

---

*H-France Review* Vol. 19 (December 2019), No. 286

Anca I. Lasc, *Interior Decorating in Nineteenth-Century France: The Visual Culture of a New Profession*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2018. xviii + 267 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, and index. 28 colored plates. \$120.00. (hb) ISBN: 978-1-5261-1340-5.

Review by Emily Davis Winthrop, Virginia Commonwealth University.

Anca Lasc's *Interior Decorating in Nineteenth-Century France: The Visual Culture of a New Profession* chronicles the paths in nineteenth-century France that formalized interior decoration as a profession in the early twentieth century. Lasc's work on the development of the profession complements various studies which take a more Anglo-American perspective.[1] She explores the careers of various figures who participated in decorating interiors in nineteenth-century France, a century which saw an increased interest in the interior and design. What these multiple figures have in common, aside from a desire to expand their industry and capitalize on the market for designing interiors, is the imagery they used in marketing interior design, creating a visual culture of the profession. This imagery acts as a unifying thread for the chapters.

The work's most substantial contribution to the field of design history is its exploration of how interior design defined itself in its proto-professional era and how it did so through the text and—especially—the imagery in design publications. Lasc explores exhibitions, existing professional practices, and the literature developed both for practitioners and the public. Her most persuasive argument centers on how the profession arose out of publications. These publications addressed taste in decoration and collecting, provided instruction and inspiration from craft professions such as furniture-making and upholstery, and promoted goods and services from merchants, especially department stores. Lasc's concentration on period texts and on what her subjects said about the interior within these texts, provides a grounded exploration of the marketing of taste and design in nineteenth-century France. She maintains her focus on the interior as she describes the various factors that worked to establish criteria and taste in the wake of the Revolution that ended the guild system, enriching its history with her use of archival sources. As a result, design publications and proto-interior designers receive a history, direct and archival, for scholars to work from, practically or theoretically.

The author sees the importance of her work as threefold: to chart the emergence of the profession of interior design, to provide a discussion of modern interior design in France that expands the subject beyond British and American contexts, and to chronicle the development of visual culture related to designing interiors. The discussion of visual culture explores connections of modern art, modern design, and modern life. These connections are complicated, and the history that

---

Lasc establishes creates many opportunities for further scholarship: her epilogue sets the stage for a stronger connection to history and historicism in Art Nouveau scholarship.

Chapter one focuses on the manuals published to guide collecting and decorating in France. Lasc uses these taste manuals as a starting point for literature on interior design. In particular, these manuals illustrate that the connections between collecting and decorating tended to be conceived in gendered terms: collecting was viewed as a masculine act related to “high” art, while decorating was considered a more feminine practice related to decorative arts.[2] Lasc provides examples, however, which make connections between art and design explicit, such as those of Henry Havard in *L’Art dans la maison*: Havard asserted that the paintings and sculptures incorporated into interiors served as decorations (p. 24). Incorporating various famous works of art, such manuals, popularized the idea of collections as decoration (p. 44), a development that is essential for the role of design in the nineteenth century. While there are many reasons to look at the history of design in the nineteenth century through the lens of class, the broad reach of these manuals testifies to their significant role. This chapter, like those that follow, approaches the field broadly without addressing the social contexts that existed beyond the texts.[3]

The second chapter shifts to the practice of fashioning rooms and the associated professions—architects, upholsterers, and cabinet-makers. Lasc makes clear that the need for interior decorators was prevalent well before a specialized profession developed to fulfill that role (p. 59). This chapter looks at the work of the professions that acted as “inventors of interiors,” a term coined by Edmond de Goncourt which provides the title of the chapter (p. 61). In the wake of the Revolution of 1789, these professions expanded their activities beyond their (previously guild-regulated) professional boundaries to become “proto-interior decorators” (p. 62). In their broader roles, these various professions used illustrations as a means to provide instruction to practitioners and inspiration to prospective clients. Lasc notes the change from wall elevations to more three-dimensional perspective drawings (p. 69). These artistic renderings allowed for more visualization on the part of the consumer, and permitted practitioners to more easily translate printed images into realized design (p. 83).

The third chapter focuses on more imaginative designs of interior spaces. “Interior dreamscapes” had their root in the theatre and the elaborate stage decorations of figures like Pierre-Luc Cicéri. Lasc relates that “Cicéri’s artistic children and grandchildren disseminated what could be called the idea of the interior for the interior’s sake,” the domestic interior as an image (p. 107). The chapter proceeds to a useful discussion of the role of interior design, imagery, and objects in exhibitions. The role of these works in exhibitions is an important element supporting the connection between modern art and modern design and could have framed the chapter.[4] The histories of various organizations which sought to unify the “industrial and fine arts” are described and Lasc does convincingly make an argument for their perceived unity (p. 118). What Lasc does not incorporate into her discussion is the nature of the separation of these two arenas, which were both unified and distinct during this era. Lasc ends the chapter by looking at what she sees as another type of exhibition through publication in pattern books, in many ways a culmination of the examination of text and imagery in the first two chapters.

