Europe. The country was transformed from a rather undeveloped nation to the heart of a new late-eighteenth-century European industrial world with material conditions and cultural vitality unimaginable just a century earlier. Moreover, the eighteenth century has been singled out as a distinct and central period in the history of British design, one in which—it has been suggested—the Georgian style was minted, a style that has come to predominate within our heritage industry, carefully protected and presented to the public as an exemplar of a specific stylistic moment.

Yet, significantly, the concept of a Georgian Interior is something of a misnomer. Royal reigns may prove a convenient labeling device but, unsurprisingly, monarchical births and deaths do not necessarily denote major stylistic developments. In what might be regarded as a successful branding exercise, architectural historians of the 1920s, such as Roger Fry and Francis Yerbury and, in the 1940s, John Summerson, used 'Georgian' as a shorthand for a particular architectural and design moment. 'Georgian' in this context was claimed as a neoclassical architectural tradition that was associated with clean lines and cohesive interior and exterior schemes, a stylistic precursor to modernism. The enthusiasm for this stylistic labeling was, for example, expressed particularly in the neo-Georgian Revival in the 1980s, in which revisions to domestic architecture was included amidst a broad fashion movement that adopted elements categorized as Georgian (Robinson).

In 1904, visitors to the Louisiana Purchase Exhibition (a trade fair held in St Louis, USA) found, situated amidst a set of period rooms, a Georgian interior, one constructed to represent eighteenth-century 'British' style. The formula used by the 1904 exhibition to reconstruct a Georgian interior is one that has proved remarkably resilient, reiterated in many studies of eighteenth-century design and the decorative arts. Not least, it is a formulation that has much in common with the traditions of conservation and presentation in heritage and museum contexts. In such settings, Georgian is usually taken as a stylistic shorthand for the classical Palladianism of mid- to late-eighteenth-century elite properties. As the illustrated guidebook explained:

> *[T]he Georgian dining room [is] filled with genuine Chippendale mahogany. The clock is especially worthy of note, being more than 300 years old. The Adams room beyond is an English tea room and its furnishings are in satin wood of the celebrated Sheraton make [2].[3]*

In this context, the Georgian interior was made recognizable by a simple register of components: first, feted craftsmen and designers (Chippendale, the Adam brothers and Sheraton); second, particular categories of materials and objects (magnificent woods, the furniture crafted by 'celebrated' makers and a clock—notably one older than the interior in which it was displayed); third, the suggestion of precise forms of social behaviour (dining and taking tea); fourth, the conflation of English style with Britain; fifth, the implication that Georgian style meant expensive goods developed for an elite market, and, finally, a concern with authenticity. This Georgian interior was presented as a 'genuine', realizable interior—an interior applauded as the zenith of British style, a legacy constructed in the late-eighteenth century by an exclusive group of design heroes.


'The Georgian Room', Royal Commission, St Louis International Exhibition 1904: The British Section compiled by Sir Isidore Speilmann (London, 1906) British Library, 7957.h.12 (c) British Library Board. All Rights Reserved.

Figure 8.4.2.2: 'The Georgian Room', *Royal Commission, St Louis International Exhibition 1904: The British Section* compiled by Sir Isidore Speilmann (London, 1906) British Library, 7957.h.12 (c) British Library Board. All Rights Reserved.

Chippendale's *Director*

To promote his furniture business, in 1754 Thomas Chippendale published *The Gentleman and Cabinet-Maker's Director*, a unique volume that included designs for all kinds of furniture needed by any household and with a variety of style options popular at the time.. Though there are many instances of furniture being realized in line with Chippendale's designs in the *Director*, furniture that went on to be associated with his name is not exclusive to his own designs. In fact, Chippendale encouraged fellow cabinetmakers to improve upon and adapt his designs. "In print, Chippendale's designs spread throughout the British empire, following the routes of the expanding maritime trade and colonization in North America and the Caribbean. Through the widespread adoption of the designs and aesthetic found in the three editions of the *Director*, Chippendale quickly became a hallmark for quality British and American furniture, and eventually synonymous with the furniture style of the period at large" (Speelberg, 2018).



Figure 8.4.2.3: English chair, c.1755-70, carved mahogany, after a design by Thomas Chippendale. (© Victoria and Albert Museum, London)

Designer and historian Galen Cranz (1998) asserts that "One thing is certain: our chair habit was created, modified and nurtured, reformed and democratized in response to social -- not genetic, anatomical, or even physiological -- forces" and goes on to paraphrase architectural historian Vincent Scully: "In fact, chairs were used to denote status from the 1700s through the nineteenth century in North America" (pp. 30 & 44). Cranz is writing from a late-twentieth-century American perspective but recognizes the cultural heritage of chairs as originating in historic Europe. "The eighteenth century is widely viewed as an apex in chair history because of the new attention paid to comfort and artistic unity . . . Even at the height of the Rococo period, with its flowing asymmetrical forms, furniture was still placed symmetrically. What was important was matching decor, not matching the human body. Sofas and chairs were richly upholstered in fabrics that matched, or at least blended with, the hangings in the room. The upholstery was the most expensive and prized part of the seating" (Cranz 1998, pp. 42-43). The Victoria and Albert Museum collection includes a set of six side chairs constructed between 1755-1770 with the most copied design from Chippendale's *Director* (above). The side chairs are made of mahogany with an upholstered seat, and Chippendale's notes to the plate indicate that the fabric used to cover the chair should match that of the window curtains of the room, signifying a continuation from Rococo interior design principles ("Chair, ca. 1755-1770 (made)").

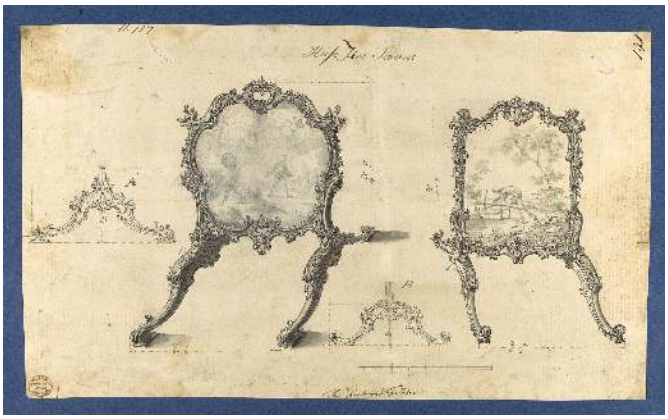


Figure 8.4.2.4: Fire Screens, in Chippendale Drawings, Vol. I. 1754 (Public Domain; Metropolitan Museum of Art)

Thus, the distinction between Georgian (or other neoclassical) and design previous -- such as Rococo or Baroque -- is implied to lie within decorative style. *The Director* outlined three styles fashionable in them mid-eighteenth century: "Gothic," "Chinese" and "Modern." "Modern" style made reference to French Rococo, as this was the (relatively) modern fashion in the early to mid-eighteenth century. At the time, popular opinion held that French arts were superior to others, even domestic British arts (see 10.1: Rococo Interiors).

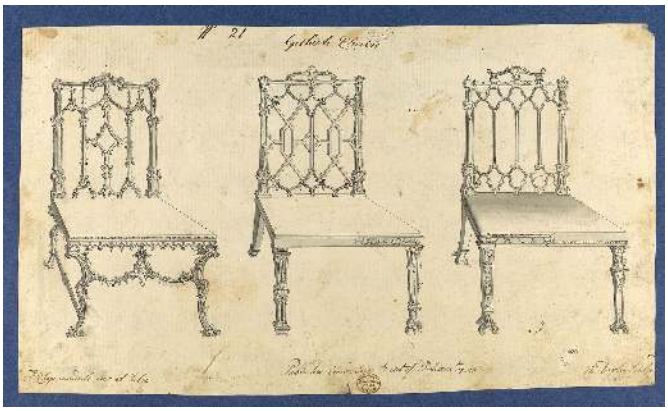


Figure 8.4.2.5: Gothick [Gothic] Chairs, in Chippendale Drawings, Vol. I. 1753 (Public Domain; Metropolitan Museum of Art)

"Gothic" style provided a contrast, making reference to architectural ornamentation used in Gothic cathedrals of the middle ages, less so with reference to actual medieval furniture (see Chapter 4.2: Furniture in the European Middle Ages). This style was received as particularly patriotic to the British public, as the Gothic period was a height for British architecture (even though Gothic architecture has its origins in France).



Figure \(\
PageIndex
{6}\):

China Case, from Chippendale Drawings, Vol. II. 1753. (Public Domain,
Metropolitan Museum of Art
)

"Chinese" style was a form of chinoiserie and drew from a variety of Asian motifs, not exclusive to those from China.

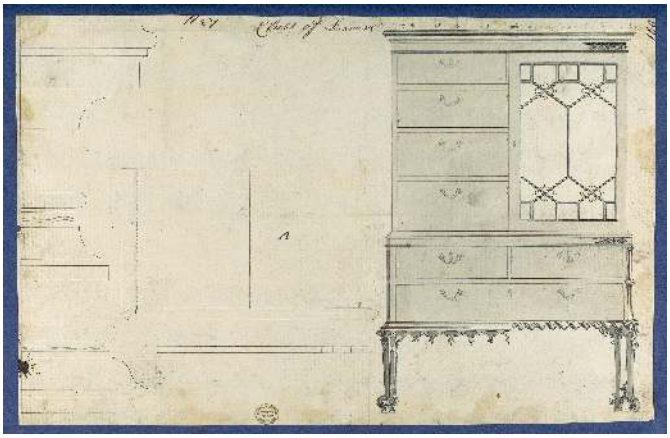


Figure 8.4.2.7: Chest of Drawers, from Chippendale Drawings, Vol. II. 1753. (Public Domain; Metropolitan Museum of Art)

Frequently, variations of design ornamentation would be included on one plate, underscoring the separation of decoration from a core structural design that was still based on neoclassical principles that dominated design during this time. The title page of Chippendale's *Director* includes citations from the classical texts of Homer and Ovid and continues on with an introduction outlining the proportions of the five classical architectural orders, a basis for the furniture designs that follow it, regardless of style.

Notes

1. There exists a prolific range of decorative arts studies of particular categories of goods. Recent publications examining silverware include P. Glanville & H. Young (eds.), *Elegant Eating: 400 Years of Dining in Style*, V&A Publications, London, 2002; W. Guthrie, *Dundee Silver 1750–1850*, Dundee, 1994; J. Lomax, *British Silver at Temple Newsam House and Lotherton Hall: A Catalogue of the Leeds Collection*, Maney, Leeds, 1992; broad survey texts, such as P. Glanville, *Silver in England*, Unwin Hyman, London, 1986, covered the history of materials and products across more than a century. A recent important contribution which combines decorative arts studies with a business and social history is H. Clifford, *Silver in London: The Parker and Wakelin Partnership, 1760–76*, Yale University Press, London, 2004. Other categories of goods are covered in publications such as G. W. Beard, *Upholsterers and Interior Furnishings in England 1530–1840*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1997; C. Gilbert, *A Pictorial Dictionary of Marked London Furniture 1700–1840*, Furniture History Society, London, 1996; A. Coleridge, *Chippendale Furniture: The Work of Thomas Chippendale and His Contemporaries in the Rococo Taste, c. 1745–65*, Faber, London, 1968. Texts celebrating the achievements of particular architects include E. Harris, *The Genius of Robert Adam: His Interiors*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 2001. The classic survey of visual sources is P. Thornton, *Authentic Décor: The Domestic Interior 1620–1920*, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, London, 1984; C. S. Smith, *Eighteenth-Century Decoration. Design and the Domestic Interior in England*, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, New York, 1993, was initially classed as a ‘sourcebook’ even though he was pioneering a reinterpretation seeking to complicate the narratives and to position visual representations of the interior in a broader social and cultural history. It was only later published as a standard monograph, alas with few of the original images. See C. S. Smith, *The Rise of Design: Design and the Domestic Interior in Eighteenth-Century England*, Pimlico, London, 2000.
2. The conference was generously supported with grants from by the British Academy and the Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art.
3. This extract is included in the ‘Domestic Interiors Database’, available on www.rca.ac.uk/csdi (ID code: RP153).

Anonymous, *The Greatest Expositions: Completely Illustrated Official Views of the Louisana Purchase Exhibition* (1904), p. 24. The emphasis is ours

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8.4.3: Empire Style

Abridged and adapted from "Sèvres Porcelain and the Articulation of Imperial Identity in Napoleonic France"(22 September 2007) by Steven Adams in *Journal of Design History*, Volume 20, Issue 3, Autumn 2007, Pages 183–204 with additions by Michelle Ray

The Sèvres factory was a site of constant innovation and became the first European factory to produce hard-paste porcelain that more closely approximated east Asian porcelain imports. From its inception in 1756 during the reign of Louis XV, the Sèvres porcelain manufactory made elaborate, highly decorated dinner services for the exclusive use of the French royal court. The objects used by the king were seen as extensions of his body and the act of decorating them became a means of royal veneration. While the French Revolution saw the decline of the manufacture, Napoléon recognized the enormous political value of Sèvres porcelain. Imperial power, however, was predicated not on the divinity of the Emperor, but on the clear demonstration of the material and cultural benefits brought about by his administration. This shift in the nature of executive power prompted a change in the design and decoration of Sèvres porcelain. Rococo decoration found in *ancien régime* porcelain was abandoned in favor of a highly didactic imagery that charted the triumphs and benefits of Napoleon's regime, begetting the Empire style.



Figure 8.4.3.1: Pair of vases, 1789, hard-paste porcelain; gilt bronze, marble, Height (each): 9 1/16 in. (23 cm), Sèvres Manufactory (public domain, Metropolitan Museum of Art)

The European Sculpture and Decorative Arts collection at the Metropolitan Museum of Art exhibits examples of Sèvres porcelain from all periods of manufacture. The description of a pair of vases outlines the significance of Rococo decoration found in *ancien régime* porcelain:

> Made in 1789, on the eve of the French Revolution, this pair of vases reflects the superb quality and luxuriousness achieved by the Royal Porcelain Manufactory at Sèvres at the peak of its production. The vases were made to be purely decorative, and their diminutive scale was especially well suited to the intimate interiors that were in vogue in late eighteenth century France. They are painted with delicate scrolls that incorporate vegetal motifs, cornucopias, and birds' heads. This type of decoration, known as the arabesque style, was very much in fashion in the 1780s not only throughout the decorative arts but also in interior decoration. On these vases the scrolling motifs surround panels painted to resemble prints depicting a male river god and a woman in classical dress. The richness of the decoration is enhanced by the two colors of marble employed for the base and by the finely worked coiling snakes that form the handles. -- The Metropolitan Museum of Art

The elaborate design of Sèvres porcelain, its opulent use of decoration, color and gilding, the high technical standards of its production and its use of subjects from classical literature had both a political and an economic significance. Sèvres porcelain showed France as a cultured nation with a highly accomplished workforce and its elaborate decoration functioned as a statement about the power, wealth and aesthetic discrimination of the court.4 The objects used by the king, as Leora Auslander has noted, were understood as metaphorical extensions of the king's body and their decoration became an act of royal veneration.5 Furthermore, the various members of the royal household, the court and other dignitaries who commissioned elaborate services were said to have made a significant contribution to the French economy.6 For the marquise de Pompadour, the commission of very large quantities of porcelain from the Sèvres factory was, as Mimi Hellman has observed, seen as an act of patriotism.7 Such commissions were also said to encourage the development of the arts and brought foreign currency into the French economy. This imperative to generate foreign income was driven in part by the mercantilist belief that the amount of wealth in circulation was static and that the production and consumption of luxury goods in France bolstered its economy in direct proportion to the extent in which it enfeebled those of its European competitors.

The significance of decorative form at the Sèvres factory can be measured in a number of ways. It is evident in the way in which pre-classical, classical and Hellenistic pottery, known generically as Etruscan art, provided one style in a much larger repertoire of decorative forms for Sèvres' artists to use. The acquisition of Dominique Vivant-Denon's large collection of Etruscan pottery by the comte d'Angiviller for use as a study

collection at Sèvres in 1783 was seen to provide the factory's artists with what the comte described as ‘charming ideas for decoration’.10 The function of decorative form was further evident in the way in which a very wide range of paintings, drawings and engravings of allegorical and religious subjects, landscapes, animals and flowers were bought for the artists at Sèvres to adapt as decorative motifs. Many of these motifs were used with little systematic discrimination. Landscape imagery was common, however, the scenes used to decorate porcelain were generally based on idealized pastoral views or Chinese-inspired motifs taken from engravings, rather than depictions of specific locations. When, in a few instances, specific locations were used to decorate porcelain, they were typically picturesque adaptations of views from the Italian grand tour and, again, seem to have had no overtly didactic or political purpose.14

In some respects, there are clear similarities between the design, production and use of Sèvres porcelain services during the *ancien régime* and Empire. There are, however, significant differences between the design and decoration of services made during the *ancien régime* and those made during the Empire. Many of the artefacts in the *Service de l'Empereur* were based not on stylistic adaptations of the sort found in the 1789 pair of vases, but precise copies of Etruscan artifacts.33 The Etruscan-inspired forms used in the design of the *Service de l'Empereur*, for example, were exact copies of originals in the factory's collection and were informed by an acute historical consciousness about the standing of France in relation to the classical world, a consciousness largely absent from discussions about decorative form during the *ancien régime*. The *surtout* (table setting) for the *Service de l'Empereur* was modeled on specific sculptures taken as war booty during Napoléon's campaigns abroad and was designed to be set out in a specific combination with the Service's other components.

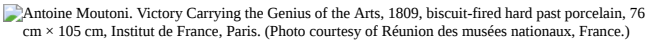

Antoine Moutoni. Victory Carrying the Genius of the Arts, 1809, biscuit-fired hard past porcelain, 76 cm × 105 cm, Institut de France, Paris. (Photo courtesy of Réunion des musées nationaux, France.)

Figure 8.4.3.1: Antoine Moutoni. *Victory Carrying the Genius of the Arts*, 1809, biscuit-fired hard past porcelain, 76 cm × 105 cm, Institut de France, Paris. (Photo courtesy of Réunion des musées nationaux, France.)

Similarly, the *Service Eqyptienne* of 1811 reveals much about the political events of the Consulate and Empire. It comprised a seventeen-piece *surtout* modelled on ancient Egyptian monuments and was designed to be displayed with plates decorated with landscapes taken from the Denon's drawings made during the Egyptian campaign.19



Figure 8.4.3.2: A plate of the second Sèvres Egyptian Service, depicting the Colossi of Memnon, 1810-1812, photo: Osama Shukir Muhammed Amin FRCP(Glasg)(CC BY-SA 4.0, Wikimedia Commons)

In the same way that royal power was embodied within the decorative form of *ancien régime* porcelain, so Imperial power was articulated, at least in part, in the historical forms taken in Empire ceramics. The eleven services commissioned by Napoléon, like those commissioned by Louis XVI and his court, were elaborate, technically sophisticated, expensive and seen as demonstrations of Consular and Imperial power. The Sèvres factory languished during the French Revolution and Lucien Bonaparte's attempt to revive it in May 1800 was prompted by a renewed awareness both of its economic potential and its value as a tool of propaganda.18 Writing to the minister of the interior in 1800, Aléxandre Brongniart spoke of an attempt to purge the factory of an outdated rococo aesthetic and to replace it with ‘renewed’ forms made after precise copies of Hellenistic originals.35 Described as ‘gothic’—a pejorative term denoting the elaborate shape and extravagant decoration of Sèvres porcelain made during the *ancien régime*—the rococo style was closely associated with the ‘corrupt’ tastes, and by extension the corrupt politics of the monarchy.36 Other forms of decorative arts such as furniture also saw great changes in form and ornamentation. Gontar (2004) notes that "Neoclassical and Egyptian images enlivened Empire objects of every description . . . fitted with brass and ormolu figurines drawn from myth and history, Empire furniture was largely austere and geometric." This "austerity" was relative, of course. Munger's (2004) description of Sèvres ceramics of the period can be carried over more broadly to furniture, as "Empire taste favored extensive gilding, rich border designs, and elaborate figural scenes." The Metropolitan Museum of Art pairs an Empire commode with a breakfast service that exhibits these similarities.





Figure 8.4.3.3: Left: Cabinet (commode à vantaux), François-Honoré-Georges Jacob-Desmalter, Oak, thuya wood veneer; gilt-bronze mounts; marble top, ca. 1813–25 (public domain, Metropolitan Museum of Art); Right: Breakfast Service (déjeuner), Sèvres Manufactory, 1813 (public domain, Metropolitan Museum of Art)

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"Pair of Vases." *Metropolitan Museum of Art*, (n.d.), https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collec.../search/236178, 23 March 2026.

Munger, Jeffrey. “Sèvres Porcelain in the Nineteenth Century.” In Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History. New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000–. http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/sevr/hd_sevr.htm (October 2004)

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8.4.4: Victorian Interiors

British Nationalism: Collecting French Furniture in the Nineteenth Century

Adapted from "Chapter 7: Appropriation as a Form of Nationalism? Collecting French Furniture in the Nineteenth Century" in *Art Crossing Borders* by Adriana Turpin and "Chapter 11: Victorian into Modern- Exploring the Boundaries between Mind and World" in *American Encounters: Art, History, and Cultural Identity* by Angela L Miller, Janet Catherine Berlo, Bryan J Wolf, and Jennifer L Roberts

During the “long” nineteenth century, at a time when Britain reached its greatest economic and political power, the taste for the furnishing and decoration of the houses of the aristocrats and *nouveaux riches* was resolutely French. Moreover, it was the France of the eighteenth century that was recaptured in the boudoirs, drawing and reception rooms of the great London mansions and country residences. The history of this phenomenon can be traced back to the late eighteenth century, when British and Irish aristocrats traveled to France to acquire firstly contemporary and then antique works of art. The period ends with the advent of the Great War and the demise of the great London and country houses. By this time, as J. Mordaunt Crook in *The Rise of the Nouveaux Riches* describes, central London, Mayfair, Park Lane and Piccadilly were filled with the houses of the newly rich; he gives a breathless account of an astonishing number of houses furnished in the eighteenth-century style, often by French architects and designers or architects of French origin.[1] Although the style was clearly associated with ostentation and wealth, acquiring or collecting French furniture also appealed to the connoisseur, who could admire the quality and superb craftsmanship of the works of art collected. In addition to the well-known and very rich collectors, eighteenth-century French furniture and porcelains were acquired at all levels of British society, as can be seen in the quantity of French furniture in nineteenth-century sale catalogs of ‘a gentleman’ or a ‘householder.’[2] During the nineteenth century for the first time there was a market for old or antique furniture and porcelains. This may, at the outset, largely have been the result of the driving opportunism of French and British dealers resulting from sales during and after the Revolution in France. It became a national phenomenon as the ‘old French style’—as it was often called—grew into an accepted form of decoration and furnishing of the drawing rooms of Britain. The market for French works of art (or copies thereof) remained strong well into the twentieth century.

The concept of nationhood, national identity, Britain’s role as a colonial empire and the manifestation of this identity were all areas of intense debate and scrutiny during the nineteenth century. A key construct in the formation of national identity is the argument that Benedict Anderson has discussed in *Imagined Communities*, namely that the idea of nationhood grows out of the creation of communal entities.[3] Although he is referring to the contemporary emergence of new nations, his analysis can be applied to the historic emergence of the nation during the nineteenth century and developed to demonstrate that the appropriation of a French decorative style was part of the developing consciousness of the nation. In this context it can be argued that acquiring and displaying French works of art moved from the prerogative of aristocratic elites to an acceptable demonstration of British wealth and national pride. As this essay demonstrates, adopting the French alternative had a significant and widespread appeal to the wealthy and indeed the not-so-wealthy. This is all the more significant as there were two other historicist revivals taking place in Britain at the same time: the Gothic revival, championed as the historical national style, and that of the Italian Renaissance. Much admired for its associations with humanism and the individual, Renaissance art was collected by those who often described themselves as the heirs of the Medici and other great mercantile princes. In contrast to the Italian Renaissance, the market for French decorative arts was to be found in the aristocratic origins of this taste. Thus a major factor in its acceptance was its international nature, connecting figures not only in France and England, but also in Germany, Italy and indeed throughout most of Europe. It is also important to note that the revival of the French eighteenth century was not confined to Britain, but was part of an aristocratic style found all over Europe. In Germany many palaces were decorated in a revived rococo style, particularly those created for Emperor Ludwig II (1845–86). At Linderhoff (1869–78) the interiors drew on the rococo decorations of the Munich Residenz of Nymphenburg as much as on French design; at Herrenschiemsee Palace (1878, and still uncompleted in 1886) Ludwig created a new Versailles.[4]

The motives for importing French taste into Britain can be examined fruitfully as part of a transnational and international phenomenon. While the English admiration for French things rarely progressed to an appreciation for French painting, which remained under constant attack, imitating French interiors of the previous centuries was enormously in vogue: this arguably was not seen as “French” per se, but as a demonstration of wealth, taste and a reflection of the owner’s position in society. The grandeur of the late nineteenth-century houses became a mark of the new wealth and prosperity of the country, and in this way they contributed to the national identity. Part of the context in which French works of art were collected and sold was thus the overall taste for the French style in decoration and architecture.

Collecting French furniture from the eighteenth century was thus one of the several historicist movements that drew on the past to provide inspiration for the contemporary,[5] but one with particular resonance and on a far larger scale, as the thousands

of goods available created the perfect scenario for the English market, in which a burgeoning demand was fed and then multiplied by a plentiful supply.

The description below of one of the most important and most expensive pieces of French furniture brings together the various selling points emphasized to attract the wealthy buyer:

> A magnificent cabinet of mahogany elegantly disposed in three panels or compartments, opens by folding doors, surmounted by a mask of Apollo, and a frieze of foliage. In the centre panel is suspended the lyre of Apollo between two wreaths of olive, resting upon a torch which springs from the centre of two branches with Arabesque scrolls connected by festoons […] The arms of a branch of the royal family of France and a group of Cupids of or-molu surmount this splendid piece of furniture (a chef d'œuvre of the ingenious Riesner) […] and formerly belonged to the Palace of Versailles where it was sold by the commissioners of the French Convention in an early period of the Republic.[6]


Figure 7.2

Figure 8.4.4.1: Jean-Henri Riesener, *Jewel cabinet made for the Comtesse de Provence*, 1774. Mahogany veneer with gilt-bronze mounts, 246 × 147 × 54.6 cm. Windsor, Royal Collection Trust © Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II 2018

Even taking into account the hyperbole of the auction houses, the language of the sale catalogs emphasized the status of French furniture as a collectable commodity and it is clear that what was being sold was status. 'A matchless Louis XIV Boule table,' 'a superb Parisian commode,' 'a noble and lofty armoire:' these were the terms in which this furniture was described.

The collecting of French furnishing was not, however, just confined to the aristocracy or the opulent millionaires, who, as will be seen, decorated their London houses with choice specimens of French furniture. There was a steady and increasing market for French furniture at every level. The Foster auction catalogs held at the Victoria and Albert Museum show that in the biweekly sales held in their auction rooms in Greek Street, Soho, furniture in the "old French" style abounded. As with the more important sales, furniture by Boulle and Riesener was marked out for mention. Generally called 'Buhl,' it was often not specified whether the object was authentic or an imitation of French work; the prices could be as low as 11*s* or as high as several pounds. Those items described as Louis XIV, such as, for example, 'A Louis XIV Marqueterie commode of 4 drawers, with swept front, massively mounted, with or-molu handles, corners & feet and Italian marble slab' was sold for four times that price. Thus the above lot sold at Fosters in 1845 fetched £5 17*s*.[7] This is one indication amongst many that the auctioneers could differentiate between the old and the modern, but both were desirable.

The admirers of original French works of art might cite the great skill, ingenuity and beauty of the originals to defend furnishing their houses and collecting such pieces. However, this admiration needs to be set in the context of a long tradition of distaste and distinct antipathy from British critics often couched in nationalistic terms: the decadence of French art was contrasted with the pure, simple style associated with England.

In spite of the condemnation from critics, the French style was found in the drawing rooms of both town and country houses. Hermann von Pückler-Muskau, writing in 1831, offered one very plausible reason for the success of the French style in Britain, namely that it was 'very consistent in a country where the nobility grows more and more like that of the time of Louis the Fourteenth.'[8] One motive would seem to be that British aristocrats adopted the French style as appropriate to their new status as victors of the Napoleonic Wars, and thus that they were the inheritors of the grandeur of eighteenth-century France. By the 1820s George IV, the creator of Windsor, could be said to have absorbed and taken over French decoration—despite having been an ardent supporter of the early stages of the Revolution as a young man—installing it within the Gothic exterior of the castle, thus making it "English."


Figure 7.3

Figure 8.4.4.2: Joseph Nash, *Windsor Castle: the angle of the grand corridor, showing Boulle furniture and a clock by Charles Cressent*, 1846. Watercolour and bodycolour over pencil, 33 × 41.5 cm. Windsor, Royal Collection Trust © Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II 2018

However, aristocrats with very different political views—such as the Devonshires and other Liberals—could also espouse this style in order to display the benefits of British prosperity, the results of industry and trade. Thus the ostentation implicit in the style became a virtue; the change from previous criticism was that now the French style was seen as combining skill and excellence of craftsmanship, and thus, in its original form, it could be admired. This may be one reason why late nineteenth-century fashion concerned itself with the much closer imitation of the eighteenth century rather than the early years of the century.

For Ferdinand de Rothschild, as for George IV, the eighteenth century in France was the period when the arts reached their peak. The names of André Charles Boulle and Riesener brought the English collector directly into the salons and elegant society of the eighteenth century, and for many French luxury goods represented the highest quality. Ferdinand de Rothschild described the French Revolution as bringing to England 'the priceless and countless works of art, the heirlooms of centuries.' Moreover, for him, through this 'dissemination of ancient and foreign works of art […] the multitude have been made conversant of their beauty and usefulness, that has opened out a

new vista of refinement and industry.'[9] As a result England had become the centre of this market.

In 1886 T.H. Escott, writing under the guise of a foreign visitor to England, commented:

> British cosmopolitanism shows itself in its rapid assimilation of the social ideas of other countries and in its heroic struggle to rise superior to the hampering restrictions of insular respectability. True it still possesses its own excellent common sense, but even this immense virtue is beguiled by the desire of those who possess it to prove that they are without its prejudices. London society is thus a society in a state of solution.[10]

One of the hallmarks of the nineteenth-century drawing room, the mixing of different types of decoration and time periods in a single space, became an example not just of wealth but also of the quality of British society. Disraeli's somewhat mocking tone in *Henrietta Temple* reflects the mixed appreciation of this historical medley: 'and then they were ushered into a drawing room of Parisian elegance: buhl cabinets, marqueterie tables, hangings of the choicest damask suspended from burnished cornices of old carving. The chairs had been rifled from a Venetian palace; the couches were part of the spoils of the French revolution.'[11] Disraeli's fictional drawing room could be found in many of the houses described in this essay: few collections were as concentrated on French works of art as those of George IV, the Marquess of Hertford or Ferdinand Rothschild. More typical, as has been discussed above, collections reflected an eclectic mixture of furnishings from myriad dates and countries, and this was increasingly the taste in the bulk of the nineteenth century into the twentieth century, known as the Victorian period. In its narrowest definition, the term "Victorian" refers to anything occurring during the reign of Queen Victoria in the United Kingdom (1837-1901). But it has come to denote any one of a series of cultural, artistic, and social qualities that characterized middle-class society in the anglophone world of Britain and the United States. The Victorian is often positioned as the cultural order of extravagance and eclecticism against which modernists rebelled in the early twentieth century.

It is by drawing on the discussions about cosmopolitanism that the resolution of the appropriation of a foreign style to formulate a British identity can be addressed. Furthermore, cosmopolitanism could be linked to Britain's destiny and importance. Thus in the discussion which surrounded the Great Exhibition, for example, abundant use could be made of Kant's rhetoric of world peace, turning it to argue that Britain, with its industrial supremacy, would lead the world towards its egalitarian destiny—not least by aligning its territories with the progressive trajectory of European civilization. 'What is more natural than that the first exhibition of the Works of Industry of *all* Nations should take place among a people which beyond every other in the world is composed of *all* nations' was only one of many such statements of pride in the wealth and cosmopolitanism of the nation.[12] It is in this sense of cosmopolitanism that the collection of the Ancien Régime may be most closely associated. For the owners of these mansions, the mixture of antiques from international sources reflected cosmopolitanism as an expression of pride and national supremacy. The drawing rooms of the English could thus demonstrate the power of the British nation to own works of art from all countries, united under one roof. Whatever one's means, cosmopolitanism created the final stage in British perception of the revived French style, placing taste, wealth and national pride on display in the drawing room.

Figure 7.4

Figure 8.4.4.3: Anon., *The Drawing Room, Wimborne House, 22 Arlington St., Mayfair, formerly Hamilton House and bought from the Dukes of Hamilton in 1870 by Sir Ivor Bertie Guest, ironworks owner*, 1902. London, Country Life Picture Library © Country Life Picture Library

Footnotes

1. Joseph Mordaunt Crook, *The Rise of the Nouveaux Riches: Style and Status in Victorian and Edwardian Architecture* (London: John Murray, 1999), 153–212.
2. For the purpose of this essay, in addition to sale catalogues from Christie's, Manson & Woods, the author searched more than 100 catalogues produced by the auction company Foster and Sons between 1826 and 1850, held at the National Art Library in the Victoria & Albert Museum. These cover sales held weekly at the auction rooms at 54 Pall Mall of the contents of what appear to be mid-level households. The question of who we could consider "middle class" is complicated, but as the catalogues show, French furniture appears in a wide variety of sales throughout the century. I would like in particular to thank Eunmin Lim, who transcribed many of these auction catalogues, and Preston Fitzgerald, for his assistance in researching the catalogues in Christie's archives.
3. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983).
4. Ken Ireland, *Cythera Regained: The Rococo Revival in European Literature and the Arts, 1830–1910* (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2006), 139–41. Discussions as to the relevance of the eighteenth century to nineteenth-century identity and taste were as intense on the Continent as in Britain. Discussion on the style as a matter of historic precedents include: Gotfried Semper, *Der Stil in den technischen und tektonischen Künsten*, vol. 2 (Munich: F. Bruckmann, 1860), 350; Anton Springer, "Der Rococostil," in *Id., Bilder aus der neueren Kunstgeschichte*, vol. 2 (Bonn: A. Marcus, 1867), 213; Peter Jessen, *Das*

Ornament des Rococo (Leipzig: E.A. Seeman, 1894); August Schmarsow, *Beiträge zur Ästhetik der Bildenden Künste. Barock und Rokoko* (Leipzig: S. Hirzel, 1897). There were also many critics of the style, including: Gustav E. Pazaurek, *Dreierlei Rokoko: Ausstellung im Königlich Württ. Landes-Gewerbemuseum Stuttgart 1909/Katalog im Auftrag der Königl. Zentralstelle für Gewerbe und Handel* (Stuttgart: Klett & Hartmann, 1909). See: Ireland, *Cythera Regained*, 118 and 158. Much of this has to do with the revival of the style in both interiors and the decorative arts and as such is a different discussion from the present essay.

5. Rosanna Pavoni, ed., *Reviving the Renaissance: The Use and Abuse of the Past in Nineteenth-Century Italian Art and Decoration* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997). The introduction provides a strong argument that the revival of the Renaissance style was also seen by contemporaries as a form of improving the quality of design and manufacture. See for example: Annalisa Zanni, “The Neo-Renaissance as the Image of the Private,” in *Reviving the Renaissance*, 29–47.
6. *Sale of the contents of Cavendish St. Watson Taylor*, Christie’s, 28 May 1825, lot 76.
7. National Art Library, London: *FOREIGN ANCIENT ELEGANCIES including beautiful marqueterie commodes, consoles and tables … French Secretaires, Suites of Tapestry from the looms of Beauvais & Gobelins … A suite of Boule commodes, Bibliotheques, Library & other tables for a drawing room richly decorated with or-molu and about two hundred cabriole chairs in sets of six, twelve and twenty-four which by direction of the IMPORTER will be sold by Auction by Messrs Foster and Son at the Gallery 54 Pall Mall on Thursday the 15th of May, 1845 and two following days*.
8. Hermann von Puckler-Muskau, *Tour in England, Ireland, and France, in the Years 1828, and 1829. […] In a Series of Letters. By a German Prince*, transl. Sarah Austin, vol. 4 (London: Carey, Lee and Blanchard, 1832), 338–9.
9. Rothschild, “The Expansion of Art,” 57.
10. Thomas Hay Sweet Escott, *Society in London, by a Foreign Resident* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1886), 24.
11. Benjamin Disraeli, *Henrietta Temple: A Love Story* (London: Henry Colburn, 1837), 350, quoted in: Crook, *The Rise of the Nouveaux Riches*, 173.
12. Agathocleous, *Urban Realism*, 37.