There is a great deal of literature relating to the department store in nineteenth-century France. Lasc manages to bring new contributions to this topic and situates her work alongside works devoted to this subject.[5] She explores the role of the visual culture of interior design as it became marketing for retailers who aligned themselves with the artistic nature of this

burgeoning profession (pp. 152-153). Her history of the visual culture of interior decorating, and particularly the “interior dreamscape,” demonstrates that this was an artform that merchants, and primarily department stores, fully embraced. Lasc explores the artistic and commercial nature of displays in stores as well as in the catalogs and publications produced by stores. Au Bon Marché, in particular, provides an example of artistic images of interiors and practical, commercial information for buyers (pp. 169-170).

Historicism is a thread that exists throughout Lasc’s work, since this was the topic of so many manuals and a prevalent theme in interior decoration. The last chapter, however, looks to the modern style. Lasc focuses on the most private spaces, such as the boudoir, which experts suggested ought to receive modern treatment (p. 193). Lasc presents the eclecticism of the “modern style” as both an accompaniment, and an alternative, to historical and exotic themes (p. 202). Alexandre Sandier, for example, firmly establish an innovative aesthetic in response to historicism in France. Lasc describes how Sandier, working without historical details, focused on the aesthetic nature of each object and its importance to the idea of the interior as a whole (p. 213). This leads to a final discussion of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century movement of Art Nouveau.

Lasc identifies a confusion in studies of Art Nouveau regarding its origins and parameters (p. 217). Art Nouveau, she argues, is a plurality among pluralities. She approaches the subject in the same manner in which she discusses interior decoration throughout her work, with attention to the fluidity of styles, rather than to the specific class context of potential audiences. While there is an element of Art Nouveau that reacts to the historicism and everyday commerce of the interior that grew in the nineteenth century, and which Lasc chronicles, one cannot neglect the engagement of some Art Nouveau designers in that world. Lasc recounts a very detailed history of a profession through its literature and visual culture. This history, especially her detailing of the intertwined nature of art and decoration throughout the nineteenth century, allows us to understand better the history of design and where design, the decorator, and the interior as a space of art, were at the end of the nineteenth century.

## NOTES

[1] Charlotte Gere has explored the development of British interior designs in various works including *Nineteenth-Century Decoration: The Art of the Interior* (New York: H.N. Abrams, 1989). American interior design has been the subject of multiple publications such as the very recent Paula Lupkin and Penny Sparke, *Shaping the American Interior: Structures, Contexts, and Practices* (London and New York: Routledge, 2018). There are also many similar studies to Lasc’s prolonged endeavor that exist as essays in various anthologies. Lasc herself contributes to Anca I. Lasc, Georgina Downey, and Mark Taylor, eds., *Designing the French Interior: The Modern Home and Mass Media* (London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015).

[2] Nineteenth-century collecting and decorating have been explored in works like Rosalind H. Williams, *Dream Worlds: Mass Consumption in Late Nineteenth-Century France* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982) and Pamela J. Warner, “The Competing Dialectics of the *Cabinet de Travail*: Masculinity at the Threshold” in *Interior Portraiture and Masculine Identity in France, 1789-1914*, ed. Temma Balducci, Heather Belnap Jensen, and Pamela J. Warner, 159-176 (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2011).

[3] Leora Auslander has skillfully addressed the broader social context of specific styles of furnishings in nineteenth-century France in works such as *Taste and Power: Furnishing Modern France* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996). Lasc's approach to the interior as art will assist a new generation that looks to expand the social history of interiors.

[4] Claire Jones explores the nature of design and sculpture through exhibitions and organizations at length in *Sculptors and Design Reform in France, 1848-1895: Sculpture and the Decorative Arts* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2014), its omission from Lasc's work is unfortunate.

[5] Many scholars have approached this subject from the perspective of social contexts of consumption and class. Lasc's work is an artistic complement to such publications like Lisa Tiersten's *Marianne and the Market: Envisioning Consumer Society in Fin-de-siècle France* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).

Emily Davis Winthrop  
Virginia Commonwealth University  
[edwinthrop@vcu.edu](mailto:edwinthrop@vcu.edu)

Copyright © 2019 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for redistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172