The Marketplace of Styles

From "10.1: The Cosmopolitan Spirit in America" in *American Encounters: Art, History, and Cultural Identity* by Angela L Miller, Janet Catherine Berlo, Bryan J Wolf, and Jennifer L Roberts

World's Fairs were crucial incubators of the influences that transformed European and American art and design in the final decades of the nineteenth century. The opening up of new markets in Asia and the Middle East enriched the range of styles available to artists, stimulating consumer taste in exotic objects and leading to a vogue for incorporating Japanese and Islamic influences into domestic interiors (below). World's Fairs began as international trade fairs with London's Crystal Palace Exhibition in 1851, showcasing industrial and artisanal goods from around the world as a way of promoting domestic crafts and industries to international audiences. The display of the most characteristic products of a culture helped to establish categories in which the diversity of market goods from around the world could be organized. World's Fairs fueled consumer fantasies of exotic locales and peoples. Yet while providing entertainment, the international exhibitions of goods at the World's Fairs also connected the industrialized, developed nations to the less "advanced" cultures of North Africa, the Middle East, and Asia. These non-Western participants occupied a subordinate position as colonies supplying the growing consumer appetites of a prosperous middle class in Europe and the United States. World's Fairs promoted the idea that the more advanced nations were entitled to assimilate goods and materials from around the world, and claim all of history and geography as their own. This imperial attitude was linked to racial ideas that- as we have seen- also shaped social and class difference on the national level.



Figure 8.4.4.4: LOUIS COMFORT TIFFANY & CANDACE WHEELER, Mr. George Kemp's Salon, c. 1883, from Artistic Houses: Being a Series of Interior Views of a Number of the Most Beautiful and Celebrated Homes in the United States (1883- 1884), vol. 1, pt. 1, reprinted in Amelia Peck and Carol Irish, Candace Wheeler: The Art and Enterprise of American Design, 1875- 1900. Photograph. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Thomas J. Watson Library.

The scholar Anne McClintock identifies the World's Fairs of the late nineteenth century as primary sites of what she terms "commodity racism."[14] World's Fairs displays and advertisements visualized the racial hierarchies around which the national cultures of these years were organized. Western commodities such as soap were advertised as missionaries of enlightenment, extending influence around the globe from the metropolitan centers of London, Chicago, and Paris to the benighted colonial hinterlands of Africa, Asia, and the Middle

East. The geographical reach of Western goods and markets subsumed the world's cultures into a single ascending scale of development, measured by Western standards of progress.

Romantic Regionalism in California and New Mexico

Adapted from "Chapter 15.1: The Rediscovery of America" in *American Encounters: Art, History, and Cultural Identity* by Angela L Miller, Janet Catherine Berlo, Bryan J Wolf, and Jennifer L Roberts

Interest in the Spanish legacy of the American Southwest was one of a series of romantic revivals beginning in the nineteenth century United States. In the early twentieth century, the Pueblo and Mission revivals found their place within a broader national (indeed international) movement to recover the artisanal and communal building traditions identified with the origins of national cultures. Nationalistic pride played a role in these historical revivals, which were celebrated as "straight from our own soil" and "a true product of America."

Romantic Regionalism brought together businessmen, architects, and regional promoters around a picturesque vision of a premodern past before the arrival of the Yankees. It may seem paradoxical that these very Yankees were responsible for shaping a regional image so indebted to a time before they arrived. The fascination with the premodern era-here as elsewhere in American arts and culture often accompanied and even facilitated the process of modernization by offering an imaginative retreat from the pressures of the present.

"Mission Revival" Style

California led the way in exploiting its Hispanic heritage. At the Chicago World's Fair or Columbian Exposition of 1893, state pavilions were designed in a range of regional styles: plantations for the South, for example, and Spanish Mission styles for the California Building (identified by red-tiled roofs, arcades, stuccoed walls, and asymmetrical massing). By 1915, at international expositions held in San Francisco and San Diego, the Mission style had become the official expression of California's regional identity. In the years after statehood in 1912, New Mexicans developed their own versions of the "Mission revival," inspired by the ancient cliff dwellings and historic Pueblo villages of this region.

The "Mission myth" of an exotic Hispanic and Indian heritage had several major components, as outlined by the historian Mike Davis: a peaceful population of Mission Indians living in harmony with their European conquerors, and a colorful Mexican population who passed along their music, carefree ways, and picturesque buildings to the more dynamic Euro-American cultures that took their place. The Mission myth transformed the region's troubled history of forced Native labor on the Missions into a fantasy of caballeros and dark-eyed senoritas. For generations of Californians, the curved gables, red-tiled roofs, bell towers, and arcaded plazas of Catholic Missions became for the West Coast what the Colonial Revival was to New England and plantation-style homes were to the South: a means of instant access to a romantic past, remote from the present.



Figure 8.4.4.5: CHARLES LUMMIS, El Alisal, Los Angeles, 1897- 1910. Southwest Museum, Los Angeles, California.

One of the primary figures behind the creation and promotion of the regional myth in California was actually from Ohio. Charles Lummis (1859-1928), a young journalist, had walked to Los Angeles in 1884 in search of a better climate and improved health. In his writings and activities as an editor, amateur archaeologist, founder of the Southwest Museum in Los Angeles, and preservationist, Lummis helped spawn a new regional consciousness among wealthy exiles from the East. Lummis was at the heart of the region's first literary and artistic vanguard, centered along the Arroyo, a wooded gulch set against the dramatic backdrop of the San Gabriel Mountains in Pasadena. Drawn by the healthful Mediterranean climate of the region, Lummis constructed a baronial home for himself with the invented Spanish name of El Alisal (1897-1910), built of boulders hauled up from the dry creek bed by the labor of Pueblo Indians imported from New Mexico (above). Combining such picturesque features as a defensive tower, a Mission-style gabled wing with hanging bell (inspired by the newly restored Mission San Gabriel nearby), and hacienda-like main house, and surrounded by indigenous plantings, El Alisal expressed a widespread fascination with California's Hispanic past, filtered through an image of Spain's aristocratic Old World culture. In his home, life, and writings, Lummis helped foster the regional myth that would shape the restoration of California's Franciscan Missions in the early twentieth century.

"Pueblo Revival" or "Santa Fe" Style

In the 1850s Jean-Baptiste Lamy, archbishop of Santa Fe, newly arrived from the East, campaigned to obliterate the art of the santeros. For him this was a shameful reminder of the barbaric conditions of a frontier society that his enlightened leadership

would soon leave behind. Half a century later, attitudes toward the Hispanic heritage of the Southwest had radically changed. As in California, architects, preservationists, and civic promoters now turned to the Spanish and Native history of the region for a romanticized regional image: "One must go to New Mexico to find an American architecture and an American art."9 Promoters celebrated the Southwest for its archaic and spiritual intensity. In the decades between the wars, tourists from the East flocked to New Mexico and Arizona in unprecedented numbers, in search of ancient mysteries and legendary histories. Indigenous ruins dating back ten centuries offered parallels to the great ruins of Old World civilizations, and captured Americans' romantic longing for a deep history that would counter claims of their nation's cultural shallowness.



Figure 8.4.4.6: Mission Church of San Esteban del Rey, 1629, Acoma Pueblo (Smarthistory)

In New Mexico, the "Pueblo" style-drawing on the massive simplified adobe contours, wooden beam construction, and battered and buttressed walls of such buildings as the church of San Esteban at Acoma Pueblo (above)- fused Native and Hispanic adobe building traditions in a distinct architectural image. San Esteban served as the source for the architect Isaac Hamilton Rapp's (1854-1933) New Mexico state building at the San Diego exposition of 1915, and later for the Museum of New Mexico building in Santa Fe (below). The architects Charles Whittlesey and Mary Colter (1869-1958)-whose 1904 Hopi House perched on the rim of the Grand Canyon-drew inspiration from the multi-storied buildings of the Hopi and other Pueblo peoples.



Figure 8.4.4.7: ISAAC HAMILTON RAPP, New Mexico Building, Panama-California Exposition, San Diego, California, 1915. Watercolor. Museum of New Mexico, Santa Fe.

In America's first restaurant chain, the Fred Harvey Company furnished travelers on the Santa Fe Railroad with not only good food but a romanticized regional image drawing on Hispanic and Indian elements (below). Building on its Hispanic past, Santa Fe changed street names from English to Spanish in these years.



Figure 8.4.4.8: MARY COLTER (designer), Fred Harvey Indian Building Room, c. 1908. University of Arizona Library, Tucson. Special Collections.

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

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9.1: Arts and Crafts Movement

Learning Objectives

- Explain the impact of the Industrial Revolution on the formation of the Arts & Crafts Movement, enumerating its core principles and players.
- Discuss the similarities and contrasts between the Arts & Crafts Movement in Britain and the United States.
- Evaluate the extent to which the Arts & Crafts movement rejected and embraced historical design characteristics.

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9.1.1: British Arts and Crafts Movement

Reactions to the Industrial Age

by Alex Hass in *Graphic Design and Print Production Fundamentals* (B.C. Open Collection)

The Arts & Crafts movement emerged in the second half of the 19th century in reaction to the social, moral, and aesthetic chaos created by the Industrial Revolution. William Morris was its founder and leader. He abhorred the cheap and cheerful products of manufacturing, the terrible working and living conditions of the poor, and the lack of guiding moral principles of the times. Morris "called for a fitness of purpose, truth to the nature of the materials and methods of production, and individual expression by both artist and worker" (Meggs & Purvis, 2011, p. 160). These philosophical points are still pivotal to the expression of design style and practice to this day. Design styles from the Arts & Crafts movement and on have emphasized, in varying degrees, either fitness of purpose and material integrity, or individual expression and the need for visual subjectivity. Morris based his philosophy on the writings of John Ruskin, a critic of the Industrial Age, and a man who felt that society should work toward promoting the happiness and well-being of every one of its members, by creating a union of art and labour in the service of society. Ruskin admired the medieval Gothic style for these qualities, as well as the Italian aesthetic of medieval art because of its direct and uncomplicated depiction of nature.

Many artists, architects, and designers were attracted to Ruskin's philosophy and began to integrate components of them into their work. Morris, influenced by his upbringing in an agrarian countryside, was profoundly moved by Ruskin's stance on fusing work and creativity, and became determined to find a way to make it a reality for society. This path became his life's work.

William Morris, The Green Dining Room

by Dr. Rebecca Jeffrey Easby in *Smarthistory*



Figure 9.1.1.1: **Morris, Marshall, Faulkner & Co., Green Dining Room (now The Morris Room), 1866–67 (Victoria and Albert Museum, London; photo: © Victoria and Albert Museum)**



Figure 9.1.1.2: **Philip Webb, Design for the wall-decoration and cornice in the Green Dining Room, c. 1866, pencil and watercolor (Victoria and Albert Museum, London)**

The Green Dining Room is one of the best surviving examples of the aesthetic of William Morris, designer, poet, socialist, and preservationist. The room was commissioned in 1865 as a refreshment room in what was then called the South Kensington Museum (now the Victoria and Albert Museum). Morris and his colleagues (primarily painter Edward Burne-Jones and architect Philip Webb), created a tranquil, nature-inspired spot for museum patrons to enjoy a cup of tea. In keeping with the ideals of the Aesthetic Movement (where artists sought to create works that were admired simply for their beauty rather than any narrative or moral function), the harmonious muted color-scheme, emphasis on craftsmanship, and the medieval vibe of

the stained glass and woodworking, the room shows Morris's style of interior design at its finest.

Fashion for the medieval

William Morris was born in Essex in 1834, the son of wealthy middle-class parents. Raised reading the romanticized historical novels of Sir Walter Scott, Morris developed an affinity for the prevailing fashion for medievalism, which many saw as an antidote to the problems of modern industrial Britain. Conservative thinkers such as Thomas Carlyle in *Past and Present* (1843) sought to point out the deficiencies of the modern world by comparing them to practices of the medieval past.

Politicians also decried industrial practices in favor of bygone traditions, such as Conservative MP Lord John Manners who in his *A Plea for National Holydays* (1843) proposed allowing factory workers to dance around a maypole as a solution to working class unrest. Steeped in medieval nostalgia, the story that the 16-year-old Morris refused to visit the immensely popular Great Exhibition of 1851, which celebrated everything industrial, makes perfect sense.

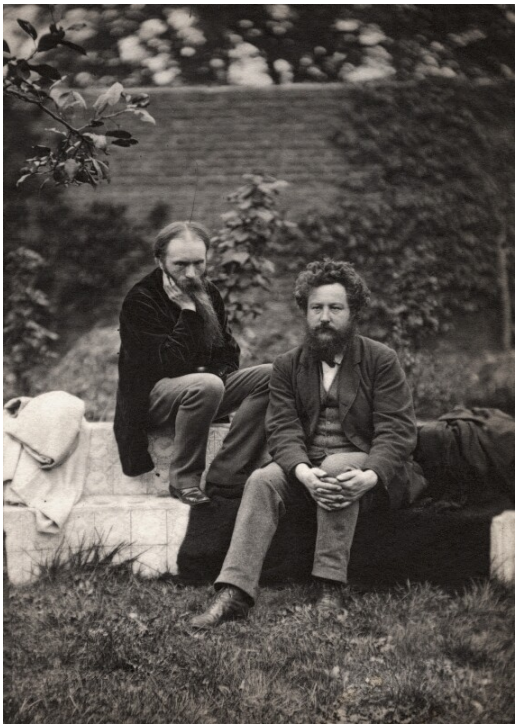


Figure 9.1.1.3: **Frederick Hollyer, *Sir Edward Burne-Jones; William Morris*, 1874, platinum print (National Portrait Gallery, London)**

While a student at Oxford, Morris met Edward Burne-Jones, who would become a celebrated Victorian painter, and the two became friends, joined by a love of culture and all things medieval. This connection was further cemented when the pair met the Pre-Raphaelite painter Dante Gabriel Rossetti and worked with him on creating a series of paintings derived from the Arthurian legends to decorate the Oxford Union. At the time Morris was apprenticed to an architect and abandoned this career to pursue art. Unfortunately, he soon realized that he lacked the same skill as his friends, but quickly discovered a talent for design, creating items such as furniture and manuscripts in a medieval style.



Figure 9.1.1.4: **William Morris and Philip Webb, The Red House, 1860, Bexleyheath, London (photo: public domain)**

Morris's first large scale decorative project was his own house, known as The Red House due to the red brick exterior. Designed by Philip Webb and completed in 1860, Morris commissioned the house as a home for his wife Jane Burden, whom he married in 1859, and their two daughters. The L-shaped plan of the house echoes medieval house plans and Morris's artistic friends helped him decorate the interior with scenes from Arthurian legends, and the stories of Chaucer, interspersed with a few classical illustrations from the Trojan War. For financial and logistical reasons, Morris sold the house in 1865.

In 1861, Morris founded the firm of Morris, Marshall, Faulkner & Co., a joint venture founded by Morris, P.P. Marshall, and Charles Faulkner, along with Ford Madox Brown, Edward Burne-Jones, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, and Philip Webb. Their medieval inspired and handcrafted items for the home were an almost immediate success, and the work of "the Firm" can still be found in churches that were renovated by the Victorians and some more avant-garde homes of the period.

"The Firm" became known for its beautiful stained-glass designs, embroidered hangings, furniture, textiles, and carpets, all of which were produced using traditional methods. Morris insisted on forgoing industrial mass production of his objects, maintaining that the work of one's hands was more beautiful than something made by machine. His famous saying "have nothing in your houses that you do not know to be useful or believe to be beautiful" became a challenge to the cluttered,

overly decorated, and to Morris's mind, less beautiful interiors commonly found in Victorian homes.



Figure 9.1.1.5: **Stained glass panels, part of a series entitled *The Garland Weavers*, designed by Edward Burne-Jones and made by Morris, Marshall, Faulkner & Co. England for the Green Dining Room, 1866–67 (Victoria and Albert Museum, London)**

The Green Dining Room is an excellent example of Morris's design ideas. The muted green, blue, and gold color scheme creates a calming backdrop to the beautiful stained-glass windows depicting women in floating white dresses, designed by Burne-Jones.



Figure 9.1.1.6: **Left figure: Sagittarius; right figure: Capricorn. After Edward Burne-Jones, by Charles Fairfax Murray, Signs of the Zodiac for the Green Dining Room, c. 1866, oils, tempera on canvas/panel and mixed media (Victoria and Albert Museum, London). Note: Burne-Jones drew the original designs and Morris & Co. employed several different painters to paint the panels. Morris was unhappy and had them all, except one, repainted by Charles Fairfax Murray**

The dado rail which forms a barrier above the dark greenish stained woodwork in the lower portion of the room also contains Burne-Jones designs of the signs of the zodiac interspersed with plant motifs. Above the rail the walls are decorated with a low plaster relief design of olive branches in a paler, yet tonally complementary shade of green.



Figure 9.1.1.7: **Morris, Marshall, Faulkner & Co., Green Dining Room, 1866–67 (Victoria and Albert Museum, London)**

Next to the ceiling is a frieze depicting hounds pursuing hares. The gold color that surrounds each animal leads the eye to the golden designs on the tray ceiling formed from stylized stencils of plants, which are reminiscent of the many wallpaper and textile designs Morris would go on to produce.

Together with the two other refreshment rooms in the museum, The Gamble Room and the Poynter Room, The Green Room created a relaxing atmosphere for museum patrons to take a break. The museum's director, Henry Cole, inaugurated the concept of the museum café, an idea which would not become standard until the 20th century. Cole was also the first to install gas lighting, which allowed the museum to open in the evening. Many of his innovations are now standard in museums around the world.



Figure 9.1.1.8: ***The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer, now Newly Imprinted*, artist: William Morris; author: Geoffrey Chaucer; illustrator: Edward Burne-Jones; engraver: William Harcourt Hooper; editor: Frederick S. Ellis;**

printer: William Morris (Hammersmith: Kelmscott Press, 1896) (Minneapolis Institute of Art)

Morris would go on to become one of the world's foremost designers. In 1875 Morris took control of "the Firm," which became known as Morris & Co. In 1871 Morris purchased a country house in the village of Kelmscott. The surrounding countryside provided inspiration for many of his designs, not only in his textiles but also for the manuscripts published by the Kelmscott Press, which Morris founded in 1891. Based on medieval illuminated manuscripts, the books published by Kelmscott Press included the celebrated Kelmscott Chaucer, as well as some of Morris's own writings such as *News from Nowhere* (1890). An accomplished poet in his own right, Morris used his writings to explain his own utopian views of society.

Throughout his life, Morris leaned more and more towards the views of socialism and became disillusioned with contemporary society. Unfortunately, his idea that everyone deserved beauty was at odds with his insistence that his products be handmade rather than using industrial processes. The workmanship that went into Morris's products made them very expensive and financially out of reach for all but the well off. It was an issue he was never able to reconcile.

The designs of William Morris left an indelible mark on Victorian society, which is still seen today. One can still purchase the work of Morris & Co., and his designs are reproduced for many mass markets, particularly textiles, wallpaper, and rugs. His "less is more" attitude resonates with many today, and the simple, natural beauty of his designs still looks fresh over 100 years later.

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William Morris: Useful Beauty in the Home

by HENI Talks



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Furnishing the Standen House

Cabinet by Agnes & Rhoda Garrett

© The Victoria & Albert Museum, London

Designers

This cabinet was made in 1875 by 'A. & R. Garrett, House Decorators' and its design is attributed to Rhoda Garrett (1841–82) and her cousin Agnes Garrett (1845–1935), Britain's first professional female interior decorators. The cousins were related through marriage to the architect John James Stevenson (1831–1908), who became a pioneer of the 'Queen Anne' style after he moved from Glasgow to London in the late 1860s. Beginning in about 1870–1, presumably through Stevenson's introduction, they worked in the London studio of the Scottish stained-glass designer and decorator Daniel Cottier (1838–91), one of whose business partners was an architect who had trained under Stevenson, John McKean Brydon (1840–1901). After this partnership was dissolved at the end of 1871, the Garretts worked in Brydon's studio, before setting up business at their home at 2 Gower Street in 1874. The cousins were part of an upwardly mobile group of artists and designers; they were prominent suffragists and Agnes' sister, Elizabeth Garrett Anderson, was the first woman to qualify as a doctor in Britain.



Figure 9.1.1.9: cabinet, attributed to Rhoda Garrett and Agnes

Garrett, 1875, walnut, mahogany, bevelled mirror glass, brass hardware (© Victoria and Albert Museum, London)

Patrons

The Garrett cousins received many decorating commissions from friends, and notable clients included the composer (of, later, *Jerusalem*), Hubert Parry. This cabinet belongs to a group of furniture commissioned in about 1875 by a solicitor, James Samuel Beale, and his wife Margaret, for their house at 32 Holland Park. The upper doors of the cabinet are carved with the monogram of the couple, and the date 1875. Other pieces designed by the Garretts for the Beales, which included seating furniture, a corner cabinet and a bookcase, are now in the collection of the National Trust and displayed in Standen House, East Grinstead, West Sussex. Standen was designed for the Beales by Philip Webb in the early 1890s. Margaret Beale and her daughters embroidered a 'Lotus' wall hanging, designed by William Morris, which is in the collection of the Victoria and Albert Museum (T.192-1953).

Style

This cabinet is arguably the most important item of furniture to have been made by the Garretts' firm. Pauline Agius, in her book *British Furniture 1880–1915* (1978; p.75) illustrated this cabinet, describing it as ‘a subtly proportioned, architectural piece in what the Garretts referred to as the ‘Queen Anne’ style.’ With its references to seventeenth- and eighteenth-century furniture, this cabinet does indeed reflect the influence of Stevenson and Brydon. Drawing inspiration from earlier periods, the upper section, with its canted mirrored sides, is loosely based on mid-seventeenth century English livery or ‘court’ cupboards (see, for example, V&A W.26–1938), while the arcaded lower section is probably based on an early eighteenth-century model (for example, see the bookcase on stand in a private collection, dated to 1710–30 and illustrated in Adam Bowett, *Early Georgian Furniture 1715–1740*, Antique Collectors’ Club, 2009, p.132, plate 3:72). The high quality of the (unknown) cabinet-maker’s work was also a hallmark of the Garrett style. In 1876 one of the popular Macmillan ‘Art at Home’ series of books on decoration, *Suggestions for House Decoration in Painting, Woodwork and Furniture*, was published under their name. It includes illustrations of furniture related in design to this cabinet. On p.52, the Garretts railed against the ‘machine-made carving, the tiles and the gilded panels which are displayed ad nauseam in what is advertised as “artistic furniture"', noting that ‘a cabinet wherein all the labour and cost is put into sound construction and delicacy of workmanship will give lasting pleasure to its possessor’.

Lotus Wall Hanging by Morris & Co.

© The Victoria & Albert Museum, London

Designed by William Morris from 1875-1880 and then embroidered by Margaret Beale from 1880-1891

Wall hanging of embroidered canvas with silks. With a large all-over pattern of conventional flowers and leaves in pinks, greens, blues and fawn on a mid-brown background. With silks in long and short, brick, satin and darning stitches on a canvas ground. Edged with woven braid and lined with green silk.



Figure 9.1.1.10: Lotus wall hanging designed by William Morris from 1875-1880 and then embroidered by Margaret Beale from 1880-1891, Embroidered canvas with silks, lined with silk, L: 95in W:74in (© Victoria and Albert Museum, London)

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9.1.2: American Arts and Crafts Movement

Adapted from "Chapter 10.3: Reform and Innovation - Handcraft and Mechanization in the Decorative Arts, 1860-1900" in *American Encounters: Art, History, and Cultural Identity* by Angela L Miller, Janet Catherine Berlo, Bryan J Wolf, and Jennifer L Roberts

Since the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the fine arts have been defined as separate from the medieval craft tradition. Within Renaissance art theory, the artist was motivated by humanist ideals of creative freedom, while the artisan was preoccupied by the problems of craft, or techne, defined by everyday utilitarian requirements. Creative choice was opposed to necessity, art to craft, and intellectual, religious, or symbolic meaning to use-value. In the later nineteenth century, artists began questioning such polarities. As industrial manufacturing transformed every aspect of life in the later nineteenth century, artists and theorists in England- and slightly later in the United States- turned to older craft methods of workmanship as an arena in which to reconnect hand and brain, a link severed by machine manufacture. They found in beautifully designed and crafted objects a way of counteracting the spiritually numbing effects of machine-made goods. By bridging art and life, artist-craftsmen also rejected the isolation of art in museums and private collections, instead applying aesthetic concerns to utilitarian objects and everyday environments. Advocates of what would come to be known as the Arts and Crafts movement (English, originating in the mid-century, reaching its height in the 1880s) and those of the associated "Aesthetic movement" promoted the idea that in choosing household furnishings, consumers also shaped the moral and social environment. As one contemporary, a Chicago sociologist (C. R. Henderson), put it in 1897, "Our works and our surroundings corrupt or refine our souls."

Origins in Social Theory

The idea that the physical environment in which people live could be "designed" to fit social values had its origins in the later nineteenth century, as part of a broad critical reaction to the historical effects of industrialization. This reaction occurred most profoundly in England, where it focused on the nature of industrial labor and its products. Beginning with the English Arts and Crafts movement, designers in Europe and the United States wished to restore labor to a central place in community life, by returning control of the labor process to the worker. They advocated a revival of the workmanship they associated with the medieval era, and urged laborers to seek creative fulfillment in work and in an "organic" integration of life and work to replace the separation of work and home, designer and fabricator. These design reforms were not tied to any one historical style; rather than imitating forms from the past, the reformers sought their underlying principles of design. These reform movements drew freely from medieval, Japanese, and Islamic art, and from a range of national vernaculars, stylizing historical motifs but also, in the case of the most original designers-such as Frank Lloyd Wright-inventing new design vocabularies. Design reform embraced not only handcraft but also machine production, subordinated to the will of the designer. The movement for design reform spread throughout Europe and the United States as designers actively exchanged ideas across national borders. Here again, World's Fairs played an important role.

Motivating design reform was the quest for aesthetic simplification. In response to the clutter, visual overload, and over-upholstered excesses of the High Victorian era, design reforms strove to harmonize furnishings, frieze decorations, tile work, rugs, and fabrics to form a complete, visually integrated whole. Advocates of "art in industry" and those who hoped to revive handcrafts both found inspiration in the ideal of an aesthetically integrated environment as a total work of art bringing painters, sculptors, designers, and architects together in collaboration.

A number of institutions for training designers appeared in these years in response to the call for improved design in industry: the Pratt Institute and Cooper Union in New York; the School of Art at Washington University; and the California College of Arts and Crafts, among others. All of them traced their roots to the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, established after the 1851 Crystal Palace Exhibition to address the perceived inadequacies of Victorian design.

Inventions, Patents, and the (Non)Collapsible Chair

Unencumbered by a centuries-old European guild tradition that limited innovation or experimentation, and fueled by a growing national market, American designers such as George Hunzinger (1835-1898) devised ingenious solutions to such perennial problems as chairs collapsing as men tilted back in them (fig. 10.27). From this American breach of manners, Hunzinger saw his marketing opportunity. Armed with another very American institution-the patent-Hunzinger created a diagonal brace used on a variety of chairs he marketed, guaranteed to withstand the rigors of the American parlor or dinner table. Patented furniture flourished in the post-Civil War decades. Folding and stacking chairs (to which Hunzinger made his own contribution), sofa beds, and extension tables all spoke to the needs of a new, more active, practical-minded public drawn to multifunctional designs for everyday living. Hunzinger's skillful use of sales agents throughout the United States, of retail marketing through mail order catalogues, and of minor design modifications targeted to different market niches, all served growing levels of consumption while maintaining high standards of workmanship. Combining the technique of interchangeable parts-chair seats or

crests-with a diverse range of styles, Hunzinger accommodated the desire for individuality and product novelty while exploiting the economies of mass production. The growing design sophistication of everyday furnishings such as Hunzinger's was fueled by a happy combination of ingenious and skilled immigrants (Hunzinger was from Germany), entrepreneurial talent and marketing flexibility, and growing consumer demand.



Figure 9.1.2.1: GEORGE HUNZINGER, Armchair, patented in 1869, 1876. Walnut, steel mesh. Brooklyn Museum of Art, New York.

Women Designers and Artistic Collaboration



Figure 9.1.2.2: WILLIAM MERRITT CHASE, Miss Dora Wheeler, 1883. Oil on canvas, 62 x 65 in (159 x 165 cm). Cleveland Museum of Art, Ohio.

In 1883, two years after painting his own studio, William Merritt Chase completed a striking full-length portrait of Dora Wheeler, a former student of his, commemorating a significant moment in her life as a professional designer and painter (above). Here, rather than contemplating the works of the older male artist, Dora Wheeler appears as a woman of intellect and distinction. Her head thoughtfully cradled in her left hand, feet planted solidly on the ground, she stares soberly at the viewer. The portrait is a study in what were then considered daring color values-a lush, fur-trimmed at-home gown of teal blue, against a wall covering of variegated gold. The color scheme is reprised in the gorgeous teal vase with daffodils placed next to her. But while Dora is here part of an aesthetic ensemble, it is an ensemble that she herself has shaped. The portrait was painted in her studio. The daughter and partner of Candace Wheeler, a leading figure in the design world of New York City, Dora had recently been appointed chief designer in her mother's company, which produced textiles and wallpapers for the city's taste-setters. Chase used this audacious portrait to parade his sophisticated tastes and his emerging talents as a painter, but he did so with the active collaboration of his admired former student. Chase made good his tribute to the professional woman artist by opening a summer landscape school on Long Island, dedicated to training women art students, and patronized by Candace and Dora.



Figure 9.1.2.3: Tulips panel (1883-87), Associated Artists (1883-1907), designed by Candace Wheeler, Silk and metallic cloth appliqued with silk velvet and embroidered with silk and metallic-wrapped cotton threads, 74 x 50 1/2 in. (public domain, Metropolitan Museum of Art)

These two women embodied in their own successful careers the skill with which ambitious women transformed older types of feminine expression-in this case needle arts-into dynamic new forms of aesthetic entrepreneurship. In 1879, Candace joined with Louis Comfort Tiffany and two others in forming The Associated Artists (1879-83), committed to a new integrated approach to interior design in which all the elements of a room were collaboratively designed to achieve aesthetic unity. Wheeler's own company, formed in 1883 and also called Associated Artists (above), designed some of the most notable interiors in New York City (below), with a mix of international styles, exotic materials, and sumptuous effects. Self-taught, Candace projected herself into the forefront of American design in the late nineteenth century. The domestic realm of middle-class women and their traditional needle arts proved for Candace and her daughter Dora to be a springboard to professional achievement and public recognition.



Figure 9.1.2.4: LOUIS COMFORT TIFFANY & CANDACE WHEELER, Mr. George Kemp's Salon, c. 1883, from Artistic Houses: Being a Series of Interior Views of a Number of the Most Beautiful and Celebrated Homes in the United States (1883- 1884), vol. 1, pt. 1, reprinted in Amelia Peck and Carol Irish, Candace Wheeler: The Art and Enterprise of American Design, 1875- 1900. Photograph. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Thomas J. Watson Library.

Hawai'ian Quilts and Cross-Cultural Collaborations

WOMEN 'S NEEDLE ARTS, even in the professional design world of New York, were often grounded in collaborative methods. Around the same time that the Wheelers were launching their successful business, white and Native Hawai'ian women collaborated in taking American quilt making in a new direction (fig. 10.29). Before contact with outsiders, indigenous women of Hawai'i made cloth from tree bark, which they dyed and stamped with geometric designs. Missionary women from New England began to teach quilting in Hawai'i as early as 1820, choosing women of high rank as their apprentices, an appropriate action in this status-conscious society. Although the New Englanders may not have grasped the implications of their actions, by introducing needlework to the highest-ranking women first, they ensured acceptance of quilting among all Hawai'ian women.

One distinctive Hawai'ian type is the flag quilt, demonstrating yet another use for quilts: as commemorative patriotic banners. Hawai'i's flag, adopted in 1845, is made up of eight red , white, and blue stripes, standing for the eight major islands. Where the stars in a U.S. flag would be, there is the Union Jack-the British flag-recalling the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century colonial power that preceded the U.S. government. In this quilt, four flags encircle the central applique design of the Hawaiian coat of arms. Just as Hawai'ian quilting itself was an encounter between the art forms of two cultures, so too this quilt reflects artistic collaboration between a white woman and a Native Hawai'ian woman.



Figure 9.1.2.5: WILHELMINA EICHINGER & MRS. AMOS , Ku 'u Hae Aloha (My Beloved Flag), Hawai'ian quilt, c. 1900 , Cotton, 81⅛ x 84 in (205,9 X 213.3 cm).

The Arts and Crafts Movement



Figure 9.1.2.6: CHARLES AND HENRY GREENE, Blacker House, Pasadena, 1907-09.



Figure 9.1.2.7: CHARLES AND HENRY GREENE, Blacker House, interior detail, 1907-09.

Though deeply influenced by English Arts and Crafts, the American Arts and Crafts movement incorporated national and regional influences specific to U.S. culture. Key to the Arts and Crafts philosophy was the insistence that design be tied to place, through the use of local and regional materials and forms as well as through the integration of built forms with their natural environments. In Californian architecture, for instance, the Spanish mission style furnished a regional version of rough, honest vernacular building that expressed ties to the culture of the original colonizers. In the work of the Pasadena architectural firm Greene and Greene, Japanese and Chinese elements are added as well- an influence appropriate to their location on the Pacific Rim. Greene and Greene also used the woods and stylized forms of trees native to California (above). The Greene brothers (Henry M., 1870-1954, and Charles S., 1868- 1857) served a cultured clientele-many of whom had migrated from the east- who helped nurture a local variant of Arts and Crafts, known as the "Arroyo" style for its location alongside a steep-sided dry creek bed near the San Gabriel mountains. Here landscape, local history and influences, and patronage fused in a regional variant of the international language of Arts and Crafts.

The American Arts and Crafts movement drew inspiration from Native American as well as Asian cultures, where beautifully crafted objects played central roles in everyday life. Finding affinities with the simplified geometric designs and handmade forms of Southwest Indian design, The Craftsman and other Arts and Crafts publications of these years advocated the use of Native weavings, baskets, and pottery in domestic interiors. Pueblo pottery forms also influenced Arts and Crafts potters themselves.

Yet the Arts and Crafts return to a preindustrial form of workmanship often went hand-in-hand with a stratified commercial organization, combining master designers with skilled crafts workers, marketing and distribution departments. Though frequently associated with a single individual-Louis Comfort Tiffany (1848-1933), for instance the products of such companies represented the work of multitudes.

Machine production put Arts and Crafts furniture within reach of the middle class by bringing down costs. Frank Lloyd Wright (1867-1959) and Gustav Stickley (1858-1942), among others, advocated the judicious use of machine production, in tandem with handwork. The problem for them was not in machinery as such, but in the tendency to use machines merely to replicate a dead past. Instead they promoted the use of machines to spare drudgery, to act as vital servants of human creative will. Stickley, a tireless supporter of Arts and Crafts philosophy and an influential manufacturer, started out life as a stonemason, and was thus familiar with labor carried out without the assistance of machinery. Around the turn of the century, he began mass-marketing the "simple life" look of the preindustrial historical forms borrowed from the Colonial Revival and related styles. Influenced by British socialist ideals, he began publishing a magazine, The Craftsman, in 1901 to promote his ideology of simplified and honest domestic living and a restoration of the workman's control over the product of his labor. Stickley's guild

organization the United Crafts was directed at bringing the designer and the fabricator-separated by industrial production-back together in one person. Yet alongside this medieval ideal, Stickley employed the most up-to-date mail order marketing, and used The Craftsman to create a national audience for his furniture. Affordable, well-made "Craftsman" furniture appealed to progressive American families who embraced the link between honest design and good citizenship.



Figure 9.1.2.8: TIFFANY & co., Pitcher, c. 1878. Silver, with alloys of copper, silver, and gold, 8⅞ in (22.6 cm) high, 6¾ in (17.1 cm) wide. Art Institute of Chicago.

Hand-hammered metal surfaces (usually copper or silver) were another stylistic expression of this handmade aesthetic. A pitcher by Tiffany and Company of c. 1878 (above) has a hammer-marked surface whose rippled effect suggests water. The pitcher also integrates Japanese influences: the design of dragonfly, water plant, and carp shows an economy of line and composition for which Japanese woodblock prints had been admired since their introduction into the West in the mid-century. The shape of the pitcher, on the other hand, derives from traditional Anglo-American sources, thus exhibiting the stylistic eclecticism characteristic of the Arts and Crafts fusion of East and West. The Tiffany Company's technical and stylistic innovations-the use of copper- and brass-colored mounts in tandem with the silver body of the piece, for instance were widely copied within an increasingly international marketplace for handmade · crafts. The aesthetic of the handmade also favored matt finishes and aged patinas over the highly glossy or shiny surfaces associated with machine production. The deliberately rough, weathered qualities of Japanese crafts carried the same appeal. Ironically, these very qualities could now be replicated through the ingenuities of American machines.



Figure 9.1.2.9: Rookwood pottery workshop, 1900. Photograph. Cincinnati Historical Society, Ohio.

Popularized through Ladies' Home journal and elsewhere, the Arts and Crafts style emerged as a lucrative industry that reproduced the handmade "look" through machine-based or standardized forms of production. Though proclaiming the "freedom of expression" of the individual artist, Arts and Crafts products often incorporated the widespread division of labor prevalent in industry (above), especially as successful firms began catering to a broader market, and producing multiples from someone else's design.



Figure 9.1.2.10: WILL H. BRADLEY, Drawing for a library. c. 1902. Graphite, ink and watercolor on paper, 25½ x 37½ in (64.8 x 95.3 cm). Published in Ladies' Home journal, 1905. Huntington Library, Art Collections and Botanical Gardens. Gift of the artist.

The Arts and Crafts concepts of meaningful work, wholesome life, and community had a wide appeal among the American middle class. But in the context of wage labor and the growing industrial-era gap between work and home, maker and user, the movement fell well short of the significant social reforms

required to realize these ideals. The high cost of handmade goods often placed them beyond the reach of ordinary families, but mass marketing through catalogues and retail brought the "look" of the preindustrial into homes throughout the nation. If Arts and Crafts itself became another style successfully marketed to sell consumer goods, it nonetheless produced a new aesthetically integrated approach to the American home and its furnishings that has remained a high point in the history of American design (above).

California Baskets and the Arts and Crafts Movement

Native American women and men across the continent had made baskets for several thousand years. But with the growing value placed on the handmade within the Arts and Crafts movement, Native women's basketry became weighted with new cultural meanings for American collectors. Nostalgic for a lost past, the white middle-class purchasers of such objects held romantic notions about Indians while remaining ignorant of their real lives. Discussions of basketry during the era 1890 to 1920 focused on the authenticity and anti-modernity of these objects and their makers. Yet the women who wove for what came to be called "the basketry craze" were very practical about their audience, providing wares for different price ranges, sizes, and tastes. While the California basketry trade provides one example of such interactions, similar processes occurred in the northwest and southwest regions as well.



Figure 9.1.2.11: SALLY BURRIS, Pomo Basket, c. 1905. University of Pennsylvania Museum, Philadelphia.

During the second half of the nineteenth century, Pomo Indian women in the mountainous area of northern California were unsurpassed as basketmakers, this art form having been handed down from mother to daughter for at least three hundred years. When Sir Francis Drake sailed into Point Reyes, California, in 1579, a member of his expedition noted that the local baskets were "so well wrought as to hold Water. They hang pieces of Pearl shells and sometimes Links of these Chains on the Brims ... They are wrought with matted down of red Feathers in various Forms." He was referring to the renowned Pomo ceremonial basket into which were woven red woodpecker feathers. But Pomo basketry was far more varied, and characterized by fine design (above). Made of willow, sedge roots, and bulrushes, the design patterns were built up horizontally and diagonally around the vessel, often in complex rotational schemes. In addition to coiled and twined color patterning, surface decoration was sometimes supplemented by feathers or beads, creating a three-dimensional design effect.

The market that developed in the early twentieth century for these extraordinary baskets illustrates that two parties with different cultural concerns can nonetheless carry on profitable exchange to the benefit of both. In the market for handcrafted goods, Anglo and Native met on grounds that were more nearly equal than in any other arena. Throughout much of Native California, basketry held an important place: men caught fish in basketry traps, and women harvested wild seeds using a woven seed beater and basket. Baskets were prominent in ceremonies marking rites of passage ranging from birth, to marriage, to death. As Pomo people came into more direct contact with outsiders during the second half of the nineteenth century, the daily use of baskets declined and they were made principally for sale to outsiders; they were much in demand by collectors by about 1900. While the Pomo had always made both large and small baskets, the external market encouraged extremes. Collectors vied for the enormous and the diminutive. In fact, the tiniest Pomo baskets were so small that several could fit on a penny. In both the miniature and the gigantic, the artist pushed her technical capabilities to the maximum. Because of its large scale and elaborate design, the basket she holds was almost certainly made on commission to a dealer or collector. Yet its maker, Sally Burris (1840-1912), was a traditional Pomo woman who had little contact with outsiders until late in her life.

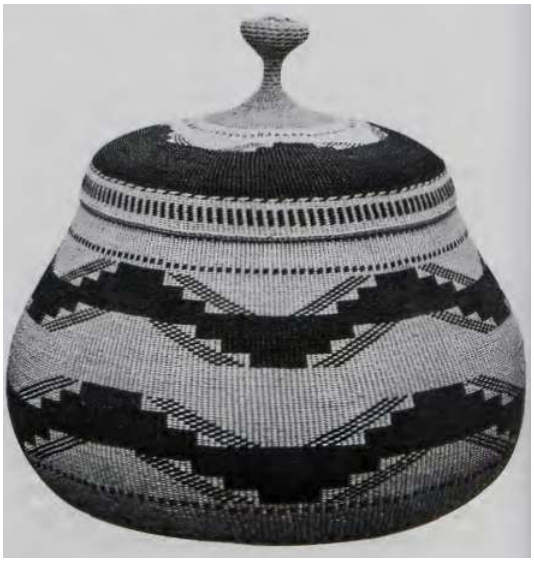


Figure 9.1.2.12: ELIZABETH HICKOX, Basket, Lower Klamath Region, California, c. 1913. Redwood root, maidenhair fern, 9 in (23 cm) high. Southwest Museum, Los Angeles, California. Caroline Boeing Poole Collection.

In contrast, the life and work of Elizabeth Hickox (1872- 1947) was more representative of intercultural complexities. She was a mixed-race woman of the lower Klamath River area of northern California, where Yurok, Karuk, and Hupa weavers lived, worked, and intermarried with each other and with non-Natives. As a result, their baskets often assimilated the styles of different groups. Hickox married a mixed-race businessman; the couple owned cars and radios, and traveled. Regarded as the finest weaver in her region, she specialized in globular baskets with lids (above). For many years she was under exclusive contract to Grace Nicholson, a wealthy California dealer who guaranteed her an annual income of $500 so that she could devote herself to her craft. Nicholson lived in Pasadena, the epicenter of the Arts and Crafts movement in the West.



Figure 9.1.2.13: Grace Nicholson's Indian Art Gallery in her Pasadena home, c. 1925. Photograph. Huntington Library, Pasadena, California. Grace Nicholson Photo Collection.

She transformed the first floor of her spacious home into a gallery (above) stuffed with textiles, baskets, and other Native objects. For most of the first quarter of the twentieth century, she sold such items to wealthy collectors, including women who eagerly sought Native women's artwork to adorn their own domestic interiors. In this instance, Nicholson promoted Elizabeth Hickox as a marketable commodity during an era when Americans were increasingly focused on name recognition and brand recognition in many aspects of their daily lives.

Hickox won individual recognition for her work, living comfortably between cultures. Paradoxically, her patrons believed they were investing in an authentic "premodern" work of Native craft that they alone valued as art. Each side in this exchange had its own objectives, each reconfirming identities through exchange. Hickox, far from being "contaminated" by contact with the market, used Nicholson's patronage to advance her most original designs. At a time when other forces were fragmenting Native lives and craft practices, the basketry trade promoted cultural survival. Having a patron who bought everything she made allowed Hickox to continue to create unique baskets-some woven with more than 800 stitches per square inch-at a time when nothing in her local culture rewarded such painstaking artistry. Elizabeth Hickox is an example of a Native artist who negotiated the opportunities of the market to nurture her own craft and to move fluidly between Native and European societies. In the marketplace of style, Native Californians recovered some of the agency and independence they had lost with the imposition of the mission system in the eighteenth century.



Figure 9.1.2.14: TIFFANY & CO., Bowl, American Indian style, 1900. Silver, copper, turquoise, 7½ in (19 cm) high. High Museum of Art, Atlanta, Georgia.

Tiffany, American Indian Basketry Design, and the 1900 Paris Exposition

1900 was a year of unparalleled prosperity for American elites. Nowhere was America's wealth demonstrated with greater opulence than at Tiffany and Company's exhibit at the Exposition Universelle in Paris. The head of Tiffany's Art Department, Paulding Farnham (1859-1927), chose to display items that, in materials and imagery, represented all North America. From jewelry set with Mexican opals and Montana sapphires, to silver bowls based on Native American basketry and pottery and set with Arizona turquoise (fig. 10.38), the splendor and originality of American design was on display. Farnham had created jewelry and bowls based on Native designs for Tiffany's exhibits at the Paris Exposition of 1890 and the 1893 Chicago World's Fair, but the designs for 1900 were particularly bold, and won numerous medals.

This vessel, formed of silver, beaten copper, and turquoise, demonstrates how indigenous design became part of the universal vocabulary of design reform at the turn of the century. It is based on a late-nineteenth-century Hupa basket from northern California. To the ordinary viewer at the exposition, much of the delight in this object may have been in the apparent contradiction seen in the transformation of a vernacular object made of humble materials (the basket) into an opulent object of semiprecious materials. Yet the basket, transformed into a luxury object by the creativity of Tiffany's designers, itself represented the highest standards of Native craftsmanship. The form adopted by Tiffany was already an object of intercultural commerce, made expressly for a high-end market and conferring status on its maker, as we have seen in the example of Elizabeth Hickox's basket, above.

Awakening the Senses: The Glasswork of Tiffany and Company and John La Farge

The decorative arts were an area not only of technical and design innovation but also of exploration into the purely sensuous properties of materials. The most advanced expression of this interest concerned stained and blown glass. It is fitting that the two most innovative designers in this area were men who had distinguished themselves in numerous other media as well. Louis Comfort Tiffany crossed the boundaries separating art from craft and painting from decoration. He produced easel paintings, but also worked in metal, mosaics, and glass, introducing rich textures, pattern, and color into unified aesthetic environments. John La Farge was a painter and watercolorist, precociously interested in the optical effects of light and color on the perception of form, before becoming interested in stained glass. Both men embraced "eye appeal" and the affective power of rich, deep color as a foundational element of design. As Tiffany explained years later, "The sovereign importance of Color is only beginning to be realized in modern times .... These light vibrations have a subjective power and affect the mind and soul, producing feelings and ideas of their own."[20] Tiffany credited a trip to Egypt and North Africa with awakening his passion for color: "I returned to New York," he later wrote, "wondering why we made so little use of our eyes."[21]

Both an artist and a businessman who ran one of the most successful companies in the history of American decorative arts, Tiffany made technical innovations that, in tandem with his marketing genius, were widely adopted. An avid traveler, he used his curiosity about other cultures and traditions-from Japan and China to Egypt, the Middle East, India, classical Greece, and Native America; and from Byzantine mosaics to Venetian glass-to fuel his visual imagination. Driving his creativity was a passion for color and light. These two concerns-grounded in the sensory apparatus of the body itself-increasingly characterized many aspects of late-nineteenth-century art. Tiffany's importance extends far beyond the leaded glass lamps, endlessly imitated, for which he is best known. He mastered a number of media (painting and watercolor, ceramic, glass and stained glass, mosaic, and metal) in an era that saw its share of "multimedia" artists. His company won international fame not simply for the extraordinary quality and beauty of its work but for combining handcraft methods with an industrial scale of production and marketing.



Figure 9.1.2.15: LOUIS COMFORT TIFFANY, Vase, 1893-1896. Favrile glass, 9⅛ in (22.9 cm) high. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Gift of H.O. Havemeyer, 1896.

In 1893 Tiffany developed a technique known as favrile (above) in which pigments were swirled into molten glass, making color integral with the glass body, and fusing form and surface in a spectacular harmony. Glass was the very embodiment of colored light, and Tiffany exploited its translucency and its fluid nature to the fullest, with swelling forms gracefully contracting to narrow openings, flaring out and pulled tautly slender. Tiffany handled these materials with a new freedom, technical

innovation, and appreciation for the abstract qualities of light and color that suggest the first stirrings of a modernist sensibility.

Along with his cosmopolitan influences, Tiffany drew from the imagery of a fecund and vital organic world, fitting comfortably within an American context while making its own unique contribution to the international language of Art Nouveau: the "new art" whose swirling, attenuated, and asymmetrical forms found their way into the visual and decorative arts of America and Europe around the turn of the century. The fluid shapes of favrile glass, along with its surface designs, suggest sea forms and flowers, while its iridescent colors recall exotic birds.



Figure 9.1.2.16: JOHN LA FARGE, Fish and Flowering Branch, c. 1896. Stained glass, 26½ x 26½ in (67.3 x 67.3 cm). Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Massachusetts.

Stained glass was an important area of innovation in American design of the late nineteenth century, for both Tiffany and La Farge. John La Farge described stained glass window decoration as "the art of painting in air with a material carrying colored light."[22] Competing for new effects that would express the beauty of colored glass, both artists embarked on a restless search for new techniques that brought them leading commissions and international fame (La Farge received a Legion of Honor decoration from the French government). Their list of patrons was a Who's Who of American business and industry, from]. P. Morgan to the Vanderbilts. The art of stained glass had changed little since its height in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Extending the possibilities of colored light into this medium, both artists developed parallel methods for achieving layered depths of modulated color, and new effects of shading and variegated hue that approximated the complex colors of nature. Both men used a vastly expanded array of colored glass, newly available through industrial methods, blended together to suggest depth and subtlety. Their techniques included incorporating opalescent glass, floating small bits of colored glass between layers (known as confetti), swirling molten glass to achieve rippled textures, and using the leading between the glass as a decorative element in the composition (fig. 10.39). They eliminated techniques that detracted from translucency- such as the medieval technique of painting in details- and they exploited random variations in color density and range to achieve painterly effects. La Farge's sources ranged from Japanese woodblock prints to Chinese Ming Dynasty painting and the monumental figural art of the Italian Renaissance. Flooded with sunlight, the stained glass of La Farge and Tiffany achieved-in the words of one European admirer-an "astonishing brilliance," unrivaled by any other art form.[23]

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9.2: Avant Garde Design

Learning Objectives

- Describe key principles and characteristics of Art Nouveau design, providing pertinent examples.
- Explain the origin of Art Deco design; List key characteristics and features of Art Deco design, providing pertinent examples of architecture and decorative art.
- Evaluate the extent to which Art Nouveau and Art Deco design makes reference to historic design, respectively.

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9.2.1: Art Nouveau

Art Nouveau

by Dr. Charles Cramer and Dr. Kim Grant



Figure 9.2.1.1: **Victor Horta, Tassel House, Brussels, 1893 (photo: Henry Townsend, CC0)**

Victor Horta's Tassel House in Brussels is one of the earliest examples of the Art Nouveau style. Horta designed the building's architecture and every detail of the interior decoration and furnishings, making the house into a *Gesamtkunstwerk*, or total art work in multiple media. The repeated use of organically curved, undulating lines — often called whiplash lines — unifies the design, repeating in the floor tiles, wall painting, ironwork, and even in the structure of the spiraling staircase and surging entryways.

A modern style using modern materials

Art Nouveau artists and designers created a completely new style of decoration, rejecting the widespread nineteenth-century practice of copying historical, and especially Classical and Medieval, forms. While each designer invented their own decorative motifs, organic, often plant-based, forms and the whiplash line became hallmarks of Art Nouveau design, appearing in multiple media and contexts.



Figure 9.2.1.2: **Victor Horta, Horta House, detail of column (photo: public domain)**

Art Nouveau architects and designers also embraced modern building materials, notably cast iron. Cast iron is both stronger and more flexible than traditional wood or stone and allows for much thinner supports, like the slender columns in Horta's own house. Iron support structures also made it possible to create curved facades with large windows, which became prominent elements in many Art Nouveau buildings, including Horta's Maison du Peuple.



Figure 9.2.1.3: **Victor Horta, Maison du Peuple, Brussels, 1899 (demolished)**

An international style

Art Nouveau is only one of many names given to this international fin-de-siècle style, which had many regional variations. The term (French for "New Art") derives from La Maison de L'Art Nouveau, the Paris art gallery run by Siegfried Bing, who was a major promoter of the new style, as well as of Japonisme and the Nabis. In addition to marketing individual objects, Bing commissioned artists and designers to create model rooms in his gallery to display Art Nouveau ensembles that included furniture, wallpaper, carpets, and paintings.

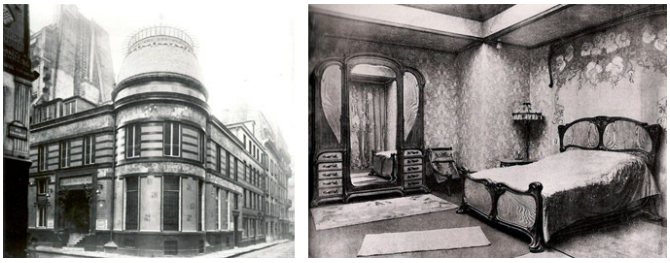


Figure 9.2.1.4: **Left: Siegfried Bing's Maison de l'Art Nouveau, Paris (demolished); right: Eugène Gaillard, Bedroom for the Pavillion de l'Art Nouveau Bing, 1900**

In addition to Paris, major centers of the modern fin-de-siècle style included Brussels, Glasgow, Munich (where it was known as Jugendstil or Youth Style), and Vienna (where it was called Secession Style). Barcelona's Catalan Modernism, especially Antoní Gaudí's architecture and decorative designs, is also closely related to Art Nouveau.

Luxury design for the masses



Figure 9.2.1.5: **Left: Emile Gallé, "Ombellifères" Cabinet, c. 1900, various woods, 40 x 49 ½ x 12 inches (The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York); Right: Emile Gallé, Autumn Crocus Vase, c. 1900, glass, 17 3/8 x 3 ¾ inches (The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York)**

French Art Nouveau was linked to government-supported efforts to expand the decorative arts and associated craft industries. Private residences and luxury objects were the focus for many Art Nouveau designers, including Emile Gallé, who made both decorative glass and furniture. Despite the close association of Art Nouveau with luxury items, the style is also apparent in urban design, public buildings, and art for the masses. Horta's Maison du Peuple was the center for the socialist Belgian Workers' Party, and among the most famous examples of Art Nouveau style are Hector Guimard's entrances to the Paris Metro, the city's new public transportation system.



Figure 9.2.1.6: **Left: Hector Guimard, Porte Dauphine, Metro entrance, 1900, Paris (photo: Chabe01, CC BY-SA 4.0); Right: Hector Guimard, Metro ironwork, detail (photo: Jean-Pierre Dalbéra, (CC BY 2.0)**

Like Horta's designs for the Tassel House, Guimard used cast iron and invented stylized motifs based on plant forms. Industrially fabricated in modular units, the cast iron was relatively cheap, but it was painted green to resemble oxidized copper, a much more expensive material that adds a sense of luxury to the elaborate entrances. The use of modules made it possible to individualize each station while maintaining stylistic unity throughout the city.



Figure 9.2.1.7: **Left: Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, *Jane Avril*, 1893, lithograph, 129.1 x 93.5 cm (The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York); Center: Alphonse Mucha, *La Dame aux Camelias*, 1896, lithograph, 207.3 x 72.2 cm (Library of Congress); Right: Jules Chéret, *La Loïe Fuller*, 1893, lithograph, 123.2 x 87.6 cm (MoMA)**

Art Nouveau designs were also widely visible in the advertising posters that decorated Paris. Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, Alphonse Mucha, and Jules Chéret depicted famous fin-de-siècle performers such as Jane Avril, Sarah Bernhardt, and Loïe Fuller. Their posters stylized the female body and used sinuous whiplash lines, decorative plant forms, and flattened abstract shapes to create vivid decorative images.



Figure 9.2.1.8: **Henry van de Velde, Tropon poster, 1899, lithograph, 44 x 30 3/8 inches, (MoMA)**

In a poster for the nutritional supplement Tropon, Henry van de Velde explored the decorative and suggestive potential of non-representational forms, using the whiplash line to create an abstract design of organic shapes that suggest both plant-like growth and dancing figures in the rising diagonal of repeated forms.

A holistic approach



Figure 9.2.1.9: **Henry van de Velde, Continental Havana Company interior, Berlin, 1899 (demolished)**

Van de Velde worked in many different media, designing buildings, interiors, furniture, and decorative objects as well as posters. In the Continental Havana Company building in Berlin he used sinuous curves to integrate the shelving, doorways, alcoves, furniture, and walls into a unified organic whole.



Figure 9.2.1.10: **Henry van de Velde, Desk, c. 1899, oak, gilded bronze, copper and leather,128 x 268 x 122 cm (Musée d'Orsay, photo: Sailko, CC BY 3.0)**

The English designer William Morris and the English Arts and Crafts Movement that he initiated were a key influence on van de Velde and many other designers associated with Art Nouveau. Morris promoted a holistic approach to interior decoration as well as advocating for the social importance of design and high quality craftwork. In 1907 van de Velde founded the School of Arts and Crafts in Weimar, Germany, which promoted similar values. It later became the famous modern art and design school, the Bauhaus, which maintained the tradition of integrating art, craft, and design for the improvement of society.

Glasgow style

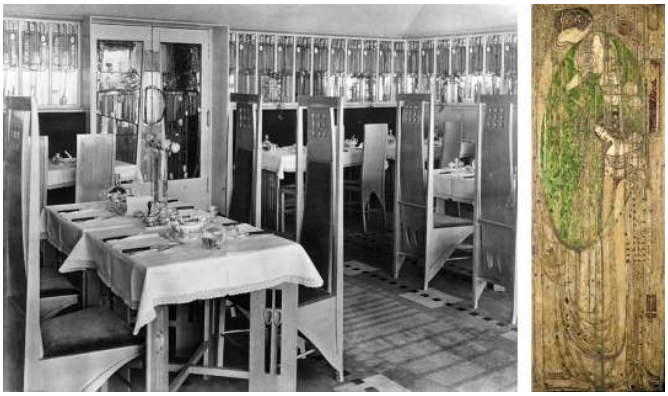


Figure 9.2.1.11: **Left: Charles Rennie Mackintosh, Room de Luxe, Willow Tea Room, Glasgow, 1903; right: Margaret Macdonald, *O ye, all ye that walk in Willowwood*, decorative panel for Willow Tea Room, 1903, gesso and beads on burlap, 164 x58 cm (Kelvingrove Art Gallery and Museum, Glasgow)**

Curving whiplash lines are a common characteristic of French and Belgian Art Nouveau, but architects and artists working in Glasgow developed a more rectilinear style exemplified by the Willow Tea Room. Charles Rennie Mackintosh and Margaret

Macdonald designed every component of the tea room, including the architecture, stained glass, decorative panels, furniture, cutlery, and staff uniforms. In keeping with Art Nouveau artists elsewhere they developed original stylized design motifs based on plant forms, but theirs were rigidly contained within elongated rectangles rather than expanding into supple curves.

Vienna Secession style



Figure 9.2.1.12: **Otto Wagner, Karlsplatz Station, Vienna, 1899 (photo: Böhringer Friedrich, CC BY-SA 3.0 AT)**

The Viennese Secession style also combined strict geometric forms with stylized organic decoration. Like Guimard's entrances to the Paris Metro, Otto Wagner's stations for Vienna's public transportation system displayed the city's modernity and wealth in their iron construction and their luxurious gold sunflower-motif decoration.



Figure 9.2.1.13: **Joseph Maria Olbrich, Secession Building, Vienna, 1898 (photo: Thomas Steiner, CC BY-SA 3.0)**

Joseph Maria Olbrich's Secession Building proclaimed the goals of the rebellious group of artists who seceded from the Austrian art establishment in order to embrace avant-garde modern art. They displayed their work inside Olbrich's building as well as hosting international exhibitions of modern art. The stylized decoration of the building is based on plant forms, while the structure emphasizes the harmonious balance of basic geometric shapes.



Figure 9.2.1.14: **Gustav Klimt, *Choir of Angels* from the *Beethoven Frieze*, 1902, casein, stucco, gold, and semi-precious stones on plaster (Secession Building, Vienna)**

The leader of the Vienna Secession, Gustav Klimt, decorated the interior walls of the main exhibition hall with a long decorative mural dedicated to Ludwig von Beethoven. The *Beethoven Frieze* combines naturalistic representation of the human body, stylized figures, and complex abstract patterns in a variety of materials. Gold leaf and semi-precious stones enhance the decorative quality of the surface, making it a dramatic union of luxurious ornament and figurative painting.

Art Nouveau was fashionable for only a brief period around the year 1900, but the movement was part of a long-term modern trend that rejected historicism and Academicism and embraced new materials and original forms. In the modern period artists and designers increasingly recognized that the health and well-being of society and all its members were supported and enhanced by well-designed objects, buildings, and spaces. The unified designs of Art Nouveau presaged the innovations of the Bauhaus as well as architects such as Frank Lloyd Wright and Le Corbusier.

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Art Nouveau: Historical Influences

Adapted from "Japonisme," "The Nabis and Symbolism" and "The Nabis and decorative art," both authored by Dr. Charles Cramer and Dr. Kim Grant and published in *Smarthistory*, June 14, 2020, accessed December 29, 2025.

Despite its rejection of the widespread nineteenth-century practice of copying historical western forms, Art Nouveau design were distinguished by drawing from historical design in other ways to ultimately create "a completely new style of decoration."

A decorative arts tradition continued in the Nabis

In the 1890s the Nabis were one of the most innovative Post-Impressionist groups working in Paris. They were engaged with the spiritual and mystical concerns associated with fin-de-siècle Symbolism and their embrace of the decorative arts was wide-ranging and included designs for wallpaper, tapestries, stained glass, and ceramics. They illustrated books, created posters, and designed costumes and sets for Symbolist theatrical productions.

Nabi paintings feature a particular quality of abstraction with emphasis on flat patterns and design, and do not allow viewers to get lost in the represented scene and forget that they are looking at colors applied to a surface. Instead, they display the tension between the represented scene and the paint that creates it by emphasizing abstract decorative forms over naturalistic details. This is emphasized in the work of Maurice Denis who stated: "A painting — before being a battle horse, a nude woman, or some anecdote — is essentially a flat surface covered with colors arranged in a certain order."[1]



Figure 9.2.1.15: **Maurice Denis, *April (Panel for a young girl's room)*, 1892, oil on canvas, 38 x 61.3 cm (Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo)**

In Maurice Denis' *April* the landscape and figures are reduced to simple shapes, and the colors are flat and unmodulated. Denis further emphasizes the surface of the picture plane by depicting the distant hills in red tones rather than fading blues to represent the effect of atmospheric perspective.

April was made specifically to decorate a young girl's room, and many Nabi paintings were designed as ensembles for specific locations. The seven-foot-tall panels of Vuillard's *Public Gardens* created a wallpaper-like backdrop for a family's living room. This integration of representational paintings into the decorative scheme of a room was markedly different from the conventional manner of framing paintings as if they were windows onto another world.



Figure 9.2.1.16: **Germaine Boffrand, Salon de la Princesse, Hotel de Soubise, Paris, 1735 (photo: NonOmnisMoriar, CC BY-SA 3.0)**

In embracing decorative painting the Nabis were participating in a well-established French tradition of decorative arts and luxurious artisanal production. During the eighteenth century Rococo paintings were designed as components of multi-media decorative ensembles for aristocratic salons, such as the Salon de la Princesse in the Hôtel de Soubise. In the nineteenth century the most prominent decorative paintings were murals in public buildings. The classicizing public murals of Pierre Puvis de Chavannes were admired by the Nabis as well as by many other Post-Impressionist and Symbolist artists.



Figure 9.2.1.17: **Pierre Puvis de Chavannes, *The Sacred Wood*, mural in the Grand Amphitheater of the Sorbonne, Paris (photo: Sigoise, CC BY-SA 3.0)**

They appreciated the suggestive qualities of Puvis' dream-like images of introspective figures as well as his simplified forms and colors. Puvis' limited range of muted pastel colors imitated the qualities of Italian Renaissance frescoes, and enhanced the flat decorative qualities of his paintings by softening contrasts and eliminating details. The Nabi painters adapted Puvis' decorative approach to modern subject matter and used painting techniques that reflected the innovations of Impressionism and Post-Impressionism in their bright colors, visible brushwork, and surface patterns.

Japonisme: a decorative art fashion

The late-nineteenth century Western fascination with Japanese art directly followed earlier European fashions for Chinese and Middle Eastern decorative arts, known respectively as Chinoiserie and Turquerie. A major supporter of Art Nouveau, the art dealer Siegfried Bing was one of the earliest importers of Japanese decorative arts in Paris. He sold them in his shop La Porte Chinoise, as well as promoting them in his lavish magazine *Le Japon Artistique*, published from 1888-1891.



Figure 9.2.1.18: **Cover of *Le Japon Artistique*, July 1888**

James McNeill Whistler's *Caprice in Purple and Gold* is an early example of Japonisme, a term coined by the French art critic Philippe Burty in 1872. It refers to the fashion for Japanese art in the West and the Japanese influence on Western art and design following the opening of formerly isolated Japan to world trade in 1853. Japonisme coincided with modern art's radical upending of the Western artistic tradition and had significant effects on Western painting and printmaking. In Whistler's painting, a European woman sits on the floor wearing richly embroidered silks like those of a Japanese courtesan while she studies a set of woodblock prints by the Japanese artist Hiroshige. Decorative objects from both Japan and China surround her, including a large gold Japanese folding screen.



Figure 9.2.1.19: **Left: James McNeill Whistler, *Caprice in Purple and Gold: The Golden Screen*, 1864, oil on wood, 50.1 x 68.5 cm (National Museum of Asian Art, Washington, D.C.); right: Utagawa Hiroshige, *Osumi Sakurajima*, from *Famous Views of Sixty-odd Provinces*, 1856, woodblock print, 36.8 x 23.5 cm (The Art Institute of Chicago)**

Japanese woodblock prints called ukiyo-e, or "pictures of the floating world," were a cheap popular art form in Japan during the Edo Period (1615-1868). They were associated with urban entertainment districts (the so-called floating world) in Japan and typically portrayed famous actors, courtesans, and wrestlers, as well as landscape views of well-known sites. Ukiyo-e prints first appeared in Europe as packaging material used to protect valuable imported porcelain objects, but they attracted the interest of European artists and art collectors and were soon imported for their own sake.



Figure 9.2.1.20: **Left: James McNeill Whistler, *Nocturne: Blue and Gold – Old Battersea Bridge*, 1872-5, oil on canvas, 68.3 x 51.2 cm (Tate Britain, London); Right: Utagawa Hiroshige, *Bamboo Yards, Kyobashi Bridge* from *One Hundred Views of Edo*, 1857, woodblock print, 36 x 23.5 cm (Brooklyn Museum)**

In addition to depicting Japanese decorative objects, Whistler used both subjects and compositional strategies derived from Hiroshige's prints of notable views in Japan. One of his most innovative and well-known paintings, *Nocturne in Blue and Gold: Battersea Bridge*, echoes Hiroshige's *Kyobashi Bridge* in

both its nighttime subject and the abruptly cropped view of the bridge in the foreground. The large areas of flat colors typical of Japanese woodblock prints may also have influenced Whistler's simplified forms and reduced color range.

The Nabis were great admirers of Japanese art. They were dedicated to the decorative arts and closely associated with Siegfried Bing's gallery Maison de l'Art Nouveau. In addition to creating paintings, they designed many decorative objects including folding screens and stained glass windows.

Pierre Bonnard, the most Japanese-influenced of the group, created many paintings in sets on vertical panels, similar to Japanese-style folding screens. The influence of Japanese design is very notable in *Nannies' Promenade*, with its diagonal composition and its use of a restricted color range and patterned silhouettes on an expanse of white paper.



Figure 9.2.1.21: **Pierre Bonnard, *Nannies' Promenade, Frieze of Carriages*, 1899, color lithograph, each panel 137.2 x 47.6 cm (MoMA)**

[1] Maurice Denis, "Definition of neo-traditionism" (1890), in Jean-Paul Bouillon, ed., *Le Ciel et l'arcadie* (Paris: Hermann, 1993), p. 5 (authors' translation).

Town Houses of Victor Horta

Adapted from "Major Town Houses of the Architect Victor Horta (Brussels)" from UNESCO World Hertiage Convention

The Major Town Houses of the Architect Victor Horta – Hotel Tassel (1893), Hotel Solvay (1894), Hotel van Eetvelde (1895) and the House and Workshop of Victor Horta – located in Brussels, are outstanding examples of Art Nouveau. These four houses, that bear testimony to the immense talent of this Belgian architect, achieve a remarkable sense of unity with meticulous attention to the smallest detail of the building, from the door handle or bell to the least piece of furniture.



Figure 9.2.1.22: Victor Horta, Winter Garden in the Hôtel Van Eetvelde, 1898 (Wikimedia Commons, CC0)

Horta, one of the earliest instigators, heralded the modern movement of Art Nouveau architecture. The stylistic revolution represented by these works is characterised by their open plan, diffusion and transformation of light throughout the construction, the creation of a decor that brilliantly illustrates the curved lines of decoration embracing the structure of the building, the use of new materials (steel and glass) and the introduction of modern technical utilities. Through the rational use of the metallic structures, often visible or subtly dissimulated, Victor Horta conceived flexible, light and airy living areas, directly adapted to the personality of their inhabitants.



Figure 9.2.1.23: Victor Horta, Winter Garden in the Hôtel Van Eetvelde, 1898 (photo: EmDee in Wikimedia Commons, CC0)

The principle of a double house connected by a glass-covered circulation area is adopted for the Hotel Tassel (Figure 1) and the Hotel van Eetvelde (above). This area, that generally contains a winter garden, is enchantingly represented at the Hotel Solvay, the most ambitious and spectacular work of Horta in the Art Nouveau period. The staircase of its house-workshop is decorated and enjoys this type of particularly elegant arrangement. The interior decors benefitted from surprising inventiveness, with the motifs flowing smoothly from the mosaic floor to the painted walls, including the wrought iron work and the custom furniture.

These four houses revived the tradition of the Bourgeois houses and private mansions of the 19th century, combining residential and representational functions which require a subtle organization of spaces and differentiated circulation. Revisited by the creative genius of Victor Horta, each one of them represents the personality of their owners and forms a coherent ensemble that illustrates the willingness to treat the architecture and decoration as a whole.

Discovering the Origins of Art Nouveau Architecture

by HENI Talks



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9.2.2: Art Deco Design

An introduction to Art Deco

Last updated: 17 April 2024 © The Victoria & Albert Museum, London

Arguably Art Deco – a term coined in the 1960s – isn't one style, but a pastiche of different styles, sources and influences. Art Deco designers borrowed from historic European movements, as well as contemporary Avant Garde art, the Russian ballets, folk art, exotic and ancient cultures, and the urban imagery of the machine age.

One of Art Deco's key sources was its forerunner, Art Nouveau, the fin de siècle style that fell out of fashion in the years before the First World War (1914 – 18). Key elements of Art Nouveau's visual language, such as plant and floral forms, were borrowed and adapted to create an updated vision, as seen in the stylised naturalistic fabric designs of the Atelier Martine.



Dress fabric, Atelier Martine, 1919, France. Museum no. T.539-1919. © Victoria & Albert Museum, London

The more linear, geometric variant of Art Nouveau, such as the work of Josef Hoffmann and Charles Rennie Mackintosh directly fed the Art Deco search for 'modern' forms and decorative motifs. Hofmann's two-handled bowl, a food vessel in gilt brass, with elegant curvilinear handles, inspired many silver designers of the 1920s.



Two handled bowl, designed by Josef Hoffmann, made by Wiener Werkstätte, about 1925, Austria. Museum no. M.41-1972. © Victoria & Albert Museum, London

Meanwhile, the arts of Africa and East Asia provided rich sources of forms and materials. Archaeological discoveries in the early 1920s fuelled a romantic fascination with early Africa and Mesoamerica. The excavation of Tutenkhamun's tomb in 1922 triggered a proliferation of Egyptian imagery such as lotus flowers, scarabs, hieroglyphics, pylons and pyramids.



Furnishing fabric, Steiner & Co, about 1920, England. Museum no. CIRC.668-1966. © Victoria & Albert Museum, London

One of the most pivotal moments for Art Deco (known then as 'Style Moderne') was the Exposition Internationale des Arts Decoratifs et Industriels Modernes held in Paris in 1925.



Woodblock poster, Robert Bonfils, 1925, France. Museum no. E.1200-1925. © Victoria & Albert Museum, London

The exhibition, dedicated to the display of modern decorative arts, brought together thousands of designers from all over Europe and beyond, including Emile Jacques Ruhlmann and Rene Lalique. Both designers were known for their exquisite detail and sense for quality. They became prominent promoters of the early Art Deco movement, putting their own modern spin on traditional craftsmanship.

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Ceylan, vase, designed by René Jules Lalique, made by Lalique glassworks, 1924, France. Museum no. CIRC.755-1969. © Victoria & Albert Museum, London



Dressing table, Emile Jacques Ruhlmann, 1919 – 1923, France. Museum no. W.14:1 to 6-1980. © Victoria & Albert Museum, London

As the 1920s advanced, many designers turned to the new visual language, colour and iconography of the Avant Garde. Movements such as Fauvism, Cubism, Futurism, De Stijl, Suprematism and Constructivism – frequently bundled together under the label of 'Cubism' – were eagerly absorbed by designers seeking to capture the dynamism of the modern world. British and American critics often used the terms 'Moderne', 'Jazz Moderne' or 'Zigzag Moderne' to characterise such work. Geometric forms worked their way into all aspects of life, including everyday small items such as vanity boxes, cigarette cases, and tableware.



Cigarette case, Gérard Sandoz, about 1929, France. Museum no. CIRC.329-1972. © Victoria & Albert Museum, London



Tea service, Harry George Murphy, 1933 – 1934, England. Museum no. M.6 to 6b 1985. © Victoria & Albert Museum, London

The stock market crash of 1929 saw the optimism of the 1920s gradually decline. By the mid 1930s, Art Deco was being derided as a gaudy, false image of luxury. By the outbreak of the Second World War, this hostility had become intense. Despite its demise, however, Art Deco made a fundamental impact on subsequent design. Its triumph is exemplified in Poul Henningse' PH lamp, manufactured by Louis Poulsen, which has been in continuous production with minor modifications ever since it was first introduced.



Table lamp, designed by Poul Henningsen, made by Louis Poulsen, 1927, Denmark. Museum no. M.26-1992. © Victoria & Albert Museum, London

Art Deco's widespread application and enduring influence prove that its appeal is based on more than simple visual allure. Its strength comes from its willingness to embrace the duality of tradition and modernity, marrying luxury and function in a versatile way. These qualities and characteristics can be enjoyed, in their many guises, throughout our collections, from fashion to furniture.

Art Deco in the Home

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From luxury handcrafted writing desks to affordable factory-made tea services, the evolution of the Art Deco movement, and its impact on home style, can be traced in our collections of furniture, fabrics, ceramics, metalware and glassware.

After the horrors of the First World War, furniture designers of the 1920s embraced notions of pleasure, glamour, luxury and escapism. They explored sumptuous surfaces and exotic materials, producing bespoke one-offs for the wealthy few. Emile Jaques Ruhlmann was regarded as a master of high-end, handcrafted interiors, best known for his elegant lines and exotic wood veneers. He referred to his richest creations as his 'precious pieces'.



Table, Emile Jacques Ruhlmann, 1923, France. Museum no. CIRC.364-1970. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London



Writing table, Emile Jacques Ruhlmann, about 1925, France. Museum no. CIRC.363:1 to 5-1970. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London

Ruhlmann was one of the star exhibitors at the 1925 Paris Exhibition, a pivotal event in the development of the Art Deco style. The British contribution to the exhibition was limited, dismissed by critics as 'conservative', however a number of British textile companies were commended for their bright, modern furnishing fabrics, of which the V&A holds many dazzling examples.



Furnishing fabric, designed by W. Herman, 1928, England. Museum no. CIRC.566-1966. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London



Furnishing fabric, designed by Gregory F. Brown, manufactured by William Foxton, 1922, England. Museum no. T.325-1934. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London

Another stand-out British contribution was the shimmering writing desk, designed by British architect and designer, Sir Edward Maufe. The desk is handmade in mahogany with a lustrous white gold surface, exotic wood, ivory, rock and silk details – the epitome of Art Deco luxury.



Desk, designed by Sir Edward Brantwood Maufe, made by W. Rowcliffe, 1925, London. Museum no. Circ.898-1968. © Victoria & Albert Museum, London

At the daring edge of bespoke interior design, the Scandal Relief commissioned by Henry Mond, the second Lord Melchett, for the drawing room of Mulberry House, Westminster, London, made humorous reference to Mond's scandalous sexual liaisons. Designed by Charles Sargeant Jagger, the relief is important for its originality, symbolism and strong design. Along with its companion piece, the Melchett fire basket, it is a rare survivor from a significant Art Deco interior, which was sadly destroyed by air raids in 1940.

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Scandal, bronze relief, Charles Sargeant Jagger, 1930, England. Museum no. A.1:1 to 4-2008. © Victoria & Albert Museum, London

As the inter-war years advanced, emerging technologies and new materials created opportunities for designers to look beyond exclusive private commissions. John Skeaping was one of a number of artists who took an interest in bringing his work to the mass market. In 1927, he designed a series of small deer sculptures for Josiah Wedgwood and Sons.



Figure group, designed by John Rattenbury Skeaping, manufactured by Josiah Wedgwood and Sons, 1927, Italy. Museum no. C.426-1934. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London

The figures were highly successful, as they had broad appeal and their relatively simple forms allowed them to be made in one piece, using an inexpensive technique called slip-casting. This affordability allowed Skeaping's Art Deco aesthetic to enter more modest middle class homes.

In ceramics, Eric Slater's 'Vogue'-shaped bone-china tea sets, manufactured by the Shelley Potteries, were another commercial success. Their geometric form worked with a range of Art Deco designs, however, the novel conical cups and solid triangular handles came in for criticism. Some customers complained that the cups' wide-mouth allowed drinks to cool too quickly, and that they could not put a finger through the solid handle, nor hang the cups for storage.



Vogue, tea service, designed by Eric Slater, manufactured by Shelley Potteries, 1930, England. Museum no. C.159:1&2-2003/C.160:1&2-2003/C.161-2003. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London



Cup and saucer, designed by Eric Slater, manufactured by Shelley Potteries, 1930 – 1931, England. Museum no. C.162:1&2-2003. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London

After the Wall Street Crash, the luxury interior market was hard hit. The demand for inexpensive consumer goods increased, accelerating a move away from handcraft practice towards a modern aesthetic compatible with new materials and industrial production. Denham Maclaren's striking zebra armchair straddled the change. Maclaren made innovative use of industrial glass and metal fittings, but the zebra skin upholstery retains an exotic, sumptuous touch, with the overall effect being playful, almost Surrealist.



Armchair, Denham Maclaren, about 1930, England. Museum no. W.26-1979. © Victoria & Albert Museum, London

Chromed steel, aluminium, mirror, coloured glass and the new plastics – such as Bakelite and Catalin – became the favoured materials of the 1930s, replacing exotic woods, ivory and sharkskin. Inexpensive and adaptable, they could emulate the sensuous surfaces typical of 1920s Art Deco, but were suited to mass production – something that radio designers and manufacturers eagerly exploited. Radios became commonplace in domestic settings and the Art Deco style was popular for these small, decorative items. Bakelite allowed exciting, complex shapes to be moulded in a high-speed industrial process.

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Wireless, designed by J. K. White, made by E. K. Cole Ltd, 1932, England. Museum no. CIRC.755-1966. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London

By the mid 1930s, the increased use of electric convector heaters provided opportunities for modern designers. Charles Barman's eye-catching design has four tiers to deflect warm air down and out. Its decorative effect is dependent not upon applied ornament but on its shiny, reflective surfaces and curvilinear, streamlined form, typical of the Art Deco aesthetic popularised in the United States.



Electric fan heater, designed by Christian Barman, manufactured by His Master's Voice, about 1934, England. Museum no. W.71:1 to 3-1978. © Victoria & Albert Museum, London

As the Second World War broke out, Art Deco furnishings fell out of favour and were replaced by the functional, unadorned aesthetic of Modernism. Preserved within our collections, however, their strength, exuberance, optimism and beauty still continue to captivate the contemporary eye.

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9.2.3: The Chrysler Building (Art Deco)

Adapted from "14.1: The Skyscraper in Architecture and the Arts" in *American Encounters: Art, History, and Cultural Identity* by Angela L Miller, Janet Catherine Berlo, Bryan J Wolf, and Jennifer L Roberts

By the early twentieth century, the skyscraper had already become the preeminent symbol of America's ascendancy As the most conspicuous feature of the new American city, the skyscraper was distinctively American, a form mostly absent from European cities, where the urban fabric dated back centuries. European admiration for these new forms relieved the longstanding sense of inadequacy Americans had felt in the eyes of Europe. Although skyscrapers embodied the modernist romance with aviation, soaring height, and freedom from limits, nevertheless, with few exceptions, American skyscrapers were sheathed in historical forms. The best-known architectural competition of the 1920s-for the Chicago Tribune Building passed over numerous modernist designs submitted by Walter Gropius, Bruno Taut, and other Europeans in favor of a neo-gothic solution by American architects Raymond Hood (1881-1934) and John Mead Howells (1868-1959), complete with a crown-like top, flying buttresses, and piers running the shaft of the building. In the eyes of its proprietors, these decorative details suffused the Chicago Tribune Building with the poetry of history. The moguls of modern media were not quite ready to adopt architectural modernism.

Cultural critics debated both the necessity for the skyscraper and the form it should take. For urban visionaries like Ayn Rand (1905- 82, author of The Fountainhead, published in 1943), the skyscraper was an emblem of heroic will and the ultimate demonstration of modernity's utopian promise. For skeptics like the writer and critic Lewis Mumford (1895-1990), the skyscraper represented a colossal waste of resources and an expression of hubris that would bring countless environmental problems in its wake. In addition, while conforming to the street grid, skyscrapers generally ignored their context, thereby neglecting the social life of public spaces and disrupting older, more use-oriented patterns of movement. Turning their back on the street, skyscrapers instead created fantasy worlds within.

The skyscraper came to symbolize the triumph of American capitalism, as expressive of the era of big money as temples were of the ancient world, or cathedrals of the Middle Ages. The collapse of the stock market in 1929 inevitably brought a dramatic shift in perspective; the New York designer Paul Frankl (1886-1958) proclaimed the Empire State building "the tombstone on the grave of the era that built it." Yet the skyscrapers that redefined the look of the American city were far more than monuments to business and the spirit of commerce. On one level their form was generated by the logic of profit (building up rather than out in the high-rent urban core). Yet in their decorative schemes they represented culture by evoking ancient symbols, distant times and places. Their ornamental details and decorative interiors offered magic carpet rides across time and space. To enter the lobby of a skyscraper from the 1920s or 1930s is to find oneself in a dimly lit fantasy world, surrounded by stylized metalwork and extended friezes in which the forces of nature are displayed in a playful storyline of unfolding life. The imagery of the nation's skyscrapers in the 1920s and 1930s takes in everything, from the underwater world to the heavens, freely associating East and West, past and future, labor and capital, the Greek gods and the gods of commerce. The imagination is transported beyond the flatfooted realities of present-day business and into sensuous realms where chiseled bodies display their gifts, linking business to humanity's oldest urges. Ambition and arrogance are redeemed; the empire-builders of the present day are linked to Prometheus, who defied the gods to bring fire to humanity. The business conducted within is blessed by fleetfooted Mercury, the god of commerce.



Figure 9.2.3.1: **Chrysler Building, photo: David Shankbone, CC: BY-SA 3.0**

Perhaps no other skyscraper has acted as such a springboard to fantasy as the Chrysler Building in midtown Manhattan. Instantly recognizable, the artist Matthew Barney (b. 1967) staged an entire episode of his film Cremaster Cycle (1994-2002) in its interior spaces. Like other buildings of these years, it is tripartite in form: a base of twenty stories with one setback, a shaft that sets back twice before a rise of twenty-seven more stories, at which point the tower begins its inward taper with a cascade of arches in sunburst formation, sheathed in stainless steel punctuated with chevron windows.



Figure 9.2.3.2: **Automobile friezes in the brickwork, photo: cogito ergo imago, CC: BY-SA 2.0**

For a brief period the tallest building in Manhattan, it was soon surpassed by the Empire State Building; together the two buildings still define the midtown skyline. With its stylized eagle gargoyles sixty-one stories up, and its four winged Mercury helmets (the hood ornament on the Chrysler car) at the thirty-first floor, along with a frieze of automotive hubcaps, the Chrysler Building offers a compelling display of urban theatricality, eclectic borrowing, and decorative fantasy from the corporate age.



Figure 9.2.3.3: WILLIAM VAN ALEN, Chrysler Building, New York City, interior, 1928-32. (photo: Tony Hisgett via Wikimedia Commons, CC 2.0)

Its ground floor lobby (above) enfolds the urban voyager in a sensuous realm of exotic woods and Moroccan marble, Mexican onyx, and German travertine, elaborately inlaid in chevrons, zigzags, and other Art Deco motifs deriving from American Indian cultures, while suggesting the global reach of American

commerce. On the ceiling is a mural of the building's construction, full of muscled men. The Chrysler Building is a monument to one man-Walter P. Chrysler- a self-made ·titan of the automotive industry whose first set of tools was enshrined like a holy relic in a glass case beneath the building's spire. Chrysler (1875-1940) was legendary for having demanded-and received-$1,000,000 a year as president of one of the large automotive companies in 1920. The Chrysler Corporation weathered the Great Depression when many other companies failed. Perhaps the Chrysler Building's greatest appeal is that it celebrated individual achievement in the era of big money.



Figure 9.2.3.4: **Detail, Edward Trumbull, *Transport and Human Endeavor*, oil on canvas attached to lobby ceiling, 1930**

Standardization and the mass production of everyday goods lay at the heart of America's rise to industrial preeminence in the twentieth century. Yet it was some time before an aesthetic expression of the new industrial modernity emerged to give American design a distinctive voice. Despite calls for reform during the Arts and Crafts movement of the later nineteenth century, American manufacturers continued to use mass-production techniques to replicate historic styles. Therefore, while America's emerging modernist artists might celebrate the industrial modernity of American skyscrapers and mass production, nevertheless most Americans lived out their lives in late Victorian domestic environments. As late as 1925, Paul Frankl wrote that "we have no decorative art." So poor was the level of American design that the nation was not even represented at the International Exposition of Modern Decorative and Industrial Arts, held in Paris in 1925 (the event that originated the term "Art Deco").



Figure 9.2.3.5: RENE CHAMBELLAN, Chanin Building (Executive suite entrance gates, 52nd floor), 1928. Wrought iron and bronze.

Following this embarrassment, Secretary of Commerce Herbert Hoover created a federal commission to encourage design innovation. The situation turned around so quickly that by 1928 Richard Bach of the Metropolitan Museum of Art could write, "The modern style ... has come to stay." American Moderne, or Art Deco, as it came to be known, was associated with the disjunctive rhythms of machinery and the stylized contours of the urban skyline. Art Deco extended across the decorative arts, architecture, furnishings, and luxury items from cigarette cases to evening wear. Its clean lines, industrial metals, and stylized silhouettes, though often handcrafted, evoked machine fabrication. Considered a masterpiece of Art Deco, the Chanin gates from the Chanin Building in midtown New York City (fig. 14.3) use the stylized forms of Art Deco-spirals, vectors, jagged bolts, zigzags, and concentric circles linked by ray lines that give the design a futuristic look. Organic swirls jostle gear-like machine parts, while the entire gate is supported by spindly stacks of coins, a sly allusion to the money that underwrote the glamorous new modern city and provided the patronage for such buildings as the Chanin and the Chrysler.

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9.3: Women Interior Decorators

Learning Objectives

- Describe the role and function of late 19th- and early 20th-century Anglophone interior decorators.
- Discuss intersectional identity politics as they relate to the beginnings of the interior decorator profession.
- Evaluate the similarities and differences between the early interior decorator profession and our contemporary interior design profession.

The Women's Sphere and Professionalization

Excerpted and adapted from "11.2: Feminine/Masculine-Gender and Late-Nineteenth Century Arts" in *American Encounters: Art, History, and Cultural Identity* (Angela L Miller, Janet Catherine Berlo, Bryan J Wolf, and Jennifer L Roberts CC BY-NC-SA 4.0) with additions by Michelle Ray

The 1890s was a time of rigid gender definition. Since the early nineteenth century, the ideology of separate but complementary spheres for men and women had been an organizing principle of American social and cultural life. As industry displaced artisanal production, and work moved out of the home, the distinction between public (male) and private (female) worlds widened over the course of the century. According to this ideology, men's talents lay in the public realm of business and politics, industry and technology; men were the agents of social progress, of artistic, scientific, and intellectual advance. Women, by contrast, were destined by their natures for the private realm of home and family (see figure below); they were the element that stabilized society through their selfless devotion to aesthetic and spiritual ideals, cultivation of beauty and emotion, and moral elevation- in short, "the higher life." The ideology of separate spheres, complementary and unequal, while elevating women as the "angels" of the household, and as morally refining "procreative" influences, also denied them the power of original creation. Women's role was to reproduce the cultural order. Throughout the repeated shocks of modernization, clearly defined gender roles offered reassurance that the basic arrangements of social life were stable.



Figure 6.1: LILLY MARTIN SPENCER, Domestic Happiness, 1849. Oil on canvas, 55½ x 45¼ in (140.9 x n4.9 cm). Detroit Institute of Arts. Michigan.

Yet the cultural organization of gender difference was increasingly out of step with women's demands for greater self-determination. Middle-class women began to enter the public sphere through the social reform movements of the antebellum era-such as suffrage and abolition. Intensified female participation in the civic sphere during the Civil War demonstrated the power that alliances of women could exert on the moral and social fabric of the nation decades before the Nineteenth Amendment (1920), which gave the vote to women. After the war, growing numbers of women wanted an active part in the cultural, social, and professional worlds of the nation, flocking to universities and newly opened colleges for women, such as Vassar (est. 1865) and Bryn Mawr (est. 1885), as well as art academies and professional schools.

However, female assertiveness provoked a multilayered reaction directed at containing women's claims for public recognition on the same terms as men. While women by the 1890s had gained some recognition of their rights to education, and to professional and creative lives outside their roles as wives and mothers, they faced a range of obstacles beyond institutional barriers.

In late-nineteenth-century society, the nonproductive realms of consumption, aesthetics, and refined perception were considered feminine. Despite a growing presence in the public sphere,

women were still symbolically linked to the domestic realm and to private life, and were thought to have a kind of interiority, or subjective life, suited to the appreciation of art. But this did not mean women were to be accepted as artists; on the contrary, the attributes of an original artist-a pronounced individuality, a 'bold" or daring execution, and focused mental power- were thought to belong uniquely to men. According to this thinking, the qualities that made women good consumers, mothers, and wives-susceptibility and intuition-made them unsuited to creative endeavors- to anything but minor, imitative art. To paint like a man was damning praise, implying that a woman had desexed herself. Narrowly defined by their reproductive function and by their biological rhythms, women who aspired to be taken seriously as artists were accused of betraying their own natures. And their natures denied them artistic genius, which was exclusively associated with male individuality.

Women's attempts at creativity automatically gave rise to assessments that subtly demeaned their efforts while reinforcing men's status as the producers of culture. This gendering of aesthetic worth, as scholar Sarah Burns has pointed out, linked artistic skill to expertise, dispassionate scientific vision, and analytic force. In these decades, style carried deeply gendered meanings for both female and male artists. Men as much as women were defined by these aesthetic discourses, even as they produced them. A more bureaucratic and technologically driven work world compromised men's sense of autonomy in the workplace and control over their professional lives, producing new forms of gender anxiety.

From the late eighteenth century on, artistic women had been consigned to amateur status by their lack of academic training, and their links with such "minor" media as watercolor. Women were also valued as copyists of the Old Masters; lacking in creative ego-so this thinking went- they transmitted the spirit of the male artist in all its unsullied purity. Women's marginalization within the art world resulted in part from lack of access to the institutions of training and the time to devote themselves to art. Still, between 1870 and 1890 the number of professional women artists increased from 414 to 11,000, according to the U.S. Census. Academic training now allowed them to master the technical requirements for making art; European study and travel put the great inheritance of past art within reach of some women with economic means; force of numbers created supportive communities of women artists as alternatives to the social networks, clubs, and student-teacher bonding that helped male artists along the path of success. Women students in Paris submitted works to the French Salon in growing numbers, testing themselves in the most challenging arenas of male artistic professionalism.

Because of its more frequent setting of the domestic world gendered feminine, interior decoration emerged as an acceptable vocation for women. Brigit May summarizes: “During the last quarter of the nineteenth century, many factors, such as greater emphasis on the importance of the home and its decoration, contributed to the separation of interior decoration from other similar vocations. By the early twentieth century, interior decoration as a profession and occupation had begun to gain acceptance in the market place and academic world” (May, 2017).

Nevertheless, the professional status of interior decorator was fraught, charged by its genderization. Grace Lees-Maffei explains: “[I]ssues of professional and amateur status in relation to interior design are intrinsically gendered, within a broader gender divide in the history of design. It was possible for women to earn a living through interior design (and interior decoration), when other design professions were closed to them. The professionalization of interior design involves the granting of professional status to an area of activity usually performed by amateurs for their domestic environments [. . .] To professionalize such an activity is to dissociate it from its amateur and domestic connections through education, the setting of standards and codes of conduct, the granting of degrees and other qualifications and the setting up of trade and professional organizations and related publishing initiatives such as textbooks and trade journals" (Lees-Maffei, 2008) These actions of professionalization have been slow to arise for interior decoration, contrasting with other male-dominated professions: "By the 1880s, doctors, lawyers, architects, and other practitioners of white-collar occupations had come together to organize nationwide professional associations, establish uniform standards, set qualifications for entry into their respective fields, and coordinate training" Lee-Maffei quotes (footnote 29). Indeed architectural training had been formalized since the early 1800s at academic institutions such as the École des Beaux-Arts, “the most important architecture school in the world [in the nineteenth century], not only because it was the oldest but also because the education it offered was so systematic”(James-Chakraborty, 2014).

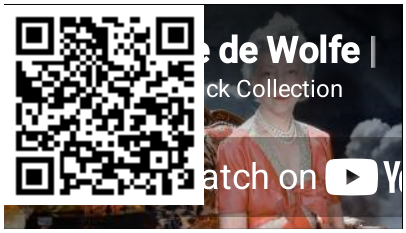
Since professionalization in general was largely restricted to men through the turn of the twentieth century, many women had to self-advocate in the form of published writing in order to establish their professional status across many sectors, including interior decorating and design. American women whose writing and careers were pivotal to the establishment of interior decorating as a profession include Candace Wheeler, Elsie de Wolfe, Nancy McClelland, Dorothy Draper, Sister Parish, Edith Wharton, and Ruby Ross Wood, all highlighted in Peter Dedek's book *The Women Who Professionalized Interior Design* (Routledge, 2022).

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The Rising Need of Interior Decoration

Abridged and adapted from "Chapter 7: Appropriation as a Form of Nationalism? Collective French Furniture in the Nineteenth Century" in *Art Crossing Borders* by Adriana Turpin

Chapter 8.4.4: Victorian Interiors outlined the motives for the nineteenth-century British historic revival trend of collecting French furniture. So far this Chapter 9: Reforming Decorative Design 1850s-1920s has presented criticism of nineteenth-century historic revivals and presented contemporary alternative design movements. This nineteeth-century design debate further supported the emergence of the interior decoration profession. Criticisms of the French style applied in British architectural interiors stressed the vulgarity of French interiors, implying a lack of morality. Thus, when writing about the rebuilding of Buckingham House, Johann David Passavant (1787–1861), visiting London in 1836, commented: "everyone will join in regretting that so much money should have been expended in converting a fine old palace into one, which from the insignificance of its proportions and unimposing exterior does little credit to the taste of the English nation" (p.119). The explanation he gave was that the magnificence of the interiors satisfied the demand of the new king for an opulent and rich setting for his palace.

Such criticisms from the early part of the century were repeated even more frequently later in the century. Influential writers, such as Charles Locke Eastlake in his *Hints on Household Taste*, published in 1869, or Edith Wharton in *The Decoration of Houses*, published some thirty years later, condemned the excesses of French ornamentation or gilding found in contemporary furniture and decoration. As stated in his introduction, Eastlake's (1869) purpose was to improve contemporary design by showing how design should follow function. He argued for chaste and sober forms, "never running into extravagant contour or unnecessary curves" (p. 143). French furniture was the opposite of this notion. Thus, he argued, "that school of decorative art, bad and vicious in principle as it was, had a certain air of luxury and grandeur about it which was due to elaboration of detail and richness of material. Its worst characteristic was an extravagance of contour and this is just the only characteristic which the tradition of upholstery has preserved" (p.55-6).

Writing on the need to reform contemporary decoration, Edith Wharton (1898) also tackled the question of taste, arguing that what was satisfactory depended on the appropriate relationship between the object and the interior (p. 85). In her attempt to reform the interior from the excesses of historic revivals, she brought a different approach from those who, like Passavant, only saw excessive ornamentation in French furnishings. She could be forgiving of French design, but only when used as originally intended: "when the rocaille manner was at its height, the main lines of a room were seldom allowed to follow the capricious movement of the ornamental accessories" (p. 56). As long as the individual piece of furniture was subordinate to the overall decoration of the room, for Wharton the style could indeed be French. In her attempt to reform the decoration of the contemporary interior, she therefore emphasized a new understanding of good taste: that each piece placed in an interior should be considered in relation to its importance to the room as a whole.

Late nineteenth century discourse on interior decoration proliferated in magazine articles such as women's consumer titles, professional art and architectural journals, and trade journals for the building and furniture industries (Aynsley & Berry, 2005) as well as many numerous popular interior-decoration advice books (Sparke, 2003). Sparke (2003) illuminates that "While each individual text had a slightly different agenda, the publications of the 1870s and 1880s on both sides of the Atlantic shared a commitment to the concepts of good taste, good workmanship and the importance of 'art' in the home" (p. 65).

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Case Study Decorator: Candace Wheeler

Adapted from "10.3: Reform and Innovation- Handcraft and Mechanization in the Decorative Arts, 1860-1900" by Angela L Miller, Janet Catherine Berlo, Bryan J Wolf, and Jennifer L Roberts (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0)

The career of Candace Wheeler (1827-1924) -- who was introduced in a previous chapter 9.1.02: American Arts and Crafts Movement -- provides a case study for understanding the context of the professionalization of interior decoration at the turn of the twentieth century. Acclaimed as America's first important woman textile designer Wheeler is credited with being one of the first interior decorators or designers. In 1879, Candace joined with Louis Comfort Tiffany and two others in forming The Associated Artists (1879-83), committed to a new integrated approach to interior design in which all the elements of a room were collaboratively designed to achieve aesthetic unity. Wheeler's own company, formed in 1883 and also called Associated Artists (above), designed some of the most notable interiors in New York City, with a mix of international styles, exotic materials, and sumptuous effects.

Self-taught, Candace projected herself into the forefront of American design in the late nineteenth century. The domestic realm of middle-class women and their traditional needle arts proved for Candace to be a springboard to professional achievement and public recognition. Candace Wheeler was also a thought leader for the professionalization of women in general, as can be evidenced from the article below that she authored in 1895. In this article, Wheeler identifies contemporary challenges to women pursuing the profession of interior decoration that can be broadened to all women seeking professionalization during this time, such as academic education as a precursor to professional status and gender role expectations in social responsibility. She highlights trained, technical skills and learned bodies of knowledge required for interior decoration and emphasizes their necessity beyond the "good taste," also necessary.

Interior Decoration as a Profession for Women

By Candace Wheeler

Originally published in *The Outlook* (1895) and transcribed here from the republication in *The Decorator and Furnisher*, June 1895, public domain.

Possibly there is no profession that, at first thought, seems so natural and appropriate a one for women as that of interior decoration; but perhaps the very appropriateness of it to a woman’s usual capacity may be misleading and mischievous, since it is very likely to prevent the serious and comprehensive study without which no profession can be worthily followed or its practice genuinely respected.

Interior decoration, at its best, certainly demands very varied and exact knowledge. A man or woman may paint pictures or model statues which deal with the emotions of nature or the vicissitudes of life, and the work may be absolutely complete as a picture or statue, appealing to human feeling and gaining entire approval from art lovers, even where the author of it has the gifts or genius of the artist without the wider education demanded by other professions. But the decorative artist must have the artistic gift or ability in all its phases; must understand form, and be able both to draw and model it; must have what is called the *color sense* very highly developed; and, in addition to these gifts and their attendant knowledge, must have an exhaustive familiarity with the literature of the art, and a knowledge of its practice extending back through all the varied styles of centuries and periods and generations.

I am often asked the question, “Is decoration a good field or profession for women?” and I can readily answer, “Certainly it is! if women will educate themselves for it.” But what would you think of a painter who proposed to paint a picture without preliminary training, not only in drawing and perspective, but in methods and mediums? And yet he could do this far more easily, because his work is individual and independent, than the decorator can make a good interior without wide knowledge of well-directed study. And this is because the work of the latter must supplement and follow, must in fact be a part of that of the educated architect.

It is necessary for the decorator to be cultivated in the same line with the architect to properly follow and combine the work; for where the two stand as widely apart as education and ignorance might place them, the work must necessarily be incongruous and unworthy.

Of course I am speaking now of real excellence, of decoration as an *art* and not as a pretty arrangement of curtains, carpets, and furniture, which are more or less in harmony with each other in color, and more or less good in shape, design, and manufacture. This sort of thing means *interior arrangement*, and not interior decoration, or decorative art.

Any ordinarily clever woman can arrange her own home in a way to “make the most of it”; she can bring pictures and books and personal and household belongings into an agreeable *ensemble*; and, if she is blest with what is popularly known as “an eye for color,” she will be able to make a home interior enjoyable to her friends and good to live with. But that is quite another thing from an interior containing treasures of art in every line of human capacity, so disposed of as to make a perfect mosaic of excellence; or even from an interior in which there are a few such things, and which must be on a plane of superiority with a successful effort of the architect.

Every man who builds a house wishes to employ the best architect within his reach or means—the man who knows the

most of his art, and knows how best to adapt it to the particular problem presented to him. If it is a grand house or a small domestic nest, the cleverest architect will make the clearest distinction in his treatment of these two widely different requirements, and he will do it because he is the cleverest man. So the decorator, who follows him in his work, should know how to adapt his treatment to the same conditions.

Now, truth compels me to confess that the man decorator—if he is not a mere man of trade, as many of them, alas! are—will follow the purpose of the architect more understandingly or conscientiously than the woman. Perhaps this is because he is more widely educated, and is less interested in and impressed by individual things; he has less enthusiasm for objects; he feels them less strongly. This latter fact, which should result in an immense advantage to the woman, is an absolute disadvantage until she has learned to generalize and not to particularize; and practical generalization comes from knowledge and training—from power to subordinate things to effects.

There is no doubt that interior decoration is a true field for the woman artist, but it requires the gifts of the artist as well as those of the woman, and it requires much special *training*.

The apparently instinctive knowledge which women have of textiles, and which men have not; the intimate knowledge of the conveniences of domestic life—conveniences which may also be used as factors in a scheme of beauty—are great advantages to women who make this choice of a profession. The difficulty is that it is chosen by many who have not the remotest idea of its ultimate requirements, and who fancy that a little gilding here and there, and a little touch of harmonizing color in curtains and carpets, make up the whole duty and business of the decorator; when, in fact, the real decorator should be competent to compare and apply all the interior ornament of the house; to draw the detail of frieze or cornice or ceiling; to design chandeliers and fixtures; to select and direct the metal work required for chimney-places; the hardware of locks and keys and doors; and the thousand and one details of a house after the work of the architect is completed and it stands, in effect, a finished building.

And when these details are complete, there is the question of color and appropriate decoration for ceilings and walls—for treatment which will distinguish each room and commend it to its own proper use, giving dignity to halls and drawing-rooms, ease and cheerfulness to the family rooms, and the suggestiveness of their several uses to the dining-room and library.

Some of the furniture may have to be designed, and all must be selected to suit the styles or periods indicated by the architect in the fashion of the house, as well as the pecuniary ideas of the house-owners.

It will be seen that here is a large demand for educated ability outside of the artistic feeling, which women are apt to consider the only necessary stock-in-trade necessary for the interior decorator. It is not to be wondered at that this idea that natural good taste is the only necessary equipment of the decorator obtains so largely, because it is only very recently that the thorough decorative artist has made his appearance. Before that the paper-hanger and painter, the cabinet-maker, upholsterer, and the carpet salesman divided the honors between them, and made interiors not always—or perhaps often—to the satisfaction of the refined householder, but quite as good as could be expected without unity of purpose or guiding skill or knowledge.

Now, with the improved results of what are rightly called artistic manufactures, both in wall-papers and general house furnishings, and with the general diffusion of art knowledge, and the instinctive color sense of Americans, many a house is made beautiful by the selection and choice of some one in the family who possesses in a high degree the feeling for harmony and subordination which makes the perfect home. This is what occurs in most homes of moderate cost where the family are characterized by general cultivation; but there are a large number of homes belonging to the “well-to-do” members of society who have none of this general cultivation, and are well aware of their own lack of it. They can appreciate what they see in other houses, but how the result is attained is and remains a profound mystery to them.

Here is the natural field of the woman decorator. The woman with cultivation and taste and an instinct for arrangement, even without special education, is entirely competent for this limited field. But why should she not be educated for wider work, since even this easy duty would be so much more easily and satisfactorily performed with wider and more comprehensive education? The larger always includes the less, and the woman whose knowledge is founded upon principles instead of small facts and experiments does her work far more safely and successfully.

But how to get this wider knowledge is the question; and here comes in a serious difficulty. There is a general want of serious preparation among women for professions of any kind, and this want of serious preparation is caused by sex—by the uncertainty of continuance in any work other than that of general manager of family interests. A girl may throw herself heartily into a profession for two or three years, but just as it is becoming something which requires energy, persistence, and determination, she has to choose between making this difficult road in life, over which she may finally walk in ease and safety, or taking advantage of the safe and accustomed path of wife and mother in the companionship of some one who promises to share with her, and, as far as possible, to lighten all of life’s difficulties.

It is natural and well for her to choose this companionship. The question, as I see it, is not at all of renouncing this natural exercise of woman's ability, but of being thoroughly trained in some one direction, in addition to the natural capacity which every woman possesses for family direction and family life; of being prepared for life's vicissitudes; of thoroughly understanding a subject which, in all its ramifications and enlargements, may make the woman ten times more of a woman even in a purely domestic capacity.

But girls do not often look at the subject in this way. They do not realize the length of life's road, and that, although it may seem to be entirely fulfilled when one enters the gate of marriage, one-third of a woman's life is usually lived after her children are grown up and have taken their place in the world; and that the education and use of the early part of life determine the aspect of this latter third—decide whether it is to be interesting and useful in its relation to the world, dignified and honorable in its relation to the family, or wearisome and dependent to one's self, to the world, and to the family. A capable and growing woman, one who has had the seed of growth planted in her youth by thoughtful education, will find the "latter days" as full of enthusiasm and enjoyment as are the early ones.

We all recognize the detriment to development and character which the expectation of a fortune is to a young man, but we do not always recognize the fact that the confident expectation of marriage operates in the same way upon the development of character in a young girl; it discourages her proper preparation for any other place in life. But since special education and earnest study cannot unfit her for marriage, it seems to me a great misfortune to have it act so universally as it certainly does against the painstaking acquirement of a profession.

This whole subject of professional education among women needs to be much more carefully and thoughtfully considered both by parents and young women themselves, since at present the attitude of the general mind toward it is one of uncertainty and doubt, and tends to make all professional study inoperative and incomplete.

But suppose this question is well settled in the mind of a girl, and she determines to adopt decoration as a profession and to prepare herself thoroughly for it. The next question is: How is she to acquire this thorough preparation? There is no course of decorative study in any of our colleges, as there is of architecture, and no school of art which carries this preparation further than the acquisition of different elements which must be afterward combined in a whole, and carried forward as a whole, if the student wishes to master the art in its entirety.

It is as if a boy who had chosen architecture as a profession could study only certain parts of his profession under competent teachers, could learn the different requirements of construction only by bits, and was obliged to bring them all together and calculate their effect upon each other by experiments, each one of which might exhibit a new and undoubted flaw, for want of the master-teaching which is really so happily within his reach. And yet this is the way in which, at the present time, a woman must study decoration.

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

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10.1: Functionalism 1910s-1940s

Learning Objectives

- Define functionalism, providing examples of functionalist design for furniture, household goods and interiors.
- List the principles of the Modernist movement of the early 20th-century and explain key social factors that led to the formation of these principles.
- Differentiate key characteristics of Modernist design from previous avant-garde movements: Art Nouveau, Art Deco and the Arts and Crafts Movement.

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10.1.1: Peter Behrens and AEG

Adapted from "Peter Behrens, Turbine Factory" (March 7, 2016) by Dr. Elizabeth M. Merrill in Smarthistory, *accessed January 13, 2026*

The establishment and evolution of AEG—the initials for the German Allgemeine Elektricitäts-Gesellschaft, or General Electric Company—was quintessentially linked to the rise of modernism. Founded in Berlin in 1883, AEG pioneered modern, large-scale industrial development. In 1887, having purchased several patents from Thomas Edison, the firm began producing electric light bulbs. Just over a decade later, AEG was not only one of the fastest growing companies in Germany, but a world-leader in the production of generators, cables, transformers, motors, light bulbs, and arc lamps.

How exactly Peter Behrens—a painter turned graphic designer—came to receive his first commissions from AEG in 1907 remains somewhat unclear. But the credentials Behrens' brought to this appointment were substantial, and his success within the industrial powerhouse was immediate. Prior to his tenure at AEG, Behrens had acted as artist-in-residence at the Darmstadt Artist's Colony, headed the Kunstgewerbeschule ("School of arts and crafts") in Düsseldorf, and with Hermann Muthesius, Josef Hoffmann, and Joseph Maria Olbrich, among others, was a founding member of the Deutscher Werkbund (German Association of Craftsmen). In his work in Darmstadt and Düsseldorf, Behrens had advocated for a functionally-guided approach to industrial design.

> Design is not about decorating functional forms—it is about creating forms that accord with the character of the object and that show new technologies to advantage.
>
> -- Peter Behrens

Behrens' first assignment for AEG involved the re-design of arc lamps—utilitarian hanging lamps intended for factories, warehouses, railway stations, and other public buildings. Thus while there was little about the existing AEG lamps that could be functionally improved, Behrens succeeded in formally enhancing them. He made the lamp's joints as few as possible, streamlined their moldings and contours, and adjusted their overall sculptural properties and proportions according to artistic principles. The new lamps were so successful that AEG promptly invited him to design the AEG trademark, as well as its kettles, coffee pots, fans, clocks, a dentist's drill, and even factory buildings.





Figure 10.1.1.1: Left: Peter Behrens, Poster for Allgemeine Elektricitäts Gesellschaft (AEG), 1912 (photo: Tekstman) Right: Peter Behrens, Poster for AEG, c. 1910

Today, the idea of an artist designing commercial, mass-produced objects or housewares is unremarkable. Numerous celebrity designers have product lines with major retailers like Target and Walmart, and as consumers, we are conditioned to look for names and labels. We associate labels with a standard of design and quality, and our fundamental reliance on "name brands" simplifies daily shopping. But this was not yet the case at the turn of the 20th century. The European industrial revolution had led to the rise of the factory and systematized mass-production, and at the same time had contributed to the demise of the artisan and individualized production. Retailers no longer sold what they themselves had produced. Rather, they sold the anonymous, white-label products that had been manufactured in factories and hawked by wholesalers. Thus

when shopping for a kettle, for example, the consumer could find the same, standardized product in a dozen of different stores. But he had no choice in terms of the kettle's design, material, or make. Moreover, because there were no labels or name brands, it was nearly impossible for him to distinguish a good-quality kettle from an inferior model.



Figure 10.1.1.2: Kettles designed by Peter Behrens for AEG, Photo By Christos Vittoratos, CC BY-SA 3.0, https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/inde...curid=32406124

AEG was one of the first major manufacturers to develop a label as a means to distinguish their products from those of their competitors. Beyond this, AEG was the first firm to invest in the art of industrial design. It wanted to sell not only the best-functioning kettles, but also the most streamlined, aesthetically pleasing kettles. AEG changed the nature of mass-production not only in its decision to hire talented artists like Behrens, but also its immense size and ever-increasing economic power.

AEG's introduction of design to industrial production heralded a new age of capitalism. It also created a new role for the artist within the industrial marketplace. According to Behrens, the role of the artist was to give form to the culture in which he lived. In the age of industry and modernization, therefore, the artist was not to replicate historical models and age-old forms, but was to create designs that expressed the spirit and rhythm of the moment. Still, good design was never to sacrifice aesthetics in favor of functionality. This was also the case in architecture. In designing highly functional factory buildings for AEG in Berlin, Peter Behrens chose not to emphasize pure functionalism. Rather, he sought to contextualize his modern constructions within the ever-evolving political and social milieu of early-20th century Europe.

As a self-taught architect, untrained in engineering, Behrens was willingly reliant on the expertise of engineers when it came to the building's materials and structural dimensions, especially turbine fabrication director Oscar Lasche who specified the essential contours of the factory. But as an artist, Behrens was able to give form and meaning to the factory in a way that eluded the engineers. Behrens saw the Turbine Factory as a symbol of modernism, and its attributes of speed, noise, and power. He wanted to make the interior and exterior as simple as possible, and in collaboration with the engineers chose to use fewer, but more massive girder frames than was commonly employed in such a large building. The AEG Turbine Factory was to be a temple dedicated to a new age of production. The classicism evoked in its reinforced concrete, pedimented façade was not of bygone traditions, but a new classicism that expressed the industrial advances that were reshaping contemporary life.

The monumental iconic façade—at the center of which stood Behren's hexagonal logo for the AEG—was also to become the company's corporate face. It is here that we can best recognize how Behrens used symbolically-charged forms to create new functions. In its materiality, the concrete façade serves no structural purpose. But in its mass, it accomplishes what the elongated steel beams of the structure's skeleton does not. The Turbine factory was not Germany's first major iron and glass building, nor was it the country's first industrial construction. It was unprecedented because it served as a cultural icon of modern industrial power. It expanded the realm of the architect's work and established new guidelines for mass-production.

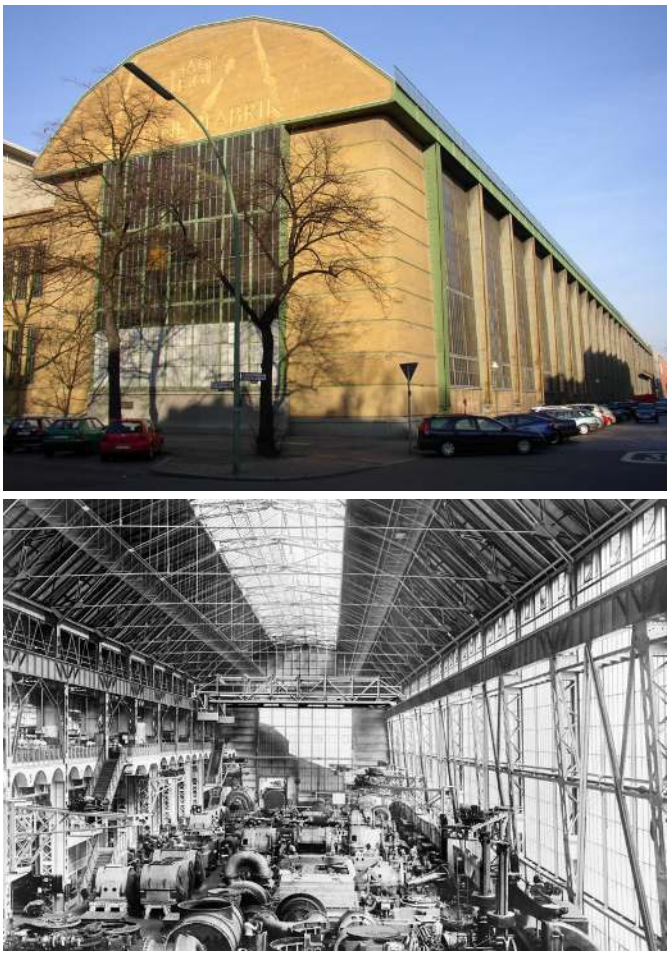


Figure 10.1.1.3:
Peter Behrens, Turbine Factory, built in 1909–10 (left photo: DorisAntony , CC BY-SA 3.0)

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10.1.2: Modernism

Historical context for Modernism

The Modernist movement blossomed in the aftermath of the First World War and the Russian Revolution – "a period when the artistic avant-garde dreamed of a new world free from history and tradition"[1]. Griffith Winton summarizes: "The Art Deco style, which reached its apogee at the 1925 Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Modernes in Paris, gradually waned; its decorative flourishes and emphasis on rich and exotic materials seemed increasingly irrelevant, considering the economic pressures of the Great Depression in the United States and growing political instability in Europe. It was replaced by the ideas of young modernist reformers who believed that beauty need not depend on ornament but could be achieved through the manipulation of form and the judicious use of color and texture, that simplicity and economy were preferable aesthetically—even morally and politically—to the elaboration and extravagance that typified Art Deco."[2] This sentiment also extended to other avant-garde designs from the turn of the century such as those from the Art Nouveau and Arts and Crafts movements-- proto-modern in their rejection of Victorian historicism but still highly decorative. The period between the World Wars saw radical changes in art, architecture and design that came to be characterized as Modern with a capital "M," sharing certain underlying principles: a rejection of decoration and applied ornament; a preference for abstraction; and a belief that design and technology could transform society.

[1] "Modernism." *Explore the Collections from the Victoria and Albert Museum*. www.vam.ac.uk/collections/modernism Accessed 26 March 2026.

[2] Griffith Winton, Alexandra. "Design, 1925–50." In Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History. New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000–. http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/dsgn2/hd_dsgn2.htm (October 2004)

What was Modernism?

Last updated: 17 April 2024 © Victoria and Albert Museum, London

The built environment that we live in today was largely shaped by Modernism. The buildings we inhabit, the chairs we sit on, the graphic design that surrounds us have all been influenced by the aesthetics and the ideology of Modernist design. But what was Modernism?

Searching for Utopia

Modernism was not conceived as a style but a loose collection of ideas. It was a term that covered a range of movements in art, architecture, design and literature, which largely rejected the styles that came before it. The methodology flourished in Germany and Holland, as well as in Moscow, Paris, Prague and New York and was prominent in the years between the World Wars.



Drawing, Edward McKnight Kauffer, 1934, England. Museum no. E.3770-2004. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London

At the core of Modernism lay the idea that the world had to be fundamentally rethought. The carnage of the First World War and the Russian Revolution led to widespread utopian fervour, a belief that the human condition could be healed by new approaches to art and design. Focusing on the most basic elements of daily life – housing and furniture, domestic goods and clothes – architects and designers set out to reinvent these forms for a new century.

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Dell-Lampe Type K, desk lamp, designed by Christian Dell, made by Zimmermann GmbH, 1929, Germany. Museum no. M.27-1992. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London



EKCO AC 74, radio, designed by Serge Chermayeff, manufactured by E. K. Cole Ltd, 1933, England. Museum no. CIRC.12-1977. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London

Architecture and social change

Europe had been ravaged by repressive political structures and glaring social inequalities. Tackling economic inequality became central to the Modernist agenda and many architects devoted their energies to housing. Affordable housing was one of the most urgent needs of the inter-war period. Designers and architects such as Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, Erich Mendelsohn and Walter Gropius developed model housing estates in an attempt to resolve the housing crisis.

In their drive to transform society, Modernist architects set out to industrialise the building process. New construction techniques and the use of materials such as steel, concrete and glass would reduce costs and allow for mass-production.



Design for White City housing scheme, drawing, Eric Mendelsohn, 1934, UK. Museum no. E.677-1993. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London

New technologies

Many artists and architects were intoxicated by the endless possibilities offered by science and technology. They envisaged a world entirely recreated in terms of the machine: everything from clothing to architecture, music to theatre. The house could be a 'machine for living in' and the task of art was 'not to adorn life but to organise it'.



Frankfurt Kitchen (detail), Margarete Schütte-Lihotzky, 1926 – 27, Germany. Museum no. W.15:1 to 89-2005. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London

Henry Ford's assembly lines had inspired the notion that mechanisation would eliminate wasted time and effort, provide high productivity, and help solve the ills of contemporary society. Industry became not only a means to an end, but also an aesthetic. Machines and machine parts were seen as models of functional, unselfconscious design, of beauty without ornament.

Rejection of ornament

So what did Modernism look like? As a design principle Modernism promoted sleek, clean lines and eliminated

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decorative additions that were purely for the sake of embellishment. Out were the frilly fripperies of pre-war styles. This new world would take its cue from technology, factories, practicality and usefulness. Form would most certainly follow function.

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10.1.3: The Bauhaus

The Bauhaus

Adapted from "The Bauhaus and Bau" (April 17, 2020) by Dr. Charles Cramer and Dr. Kim Grant in *Smarthistory*, accessed March 26, 2026 and "Chapter 5.9: Bauhaus (1919-1931) in *A World Perspective of Art History: 1400CE to the 21st Century* by Deborah Gustlin and Zoe Gustlin

After World War I, Germany became a land of the old bourgeois of industrial and militarism caught between Russian Communism and Nazi racism. The old was out, and the creation of new appeared conceivable, allowing modern art and ushered the creation and spreading of idealistic perceptions of art and design foundations. The opening of the art school after World War I was simply known as the Bauhaus. The Bauhaus opened its doors in 1919 and was considered a radical new design school located in Weimar, Germany. Although only open for fourteen years, the ideas perpetuated beyond Germany and influenced many artists and companies.[1] The core principles were a profound conception—reimagining the material world to imitate and create beautiful objects—perhaps an idealistic craft guild. Founded by Walter Gropius, he developed the school's manifesto: The school would be open to "any person of good repute, regardless of age or sex, and even went on to clarify that there were to be 'no differences between the fairer sex and the stronger sex,' in a time when women could not attend college." [2]



Figure 10.1.3.5: Architect: Walter Gropius, Bauhaus, CC BY-SA 4.0

The men of the Bauhaus were all well-known icons of the early 20th-century art scene. The women of the Bauhaus worked alongside the men making groundbreaking designs and have often been left out of written history. Women enrolled in the school and were at first encouraged and then later restricted to pursue weaving instead of the male-dominated painting, architecture, and carving. Still, the women artists persevered and became architects, industrial and graphic designers, and photographers and laid the groundwork, advancing art and design legacy. They demonstrated grit and tenacity, paving the way for other women in the future. The past decade brought forward the women of the Bauhaus as a formative group of artists who were long forgotten with immeasurable lasting effects on art in the last 100 years.



Figure 10.1.3.6: Women of the Bauhaus, Public Domain

The Bauhaus philosophy revolved around an art utopia, an entirely new concept in the art world. The world was in crisis, and Gropius "established a romantic new beginning which aimed to create a new environment and release creative spontaneity in everybody."[3] The school had a prominent pedagogy with the aim of educating the senses. However, the school still adjusted to the outside pressures of the social and political changes in Europe. Although it did not have an architecture department until 1927, the 1919 Bauhaus charter called the “complete building” the “ultimate aim of the visual arts.” Architecture requires a unification of all media, both arts and crafts:

> Let us conceive, consider, and create together the new building of the future that will bring all into one simple integrated creation: architecture, painting, and sculpture

rising to heaven out of the hands of a million craftsmen, the crystal symbol of the new faith of the future.*Translated in William J. R. Curtis, Modern Architecture since 1900 (Prentice Hall, 1996), p. 184.*

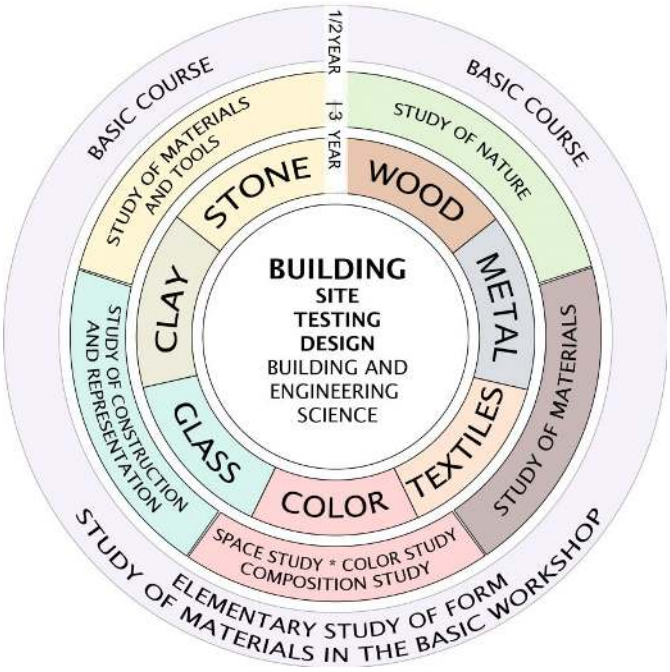


Figure 10.1.3.7: Diagram of the Bauhaus curriculum (image: SuperManu, CC BY-SA 3.0)

In the Bauhaus program of study, diagrammed above as a movement towards the center of a series of concentric circles, all students would start in a half-year or yearlong foundations course in the elements and principles of design, and then each would choose a medium to specialize in: textiles, glass, metal, and so on. The goal was for all of these different specializations to come together in *Bau* or "building," the creation of total designed environments, from the structure, to the furniture and tableware, to the rugs on the floor and the paintings on the walls.

The Haus am Horn

This goal was tested in 1923, when the struggling school was given a state loan on the condition that it prove its worth by showing concrete results in a public exhibition. Part of that exhibition was a conventional display of sculptures, paintings, ceramics, textiles, and other objects produced by Bauhaus students and staff. In addition to this, it was decided to build a model house near the school to display Bauhaus designs in a practical, everyday context.



Figure 10.1.3.7: Left: Georg Muche, Haus am Horn exterior (photo: Sailko, CC BY-SA 3.0). Right: plan (image: socks-studio, CC BY-SA 3.0)

Designed by Georg Muche (oddly, the Bauhaus weaving master), the Haus am Horn is a flat-roofed white cube centered around a living room as the main gathering place for the family. Because it is almost completely surrounded by other rooms, the living room projects above the rest of the house to let in light through clerestory windows. Surrounding it are four bedrooms, along with the entryway, kitchen, pantry, dining room, bathroom, and a small work niche.



Figure 10.1.3.8: Georg Muche, Haus am Horn, living room with rug by Marta Erps and chairs by Marcel Breuer (photo: socks-studio, CC BY-SA 3.0)

All the Bauhaus workshops were involved in the project. The furniture was designed by Marcel Breuer, a student in the woodworking workshop; the rugs by textile students Marta Erps and Gunta Stölzl (who later became head of the weaving workshop); and the lighting fixtures by Lázló Moholy-Nagy in the metal workshop.

Despite the diversity of designers involved, a surprising degree of unity was achieved because every aspect of the project was

based on the basic Bauhaus principles of functionalism and geometric rationalism. Purely “decorative” elements were eliminated for the sake of cost-effectiveness in manufacture, efficiency in usage, and harmony in aesthetics. The straight-edge and right-angle geometry of almost all of the objects, from the walls, to the window trim, to the furniture, makes them all harmonize with one another, as does the largely white and cream color scheme, enlivened with a few quiet colors.

The Bauhaus rejection of decoration did not imply a neglect of aesthetics. For Bauhaus designers, beauty was not something to be added to a functional item in the form of extra frills; instead, it was achieved through careful choices of materials, proportions, textures, and colors for the functional features of the objects.



Figure 10.1.3.9: Georg Muche, Haus am Horn, kitchen (photo: Rainer Halama, CC BY-SA 4.0)

The kitchen is a particularly good example of modern functionalist design. Wall-mounted cabinets are built in over a continuous countertop resting on more built-in cabinets between the sink and the cooker. A large horizontal window brings plenty of light into the room during the day, and all necessary items are available at arm’s reach while standing at the counter.

The faces of the cabinets are flush and smooth, apart from simple projecting knobs; there are no moldings, panels, or decorative elements that would collect dirt. The floors throughout are rubber or Triolin, a linoleum substitute, so that all surfaces are easy to clean with a quick wipe. These features are commonplace today, but in the 1920s dedicated kitchens were rare outside upper class households. Most poor and middle-class people had none of the modern appliances seen here. They cooked on a stove in the living room, and used separate furniture for food storage and preparation, rather than an integrated design of built-in cupboards and countertops.

Bauhaus Designers

Otti Berger

Otti Berger (1898-1944) was born in Zmajevac, Croatia, and enrolled in the Royal Academy of Arts and Crafts before continuing her studies at the Bauhaus in 1926. Heralded as one of the "most talented weavers," Berger started "experimenting with methodology and materials during the course of her studies at the Bauhaus to eventually include plastic textiles intended for mass production."[4] She continually developed an expressive approach to weaving, creating masterpieces, and pushing back on the idea it was women's work. Berger assumed the position as the head of the department in weaving after Stölzl abdicated the seat. The sample textile book (5.9.10) is a collection of Berger's best weaving from her time at the Bauhaus. She wove many different patterns using mercerized cotton and synthetic dyes, demonstrating the loom was not just a tool to produce a woven textile.



Figure 10.1.3.10: Textile book samples (mid-1930s, cotton, 9.5 x 24.2 cm) CC0 1.0

Her Book (5.9.11) is a weaving spectacular with a herringbone pattern in two different directions in three different colors. In 1932 Berger opened her textile factory in Berlin and worked until she was shut down by Nazi rule as she was Jewish. To escape the Nazi regime, she applied for a visa to relocate to Chicago and join the New Bauhaus School in Illinois. Her application stalled; she was arrested in Berlin and taken to Auschwitz, where she was killed in 1944. Berger's weavings live on in several collections around the world.



Figure 10.1.3.11: Book (1935, cotton, 14 x 22.9 cm) CC0 1.0

Anni Albers

Anni Albers (1899-1994) was a German artist who studied painting from an early age and entered the Bauhaus in 1922. Although interested in painting, she was required to take a weaving class and began experimenting with materials from other workshops—predominantly geometric design work. Becoming a quick master of the loom under Gunta Stölzl, Albers established an unusual graphic vocabulary of geometric designs consisting of cellophane, copper, and nylon, in addition to the usual weaving materials. She often looked to her colleague Stölzl for inspiration and technical advice and eventually succeeded her as Director of the weaving workshop. Albers met her husband at the school, and when the Nazis forced the Bauhaus to close in 1933, the Albers moved to North Carolina and taught at the Black Mountain College, of the many "new Bauhaus's" in the United States. By 1949, Albers was the first woman artist to have a solo weaving show at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City. Albers argued for the need for craft-based design. She encouraged designers to become familiar with the fibres and textures which would be used and not to think of design solely in terms of linear patterns.

While at the Bauhaus, Albers focused on experimental materials to use on the looms and discovered how sound was absorbed and the light was reflected on a cotton/cellophane curtain. In Design for a wall hanging (below), Albers created miniature gouache paintings drawing the design she would weave on the loom. The striking design is geometric and picturesque, using only a few colors with yellow dominating, the grey and green which are complementary colors.



Figure 10.1.3.12: Design for wall hanging (1925, gouache on paper, 33.5 x 26.5 cm) CC BY-SA 2.0

Gunta Stölzl

Gunta Stölzl (1897-1983) was born in Munich, Bavaria, and is known as a textile artist and facilitated the development of the weaving workshops at the Bauhaus. In 1919 she worked to become the director of weaving at the school and mentored students in the shop during her tutelage. During Stölzl's first year, she began to refer to the weaving workshops as the "women's department" due to the gender roles within the school. [5] Immediately seen as a leader, she began to highlight artistic expression in weaving, developing new techniques and processes elevating the craft to fine art.

Stölzl even reopened the abandoned dye studios utilizing the many colors and synthetic materials available, creating stunning weavings. Implementing math and geometry classes into the program, students experimented with the fabric, color, light refraction, and sound absorption. Breuer designed the Marcel Breuer Chair (below), and Stölzl wove the backrest and seat cushion.



Figure 10.1.3.13: Marcel Breuer chair (1922) CC BY-SA 3.0

Using the traditional Bauhaus color scheme, she incorporated the fabric into the design giving it more significance than a conventional seat cover. Five years later—Tapestry was woven—showcasing her remarkable talent (below). The complex piece is expertly woven in multiple directions and colors, providing interest in all areas of the tapestry. The centerpiece is a linear alignment of similar hues of red with a complementary shade of green squares. The rolling "hills" anchor the centerpiece with similar colors. Stölzl wove for decades after the Bauhaus creating a fantastic body of textile art.



Figure 10.1.3.14: Tapestry (1927) CC BY-SA 2.0

Margarete Heymann

Margarete Heymann (1899-1990) was a German ceramic artist and studied at the Bauhaus in her early life. She was guided toward the weaving workshop, refusing to follow her female peers, and moved into the ceramics workshop. Surviving a year in the all-male-dominated workshop, she left and started a ceramic workshop. Designing angular objects painted with colorful glazes, their company employed over 120 artists, and Heymann's ceramics were a quick hit selling in shops in Europe and the United States. Porcelain (below) is a beautiful example of a newly designed teapot in a vivid teal glaze. The unique circular teapot is a playful design that many people thought was a revolution in purpose.

Unfortunately, Heymann's husband and brother were killed in 1928, leaving her with young children and running a company. By 1931, sales began to drop off with the political atmosphere in Germany. She sold the company in 1934 and fled to England to escape Jewish persecution devoting the rest of her life to Greta Pottery, a new company. Refusing to live by the rules, she was a shooting star at the Bauhaus, lasting one year; however, it profoundly impacted her life. "It is tempting to think that all a successful designer needs are talent and determination. But they're not enough when gender, geography, genre, and timing conspire against you, as they did for Margarete Heymann."[6]



Figure 10.1.3.15: Porcelain (1930) CC BY-SA 3.0

[1] 10 Bauhaus principles that still apply today. https://art.art/blog/10-bauhaus-principles-that-still-apply-today

[2] Billard, J. (2018). The other art history: the forgotten women of the Bauhaus. https://www.artspace.com/magazine/ar...-bauhaus-55526

[3] Fiedler, J. (2006). Bauhaus. Konemann. (p. 19).

[4] Weibel, P. (2005). Beyond art: a third culture. A comparative study in cultures, art and science in 20th century Austria and Hungry. Vienna: Springer-Verlag.

[5] Weltge, S. (1993). Bauhaus textiles: women artists and the weaving workshop. Thames and Hudson.

[6] Rawsthorn, A. (2009). A distant Bauhaus star. The New York Times. https://www.nytimes.com/2009/11/02/arts/02iht-design02.html

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10.1.4: Domestic life in a Modern world

Domestic life in a Modern world

Last updated: 17 April 2024 © Victoria and Albert Museum, London

The radically new Modernist architecture led designers to re-consider virtually every aspect of the interior, from the arrangement of walls and furniture to the choice of lighting and tableware.

Rethinking the kitchen

In some instances, entire rooms were re-imagined. The kitchen, for example, became a laboratory for rational, well-thought-out use of space, a domestic workspace in which the housewife could cook, wash, iron and clean efficiently.

In 1927, Austrian architect Margarete Schütte-Lihotzky (known as Grete) was helping to build housing projects as part of the Municipal Building Department in Frankfurt, Germany. The aim of the vast project was to standardise building elements and mechanise all construction. This applied not only to the exterior construction but to the interiors as well. An effective kitchen, for instance, would reflect an organised and rational domestic interior.

Lihotzky's Frankfurt Kitchen was not the first ever fitted kitchen but it was the first to be made in mass quantities. It became the most successful and influential kitchen of the period.



Frankfurt Kitchen (detail), Margarete Schütte-Lihotzky, 1926 – 27, Germany. Museum no. W.15:1 to 89-2005. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London

Efficiency was key to the design. The housewife's movements and patterns as she circulated around the kitchen had been tracked and analysed. Each element of the kitchen was measured in relation to others in order to minimise unnecessary steps and therefore save labour. A large window and moveable overhead lamp provided generous light. The drop-down ironing board and slatted dish rack positioned over the sink added to the efficient layout. Eighteen aluminium storage containers with pouring spouts at the back allowed easy access to flour, sugar, rice, and other dried goods (no need to open a cupboard), and the refuse bin was built into the wall with access on both the kitchen side, for disposal, and on the hall side for rubbish removal.

Hygiene was also paramount. The kitchen was separated from the dining area because at the time it was deemed unhealthy to have an 'eat-in' kitchen. Cupboards and counters were painted blue in the belief that flies would be discouraged from landing on their surfaces. Lihotzky also recommended oak wood to repel mealworms, and utilised raised concrete plinths to avoid dirt-catching and insect-attracting nooks and crannies.

Ten thousand of these kitchens, made in three sizes to fit different flats, were produced. Although reception was mixed (some women felt that rather than easing their burden, the small space cut them off from the rest of family life) the influence the kitchen had on interior design was immense.

Domestic household goods

While kitchen design was being streamlined, other household goods were scrutinised in an effort to modernise the home. Architect Bruno Taut urged householders to 'get rid of everything that is not essential for living'. Although not all wanted (or could afford) to follow this injunction, a new product market did evolve, reflecting Modernism's 'rational' vision of the home. These Modernist products were described as 'household equipment'.

Lighting the way

Following architect Walter Gropius' adage to 'return to the heart of things', designers stripped away the ornament from household goods to return them to their functional core. Lighting, for example, was an essential tool for home and office. Functional yet expressive lamps such as Wilhelm Wagenfeld's Table Lamp MT8/ME2 were exhibited extensively by the Bauhaus in 1924. Wagenfeld had apprenticed as a silversmith before studying at the Bauhaus Metal Workshop. He went on to become a highly popular and successful designer of metal and glassware. The Table Lamp MT8/ME2 was notable for its translucent glass globe, which provided both ambient light and direct light for reading – but its high price put it out of reach of many would-be buyers.



MT8, table lamp, Wilhelm Wagenfeld, about 1924, Germany. Museum no. M.28&A-1989. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London

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Homeowners and business-owners were looking for lighting that was not only reasonable and pragmatic but was also stylish. The PH lamp, developed by Poul Henningsen, was prized for its three tiered, moulded opalescent glass shades predicated on mathematically determined curvatures. These shades provided the maximum amount of light without shining into the eyes of the user. Danish designer Henningsen, who had trained as both a mechanical engineer and architect, made no less than 40 versions of the PH lamp, in wall-mounted, standing, and hanging styles.



Table lamp, designed by Poul Henningsen, made by Louis Poulsen, 1927, Denmark. Museum no. M.26-1992. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London

Versatility was also prized among Modernist designers. Produced in 1930 by master craftsman Christian Dell, the Dell-lamp type K was a characteristic feature of many middle-class houses, apartments and housing estates across Germany. Made of lacquered steel, nickelled brass, cast iron and 'ebonite' (very hard rubber), the Dell-lamp possessed an ingenious structure that allowed it to be fully adjustable. The lamps were advertised as having 'functional form and the lightest, most extreme adaptability'. In 1931, Richard D. Best of Birmingham produced a similar lamp, the Bestlite, which became a feature of the British Modernist interior throughout the 1930s.



Dell-Lampe Type K, desk lamp, designed by Christian Dell, made by Zimmermann GmbH, 1929, Germany. Museum no. M.27-1992. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London

Plastics enter the home

Machine-made and purely functional goods, however, also needed to perform a 'psychological' function in the home. A pleasing surface treatment, elegant form and smooth contour would elevate an object from simply 'fit-for-purpose' to a satisfying and agreeable home addition.

In the 1930s, plastic was quickly recognised as a structural material with inherent qualities that would make it suitable for many common objects, such as radio cases and cigarette boxes. When Bakelite (phenol formaldehyde) was introduced, the rangebound aspects of wood were replaced by the limitless possibility of this new, mouldable material.

Radio emerged, after the First World War, as a new industry with rapidly expanding devotees. The earliest receivers resembled scientific instruments, but by the 1930s, plywood casings gave way to the 'moderne' (later Art Deco) sophistication of plastics.



Ekco AD-65, wireless, designed by Wells Wintemute Coates, made by E.K.Cole Ltd, 1932, Uk. Museum no. W.23:1-1981. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London

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The quintessential curves made available by plastic can be seen in Wells Coates' AD-65 wireless, made entirely from Bakelite for Ekco Radio, and the Model EC 74 radio produced by Serge Chermayeff, one of the interior designer industry's leading figures. Although at first consumers considered Bakelite an inferior substitute for wood, these innovative designs became immensely popular with the buying public.



EKCO AC 74, radio, designed by Serge Chermayeff, manufactured by E. K. Cole Ltd, 1933, England. Museum no. CIRC.12-1977. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London

Daily life

The new media of radio and sound cinema, as well as powerful advertising campaigns, enticed the public to embrace the message of modernity as progress.

Considering that mass production (and mass consumption) was a central tenet of Modernist thought, what better way to promote these ideals than with the everyday objects used in the home? Many designers chose to focus on furniture but a few turned their attention to the smaller household items such as tea sets, appliances and ashtrays.



M.73A-1988, Marianne Brandt, 1924, Germany. Museum no. M.73-1988. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London



Tea pot, Naum Slutzky, 1928, Germany. Museum no. CIRC.1232-1967. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London

In these items, the symbolic rigours of practicality, efficiency, rationalism and functionalism are softened. The aesthetic of the machine gives way to a more humanist tendency. Although they still represent a cultural shift in tone towards the functional organisation of design, the artist's hand in these objects is still present.



Savoy, vase, designed by Alvar Aalto, manufactured by Karhula. Museum no. C.226-1987. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London

The sophisticated Modern home

Last updated: 17 April 2024 © Victoria and Albert Museum, London

The V&A's furniture collection contains an array of items once coveted by homeowners who were searching for timely, elegant and most importantly, Modern, design.

Penguin Donkey bookcase, 1939

In the late 1930s, the Penguin Donkey bookcase by Egon Riss was set to be a best seller, but its success was thwarted by the onset of war. Now it is a rare object.

It was made by Isokon, probably the most forward-thinking British furniture manufacturer of the 1930s. Its founder, Jack

© All Rights Reserved

Pritchard, worked with the leading modernist designers and architects of the day to produce what have become design classics, such as Marcel Breuer's famous Long Chair.



Penguin Donkey, bookcase, designed by Egon Riss, manufactured by Isokon Furniture Company, 1939, UK. Museum no. W.19:1 to 3-1993. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London

Isokon furniture exploited the strength and lightness of bent plywood, and the Donkey is no exception. It was named the Donkey because of its organic, curvilinear shape with four legs and two 'panniers'. Books were stacked in the panniers while the space between them could be used for magazines and newspapers.

The Donkey impressed Allen Lane, the publisher of Penguin paperbacks. This new type of paperback book was the first reasonably priced, best-quality, international literature made available to a wide public – for the price of a pack of cigarettes. Lane inserted 100,000 leaflets for the bookcase into Penguin books, and the newly renamed Isokon Penguin Donkey looked set to be a great success. Unfortunately the Second World War broke out at exactly the time that the Donkey was launched, causing production to cease. Only about a hundred Donkeys were made.

The Penguin Donkey, however, has been reinvented several times. In 1963 Pritchard sold a new version ('Mark 2'), revised by the well-known designer Ernest Race, and in 2003 Isokon's successor firm, Isokon Plus, began making the Donkey 3, designed by Shin and Tomoko Azumi.

Drinks Trolley, 1938 – 9

The 1930s were a time of great change in society, art and design – nowhere more so than in central Europe. Modernism, inspired by the teachings of the Bauhaus design school, had become in vogue. Self-contained bar cabinets, or drinks trolleys, became a fashionable item of furniture because they were both functional and portable, and could be rearranged to suit open-plan living accommodations.

In about 1938, Eugene Schreiber, a timber merchant, and his wife, Elizabeth, commissioned a young designer, Zsuzsa Kozma, to re-design the living room of his family's flat in Budapest, Hungary. She was the daughter of an eminent Hungarian architect, designer and writer Lajoz Kozma and at this time, aged only 26, she worked in her father's office. The living room she designed for the Schreibers included a divan, chairs, a number of fitted units, and a drinks trolley. What was not built-in was easily moved, ensuring the room was open and flexible, in keeping with modernist principles.



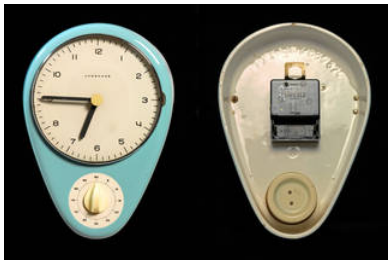
Drinks trolley, Zsuzsa Kozma, 1938 – 9, Hungary. Museum no. W.21-1997. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London

The trolley has various folding and cantilevering elements, which contribute to its architectural and sculptural features. It was its portability, however, that saved it from potential ruin. Due to the political and social tumult in Hungary at the end of the Second World War, the Schreibers emigrated to England. Most of the built-in contents of the flat were abandoned but the drinks trolley came with them. Zsuzsa Kozma emigrated further, settling in Australia with her husband, where she anglicised her name to Susan Orlay and continued to design interiors.

Irradiation Lamp and Kitchen Clock, 1951 and 1956

After the Second World War, a new school devoted to the rebuilding of Germany was formed in Ulm. The school shifted its focus to experimental design and became the figurehead of Western German modernism, and was often referred to as a 'new Bauhaus'. Swiss artist, designer and architect Max Bill became its Director. Bill was a former Bauhaus student and one of the most significant figures in post-war industrial design.

The irradiation lamp and kitchen clock Bill designed were some of the earliest and most notable objects put into production. Everyday objects (kitchen appliances, audio visual equipment, tools, shelving etc) were a central focus for the work of Ulm designers, who promoted 'moral purpose through design' and 'good form'.



Kitchen wall clock, designed by Max Bill and Ernst Moeckl, manufactured by Junghans, 1956, Germany. Museum no. M.224-2007. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London

The lamp consists of two identical cones of metal sheeting, one to house the lamp and the other the adaptor, with a flexible 'goose-neck' tube connecting them, which would act as a carrying handle. The clock is moulded in an inverted, triangular 'V' shape and incorporates a mechanical timer. The Ulm school's achievements in industrial collaboration with companies such as Junghans (who manufactured the clock) and Braun produced an

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enduring legacy of modernist product design that was highly influential around Europe.



Irradiation lamp, designed by Max Bill, manufactured by Novelectric A.G., 1951, Switzerland. Museum no. M.27-2008. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London

These examples of what was to be known as 'rational modernism' were unique and wholly unlike other post-war philosophies such as the more streamlined styling of American design. The strict tenets of Modernism, however, would soon be forced to adapt to a Cold War world, and enter a historic and radical phase of modern design.

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10.2: Modern Chair Design 1920s-1960s

Learning Objectives

- Explain the significance of chair design to the Modernist movement, providing key examples.
- List key design characteristics that place certain chair designs into the Modernist movement.
- Identify the changes in post-war Modernist design and explain why these shifts occurred.

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10.2.1: Take a seat - a story of Modernism in three chairs

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Last updated: 17 April 2024

How often do you think about the chairs you sit on? In Modernist circles, the chair represented a particularly important and popular design challenge. This was partly because the new interiors of the time required suitable furniture, but also because the poor economic climate during the inter-war years led many architects to pursue other opportunities to gain clients.

Literally hundreds of architects and designers produced chairs. In their shiny, chromed surfaces and mechanistic, hygienic appearance, these chairs declared the radical nature of the new interior.

Chairs at the V&A span the length and breadth of Modernist design and epitomise the era's vast and wide-ranging contribution to modern seating.

Model B3 Chair – Marcel Breuer

This chair – one of the first to be made of tubular steel – is regarded by many as the most important piece of furniture of the 20th century. Known as the Club Chair and later as the Wassily, the B3 was designed by the Hungarian-born Marcel Breuer. In 1925, after four years of studying at the Bauhaus in Germany, Breuer was appointed master of the school's furniture workshop, aged 23.



Figure 10.2.1.1: Club chair model B3, armchair, designed by Marcel Breuer, manufactured by Standard-Möbel, 1925 – 26, Germany. Museum no. W.2-2005. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London



Figure 10.2.1.2: Club chair model B3, armchair, designed by Marcel Breuer, manufactured by Standard-Möbel, 1925 – 26, Germany. Museum no. W.2-2005. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London

Breuer became interested in finding ways in which new materials could be used in the design of furniture suited to modern life. The B3's metal frame was inspired by a bicycle frame, and the use of tubular steel allowed the minimum use of material to achieve maximum strength. This breakthrough would inspire other architects and designers to experiment with two-legged chair design.



Figure 10.2.1.3: Club chair model B3, armchair, designed by Marcel Breuer, manufactured by Standard-Möbel (details), 1925 – 26, Germany. Museum no. W.2-2005. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London

Model MR20 – Ludwig Mies van der Rohe

Mart Stam is credited with developing the first cantilevered chair, that is, a chair devoid of back legs that relies solely on the strength of its tubular steel front legs. The invention of a chair that had a 'floating quality' and apparently defied gravity fit perfectly with Marcel Breuer's initial notion that the modern chair should make one feel as if sitting "on a resilient column of air".



Figure 10.2.1.4: MR20, armchair, designed by Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, manufactured by Thonet, 1927, Germany. Museum no. CIRC.861-1968. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London

Mies van der Rohe, one of the most important figures in Modern architecture and the originator of the phrase 'Less is More', patented this curvilinear cantilevered chair model. The grace and elegance of the chair gave it instant appeal.



Figure 10.2.1.5: MR20 (details), armchair, designed by Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, manufactured by Thonet, 1927, Germany. Museum no. CIRC.861-1968. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London

Mies van der Rohe was vice president of the Deutsche Werkbund, an association of artists, designers and architects who worked in partnership to create furniture and architecture using mass-production techniques. Their influential exhibition 'Die Wohnung' (The Dwelling), in 1927 included the beautifully

proportioned MR chair. It has remained in production to this day.

Paimio Armchair – Alvar Aalto

From the 1930s onward, the proliferation of steel furniture led to a backlash by designers against, as Mart Stam decried, the overcomplicated 'steel macaroni monsters'. Plywood regained prominence, as did softer, more natural influences.



Figure 10.2.1.6: Paimio armchair, designed by Alvar Aalto, manufactured by Huonekalu-ja Rakennustyötehdas Oy, 1930, Finland. Museum no. CIRC.861-1968. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London

Designer Alvar Aalto moved away from the functional, rational coldness of metal and adapted a more human-centred approach to seating design. The Paimio armchair, built for use in the Paimio sanatorium that Aalto had also designed, used bent laminated birch wood and bent plywood to allow tuberculosis patients to rest comfortably and breathe more easily. The organic, scrolling nature of the wood shows Aalto's masterly skill in moulding the material.



Figure 10.2.1.7: Paimio armchair, designed by Alvar Aalto, manufactured by Huonekalu-ja Rakennustyötehdas Oy, 1930, Finland. Museum no. CIRC.861-1968. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London

Aalto's bentwood furniture had a great influence on the American designers Charles and Ray Eames and the Finnish-born Eero Saarinen.



Figure 10.2.1.8: armchair (details), designed by Alvar Aalto, manufactured by Huonekalu-ja Rakennustyötehdas Oy, 1930, Finland. Museum no. CIRC.861-1968. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London

Late-Modern chair designers, often obsessed with producing one-piece moulded furniture, continued to explore steel and plywood frames, and were helped by the introduction of fibreglass and plastics. Breuer, Mies van der Rohe, Charles and Ray Eames and others, carried on producing some of the finest examples of modern seating design, several of which are in the collection.

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10.2.2: Modernism and the natural world - the designs of Alvar and Aino Aalto

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Last updated: 17 April 2024

Modernism is often reduced to a set of principles that emphasised strict geometry, a lack of ornament and the triumph of machine-made construction. Nature and the natural world seemed to have no place in this formal, functional landscape. Finnish designer and architect Alvar Aalto, however, together with his wife Aino, advanced the notion that human emotion and natural forms could be used as a source of organic architecture and design while also remaining rationally and structurally modern.

Alvar Aalto was a giant of the Modernist scene, without ever abiding by the strict rules of high Modernism. Brought up amidst a stark Finnish forest landscape, he grew to consider nature unforgiving as well as nurturing. His design for the Paimio Sanitorium – an isolation hospital for tuberculosis patients in the forest east of Turku, southwest Finland – is considered a pinnacle of International Modernism, and "one of the most impressive buildings of the 20th century" (*Architectural Digest*).



Chair, designed by Alvar Aalto, manufactured by Huonekalu-ja Rakennustyötehdas Oy, 1932 – 3, Finland. Museum no. W.39-1981. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London

The Sanitorium's connection to nature is twofold: first, nature is understood to be hygienic and health-giving – patients were able to rest on sun-drenched balconies and roof terraces. Second, the facility's furniture, all of which was crafted by Aalto and his first wife Aino, was made specifically to provide a degree of comfort to those ailing from a pulmonary disease. Tubular steel was a signature design material for Modernists, but in the Sanitorium, Aalto returned to the warmth and comfort of wood. His pleasing, wood-based furniture was full of undulating lines without the outward appearance of 'mass production' because, as he insisted, "the process of mechanisation, having been the prime cause of change in society, now threatens to smother its initial objective".

Aalto's inpsiration

In 1927 Aalto had ordered many pieces of metal furniture designed by Marcel Breuer for his own house. Aalto quickly saw the limitations of these metal chairs: their ease in transmitting heat and cold, their harsh reflective surfaces, and their lack of comfort. The following year Aalto designed his first cantilevered chair, made from tubular-steel legs, but with the addition of a plywood seat.



Model B32 chair, Marcel Breuer, 1928, Germany. Museum no. W.10-1989. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London

Adding bentwood strips of plywood to the design marked a transition between Aalto's attempts to create cantilevered chairs with tubular-steel bases, and his move to designing two-legged chairs entirely in wood. The all-wooden chair designed for the Sanitorium required considerable development: a child's version of this chair had been designed in 1931 – 2, but an adult-sized chair required relatively thick, springy legs to support the sitter. The legs were made from moulded, laminated Finnish birch and the seat from much thinner birch plywood. The nature of the material was emphasised by the choice, in this example, of birch with a curly figure or grain for the seat and back. The design exploits the unique tensile strength of thickly laminated wood, and the fact that plywood can be made very thin if it is supported.



Paimio Armchair, designed by Alvar Aalto, manufactured by Huonekalu-ja Rakennustyötehdas Oy, 1930, Finland. Museum no. W.41-1987. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London

Anxious to provide seating that was as welcoming and comfortable as possible, Aalto again opted for an all-wood construction in his armchair design for the lecture hall at Paimio. Aalto and his friend Otto Korhonen spent a considerable amount of time researching new industrial methods

of forming plywood sheets, especially because the birchwood readily found in Finland was not as flexible as the beechwood used by other companies, such as the Austrian manufacturers Thonet-Mundus. By the mid-1930s, Aalto had mastered the possibilities of forming plywood in hot metal presses: the freeform curve of the seat and back is both an expression of the free will of the artist and a masterly deployment of the elasticity of the material. Alternate versions also included an upholstered seat. These armchairs, manufactured for sale by Otto Korhonen's firm, and from 1935 by Artek (the Finnish furniture design company co-founded by the Aaltos), became among the most successful of Aalto's designs.



Paimio Armchair (details), designed by Alvar Aalto, manufactured by Huonekalu-ja Rakennustyötehdas Oy, 1930, Finland. Museum no. W.41-1987. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London

Seemingly simple, Aalto's stacking stools represented a huge advance in manufacturing, and many thousands were produced. Aalto wanted to devise a method of created rigid bent elements that could simultaneously serve as the leg and support for a seat. He called the standard leg of his three-legged stools the 'Doric' leg or the 'bent knee'. Aalto and Korhonen patented (in Scandinavia and Britain) the method by which the Doric legs were formed: thin sawcuts were made along the grain of a piece of birch wood (most of the length of which formed the leg), thereby allowing the necessary flexibility to bend the piece at the top. Into these slots were glued thin sheets of veneer, which, when set, maintained the right-angle bend. At first, the L-shaped legs had to be manufactured by hand, forming the tight curve out of the separate veneers of wood as it was glued, but a machine was soon developed that could perform this action in a hot press. The stool is reduced to its basic industrial components: an L-shaped leg and a circular top. Dozens of stools could be stacked in a corner, and the resultant spiralling form became a motif among displays of Aalto furniture in the 1930s, and ever since.



Stool, designed by Alvar Aalto, manufactured by Artek, 1929 – 30, Finland. W.50-1977. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London

The basic bent leg is a classic development of Modernist thinking without the hard and cold qualities of metal construction. In modified form the three-legged stools are still produced today in huge quantities, meeting the basic need of robust additional seating.



Armchair, designed by Alvar Aalto, manufactured by Artek, 1929, Finland. W.53-1977. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London

Aalto's furniture was imported into Britain by the company Finmar. This company was founded in 1934 by Philip Morton Shand and Geoffrey Boumphrey following the success of an exhibition of Aalto furniture that they had arranged the previous year. It was sold to progressive furniture retailers such as Heal's and Bowman's and was used in both domestic and public buildings. The above example is from a design first produced in 1929, although this chair must date from after 1934. It has a birch frame with laminated plywood seat and back.

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Aalto was a proponent of *gesamtkunstwerk*, or total work of art, a concept evidenced in his desire for control over every aspect of the Paimio interior. He produced everything from plates and dishes to door handles and fittings for clients in Finland and beyond. After winning a competition organised by prominent Finnish glassworks Karhula and Iittala in 1936, ten of Aalto's winning sketches (initially known by the intriguing title *Eskimoerindens Skinnbuxa*, or Eskimo-Woman's Leather Breeches) were produced for the 1937 International Exhibition in Paris (whose Finnish Pavilion was also designed by Aalto). Alvar's curvaceous vase was then used by Aino and Alvar when they custom designed the furnishings and fixtures for the Savoy Restaurant in Helsinki, giving the piece its common name.



Savoy vase, Alvar Aalto, 1937, Finland. Museum no. C.226-1987. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London

The organic, sinuous shapes that Aalto brought to his birchwood chairs was to become a thematic trend in his furnishings. The inspiration for the Savoy vase – if not the knickers of Eskimo women – has been widely disputed. Some suggest it represents the Finnish landscape, while others see it as the lines of a section cut from the base of a tree. Perhaps its fluid nature prefigures the liquids that it would encapsulate. Indeed, Aalto himself "alleged that the lines of the vase were prompted to him by the captivating shape of a puddle". Critics suggest, however, that the free-form theme could already be found in the Art Nouveau designs of Finnish architect Eliel Saarinen and in vases produced by glassware manufacturers Orrefors.

Finally, the Aaltos' fastidious eye for detail, commitment to modernist ideals and close references to nature can be seen in Aino Aalto's Bölgeblick range of glassware. The complete range consisted of a pitcher, tumbler, sugar bowl, creamer, plates and bowls of various sizes, and possibly a vase. In 1932 Aino entered the designs in the Karhula-Iittala design competition and came second. The pieces were slightly modified for the Milan Triennale in 1936 and earned her a gold medal.



Bölgeblick tumbler, jug and plate, designed by Aino Marsio Aalto, manufactured by Karhula, 1932, Finland. Museum no. C.228 to 228B-1987. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London

Similar to the Aaltos' bent-knee stool, the Bölgeblick tumblers were praised for being stackable. This supreme functionality, on top of their simplicity of design, has made them an icon of Modernism that has yet to go out of fashion. But it is their ringlets of concentric circles, like the waves formed from a drop of water, that attracts such attention. The Aaltos' dedication to 'natural geometry' imbues their works with functional yet wholly liveable designs.

The Aaltos' incorporation of the natural world seemed to run parallel to the 'un-natural' and uncompromising domain of Modernism, yet their influence was undeniable. The debate about the place of nature within architecture and design would forever be altered by their extraordinary oeuvre.

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10.2.3: The Chandigarh Chair

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This humble-looking wooden chair has become a 20th-century design classic – much revered, reproduced and replicated. But its fascinating origin story is often untold, and its designer, Eulie Chowdury, usually remains uncredited.

You might recognise these simple yet elegant chairs, made from teak and cane – traditional materials which hint at their Indian origins. Today, these chairs are often referred to as 'the Jeanneret chair', named after Pierre Jeanneret, cousin of the famous Swiss-French architect Le Corbusier. They have become iconic and desirable design objects, which fetch huge prices at auction in Europe and the USA. But they have become disconnected with Chandigarh, the city in the Punjab region of northern India, where they were first produced in the 1950s by a team of architects, including Eulie Chowdhury, the only Indian woman on Le Corbusier's team.





(left to right): V-leg officer's chair, designed by Eulie Chowdhury, 1950 – 55, Chandigarh, India. Museum no. W.29-2010. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London; Library chair, designed by Eulie Chowdhury, Le Corbusier and Pierre Jeanneret, 1950 – 55, Chandigarh, India. Museum no. W.30-2010. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London

The chairs were manufactured from local materials in workshops surrounding Chandigarh, and installed in buildings across the city. Chandigarh was the first Modernist city in the world. It was created following India's independence from British rule in 1947, when a violent partition divided the subcontinent into Muslim-majority Pakistan and secular India. Having lost the capital city, Lahore, to Pakistan, the newly-sworn-in Prime Minister Jawarharlal Nehru commissioned the design of a new administrative capital, which would house the thousands of people displaced by the partition.



Relief model showing a plan of Chandigarh, made by Chandigarh College of Architecture after an original by Giani Rattan Singh, 2023, Chandigarh, India. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London

Nehru wanted Chandigarh to be a city "unfettered by the traditions of the past" and “a model for our glorious future growth of the country”. He engaged the British architect couple Jane Drew and Maxwell Fry, impressed by their previous work in West Africa. Fry and Drew enlisted Le Corbusier, who leapt at the chance to build his ideal city from scratch. However, he focussed on the prestigious public buildings in the Capitol Complex, and worked on site for just three months of the year, while his cousin, Jeanneret, worked on the day-to-day construction of the city, with Drew, Fry and a team of Indian architects and designers. Nehru wanted the project to be a 'living school' for a new generation of Indian architects and he stipulated that the Europeans must train local architects on the job, rather than bringing their own staff with them.



Le Corbusier in Chandigarh with the plan of the city and a model of the Modular Man, his universal system of proportion, 1951. © FDL, ADAGP 2014



Portrait of model makers Rattan Singh and Dhani Ram, at work on the model for Capitol Complex, Sector 1, Chandigarh, India, circa 1960. Pierre Jeanneret fonds, Canadian Centre for Architecture. Gift of Jacqueline Jeanneret. © CCA

Eulie Chowdhury (1923 – 95), a young Indian architect, joined the team in 1951. She was unusual, not just because she was a woman, but also because she was the daughter of a diplomat and, unlike her colleagues, had spent her youth travelling the world. She went to school in Japan, studied architecture in Sydney and ceramics in New Jersey. She also spoke fluent French and this gave her an instant connection with Le Corbusier and Jeanneret.



Eulie Chowdhury with Pierre Jeanneret and some of the Chandigarh architects, Chandigarh, india, 1960. Photograph courtesy Prabhinder Lall.

Chowdhury helped Le Corbusier to prepare detailed drawings of his major projects on the site – the Capitol Complex, Geometric Hill, Tower of Shadows, and the Martyrs Memorial. She also collaborated with Jeanneret on some of his projects and was in sole charge of the design and construction of the Home Science College, the Women's Polytechnic and several houses for Government Ministers. Chowdhury went on to hold a number of important offices in India including Chief Architect of Chandigarh and Chief Architect of Punjab.



The Government Home Science College at Sector 10, Chandigarh, designed by Eulie Chowdury. Photo by Sarbjit Bahga (CC BY SA 4.0)

As well as these achievements, Chowdhury designed some of the city's wooden furniture – now widely recognised and desirable. The Chandigarh architects carefully considered the wider design of the new city, designing details from street fittings to furniture tailored specifically to each building. Le Corbusier designed furniture for the major buildings, in particular the High Court, including a pair of striking spiral witness stands, or 'accused cabins'. Pierre Jeanneret designed much of the rest but the contribution of the Indian team to the design of furniture at Chandigarh is little documented or recognised. The architect’s office at Chandigarh comprised a lot of people and it is likely that many different architects contributed elements to each design. An edition of *Marg* Magazine from 1961 explicitly names Chowdhury as the designer of the library chair, though more recently this attribution has been lost or ignored in favour of associating it with Jeanneret.

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A witness stand, or 'accused cabin', from the Chandigarh High Court, designed by Le Corbusier, on display in the Tropical Modernism exhibition at V&A South Kensington. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London

Jeanneret's own designs used the dimensions of Le Corbusier's modular system – a universal system of proportions based on the height of an average French man (initially 1.75 metres and later increased to 1.83 metres), which underpinned much of the planning and detailing of all his projects in Chandigarh. Eulie Chowdhury carefully reconsidered and adapted these proportions to create furniture more suitable for smaller, potentially female statures. Today the chairs are admired for their simple tapered elegance, ergonomic design and strong construction, despite being made from standard bits of timber.



Chandigarh Chairs on display in the Tropical Modernism exhibition at V&A South Kensington. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London

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10.2.4: Post-War Design and Commercial Modernism

Adapted from "Post-war Design and the Domestication of Modernism" by Angela L Miller, Janet Catherine Berlo, Bryan J Wolf, and Jennifer L Roberts in *American Encounters: Art, History and Cultural Identity* with additional information on the Eames lounge chair and ottoman sourced from Herman Miller

In another sector of American culture, far removed from the edginess of the 1950s avant-garde, were designers and architects who combined a new sophistication and confidence with international influences, using new manufacturing techniques and materials. In the decades after World War II, the redesign of the everyday living environment emerged as a central undertaking for this generation of designers. Good design was no longer merely for the elite.

Beauty, convenience, and comfort were now to be within the reach of ordinary Americans, including returning veterans and their young families. As with streamlining-the style of the years between the wars-the movement for good design profited from the presence of European talent. Two furniture companies in particular-Herman Miller and Knoll Associates-worked closely with modernist designers such as the Americans Charles Eames (1907-78) and George Nelson (1908-86), Finnish architect Alvar Aalto (1898-1976), and emigre German architect Mies van der Rohe (1886-1969), to produce and distribute innovative furniture. In collaboration with museums and department stores, post-war designers marketed modernism to the masses. The good design movement of the post-war years turned away from streamlined forms suggesting speed-driven frictionless modernity, preferring instead organic shapes emphasizing comfort and functionality Biomorphic design, evoking nature and the body, helped consumers feel at ease in the increasingly artificial environments of air travel, and corporate and suburban spaces. In architecture and product design, organic forms, soft contours, and molded spaces vied with the impersonal appeal of stark "International Style"

Museums and the Marketing of "Good Design"

Continuing a marketing trend established in the 1920s, American museums took the lead in educating consumers about good design. In such exhibits as the Museum of Modern Art's "Useful Objects," which offered products ranging in price from 25 cents to 25 dollars in 1946, and its "Good Design" program between 1950 and 1954 (below), or the Walker Art Center's Everyday Art Gallery, in Minneapolis, featuring bowls, ceramics, radios, and household appliances, fine arts institutions around the nation encouraged high-quality industrial and product design.



Figure 10.2.4.1: Installation view of furniture by Charles Eames and Eero Saarinen from Organic Design in Home Furnishings exhibition, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1941. Museum of Modern Art, New York.

The museum expanded its educational mission to the middle class, and from the fine arts to domestic living. As American industry shifted from wartime to peacetime production, museums teamed up with industries, designers, and retailers to "domesticate" modernism: Norman Rockwell's young husband escapes church by reading the paper in Eero Saarinen's Womb Chair, as the newest in mid-century modern is comfortably accommodated in suburban domesticity (below). As the corporate "hidden persuaders" gained a hold over consumers through the allure of advertising, advocates of good design saw their mission as instructing middle-class families about how to live. Often they adopted the same strategies as corporate business. The Museum of Modern Art used the techniques associated with mass marketing- consumer surveys, TV and magazine advertising, and public education through panel discussions-to make good design widely accessible. As with so many other aspects of Cold War culture, design was recruited in the cause of a morally fortified nation, unified around core principles: good taste made good citizens.

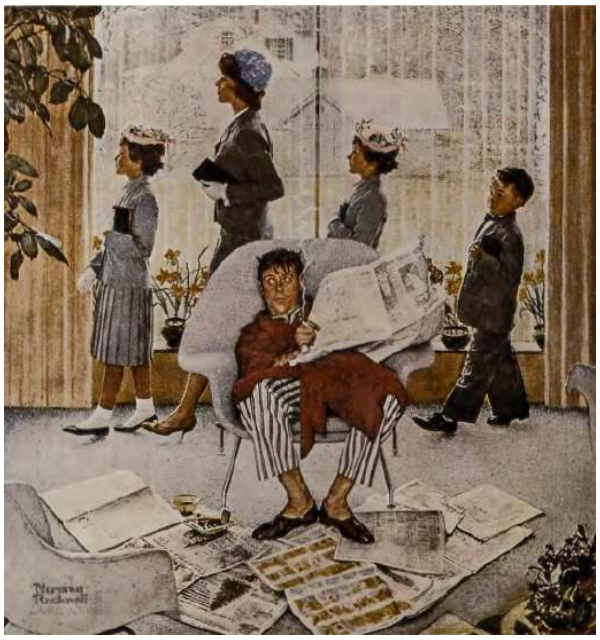


Figure 10.2.4.2: NORMAN ROCKWELL, Easter Morning, 1959. Oil on canvas, 53 x 49 in (134.6 X 124.4 cm). Private collection.

Like other consumer products, one's choice of everyday design came to denote a great deal about one's educational level, living preferences, and social networks. In the 1950s post-war tract developments of single-family homes with lawns and small children, the furniture of choice was stuffed, padded, and upholstered. More sophisticated consumers (those who may have also listened to jazz and traveled to Europe) chose Scandinavian modern. Scandinavian proved to be an acceptable middle-of-the-road form of modernist design for many: well made, with accommodatingly soft contours and the comforting familiarity of wood, Scandinavian furniture introduced a new level of unornamented simplicity and harmonious lines that combined machine manufacture with handcrafted forms. Textiles, ceramics, and glassware expanded on the Scandinavian aesthetic.

Taste in the mid-century United States was precisely calibrated to one's social class, as this staged photograph suggests (below). The social stratification of "high brows," "middle brows," and "low brows" was given material expression through product design. The ostensibly classless nature of American society paradoxically produced class anxieties: the more one insisted on the absence of social distinctions based on equal access to opportunity, the more they came in through the back door of design and material life. Apart from the big divide between modern and traditional, the modern itself was a rather complicated affair. One observer identified ten different types of modern design in American everyday living, among them "Unrelenting Modern" (Bauhaus); "Nostalgic Modern" (streamlined); Floradora Modern (glitzy glamorous Hollywood, identified with the work of the well-known designer Elsie de Wolfe, 1865?-1950); and Jukebox Modern (selfexplanatory). Bridging these stylistic distinctions was a common concern with style as an indicator of one's particular social identity, self-image, and placement within American life.

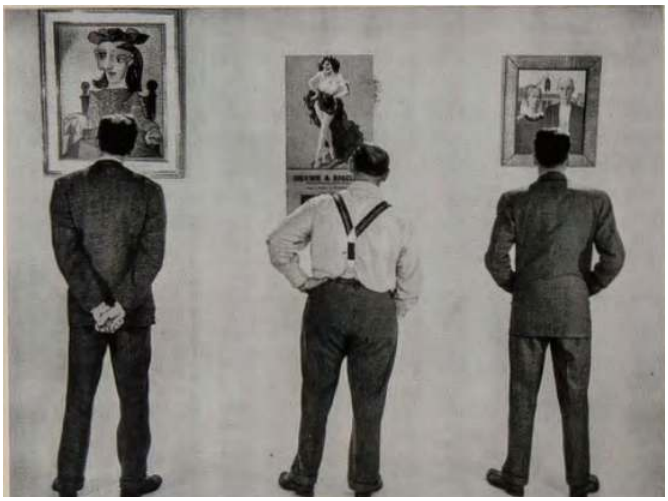


Figure 10.2.4.3: HERBERT GEHR, High-brow, Low-brow, Middle-brow from Lift Magazine, April 11, 1949.

Charles and Ray Eames

From airport waiting areas, to university classrooms, to family dens, the designs of Charles and Ray (1912-88) Eames have enjoyed a deep presence in our everyday visual environment throughout the second half of the twentieth century. As a husband and wife team their careers wove together the best aspects of European modernist design's commitment to affordable, functional, and aesthetically sensitive objects for everyday living- with an enthusiasm for new materials (plastic, fiberglass, molded plywood, and polyester resin), and an inventive approach to mass production that characterized post-war America (below). The married couple worked as a team and Ray Eames, though long overshadowed by her husband Charles, has recently been restored to her proper place as an innovator. Buoyed by confidence in the applications of science and industry to solving quality-of-life issues for middle-class Americans, the Eameses offered a vital example of how to humanize environments shaped by mass production and standardization.



Figure 10.2.4.4: CHARLES & RAY EAMES, Tandem Sling Seating, 1962, John Wayne Airport, Orange County, California, 1993.

Their melding of European and American approaches also integrated two streams of modern design: the rationalist machine aesthetic associated with standardized production, and the biomorphic organicism of soft yielding shapes. Driven by the emerging science of ergonomics, these designs considered how to accommodate human bodies to machined objects. One of the Eameses' most ubiquitous chair designs, done in collaboration with architect Eero Saarinen (1910-61), consisted of a single molded plastic seat that could be combined with other parts in a wide variety of permutations (below). Varying a few basic elements-materials (molded plastic, wire mesh, and padded upholstery), color (orange, green, blue, black, and yellow), and base (pedestal, rocker, swivel, and wire strut)- the Eameses furnished a reliable standardized form with customized features, in a manner similar to earlier inventive American designers like Hunzinger (see 11.1.2: American Arts and Crafts Movement). Their exuberant personal style, friendly designs, and marketing sophistication made modernism accessible to millions of middle-class Americans.



Figure 10.2.4.5: LCW (Lounge Chair Wood) Chair by Charles and Ray Eames, designed 1945-46, molded plywood, teakwood veneer, rubber shock mounts, Honolulu Museum of Art accession 4410.1, photo: Hiart, CC0 1.0

During wartime, they developed leg splints and litters for the Navy out of molded laminated bentwood, in which industrial methods were combined with a technique for bending thin layers of wood that had its counterpart in bentwood containers made in Native Alaskan and Northwest Coast cultures. After the war, they perfected their methods to mass-produce the distinctive plywood "Eames Chair" (above). As one admirer wrote, they produced "organic abstractions in which esthetics and science meet on the plane of utility." Design in their hands spoke to practicality and to the emotional requirements for meaningful connection with the world of things.



Figure 10.2.4.6: The living room of the Eames House, Santa Monica, California, 1992. Lucia Eames Demetrios and Shelley Mills.

The interior of the home Charles and Ray Eames designed for themselves in Pacific Palisades, California (above) shows a fluid relationship of indoor to outdoor space exploited the qualities of the southern California environment. The interiors feature the well-curated combination of ethnic artifacts-masks, textiles, stools, and carvings from the Eames' collection alongside modern furnishings, many of their own design. This includes the iconic lounge chair and ottoman (below). Famously debuted on national television on the NBC television network Home Show, hosted by Arlene Francis, in 1956, Charles Eames explained that the designers wanted have the "warm, receptive look of a well-used first baseman's mitt." Though this description evokes a humble, everyday scene of American life, the lounge chair and ottoman are part of permanent museum collections at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City and the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, denoting its exceptionality and celebration in media and marketing.



Figure 10.2.4.7: Lounge Chair and Ottoman by Charles Eames (1955), public domain, Wikimedia Commons

Biomorphic Design

Machine Age design between the two world wars took its inspiration from the precise, interchangeable, repetitive forms of machine production; design in the years following World War II increasingly emphasized wholeness, integrity, and organic unity. This turn to the "biomorphic" crossed the design arts to take in architecture, offering an alternative to the sleek glass and steel modernism that increasingly defined corporate culture. Artists such as the sculptor Isamu Noguchi (1904-88) (below) and architects such as Saarinen also turned to furniture design.



Figure 10.2.4.8: ISAMU NOGUCHI, Lounge Table, 1944. Glass and oiled walnut cabinet, 15¾ x 50 x 36 in (40 x 127 x 91.4 cm).

Saarinen's Womb Chair (below), manufactured by Knoll, employed a fiberglass shell over bent steel rods. As with other biomorphic shapes in Saarinen's furniture, the compound curves (curves, that is, in multiple planes) and laplike welcome of the Womb Chair carried a ready appeal for consumers who admired the combination of up-to-date industrial materials with yielding forms and reassuring references to the human body.



Figure 10.2.4.9: Eero Saarinen (American, born Finland, 1910-1961). Womb Chair, Model No. 70, Designed 1947-1948, Manufactured ca. 1959. Chrome-plated steel, fiberglass, plastic, wood-particle shell, latex foam, original fabric upholstery, 36 x 40 x 34 in. (91.4 x 101.6 x 86.4 cm). Brooklyn Museum. 2001.37.1 Brooklyn Museum, No restrictions, https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/inde...curid=34074938

Like streamlining in the 1930s, post-war biomorphic design developed into a style independent of function. It was applied to everything from kitchenware to casinos, from textiles to ceramics, glassware, and furniture, and from architectural interiors to the kidney-shaped pool in the backyard. It reached across media and across the economic and taste spectrum. It brought the night-time fantasies and whimsical psychic landscapes of the Surrealists-in particular the biomorphic shapes of Jean Arp (1886-1966), Paul Klee (1879-1940), and Max Ernst (1891-1976)-into the light of an American suburban morning. Designer Eva Zeisel compared the melting forms of 1940s tables, containers, and other household objects to the disturbingly fluid shapes of Surrealist painter Salvador Dali, suggesting metamorphosis, mutation, and transformation. Like the organic abstraction of the early twentieth century, biomorphism represented a return to nature as a realm distinct from the technological, a flight from the hard-edged, the machined, and the geometric. It returned the post-war consumer back to the curving, welcoming shapes of the maternal body.



Figure 10.2.4.10: Some of Zeisel's ceramic pieces designed for Red Wing Pottery's "Town and Country" dinner service (1947). This set includes a "mother and child" salt[11] and pepper shakers, yellow pitcher,[12] and a white baby oil pourer[13] that exemplify her organic, curving forms. Photo: Brooklyn Museum - Brooklyn Museum, CC BY 4.0, https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/inde...curid=57711924

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10.3: Commercializing Furniture 1950s-1980s

Learning Objectives

- Explain how features of Modernist design facilitated the increased post-war commercialization of furniture.
- Evaluate the social and political significance of Modernism's post-war adaptation beyond Europe and the U.S.
- Summarize "tropical modernism," listing key similarities and differences from early 20th-century modernisms.

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10.3.1: What is Tropical Modernism?

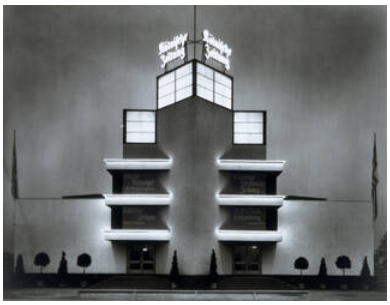
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Last updated: 17 April 2024

Not sure what makes this major architectural style unique? Read on to discover how Tropical Modernism evolved out of 1920s European Modernism, and later became a symbol of modernity and independence in India and West Africa.

What is Modernism?

Modernism was a revolutionary architecture developed in Europe in the 1920s, which placed the function of the building at the heart of its design. Its leading advocates were the Swiss-French architect, Le Corbusier, and the German founder of the Bauhaus art school, Walter Gropius, who championed clean lines, unornamented facades, and expanses of glass and flat roofs. An early example is the offices of the newspaper *Kölnische Zeitung* in Cologne, Germany, designed in 1928 by architects Wilhelm Riphahn and Caspar Maria Grod. A photograph of the building taken by Werner Mantz emphasises the strict symmetry of the white concrete structure, with its severe angles and geometric shapes.



Cologne Newspaper Works, photograph, by Werner Mantz, 1928, Cologne, Germany. Museum no. PH.136-1979. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London

Modernist architecture arrived on British shores largely via European émigrés who came to the country to avoid Nazi persecution in the 1930s. One of the most confident examples of the movement during this period is the Finsbury Health Centre in London, designed by Russian architect Berthold Lubetkin and his practice Tecton in 1935. The poster 'Your Britain, Fight For It Now', produced during the Second World War, uses the building to represent a vision of a utopian future Britain.



Your Britain. Fight For It Now, poster featuring an image of Finsbury Health Centre, designed by Abram Games, 1942, United Kingdom. Museum no. E.295-2006. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London

Architect couple Jane Drew and Maxwell Fry were among the first British Modernist architects to embrace the utopian ideal that a radical new architecture in concrete, glass and steel would build a better world. Jane Drew was a key figure in debates about reconstruction in Britain following the War. She participated in the Britain Can Make It exhibition at the V&A in 1945, and designed part of the site for the 1951 Festival of Britain. One of Maxwell Fry's best known designs in Britain is the Sun House in Hampstead, designed in 1935, with unadorned white walls, long strips of windows and a flat roof – the hallmarks of European-style Modernism.

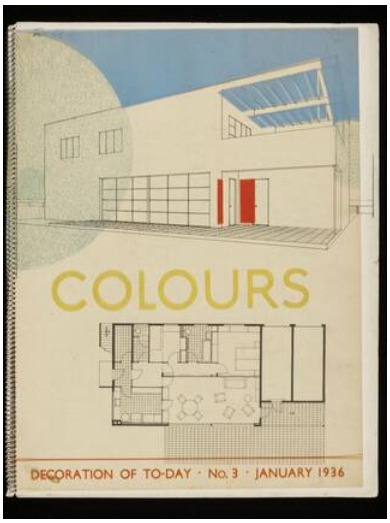




(Left to right:) Jane Drew and Maxwell Fry with a model of one of their many buildings for the Gold Coast, 1 945. Image courtesy RIBA; Plate depicting Maxwell Fry's 'Sun House', People Will Always Need Plates, 2006, UK. Museum no. C.111-2014. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London

However, this minimalist aesthetic, which rejected tradition, was seen as too severe for British tastes. A trade catalogue, *Colours*, written and illustrated by Russian-British architect Serge Chermayeff, was an attempt to soften the perceived severity of the Modernist style for a dubious British audience. Modernism failed to take root in Britain, so Fry and Drew found

opportunities in West Africa instead, where they developed their own version of Modernism, adapted to the climate.



Colours: Decoration of To-day, no.3, written, illustrated and produced by Serge Chermayeff, printed by Kynoch Press, published by Nobel Chemical Finishes Ltd, 1936, London, England. Museum no. 38041800558231. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London

From Modernism to Tropical Modernism

In the 1940s and '50s, the British government sought to offset growing calls for independence in West Africa, then under colonial rule, by funding modern education and public infrastructure projects. Jane Drew and Maxwell Fry were Tropical Modernism's leading practitioners. They seized the opportunity to put Modernist principles into practice in West Africa and India, inventing a distinctive version of Modernism adapted to the hot and humid climate of these regions. They defined 'the Tropics' as a broad geographical zone spanning the equator and covering 40 percent of the world's surface. It was a colonial definition that encompassed most of the territories of the British Empire, but ignored regional variations in climate as well as local cultures and traditions.

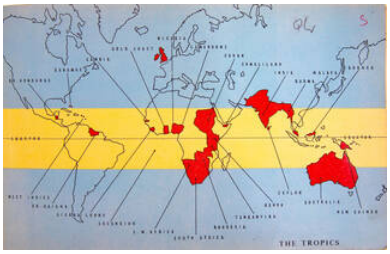


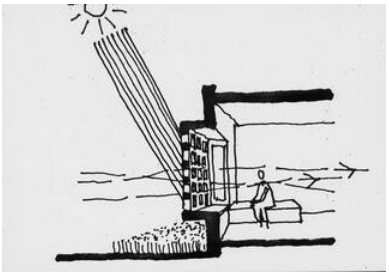
Illustration from Village Housing in the Tropics, written by Jane Drew and Maxwell Fry, 1947. Museum no. null. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London

During the Second World War, Maxwell Fry was stationed in the Gold Coast (now Ghana) and Jane Drew joined him there in 1944 to advise the British colonial governments in West Africa on town planning. After the war, Fry and Drew stayed on to build schools, colleges and other institutions paid for by the Colonial Office's large post-war fund – equivalent to £6 billion today – to reform, rebuild and modernise Britain's colonies. West Africa became an experimental laboratory for British architects, providing opportunities and commissions they would not have had at home.

Fry and Drew used the latest environmental and building science to adapt Modernism, which had been originally designed for Europe's temperate climate. Analysing solar path movements and meteorological data provided by building research stations, they developed principles that would provide passive cooling, maximise shade and allow ventilation. To do this, they positioned buildings so that solid walls on the East and West blocked the strongest sun. The longer North and South facades were open, using features such as **brise soleils**, **adjustable louvres** and **wide eaves** to allow cross ventilation and provide shade.

Brise soleils

Brise soleil are semi-permeable screens that allow a breeze to enter a building and cool the interior, while deflecting sunlight.



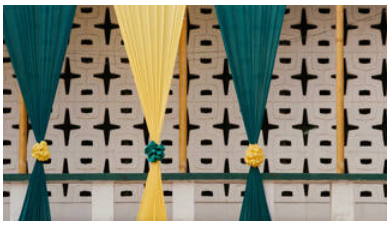


Diagram of a brise soleil at Aburi Girl’s School, Ghana, from 'Tropical Architecture in the Humid Zone', 1956, publisher B.T Batsford. Courtesy of RIBA. Brise soleil wall at Wesley Girls School, by Fry, Drew and Partners, 1947, film still from 'Tropical Modernism: Architecture and Independence'. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London

Wide eaves

Wide eaves are the edges of a roof that overhang a building's walls and shield the interiors from intense sunlight and rain.

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Wides eaves at Mfantsipim School, Cape Coast, by Fry, Drew & Partners, film stills from 'Tropical Modernism: Architecture and Independence'. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London

Louvres

Adjustable louvres, or slats, offer protection from sun and rain while allowing natural ventilation.





(Left to right:) Horizontal louvres on the School of Engineering, KNUST, James Cubitt and Partners, 1956, film still from 'Tropical Modernism: Architecture and Independence'. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London; Vertical louvres on Scott House, Accra by Kenneth Scott, 1961, film still from 'Tropical Modernism: Architecture and Independence'. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London

Not long after they arrived in West Africa, Fry and Drew attracted international attention for their books, *Village Housing in the Tropics* (1947), a pocket guide to self-building in hot climates, and *Tropical Architecture in the Humid Zone* (1956), which set out a design system rooted in climate science. *Tropical Architecture in the Humid Zone* presented case studies from across what they identified as the 'tropical zone', but the buildings featured are largely by British architects, and no African architects are included. Fry and Drew actively dismissed local building traditions, commenting: "There seemed to be no indigenous architecture, we therefore tried to invent an architecture which specifically met the needs of the West Africans and dealt with climate and the diseases it brought with it."

African art played a key role in the development of a Modernist aesthetic in the early 20th century. European artists exoticised and appropriated the sculptural abstraction they admired in artefacts of colonial conquest. In his collages, Eduardo Paolozzi, who taught alongside Fry and Drew at the Department of Tropical Studies, fused architectural images with ceremonial African masks, stripping them of their cultural and ritual significance. Similarly, to ornament the facades of their buildings, Fry and Drew made superficial references to West African symbols which they described as 'relics of a beautiful savage life'.



Eduardo Paolozzi, Klokvormig Masker, 1946 – 47. Courtesy Flowers Gallery, London. © Trustees of the Paolozzi Foundation, licensed by DACS

When designing their buildings, Drew and Fry went against European Modernism's rejection of ornament, incorporating local symbols to add an element of fantasy. At Opoku Ware school, the repetitive perforations in the brise soleil are based on the crescent-shape of an Ashanti stool. Jane Drew said:

> The particular architectural character comes not only from the mono-pitch roof and long low blocks … but from the sunbreakers, grilles and other shading but breeze-permitting devices.[…] the sunshine and moisture and

> heavy overcast sky and feeling of oppressive lethargy seem to call forth moulded forms which are rhythmical and strong, not spiky and elegant, but bold and sculptural. -- *Jane Drew*





(Left to right:) A concrete screen or brise soleil at Opoku Ware school, featuring the symbol of an Ashanti stool. Photograph by Iain Jackson; An example of an Ashanti stool, believed to be for a Queen Mother, Ghana. Image courtesy The Children's Museum of Indianapolis.

By the 1970s, Tropical Modernism had begun to fade out, as its principles of climate regulation were rendered redundant by air conditioning technology. Open facades, which had facilitated cross-ventilation, were entombed in glass. But as we face an era of climate crisis, what lessons can be learnt from Tropical Modernism's principles of passive cooling? And what will the fate of this heritage be, with so many Tropical Modernist buildings under threat from both decay and new development?

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10.3.2: Kingsway Stores in Colonial and Postcolonial West Africa

Abridged and adapted from "'Kingsway leads the way to modern living': British Profit-seeking and Modernism in Ghana and Nigeria 1920–1970" by Ewan Harrison, Iain Jackson, Irene Appeaning Addo, Oluwaseun Muraina (*Journal of Design History*, Volume 37, Issue 3, September 2024, Pages 217–235, https://doi.org/10.1093/jdh/epae010)

Introduction

The Kingsway chain grew in the first half of the twentieth century by servicing the needs of British colonists through the sale of homeware, clothing, and food imported from Britain. In response to independence, Kingsway's management instrumentalized a modernist mode of domesticity—selling modernist homeware, furniture, and fabrics, through didactic marketing campaigns such as exhibitions and ideal home shows—in new modernist stores on prominent sites in Ghana and Nigeria's largest cities, in order to both expand its market amongst African bourgeoise consumers and build goodwill amongst elites in West Africa.[4] Kingsway therefore offers a case study in how a particular mode of Euro-American modernist design "traveled" to West Africa.[5]

Modernism is a multivalent term, especially in colonial and post-colonial contexts.[6] A recent historiographical turn has seen challenges to any notion of a singular modernism generally, and in West Africa specifically.[7] Here, we use the term modernism to refer to a mode of architectural, interior, and product design that utilized clean lines and minimal abstracted, non-referential ornamentation. This was a European mode of modernism: the furniture Kingsway sold was inspired by Scandinavian designs, its fabrics and its crockery and glassware were produced by British manufacturers, and its stores were built to the design of a British architectural practice, TP Bennett & Partners.[8]

While scholars have argued against the notion that modernism "was a developmental and disseminative movement, one that worked forward and outwards from a Western locus," here we argue that Kingsway's uses of modernism *can* productively be read as a project directed from the colonial and post-colonial metropole to West Africa.[9] This is not to present Euro-American modes of modernism as somehow "natural," and their movement to West Africa as preordained, as many contemporary proponents of modernist design suggested.[10] Instead, we present this as a highly problematic transfer, for this was a modernism made operative: responding to an African agency, but undertaken with the goal of maintaining the profitable operation of both the Kingsway Stores, and its parent company the UAC, across West Africa during the transition to independence. Centring Kingsway therefore reveals the imbrication of modernist design with colonial and neocolonial profit-seeking in the region.[11] While an extensive historiography has persuasively examined architectural modernism's intertwining with the late colonial project in West Africa, here we reveal modernism in the service of highly agile forms of capitalism, responding to the ends of empire, while seeking to preserve colonial patterns of profit extraction.[12] Kingsway's, and the UAC's, operations suggest that the formal ends of political rule in "British" West Africa provided profitable opportunities for commercial actors in the region. Modernist design was a tool in helping these actors' profit at this time of rupture.[13] The modernist domesticity that Kingsway instrumentalized drew upon two colonial practices of homemaking: the sale of the "cultural artifacts of Europeanness" to colonizers and the "improving" interventions into indigenous patterns of domesticity undertaken by colonial regimes.[14] Accordingly, this article takes a *long duree* approach to Kingsway's operation.

Kingsway Stores, gender, and colonial modernism

Formal British rule in West Africa grew out of a nineteenth-century demand for raw materials, especially palm oil.[20] British firms that dealt in resource extraction often also acted as retailers of imported goods.[21] In 1915, one such merchant firm, Miller Brothers, opened a brand new store in Accra. Miller's named their new store Kingsway, in reference to their new headquarters at West Africa House on London's Kingsway. Indigenous West Africans were Kingsway customers from the outset: the Accra Kingsway store stocked cloth "in patterns that are particularly alluring to the peoples of the Gold Coast," whilst a new store opened in Lagos in 1930 was aimed at the "2,500 or so Europeans and an increasingly large number of natives wearing European dress and with European tastes."[26] West African cities contained large populations of what were problematically referred to as "Europeanized natives": African traders, businessmen and women, lawyers, clergymen, educators, journalists, and clerical staff in the colonial service, who constituted a ready market for the Kingsway's products.[27]

However, the principal market envisioned by the UAC was British expatriates, which at first were primarily men (as European women were initially deterred from settling in West Africa).[30] But as the early twentieth century saw a new emphasis on the moral dimension of the imperial mission this took the form of "asserting a distinct colonial morality, explicit in its reorientation toward the racial and class markers of 'Europeanness'"[31] and between 1920 and 1930 the population of European women in the Gold Coast colony tripled, and there was a similar growth in numbers in the Nigeria and Sierra Leone colonies.[33]

The presence of European women "accentuated the refinements of privilege and the etiquettes of racial difference […] women

put new demands on the white communities to tighten their ranks, clarify their boundaries and mark out their social space" in anglophone West Africa.[34] The urban impact of this demographic change was clear—racially segregated bungalow reservations proliferated.[35] Within the reservations, colonial officials and expatriated businessmen lived in bungalows designed and built by Public Works Departments (PWDs). This housing was often simple in its execution: with living space raised off the ground, a covered veranda facing a garden, and often a separate block housing kitchen and servant accommodation to the rear.[37] The materials used in the construction of these residences—rendered concrete blockwork, sheet metal or roof tile, and metal frame windows—were manufactured in Britain and shipped to West Africa. As Itohan Osayimwese has persuasively argued, this reliance on prefabricated elements results in a close relationship between the colonial bungalow and the developing modernist project in Europe, even if the actual dwellings occasionally featured non-modernist design features such as pitched roofs and casement windows.[38] In the final years of colonial rule, British architects working in West Africa designed numerous examples of more consciously modernist housing: indeed the private residence for the colonial expatriate was a key architectural typology in "tropical modernist" architecture.[39]

The "sharpening of racial lines" created by the institution of bungalow reservations was accompanied by "an increasing embourgeoisement of colonial communities."[40] Within the European Reservations, a memetic of a haute-bourgeoisie English life was performed through a constant round of luncheons, tennis parties, drinks, and dinner parties where commercial consumption was key.[41] The bungalow was also a "key contact zone" between the races.[45] A "microcosm" of the empire as a whole, the bungalow formed a space in which the colonizer interacted with servants, tradesmen, and invited elite African guests.[46] The enactment of the bungalow as simultaneously a comfortable home and a standard bearer for the imperial project was a task attributed to the colonial wife. To support her in this task, the colonial wife increasingly relied on Kingsway Stores (see below).[49] Kingsway Stores advertised itself with the slogan "orders delivered direct to bungalows."[50]


Kingsway Stores freetown advert, 1954. UAC/1/11/20/3. Reproduced with kind permission of Unilever-Archives.

Kingsway Stores freetown advert, 1954. UAC/1/11/20/3. Reproduced with kind permission of Unilever-Archives.

These stores were designed by the Unilever In-House Architects Department, headed by James Lomax-Simpson (1882–1977). The designs that his team produced for Kingsway Stores tended toward the mildly *moderne*. The Freetown Kingsway store is a paradigmatic example. The inflow of goods imported by Kingsway was the symbolic corollary to the outflow of raw materials that the UAC extracted from West Africa.[51] This was not lost on anti-colonial protestors: British-owned merchant businesses were targeted in the so-called "Accra Riots" of 1948, which saw the UAC's Accra Headquarters burnt down, while the Freetown Kingsway Store had its windows broken in the early 1950s, in anti-colonial protests organized by local female market traders (see below).[52]


Kingsway Store freetown "Damage Through Riot," 1955. UAC/11/9/44/29. Reproduced with kind permission of Unilever-Archives.

Kingsway Store freetown "Damage Through Riot," 1955. UAC/11/9/44/29. Reproduced with kind permission of Unilever-Archives.

These protests triggered political change in the 1950s, which ultimately culminated in the independence of Ghana in 1957 and Nigeria in 1960. Kingsway's management hoped that British civil servants would stay during this period, but it quickly became clear that this was not to be the case.[53] Meanwhile, the spending habits of "the more transient" expatriate population who remained changed too, "being now largely daily necessities, rather than consumer durables."[54] Kingsway's board noted it had "to adapt ourselves to the new pattern" of consumption in the region if it was to survive.[55]

Selling modernist domesticity at independence

An advertisement for Kingsway Stores from 1961: a party in an elegant room is in progress. Two bejeweled women in elaborate cocktail dresses admire a length of abstractly patterned fabric. Behind them, two men in dinner jackets smoke cigars, while a third man, in a waiter's uniform, enters the room from a kitchen bearing a tray of drinks. The space that this party happens in is schematically sketched out, but the furniture is detailed with precision: a sideboard bears an arrangement of sculptural plants, a coffee table with splayed legs supports a soda siphon and cocktail shaker. The viewer's access to this chic party is barred by a foreshortened modernist armchair, but the explanatory text offers a way the viewer can enter: "For True Elegance … Kingsway leads the way to Modern Living […] this fascinating range of top-quality goods is conveniently arranged all under one roof so that shopping is a real pleasure."[56]


Kingsway leads the way to modern living (Advertisement Nigeria Magazine c.1960–1). Reproduced with kind permission of Unilever-Archives.

Kingsway leads the way to modern living (Advertisement Nigeria Magazine c.1960–1). Reproduced with kind permission of Unilever-Archives.

This advertisement is illustrative of the ideal African customer as imagined by Kingsway Stores during the ends of empire. At independence, a UAC executive noted that there were enough "African Ministers and their wives and families, senior African Civil Servants, [and] the ever-increasing class of professional men of all kinds" to provide a market for Kingsway goods.[57] Kingsway efforts to capture this target market were spearheaded by Eleanor MacDonald (1910–2004). A sometime champion fencer and former spy, MacDonald was a pioneer of market

research, especially in the field of studying women as consumers.[58] She joined the UAC in 1959, as "Women's Advisor," a senior position that entailed "expanding provision for African women."[59] Her influence can be detected in the *Modern Homes Show* at the Lagos Kingsway in 1962, which "spot[lit] the womanly art of making a home comfortable, beautiful, sophisticated and smart without heavy spending."[62] Displays and demonstrations provided advice "on such subjects as how to create harmony with simple furnishings, lighting, and ornaments, how to have a charming table, a well-planned kitchen, how to take care of furniture, to arrange flowers."[63]

Through these events, MacDonald subverted longer practices of missionary and colonial intervention in the domestic lives and homemaking practices of African people. Kingsway's *Modern Homes Show* mirrors colonial exhibitions, such as the *Ideal Home Show* mounted by the Accra Housing Department and Department of Social Welfare in 1955, whilst its demonstrations recall the books of household management published across the African empire, as part of domestic science education programs.[64] This colonial-era advice to African women emphasized simplicity and cleanliness: *About Your Home*, published in the Gold Coast colony in 1954, had advocated for simple furniture and minimal ornament.[65] This reflected both "Christian mores of thrift, humility, and modesty," and official fears that African budgets would be stretched by imprudent spending on imported home goods.[66] Kingsway used similar tactics to quite different ends: its *Modern Homes* exhibition aimed at inculcating habits of consumption and spending, by advocating for the purchases needed to perform "the tricks of entertaining which make a housewife into a hostess."[67]

Kingsway's post-independence advertising, the Modern Homes exhibition, and MacDonald's other didactic marketing efforts were the tools used by Kingsway to recast colonial-modernist domesticity as an elite-African-domesticity. Kingsway's advertising and images of its shop displays clearly show that the imported clothing, furniture, crockery, and fabrics it sold certainly suggest that the "cultural artefacts of Europeanness" on sale to colonists in late colonial West Africa, were increasingly modernist in mode.[69] Images from private collections of British colonists of the period demonstrate a prevalence of modernist-designed furniture and fittings in late colonial interiors.[70] In the late 1960s, the furniture on sale in Kingsway's Nigerian stores was described as being "as good as any Danish" in mode, despite its manufacture on timber plantations in West Africa by another UAC subsidiary, the African Timber and Plywood Company.[72] Photographs of store interiors from this period show a more conscious effort to "market" goods through their display, with furniture and homeware arranged as room sets in the Port Harcourt store in 1963 (see Figure 5).


Furniture on display in Kingsway Port Harcourt, 1963. UAC/2/10/B2/8/1/6. Reproduced with kind permission of Unilever-Archives.

Furniture on display in Kingsway Port Harcourt, 1963. UAC/2/10/B2/8/1/6. Reproduced with kind permission of Unilever-Archives.

But Kingsway was as much responding to an indigenous demand for modernist goods as it was creating it. These were confident consumers, for whom foreign manufactured goods connoted both class status and a new modernity. This was captured in our interviews of former shoppers and employees. Many emphasized the store's modernity: these "were modern shops that have everything that you need," and that the stores were associated with socio-economic and political elites: with one respondent recalling that "you could bet on the class of people shopping in the Kingsway," and another, that Kingsway was where "very big people" shopped. One respondent recalled that her mother, a secondary school headmistress, had been horrified to see a person of perceived lower social status wearing clothing made from the same cloth that she was wearing and thereafter resolved only to shop at Kingsway. For this respondent, Kingsway goods were closely connected to the family's class and professional status.

The purchase of imported goods was also deeply intertwined with the process of political independence. Bianca Murillo quotes a visitor to the Accra store, on "dressing up" to go shopping at Kingsway: "here was a nation where the idea [was] that we are primitive, we are uncivilized ... but in that short period of time we really wanted to show the world we are capable of doing things better ... hence dressing up."[75] As Murillo notes, "dressing up and shopping at Kingsway Stores [was connected to the] subverting or challenging of colonial ideas of African inferiority."[76]

Fine buildings enrich a country: New stores at independence

Alongside efforts to market modernist goods to African consumers, Kingsway Stores greeted independence with a program of physical expansion, with modernist stores built on prominent sites. The first of these was a new store in Accra, opened by Kwame Nkrumah as part of Ghana's independence celebrations in 1957 (see below). This store was designed by the British architects TP Bennett & Partners, a practice selected because of its close connections with Taylor Woodrow, a British contracting firm that operated West African subsidiaries in partnership with the UAC.[80]

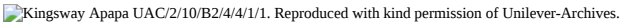

Kingsway Accra Exterior UAC/1/11/9/46. Reproduced with kind permission of Unilever-Archives.

Kingsway Accra Exterior UAC/1/11/9/46. Reproduced with kind permission of Unilever-Archives.

The new Kingsway was located on a newly constructed avenue connecting the city center and the airport, Independence Avenue, adjacent to ministerial buildings and the headquarters of the Ghana Cocoa Marketing Board, a move that made

commercial sense and served to associate Kingsway with Nkrumah's urban ambitions for Accra.[81] The form, materials, and technology of the new store marked it out as an avatar for a new kind of architectural modernity in Accra.[84] Modernist architecture in late colonial West Africa was concerned with directing and minimizing the effects of sunlight and heat, by the use of concrete brise-soleil, canopies, and pierced concrete detailing. In contrast, the new Kingsway Store featured large expanses of glazing held in place by thin steel supports: an effect that gestured toward the work of Mies Van der Rohe, and which was made possible by the fact the building was entirely air-conditioned.[85]

Inside, the store included a food hall and cosmetics department on the ground floor, while home-wear, clothing, sporting and electrical goods were sold on the upper floors, alongside restaurants, a beauty salon, and an international post-office.[86] The store's interiors were quietly luxurious: the glossy materiality of the building's exterior was continued through the extensive use of imported terrazzo. The store also included the first escalator in Anglophone West Africa, something of particular note to locals.


Kingsway Apapa UAC/2/10/B2/4/4/1/1. Reproduced with kind permission of Unilever-Archives.

Kingsway Apapa UAC/2/10/B2/4/4/1/1. Reproduced with kind permission of Unilever-Archives.

A similar process was undertaken in Nigeria and, in general, the UAC chairman regarded these new stores as a "safeguard against the future."[89] Care was accordingly taken that these store buildings be as architecturally striking as possible. At Ibadan, the Kingsway store took the form of a four-storey block with its principal façade clad in patterned glaze tile, whilst at Apapa, TP Bennett's produced a striking design with the façade composed of geometrically patterned pre-cast concrete. While the physical prominence of new stores was often maximized through towers and other features, so too were depictions of the stores in advertising images.[94] These images also show attempts to build popular ownership of the stores. A new element in its advertising sought to tie the store to their local contexts, to "narrate" the new buildings to Indigenous communities.[98] A newspaper article written by the ubiquitous Eleanor McDonald described a tour around the new Ibadan store in 1962:

> The view of the staircase is most impressive! It has an air of lightness and airiness which is fascinating and enables you to see from one side of the store to the other. This has been achieved by a modern architectural technique […] up the stairs you go, looking down on the fountain playing its wide, fern-lined bowl. This fountain has already acquired the Yoruba name for flowing water – Orisun…[99]

Connected to these endeavors to narrate Kingsway as a part of local cultures, were attempts to increasingly reposition a visit to the Kingsway store as something with wider appeal beyond the upper-bourgeoise, elite shopper. Kingsway's advertisements therefore operated on three levels: to sell bourgeois lifestyle goods to affluent consumers; to inculcate a sense of nationalist pride amongst a wider community of Africans who could not afford imported luxury goods, and to reflect nationalist political ambitions, steeped in development theory, as evidence for the teleological progress of West African states from colonized territories to affluent, confident, independent nations. That the Kingsway chain continued to expand throughout the late 1960s and 1970s—a period of instability in both Ghana and Nigeria—illustrates the success of Kingsway's efforts to use modernist design and architecture as an operative tool.[102]

Conclusion

This article has demonstrated that the Kingsway department store constituted key sites for the experience of Modernist design in late colonial and decolonizing Anglophone West Africa. It has shown that this was not somehow "spontaneous" or "natural," but was, in fact, closely directed from London, for expressly capitalistic reasons.[104] These new Kingsway Stores are a concrete manifestation of British capital's post-independence presence in the region. And advertising images made this explicit: images of Kingsway Stores were widely circulated as evidence for the modernizing "investments" made by British capital in post-independence West Africa. Kingsway functioned as evidence for post-colonial renewal and widening prosperity. In choreographing the interior design and consumerist lifestyle aspirations of the African middle classes Kingsway satisfied demands for an individual prosperity that was at the heart of postcolonial notions of progress, something also evidenced by its grand new store buildings. Far from the Kingsway being a symbol of the colonial past, it paradoxically became an icon of a prosperous future.

This account offers a fundamental troubling of the existing historiography on modernism in West Africa. This has tended to present modernism—especially in the field of architecture—as either a product of the developmental turn in late colonial management in the region or, alternatively, as the preferred design language of new nations emerging from colonialism into independence. But, in centering the Kingsway Stores, modernism instead appears as a business survival strategy. Instrumentalized and mobilized to ensure that the Kingsway chain, and its parent company, the UAC, was able to prolong colonial forms of profit and capital flows, supply chains, and ownership for as long as possible after independence, modernism emerged as troublingly imbricated with colonial and neocolonial profit-seeking.

Footnotes

1. Kwame Nkrumah, *Neo-Colonialism: The Last Stage of Imperialism* (London: Panaf, 2004), 178. See also Bianca Murillo, "The Devil We Know: Gold Coast Consumers, Local Employees and the United Africa Company 1940–1960," *Enterprise & Society* 12, no. 2 (June 2011): 317–55; Stephanie Decker, "Corporate Legitimacy and Advertising: British Companies and the Rhetoric of Development in West Africa, 1950–1970," *The Business History Review* 81, no. 1 (Spring 2007): 59–86. The architectural and urban dimensions of the UAC's business in West and Central Africa are studied in: Iain Jackson et al., *Architecture, Empire and Trade: The Architecture of the United Africa Company* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, forthcoming, 2024).
2. Letter from Archer to Hockley, December 18, 1956, UAC/2/20/4/3/2/2, UA.
3. Sarah Stockwell, "Ends of Empire," in *The British Empire: Themes and Perspectives*, ed. Sarah Stockwell (London: Blackwell Publishing, 2008). See also Frederick Cooper, *Africa Since 1940: The Past of the Present* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).
4. In this Kingsway was building upon a long history of colonial interventions in the domestic lives of West African people. See, for example, LaRey Denzer, "Domestic Science Training in Colonial Yorubaland," in *African Encounters with Domesticity*, ed. Karen Tranberg Hansen (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1992) and essays in Frederick Cooper and Laura Ann Stoler, eds., *Tensions of Empire: Colonial Cultures in a Bourgeois World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).
5. Early histories of the global spread of modernist architecture and design have in many national contexts "failed to problematize" the "global reach" of modernism, presenting its spread as somehow "natural and spontaneous." Duanfang Lu, "Architecture, Modernity and Identity in the Third World," in *Third World Modernism*, ed. Duanfang Lu (Oxford: Routledge, 2011), 1–29.
6. See Frederick Cooper, *Colonialism in Question: Theory Knowledge History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).
7. Lu, "Architecture, Modernity and Identity"; Mark Crinson, "Imperial Modernism," in *Architecture and Urbanism in the British Empire*, ed. G.A. Bremner (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 198–238, and Irene Cheng, Charles L. Davis II, and Mabel O. Wilson, "Introduction," *Race and Modern Architecture: A Critical History from the Enlightenment to the Present* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2020), 3–22. Ikem S. Okoye, "Where Was Not Modernism?" https://www.cca.qc.ca/en/articles/77238/where-was-not-modernism (accessed June 3, 2023).
8. Notes from BJ Dale May/June 1967, UAC/1/3/4/7/5, UA.
9. Crinson, *Imperial Modernism*, 201. Crinson is referring here to J. Hosagrahar, *Indigenous Modernities: Negotiating Architecture and Urbanism* (London: Routledge, 2005), amongst other works.
10. Lu, "Architecture, Modernity and Identity," 5.
11. We are indebted to the scholarship of Bianca Murillo, who discussed the redevelopment of the Kingsway Stores in Accra as intimately connected to ideas of modernity. But Murillo does not address the longer history of Kingsway and Modernist design (as distinct from political constructs of modernity) in both the colonial and post-colonial contexts of West Africa. Bianca Murillo, *Market Encounters: Consumer Cultures in Twentieth Century Ghana* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2017), 87.
12. Mark Crinson, *Modern Architecture and the End of Empire* (London: Ashgate, 2003); Hannah le Roux, "The Networks of Tropical Architecture," *The Journal of Architecture* 8, no. 3 (2003): 337–54; Iain Jackson and Jessica Holland, *The Architecture of Edwin Maxwell Fry and Jane Drew* (London: Routledge, 2014); Iain Jackson and Nwola Uduku, "Sub-Saharan Africa" in *Architecture and Urbanism in the British Empire*, ed. G. A. Bremner (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 393–422. This has however largely avoided unpicking business relationships with modernism.
13. Erik Linstrum et al., "Decolonising Britain: An Exchange," *Twentieth Century British History* 33, no. 2 (2022): 274–303.
14. Laura Ann Stoler, "Making Empire Respectable," *American Ethnologist* 16, no. 4 (1989): 634–60, and Britta Schilling, "Design Advice for the African Home," *Interiors* 5, no. 2 (2002): 179–97.
15. For a history of the second colonial occupation in West Africa, see Bekeh Ukelina, *The Second Colonial Occupation* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2017).
16. Karen Tranberg Hansen, "White Women in a Changing World," in *Western Women and Imperialism*, eds. Chaudhuri and Strobel (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), 247–69.
17. The phrase "ends of empire" is used deliberately here. Stockwell, "Ends of Empire."
18. Aníbal Quijano, "Coloniality and Modernity/Rationality," *Cultural Studies* 21, no. 2–3 (2007): 168–78.
19. Semi-structured interviews were undertaken in Ghana and Nigeria between April 2022 and January 2023. For the concept of reading the archive against and with the grain, see Ann Laura Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009).
20. Ambe Njoh, *Planning Power* (London: UCL Press, 2006).
21. The exports were funded by the sale of the imported goods. See *Diary of Congo and West Africa Tour 1924–1925*, UAC/2/34/4/1/1, UA.

22. Murillo, *Market Encounters*, 38–39.
23. Anon., *The Red Book of West Africa* (London: WH Collingridge, 1920).
24. See *The Red Book of West Africa*.
25. Murillo, *Market Encounters*, 35.
26. *Red Book of West Africa*, and Board Correspondence: Lagos Stores, August 29, 1930, UAC/1/1/1/12/14, UA.
27. See, for example, *The Red Book of West Africa* for descriptions of "Europeanized" Africans.
28. Some contemporary advertising does also feature Africanized figures. See Prestige and Goodwill Advertising campaigns, UAC/1/11/20/3, UA.
29. Ukelina, *The Second Colonial Occupation*.
30. Margaret Strobel, *European Women and the Second British Empire* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 25.
31. Stoler, "Making Empire Respectable," 645.
32. Strobel, *European Women and the Second British Empire*, 21.
33. Paula Jones, "The United Africa Company in the Gold Coast/Ghana 1920–1965" (PhD diss., University College London, 1983).
34. Stoler, "Making Empire Respectable," 640.
35. Robert Home, *Of Planting and Planning* (London: Routledge, 2013); Anthony King, *The Bungalow* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995); Tim Livsey, "State, Urban Space, Race," *The Journal of African History* 63, no. 2 (2002): 178–96.
36. See, for example, UAC/2/10/4/1/2/10; UAC/2/10/4/1/2/11; UAC/2/10/A3/3/3/1/5; UAC/2/13/A/3/2/44; for photographs and plans of company housing built by the UAC and its subsidiaries.
37. UAC of Ghana Ltd: *Bungalow Equipment and Standard List*, UAC/2/20/3/8/1, UA.
38. Itohan Osayimwese, *Colonialism and Modern Architecture in Germany* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2017).
39. Houses designed by tropical modernists are featured regularly in the pages of the *West African Builder and Architect*. For some examples of the previously unpublished, see the photocards collection of the UAC, especially Photocards Box 14: Côte d'Ivoire and Gambia, UAC/1/11/10/1/4–5, UA.
40. Stoler, "Making Empire Respectable," 640.
41. For Africans, the bungalow reservation could be a place of violence. This is well captured in African fiction. See Ayi Kwei Armah, *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* (London: Houghton Mifflin, 1968).
42. Helen Callaway, *Gender, Culture and Empire: European Women in Colonial Nigeria* (London: Macmillan, 1987), 187.
43. Callaway, *Gender, Culture and Empire*, 194.
44. UAC of Ghana Ltd: *Bungalow Equipment and Standard List*, UAC/2/20/3/8/1, UA.
45. Britta Schilling, "Design Advice for the African Home," 179.
46. Ibid., 179.
47. Callaway, *Gender, Culture and Empire*, 170.
48. Maurice Kewley, "Home and Away: A Kind of Memoir for Family and Friends Past and Present," 1999, UAC/1/11/14/3/10, p. 9.
49. Memoir of Mrs. Thorpe, UAC/1/11/14/3/7, UA.
50. Odds and Ends, Public Relations Box 35, UAC/1/11/13/2/2, UA.
51. Nkrumah, *Neo-Colonialism*, 178.
52. For an account of the anti-colonial protests in the Gold Coast, see Murillo, *Market Encounters*. For the much less well documented equivalents in Sierra Leone, see *Damage Through Riot*, UAC/11/9/44/29, 1955, UA, and *Disturbances in Freetown: Women's Movement*, Box 567, Sierra Leone National Archives, Fourah Bay College, Sierra Leone.
53. In Ghana and Nigeria at least. In Freetown, as late as 1968 Kingsway Sierra Leone regarded its main customer base as British expatriates. Memorandum from Thomas to Pedler, September 1968, UAC/1/3/4/7/5, UA.
54. UAC Board minutes, January 18, 1965; Board minutes, August 22, 1966, UAC/1/1/2/1/3/11, UA.
55. See previous reference.
56. "For True Elegance," advertisement for Kingsway Stores published in *Nigeria Magazine* 71, December 1961.
57. Quoted by Murillo, "The Modern Shopping Experience," 372–73. This was said about the store in Accra, but similar sentiments were expressed about Nigeria.
58. Anne Pimlott Baker, "MacDonald, Eleanor Catherine," *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (2008), https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/93469 (accessed May 13, 2023).
59. See previous reference.
60. Letter from Macdonald to S. M. Mepayiyeda, August 15, 1963, UAC/1/11/4/1/3, UA.
61. See previous reference.
62. Anon., "Tips for the Home," *The Post*, March 13, 1962.
63. See previous reference.
64. See Anon., "Ideal Home Exhibition Drew 2000 Visitors a Day," *Gold Coast Weekly Review*, September 5, 1956, and Schilling, "Design Advice for the African Home," 185.
65. Schilling, "Design Advice for the African Home," 185.
66. See previous reference.
67. Anon., "Tips for the Home." See also Bianca Murillo, "Ideal Homes and the Gender Politics of Consumption in Post-Colonial Ghana 1960–1970," *Gender and History* 21, no. 3 (2009): 560–75.
68. Study of African Women Memorandum, UAC/1/11/4/1/3, UA.

69. UAC/1/11/9/45/32, UA.
70. With thanks to Michael Hirst for sharing photographs of his apartment in Tema, Ghana, c. 1955–57.
71. Study of African Women, UAC/1/11/4/1/3, UA.
72. Notes from BJ Dale on a visit to Kingsway Stores Nigeria, May/June 1967, UAC/1/3/4/7/5, UA.
73. Memorandum from D. H. Buckle, UAC Press Officer, to Miss J. Blow, July 8, 1959, DES/DCA/9/1005/64/1, Design Council Archive.
74. Memorandum from Reeve to White, undated c. 1958, and Memorandum from D. H. Buckle to Miss J. Blow, 1959, DES/DCA/9/1005/64/1, Design Council Archive.
75. Murillo, "The Modern Shopping Experience," 379.
76. See previous reference.
77. See Jessica Lynn Pearson, "Decolonising the Sky," *Humanity* 14, no. 1 (2023): 68–84; and Aben Dove Osseo-Asare, "Kwame Nkrumah's Suits," *Fashion Theory* 25 (2021): 597–632.
78. See, for example, Adom Getachew, *Worldmaking After Empire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019).
79. UAC/2/10/B2/4/3/2, Kingsway Stores Property Correspondence and Memoranda, UA.
80. The UAC's partnership with Taylor Woodrow is discussed in greater detail in *Architecture, Empire & Trade*.
81. Plans for future development of Accra, 1957, GH/PRAAD/RG.5/1/89, Public Records and Archives, Accra, Ghana.
82. *In Business with Nkrumah*, Papers of Sir Frederick James Pedler, MSS.Afr.s.1814, Bodleian Library, University of Oxford; and *Plans for Future Development of Accra*, 1957, GH/PRAAD/RG.5/1/89.
83. *In Business with Nkrumah*, MSS.Afr.s.1814, Bodleian Library.
84. See Murillo, *Market Encounters*, 86–114; and Janet Hess, "Imagining Architecture," *Africa Today* 47, no. 2 (2000): 35–58.
85. TP Bennetts also provided an extruded central section to the store's principal façade housing Kingsway's first-floor restaurant, resulting in a composition recalling London's Royal Festival Hall. While the Royal Festival Hall was not at the architectural vanguard of the late 1950s, it was a statement building familiar to British expatriates in Accra and to elite Ghanaians who had traveled to London.
86. *The Kingsway Organisation 1957–1961*, UAC/1/11/9/46, UA.
87. Tim Livsey, *Nigeria's University Age: Reframing Decolonisation and Development* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).
88. Improvements to Kingsway Store Branch at Cape Coast, January 4, 1974, Kingsway Stores of Ghana Ltd., Cape Coast, UAC/2/10/B3/4/2/3, UA.
89. Notes from BJ Dale on a visit to Kingsway Stores Nigeria, May/June 1967, UAC/1/3/4/7/5, UA.
90. Compare correspondence in the file related to the development of the Accra store, UAC/2/20/4/3/2/2, and memoranda from Thomas to Davies, August 26, 1964, UAC/1/3/4/7/5.
91. Notes of a meeting held at UAC House, March 24, 1955, UAC/2/20/4/3/2/2, UA.
92. Memorandum from Thomas to Davies, UAC/1/3/4/7/5, UAC Archives.
93. UAC Board Meeting, September 25, 1963, UAC/1/1/2/1/3/11, UA.
94. *Facets of Enterprise* advertising campaign, c. 1950, UAC/1/11/21/8.
95. *Kingsway Serves the Nation*, undated advertisement, UAC Advertisements: Nigeria, Ghana, Sierra Leone, Gambia, UAC/1/11/21/8, UA.
96. Notes for Mr. Joyce, UAC/2/10/B2/4/2/4, UA.
97. *A Career with the United Africa Company*, UAC/1/11/18/2/23, UA.
98. Giulia Scotto, "Between Visible and Invisible," in *Oil Spaces*, ed. Carola Hein (London: Routledge, 2022), 84–96; Nate Plageman, "'Accra Is Changing, Isn't It?'," *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 43, no. 1 (2010): 137–59.
99. Eleanor McDonald, "Kingsway: Of Modern Structure," *The Nigerian Tribune*, February 2, 1962.
100. UAC Board Committee Minutes, Kingsway Division: Minutes of a meeting held August 22, 1966, UAC/1/1/2/1/3/11, UA.
101. Decker, "Corporate Legitimacy and Advertising."
102. Notes for Mr. Joyce, UAC/2/10/B2/4/2/4, UA. The later history of the Kingsway Stores is explored in greater detail in Jackson et al., *Architecture, Empire and Trade*.
103. Africanisation of Distributive Trade Ghana, January 2, 1969, Corporate Planning Box 9, UAC/1/9/5/5, UA.
104. Lu, "Architecture, Modernity and Identity in the Third World," 6.
105. See Jackson et al., *Architecture, Empire and Trade*. See also Stephanie Decker, *Postcolonial Transition and Global Business History* (London: Routledge, 2022), and Vanessa Ogle, "'Funk Money'," *Past & Present* 249, no. 1 (2020): 213–49.

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10.3.3: Modular Furniture in China

Modelling Modular Living: *Furniture and Life* Magazine and Interior Design in 1980s China

Abridged from "Modelling Modular Living: *Furniture and Life* Magazine and Interior Design in 1980s China" By Jennifer Altehenger (*Journal of Design History*, Volume 35, Issue 2, June 2022, Pages 151–167, https://doi.org/10.1093/jdh/epab043)

The 1980s were a formative decade in interior and furniture design in the People's Republic of China. Following the death of Mao Zedong and the official end of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)—first under the leadership of Hua Guofeng between 1976 and 1978 and then under Deng Xiaoping after 1978—departed from the politics of mass mobilization that had marked the previous years. The policy of 'Four Modernizations', including modernization in agriculture, industry, defence, as well as science and technology, was to lead the country onto a more moderate and structured path of development. As part of this process, the CCP initiated a series of economic reforms in December 1978 and announced that the country would seek to fulfill the 'Four Modernizations' through 'Reform and Opening'; which meant moving away from a strictly Soviet or Maoist planned economy and opening to wider engagement with and investment from other countries.[1]

One of the key sectors to modernize was light industry, including the coordination and production of consumer goods such as furniture, food, cosmetics, electrical and white goods, wood and plastic products, bicycles, radios and other items. During the Mao era (1949–1976), the CCP had placed an emphasis on heavy industry, often at the expense of light industry. As Laurence Coderre has shown, state authorities thought commodities more a 'necessary evil' than a motor of industrialization.[2] As a result, many people had found it difficult to obtain even basic goods needed for everyday life. By contrast, during the 1980s, the national Ministry of Light Industry and provincial as well as municipal Bureaus of Light Industry oversaw major investments in this sector. This led to the construction or repurposing of factories, expanded the work force, made goods increasingly available and affordable to more people, and thus raised average living standards, creating a consumer culture that has been the subject of much scholarship.[3] While many foreign observers interpreted this as the onrush of capitalism, for the CCP and many observers in China at the time, it was part of building a 'socialist material civilization'. To ensure that these reforms remained grounded in and supported 'socialist spiritual civilization', state media continuously explained that the construction of this material civilization would be guided by Mao Zedong Thought and Marxism-Leninism. The goal of reaching Communism, in other words, could only be achieved through a unity of material and spiritual civilization.[4]

Official support for the modernization of light industry gave fresh momentum to individuals working in the field of 'arts and crafts' (*gongyi meishu*), architecture, urban planning, product engineering, and other related fields, who had a shared interest in constituting design (*sheji*) as a profession. Within a few years, they reinstated or established research institutes and associations, created educational programmes and exchanges, and began to publish magazines for a readership interested in design.[5] It was in this context that furniture (*jiaju*) and domestic 'interior design' (*shinei sheji*) were institutionalized as specific disciplines within PRC 'design'.[9] There had been some activity in furniture and interior design during the late 1950s, and institutions such as the Central Academy for Arts and Crafts had a research group for interior design. However, during the 1960s and early 1970s, many party officials had conceptualized private space as dangerous grounds for counterrevolutionary and bourgeois thought and decoration of such spaces as a bourgeois pastime. By contrast, home was now reconceptualized as a safe environment where morally upright socialist citizens would realize the CCP's ideal of spiritual and material civilization. There was much work to be done. Consumer demand for furniture was high, yet most furniture was still made manually. The other problem was that many people, especially urbanites, lived in small spaces for much of the decade.[10] Furniture and interior designers thus had to devise ways to use space efficiently to accommodate different activities—from sleeping to working, eating, and socializing, often in as little as ten square metres. During the 1980s, an entire industry slowly began to grow around the project to make the home multifunctional, while providing maximum comfort.[11]

This article charts the development of furniture and interior design through the prism of *Furniture and Life* (*Jiaju yu shenghuo*), a magazine first published in 1981 in the city of Xi'an in China's North-Western Shaanxi Province. *Furniture* was at first mostly written for a professional audience. Meanwhile, as of 1983, *Furniture and Life* pivoted to a broader urban audience, including regular advice columns, tips for furniture and interior layouts, home stories, and photo spreads. This proved popular. From a regional circulation of a few thousand copies, it expanded to a national readership with a print run of 250,000 copies per issue by the late 1980s.

Building on scholarship in the history of magazine and advice publishing, I survey a selection of *Furniture and Life*'s articles, reading them as the editors' attempt to achieve interlinked goals: to turn the space of home into a 'designed object', present plans and solutions for socialist living and interiors, and lend concrete shape to the CCP's more abstract concepts of material

and spiritual civilization.[12] In this process, editors helped turn modular (*zuhe*), 'board-style' (*banshi*) furniture into a symbol of new socialist domesticity.[13] I argue that in connecting modular furniture-based interior design with 'healthy living' (*jiankang shenghuo*) and the 'beautification' (*meihua*) of daily life, the magazine made it part of the cultural imagination of the 1980s. Rather than seeing the rise of China's consumer culture during the 1980s as the negation of socialism, it is more productive to understand the work of *Furniture and Life*'s editors as wanting to demonstrate that there was space for good design, privacy and comfort in Chinese socialism, even if many people's experiences of the turbulent Mao era had suggested otherwise.[14] The magazine shows, as Susan Reid has argued for the USSR, that the more comfortable homes of China's 1980s were not by default 'spaces where the official utopia of the party-state was contradicted' and therefore 'the germ of state socialism's potential undoing'.[15]

Creating *Furniture and Life*

Furniture and Life was a product of its time, politically and culturally. Throughout the 1970s, state authorities had not been able to meet demands for many furniture items (such as wardrobes or beds) and more housing, and it was a particularly pressing problem for people living in larger urban areas especially those who worked in the state or party bureaucracy, factories, schools or other kinds of 'work units' (*danwei*). Smaller furniture items, such as stools, could mostly be bought from state-owned stores. The problem was usually larger furniture items (wardrobes, beds, etc.). One could rent work unit furniture or purchase it second hand.[16] Many urbanites, however, wanted their own new pieces. Where possible, families might acquire a saw and other tools, to make their own furniture, or work with someone informally who could do woodwork.[17] Yet the most common way to obtain new large furniture items in many cities was through the ration coupon system, at least until the late 1970s. Work units were allocated a limited number of ration coupons associated with a state-owned store. Stores announced regularly which coupons were eligible for 'supply' (*gongying*). Once called, the coupon holder was entitled to visit the shop to purchase the item. However, urban centres generally lacked enough large furniture items. People would often have to wait for six months or more for their number to be called. Even then they might have to queue very early for the day's stock to arrive, often for several hours, only to have to return on the next day because there was not enough stock.[19]

Several factors explain why existing domestic industry could not meet people's demands for new furniture. First, much of the furniture was fully or mostly manually made, in workshops and local factories.[20] The second problem were material resources as solid wood was in short supply. Ration coupons disappeared soon after economic reforms began in the 1980s and stores slowly increased stocks. The pressure on supplies remained, however. While arrangements varied greatly across China, many urban families had long lived in tight quarters, often with several generations in one room.[25] The average living space for Shanghai residents was just shy of $5m^2$ (54 sf) in 1980, rising to $8.7m^2$ (94 sf) by 1988. Thirty-three per cent of households still had fewer than $4m^2$ (43 sf) per person.[27]

In line with two of the 'Four Modernizations'—industry and science/technology—state officials authorized the construction of new furniture factories, purchased machinery from Germany, Japan, Italy and other countries, trained workers, and reworked material supply lines. As modernization was meant to be anchored in scientific knowledge, municipal Bureaus of Light Industry promoted research into furniture design, production and use through a network of research institutes.[30] One of the first, the Shanghai Furniture Research Institute (*jiaju yanjiusuo*), began work in the mid-1970s. It pooled local design expertise and offered technical advice to factories. Its members also created furniture prototypes and published guidebooks containing furniture blueprints, information about materials, measurements, and tools.[31] Members worked with 'furniture industry science and technology information stations' at national and local level which collected and circulated information about furniture from across China and the world. The National Furniture Industry Science and Technology Information Station, for example, disseminated information through its magazine *Furniture* and through internal compendia, sharing technical specifications, translations of international design patents, discussions of good design and guidance on raw materials.

The idea for *Furniture and Life* grew out of this kind of institutional structure at the the Xi'an Furniture Research Institute in 1977.[32]. They obtained permission to publish *Furniture and Life* which began with four issues in 1981 as a first trial period to see if it would attract a regional readership.[35] The editor-in-chief, until his death, was the architect Zhao Shihe (1935–1989) who, with several colleagues applied their expertise in architecture to furniture and the emerging specialty of 'interior architecture' (*neishi sheji*), soon more commonly known as 'interior design'.

Modular furniture as design ideal

Publishing a magazine on furniture and interior design in everyday life proved to be a smart decision. There were still few on the topic. A readership interested in furniture meanwhile was growing. As Davis has shown for Shanghai, people increasingly felt more able to create comfortable homes and urban spending power was rising.[42] Between 1984 and 1988 in Beijing, per household spending on furniture more than doubled, while in Xi'an it tripled between 1980 and 1990.[43] The magazine's aim was not to promote consumerism though. Editors wanted to offer solutions to problems they considered common and bring

furniture and interiors into the cultural imagination. Articles seldom discussed furniture in isolation but as part of space, home, and the needs of daily life. The best furniture was at once 'useful, attractive and economical' (*shiyong, meiguan, jingji*) on its own and when placed in the room and home. Such furniture, so the rationale went, would facilitate harmonious family life, health, and thus productivity; all tenets of 'socialist material and spiritual civilization'.[44]

Modular furniture fulfilled this brief and soon became the focus. When the magazine was first published though, modular furniture was more aspiration than reality. During the late 1970s and early 1980s, customers desired furniture 'sets' (*chengtao*). A set was composed of individual pieces that could include; a bed, wardrobe, chest of drawers, dining table, and four chairs. People working in furniture research institutes thought sets problematic for several reasons. Carpenters usually made pieces manually using solid wood. That took time and resources. Moreover, institutes criticized that this furniture was chunky, either wasting or simply not fitting the space available.[48] Modular furniture units, by contrast, could be planned to fit individual spaces, serve multiple purposes, and they fit the state's agenda of the technological advancement of industry.

Besides offering flexibility in spatial arrangement, research institutes favoured modular furniture because it needed less manufacturing and could be made using engineered (or composite) wood boards (*renzaoban*), a type known as 'board-style'. The sixth, and especially the seventh, five-year plan made production of more engineered woods a key target, accelerating investment and development. Soon, board-style furniture was available in different wood veneers and coloured plastic coverings, and with each issue *Furniture and Life* intensified its coverage of board-style designs.[56]

Furniture and Life's editors expended much effort to explain why board-style furniture would be preferable, not only from the perspective of light industry but also users. Furniture sets were familiar and to many people they seemed convenient because they needed little planning and items could be moved around. Board-style modular furniture, by contrast, had to be planned out in advance because several components had to be fixed to walls. One could not just pick out a set, or individual components, one had to consider the entire room and how to use it. However, editors explained why readers should see this apparent downside as a hidden advantage that would allow users to make the most of space, and integrate shelving, beds, desks, sofas, and other objects into one design and one room.

Even if readers did not wish or could not afford to furnish the whole room in modular style, editors still offered advice on maximizing space by introducing selected modular items. Board-style furniture could also be folded to save on even more space. Fixed to the wall or other furniture, it could be opened when needed. Desks were often designed in this way and integrated into wall units or fixed to the end of beds (Fig. 1). The final advantage of these modular styles was that readers could make them themselves or commission carpenters. The ideal board-style furniture of the future was industrially made of engineered woods, a fact constantly repeated. Yet readers would not have to wait until such furniture became more widely available for purchase. They could find other ways, and work with solid woods. This might not be as efficient in terms of material use, but it would at least help maximize space. As in other socialist countries at the time, China's 'socialist material civilization' initially relied on local craftspeople and people doing DIY work.[66] Here, *Furniture and Life* could be a source of ideas and models. 'Ask the Engineer' often covered detailed technical advice, including how to align and properly fasten board-style units and shelving, and how to work across room corners.

Example of a bed with a fold-out desk, 'Bed → Writing Desk'. JJSH 2 (1986): 18.

Figure 1: Example of a bed with a fold-out desk, 'Bed → Writing Desk'. *JJSH* 2 (1986): 18.

Modelling a life of material and spiritual civilization

In the magazine, two columns—'Free Design' and 'My Home'—gave editors a space to showcase life with modular furniture, explain its benefits through practical example, and address readers as amateurs desiring advice, and as models embodying socialist material civilization.[74] The team behind the column 'Free Design' had been part of the magazine's first issue in 1981. They invited readers to submit written requests for interior designs, including information about their family size, living conditions, details of the layout and measurement of the room they wanted to furnish and what kinds of design suggestions they desired. The column demonstrated how modular furniture could help a diverse readership trying to cope with limited spaces, from studios to small apartments. There was, for example, the widowed Shanghai Jiangnan Shipyard worker who wanted his teenage daughter to have her own space in a studio in which they shared one room for sleeping and work. The team suggested a board-style bunk bed, concealed behind a curtain, and two small built-in desks facing away from each other on opposing walls (Fig. 3).[78] Sometimes the team also helped fix board-style furniture design errors. A vehicle factory worker from Shijiazhuang in Hebei Province had proudly built his own board-style bed and expansive wall unit but had accidentally followed blueprints that were too large for his small room. The team recommended he disassemble some of the units, place some behind the bed, and add a slimmer sofa to provide seating (Fig. 4).[81]

One-room design for the Jiangnan Shipyard worker. Jiaju yu shenghuo 2 (1986): 17.

Figure 3: One-room design for the Jiangnan Shipyard worker. *Jiaju yu shenghuo* 2 (1986): 17.

Design suggestion for refitting board-style furniture. Jiaju yu shenghuo 3 (1986): 10.

Figure 4: Design suggestion for refitting board-style furniture. *Jiaju yu shenghuo* 3 (1986): 10.

Since space was at a particular premium for newly-weds, who were also among the magazines' target readership, editors decided in 1987 to feature a special on the advantages of board-style furniture in the home for newly-weds (*xinhun jushi*).[82] By the magazine's own account, dozens of newly-weds and engaged couples had written to the team, all asking the same question: how to purchase appropriate new furniture, and how to arrange it in their standardized room layouts. Approaching the question methodologically, the team started on the premise that 'to make a home, the room needs to satisfy needs of sleep, daily life, study, receiving guests, preparing and having meals, hygiene and storage.'[83] 'Ideally these activities are separated', they explained, but this was not realistic in 'current circumstances'. They chose to emphasize sleep, daily life and study, which meant accommodating a double bed, sofa or small seating area for at least two people, desk, wardrobe, bedside table, and tall multipurpose shelving and wall units. Accounting for different apartment sizes, they then proposed blueprints for rooms ranging in width from 3.3m to 3.6m and in length from 4.2m to 5.4m. Readers could select from three basic designs: one where the sleeping area was clearly cordoned off (with tall shelving and curtains), a 'half-closed' one (using furniture to separate areas), and an 'open' one (with the bed in a prominent position). The team advised readers to consider which 'use and functionalities' they wanted for their sleeping area and how much privacy they desired; a relevant question for those sharing apartments with parents. Readers would also have to decide whether a quiet work area was important. If not, the article suggested placing desks somewhere with more 'movement'. Having decided on their preferences, readers could consult twenty-four drawings of different room arrangements which varied according to these considerations but also according to how the room was laid out and where doors, windows, and balconies were located (Fig. 5).

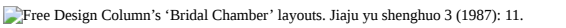

Free Design Column's 'Bridal Chamber' layouts. Jiaju yu shenghuo 3 (1987): 11.

Figure 5: Free Design Column's 'Bridal Chamber' layouts. *Jiaju yu shenghuo* 3 (1987): 11.

If 'Free Design' offered blueprints, 'My Home' demonstrated how urban interiors might look in practice, using colourful photo spreads and home stories. At first, the column had mainly introduced local TV actors, singers, or artists to show that they, too, lived in smaller spaces. In 1987, the editors shifted to focus on ordinary people's homes, inviting people to submit their own photo-stories as part of a competition.[84] The best submissions, those that showed how people dealt with small spaces to create comfortable but unpretentious homes, were then featured as colour spreads, complete with room plans and the couple's description of how and why they arranged their spaces the way they did and how they used modular furniture to achieve the desired result.

Throughout, editors were concerned though that readers understand the difference between design and excessive decoration. Decoration, as one article elaborated in early 1987, could be 'superficial' and produce 'clutter'. Good design was 'smart', made the most of little, and was 'necessary'.[88] How to distinguish this was a constant problem. After 'My home' initiated its competition, many readers sent in photos of them and their apartments, hoping to be featured. Soon after, a note to all readers asked them not to send photos that were too staged. Many submissions, editors noted, had included excessive decorations—with fruits, toys, handicraft items on display that made the room look more 'like a department store' rather than the kind of clean, modern homes editors wanted to promote. To them, these rooms lacked a 'feeling of stability' and 'spiritual beauty'.[89] Not that the magazine's criteria for good decoration would necessarily have been clear to readers over time. Only a year earlier, editors had also introduced a different column dedicated specifically to DIY ideas developed by 'wives'. It celebrated Coca-Cola cans cut open to serve as storage for pens and cognac bottles repurposed as the base for standing lamps. This was presented as sensible decoration, with 'the wife working with her brain, the husband working with his hands'.[90] Compared with such questions of decoration, modular furniture aligned more easily with the vision of material civilization.

Conclusion

Furniture and Life was among the first publications after 1978 to make home an object and a site of positive inquiry in China. In the period analysed here, its editors were trying to improve people's lives by creating new furniture in research institutes, introducing these in the magazine, and trying to anticipate and address questions and needs readers might have. It was their contribution to creating a 'new era' of Chinese socialism—a departure from the Cultural Revolution, but not from a commitment to socialism.

Because it originated in the remoter urban centre of Xi'an, *Furniture and Life* thus offers an opportunity to think through the role of material culture in urban life and in making the cultural imagination of the 1980s, including but not limited to the political centre of Beijing and the commercial hub of Shanghai. Things changed significantly for Chinese citizens, the magazine, and its editors during the 1990s. The home-building market boomed. Many more interior design magazines took up publication, including Chinese editions of international design and home-making magazines[91] Board-style modular furniture was now widely available and popular with many. But it was no longer the height of fashion; a place soon occupied by more ornate 'European-style' furniture. Magazines focused more on brands, advising readers what and where to purchase. Buying foreign-made furniture came to signify social prestige. While

state institutions receded from much of this consumer culture, the connection between furniture and interior designers, research institutes, and the light industry bureaucracy remained. The developments of the 1990s should not overdetermine how we interpret *Furniture and Life*'s history during the 1980s, however. There is a danger of seeing the 1980s as a transitional decade, and interpreting people's actions with hindsight, knowing of the eventual fall of European socialist states and the effect this momentous change had on the PRC and the CCP, including accelerated marketization. Today, the party has reinvigorated talk of China's socialist material and spiritual civilization. The developments of the 1980s can thus help trace some of the historical legacies of the party's vision for the connection between home, design, and politics in future.

Footnotes

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3. See, for example, D. S. Davis, ed., *The Consumer Revolution in Urban China*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000; K. Gerth, *As China Goes, So Goes the World: How Chinese Consumers Are Transforming Everything*. New York: Hill and Wang, 2010; K. Gerth, *Unending Capitalism: How Consumerism Negated China's Revolution*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020; J. Wang, *Brand New China: Advertising, Media and Commercial Culture*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008.
4. On the history of the term "socialist spiritual civilization," see R. Baum, *Burying Mao: Politics in the Age of Deng Xiaoping*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994.
5. C. Q. L. Xue and G. Ding, *A History of Design Institutes in China: From Mao to Market*. London: Routledge, 2018.
6. Y. Shen, *Zhongguo xiandai sheji guannian shi*. Shanghai: Shanghai renmin meishu chubanshe, 2017, 158–232.
7. C. Ho, "Design and Handicraft," in *Material Contradictions in Mao's China* (forthcoming), eds. J. Alethenger and D. Y. Ho.
8. Shen, *Zhongguo xiandai sheji guannian shi*; Y. Shen and S. Wei, *Shanghai zhizao zhong de sheji*. Guilin: Guangxi shifandaxue chubanshe, 2018; see also the series edited by Y. Shen, *Gongye sheji Zhongguo zhi lu*. Dalian: Dalian ligong daxue chubanshe, from 2017.
9. Shen, *Zhongguo xiandai sheji guannian shi*, 166.
10. On the role of architecture in the early reforms, see C. Roskam, "Practicing Reform: Experiments in Post-Revolutionary Chinese Architectural Production, 1973–1989," *Journal of Architectural Education* 69, no. 1 (2015): 28–39; and C. Roskam, *Designing Reform: Post-Revolutionary Architectural Culture in the People's Republic of China, 1971–1989*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2021.
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13. For a short discussion of modular furniture in China during this time, see Shen, *Zhongguo xiandai sheji guannian shi*, 220–22; and Y. Chen, ed., *Zhongguo jiaju shi*. Beijing: Zhongguo qinggongye chubanshe, 2009.
14. This argument is inspired by comparative cases in S. E. Reid, "Communist Comfort," *Gender and History* 21, no. 3 (2009): 465–98; and P. Betts, *Within Walls*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010, 120–47.
15. Reid, "Communist Comfort," 466–67.
16. B. Zhuang and Beijingshi difangzhi bianzuan weiyuanhui, eds., *Beijing zhi: renmin shenghuo zhi*. Beijing: Beijing chubanshe, 2007, 297.
17. This is often mentioned in local gazettes and memoirs; see Zhuang, *Beijing zhi*, 298; and for Shanghai, D. Chen, *Chen Danyan sanwen jingxuan*. Shanghai: Changjiang wenyi chubanshe, 2017, 79–81.
18. Zhuang et al., *Beijing zhi*, 298; Davis, "Urban Households," 65.
19. Zhuang et al., *Beijing zhi*, 298.
20. Q. Liu, "Woguo jiajuye fazhan you guangkuo tiandi," *Renmin Ribao*, January 23, 1985, 5.
21. J. Lü, "Beijing jiaju gongbuyingqiu yuanyin hezai," *Renmin Ribao*, August 31, 1979, 2; Xinhua shejizhe, "Jiji gaohao jiaju de shengchan he gongying," *Renmin Ribao*, November 30, 1980, 2.
22. Xinhua shejizhe, "Jiji gaohao jiaju de shengchan he gongying."
23. See previous reference.
24. Lü, "Beijing jiaju gongbuyingqiu yuanyin hezai."
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see H. Lu, “Bourgeois Comfort under Proletarian Dictatorships,” *Journal of Social History* 52, no. 1 (2018): 74–100. See also “One Hundred Items for Destroying the Old and Establishing the New,” in M. Schoenhals, ed., *China’s Cultural Revolution, 1966–69* (Armonk: M.E. Sharpe, 1996), 218.

26. D. S. Davis, “Reconfiguring Shanghai Households,” in *Redrawing Boundaries*, eds. B. Entwisle and G. E. Henderson (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 245–60, esp. 247.
27. Davis, “Urban Households,” 52.
28. Xi’anshi difangzhi bianzuan weiyuanhui, ed., *Xi’anshi zhi: shehui, renwu*, vol. 7. Xi’an: Xi’an chubanshe, 2006, 205. For Shanghai figures, see Davis, “Urban Households,” 52. National figures from *Zhongguo tongji nianjian* (1988), 799. See also D. Fraser, “Inventing Oasis,” in Davis, ed., *The Consumer Revolution in Urban China*, 25–53.
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34. Xi’an shi jiaju yanjiusuo, “Zhaosheng qishi,” *Jiaju yu shenghuo* 4 (1985): 13.
35. Many 1980s magazines were titled “… and Life.” This practice may date to before the Sino-Soviet split; see S. E. Reid, “Introduction,” *Journal of Design History* 10, no. 2 (1997): 107–18, esp. 112.
36. “Chentong daonian Zhao Shihe tongzhi,” *Jiaju yu shenghuo* 2 (1989): 4.
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38. “Zhenggao qishi,” *Jiaju yu shenghuo* 1 (1981): inside front cover.
39. *Jiaju yu shenghuo* editorial department, “Gao duzhe,” 3–4 (1981): 29.
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42. Davis, “Urban Households”; see also Davis, “When a House Becomes His Home,” 237.
43. Zhuang et al., *Beijing zhi*, 298; Xi’anshi difangzhi bianzuan weiyuanhui, *Xi’anshi zhi*, 202.
44. S. Hu, “Yao wei Xi-bei jiaju gongye fazhan zuochu gongxian,” *Jiaju yu shenghuo* 1 (1984): 2.
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46. Yan, *Private Life under Socialism*, on limits to rural furniture ownership.
47. C. Wang et al., eds., *Xinhun shouce*. Shenyang: Liaoning kexue jishu chubanshe, 1986, 12.
48. See previous reference, 13.
49. “Xiandai jiaju zaoxing ji zhuangshi diandi,” *Jiaju* 4 (1983): 36.
50. See discussions in *Journal of Architecture* (*Jianzhu xuebao*), 1958–60.
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52. Shen and Wei, *Shanghai zhizao zhong de sheji*, 178; Shen, *Zhongguo xiandai sheji guannian shi*, 218.
53. Xi’an shi jiaju yanjiu suo, “Dui keji qingbao gongzuo de shexiang,” *Jiaju* 1 (1980): 34–36; Shaanxi sheng difangzhi bianzuan weiyuanhui, *Shaanxi sheng zhi*, 662.
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56. H. Sun, “Banshi jiaju de jianjiemei he zuhemei,” *Jiaju yu shenghuo* 2 (1984): 4–5.
57. “Xiao ziliao—banshi jiaju,” 5.
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61. See previous reference.
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63. “Jiating shiyong chuzunfa 100 li,” *Jiaju yu shenghuo* 1 (1986): 12–15.
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65. C. Shi, “Doushi qiao anpai,” *Jiaju yu shenghuo* 3 (1984): 7.
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Workshop Journal 68, no. 1 (2009): 27–44; Reid, "Communist Comfort," 479.

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73. On the politics of furniture, see F. Flore and C. McAtee, *The Politics of Furniture*. London: Routledge, 2007.
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78. "Wei Shanghai Jiangnan zaochuan chang duzhe Zhou Qingfa sheji de fang'an," *Jiaju yu shenghuo* 2 (1986): 17.
79. "Wei Anhui sheng Chuzhou shi Changshan xiang duzhe Chen Yiming de sheji fang'an," *Jiaju yu shenghuo* 2 (1986): 16.
80. "Wei Hubei duzhe Wuhan dizhi xueyuan Yu Jianmin sheji de fang'an," *Jiaju yu shenghuo* 3 (1986): 16.
81. "Wei tiedaobu duzhe Shijiazhuang cheliangchang tiejia chejian Zheng Yongyang sheji fang'an," *Jiaju yu shenghuo* 3 (1986): 10.
82. "Yishihu xinhun jushi sheji," *Jiaju yu shenghuo* 3 (1987): 7–11.
83. See previous reference, 8.
84. The announcement appeared in "Wo de jia you jiang jingsai qushi," *Jiaju yu shenghuo* 1 (1987): 42; and the first photo story in "Wo de jia," 2 (1987): 24–25.
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88. H. Liu, "Cong buzhi zou xiang sheji," *Jiaju yu shenghuo* 2 (1986): 6–7.
89. *Jiaju yu shenghuo* editorial department, "'Wo de jia' you jiang jingsai ping hou gan," 3 (1987): 41.
90. "Qizi de xiangfa," *Jiaju yu shenghuo* 1 (1986): 20.
91. Davis, "When a House Becomes His Home," 237–38.

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10.4: Postmodern Design 1970s-1990s

Learning Objectives

- Explain how postmodern design challenges principles of modernism.
- Evaluate the extent to which postmodern interiors reference historical and modern design characteristics, discussing their affects.
- Identify key examples of elements of postmodern interiors and evaluate the extent of their popular appeal.

What is Postmodernism?

Last updated 17 April 2024 © Victoria and Albert Museum, London

This elusive design style is notoriously difficult to define. So we asked some of Postmodernism's leading practitioners, including Charles Jencks, Robert A.M. Stern and Sir Terry Farrell – what does it mean to be Postmodern?

Postmodernism is one of the most controversial movements in art and design history. Over two decades, from about 1970 to 1990, Postmodernism shattered established ideas about art and design, bringing a new self-awareness about style itself. An unstable mix of the theatrical and theoretical, Postmoderism ranges from the ludicrous to the luxurious – a visually thrilling, multifaceted style.



Cabinet de Curiosité, cabinet, Shiro Kuramata, 1988, Japan. Museum no. W.25:1 to 3-2010. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London

Postmodernism was a drastic departure from the utopian visions of Modernism, which had been based on clarity and simplicity. The Modernists wanted to open a window onto a new world; Postmodernism's key principles were complexity and contradiction. If Modernist objects suggested utopia, progress and machine-like perfection, then the Postmodern object seemed to come from a dystopian and far-from-perfect future. Postmodern designers salvaged and distressed materials to produce an aesthetic of urban apocalypse.



Concrete Stereo (stereo system set in concrete), Ron Arad, 1983. Museum no. W.7-2011. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London

Postmodernism had begun as a radical fringe movement in the 1970s, but became the dominant look of the 1980s, the 'designer decade'. Vivid colour, theatricality and exaggeration: everything was a style statement. Whether surfaces were glossy, faked or deliberately distressed, they reflected the desire to combine subversive statements with commercial appeal. Magazines and music were important mediums for disseminating this new phase of Postmodernism. The work of Italian designers – especially the groups Studio Alchymia and Memphis – was promoted across the world through publications like *Domus*. Meanwhile, the energy of post-punk subculture was broadcast far and wide through music videos and cutting-edge graphics. This was the moment of the New Wave: a few thrilling years when image was everything.



Super lamp prototype, designed by Martine Bedin (for Memphis), made by Fausto Celati, 1981, Italy. Museum no. M.1-2011

The excitement and complexity of Postmodernism were enormously influential in the 1980s. As the 'designer decade' wore on and the world economy boomed, Postmodernism became the preferred style of consumerism and corporate culture. Ultimately this was the undoing of the movement. Postmodernism collapsed under the weight of its own success, along with the self-regard that came with it. Yet in the 21st

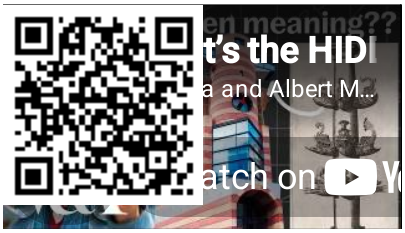
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century we are still feeling its affects. It gave us a new way of looking at the world that holds today, and a style that is resurgent.



Postmodern Architecture

Reece Davey from the Victoria and Albert Museum gives a tour of iconic postmodern buildings in London, questioning "What's the HIDDEN meaning in these crazy buildings?" and giving a glimpse into a few postmodern interiors.



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