
H-France Review Vol. 19 (December 2019), No. 287

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 Heidi Brevik-Zender, University of California, Riverside.

Anca I. Lasc's well-researched book sets out to bring serious attention to the rise and work of the interior designer in the second half of the nineteenth century in France, and in this it admirably succeeds. Mining an impressive corpus of previously understudied archival materials, with a focus on print culture portraying domestic interiors, Lasc makes a convincing case for a scholarly reconsideration of the period's interior design aesthetic, an aesthetic that has traditionally been dismissed as mere eclecticism or historical pastiche. As Lasc puts it, "private interiors during the second half of the nineteenth century in Europe and the US have traditionally been seen as assemblages of unrelated objects of radically different aesthetic values and backgrounds, amalgamated in one setting without rhyme or reason" (p. 16). Her book provides a corrective to this perspective, demonstrating that the (male) practitioners of the newly emerging profession of interior designer often had organized, systematized, and well-articulated approaches to the arrangement of modern private spaces, which they modeled into complete architectural ensembles. This book contributes to the rich and growing interdisciplinary literature on interior spaces in nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century France and will be of particular interest to researchers working on the intersections of design, art, and architectural history.

Chapter one discusses collecting, which has tended to be seen by scholars of the nineteenth century as a masculine practice. Here collecting is put into dialogue with decorating, traditionally considered a feminine, and thereby inferior, domain to collecting. To argue that the line between collecting and decorating in this period had blurred, Lasc examines some refreshingly unexpected sources, for instance the case of Adolphe Thiers, first president of the Third Republic, whose personal collection of artifacts doubled as decorations for his private library. Thiers's collection included reproductions alongside authentic pieces, a co-mingling that obscured the distinction between decorative objects and works of fine art. Analyzing writings by the influential art historian Charles Blanc both on Thiers and on broader issues related to design in Blanc's journal the *Gazette des beaux-arts*, Lasc offers a new look at the ways in which institutional leaders from the world of *beaux arts* were also involved in discourses surrounding the affordable decorating of domestic spaces, a subject that would have been of particular interest to the period's expanding middle class. Focusing on rococo, orientalist, Renaissance, and Gothic revival styles, the book's opening chapter establishes that, far from representing assortments of confused,

eclectic bric-a-brac, model interiors were designed by decorating professionals according to precise rules based on concepts such as historic revivalism and themed rooms.

Chapter two looks at practitioners from the once separate specialized professions of architecture, upholstery, and cabinet making, and examines the ways in which these domains began overlapping in earnest through interior decoration. Though acknowledging that the work of conceiving and constructing private interiors can be traced back to the seventeenth century in France, Lasc posits that it was in the nineteenth century that interest in and the production of designs for interior living spaces became widespread. For Lasc, two important historical points of reference were the fall of guilds after the 1789 Revolution and the urban reconstructions of Haussmannization, the latter of which resulted in large-scale changes to Parisian urban dwellings. Increased attention to private interiors brought about new visual approaches to rendering them. These included perspectival views that displayed all of the furnishings in the center of the room rather than lining the walls, reflecting possible shifts in sociability (pp. 67-68), and diagrams drawing on applied geometry and other mathematics-based skills to measure and structure homes' interior spatial layouts (pp. 80-83). Professionals who had trained for once-discrete occupations such as architect (Henri Labrouste and César Daly), *ébéniste* or cabinet-maker (Jules Verchère), and *tapissier* or upholsterer (Jules Verdellet, Claude Aimé Chenavard, and G. Félix Lenoir) found themselves competing with one another over a growing market of consumers desiring reasonably priced designs of "coherent interior ensembles" (p. 67) for their homes. Publishing in illustrated books, periodicals, and magazines aimed sometimes at specialized readers but often to the general public, these professionals joined art critics such as Henry Havard and magazine editors such as Désiré Guilmard and the father-son duo of Victor and Victor-Léon Quélin in producing an abundance of visual depictions of ideal interiors. These widely available illustrations provided models both practical and imaginative for professionals and clients, and helped to define the profession of interior designer during this period still characterized, nonetheless, by occupational flux and frictions among its various stakeholders.

In chapter three Lasc proposes to study "the intricate relationship between art, interior decoration, and stage design" (p. 106). However, rather than focusing on direct links between interior decor and set designs for the stage as readers might expect, instead Lasc illuminates a more nuanced relationship between stage and interior design by connecting both to period tensions between the decorative and the fine arts. The chapter centers on the interior design illustrations of decorators G. Félix Lenoir (active c. 1859-1900), Alexandre-Eugène Prignot (1822-1887), Georges Rémon (1853/54-1931) and Pierre-Luc Cicéri (1782-1868), all of whom worked across the areas of "high" Salon art and commercial design but also in theater and opera. The chapter begins with a useful summary of the history of the exclusion of decorative arts from the official Salons and the ways in which this changed, at least in theory if not in immediate practice, following the abolition of guilds after the Revolution. Later, the decorative arts succeeded in establishing their own official governing body, the *Société nationale des beaux-arts* in 1890 which created its own annual exhibition venue, the *Salons du Champs-de-Mars*. Lasc discusses other groups such as the *Union centrale des arts décoratifs*, established in 1882, and its publication the *Revue des arts décoratifs*, which valorized the industrial arts and underscored the creative artistic labor involved in design.

Some of the most compelling sections of this chapter deal with what Lasc identifies as "fantasy architecture" (p. 106) or "interior dreamscapes" (p. 133). Allowing themselves freedom from "the rigid categories imposed by the Académie des beaux-arts" (p. 115), decorators drew on their

experience working on theater and opera sets to incorporate elements of fantasy into their illustrations for home interiors. What is most intriguing is that these illustrations were not literal or audacious in their use of fantasy or imagination; rather, their construction of “dreamscapes” was more subtle than this evocative term implies. Lasc exposes how room diagrams that might seem to be nothing more than conventional blueprints for realistic and reproducible interiors actually held playful, inventive, and illusionary elements that brought them closer to works of art informed by a commitment to aesthetic innovation. In one case, for instance, Lasc argues that the layouts between adjoining rooms in one of Lenoir’s home designs are utterly illogical and never could have existed in a typical home; Lenoir’s plans thus constituted more a theatrical dreamscape than a practical, habitable design plan (pp. 107-108). Another of Lenoir’s inclinations was to create bedrooms and salons featuring one immense, flamboyant curtain. In one such composition, Lasc points out, the curtain “seemed to assume a life of its own” (p. 112), underscoring the theatricality and imaginative spirit that could be possible in schemes for private dwellings. It is clear that Lasc has comprehensive knowledge of the print culture of interior decoration from this period, and here she interprets pattern manuals, illustrated books, and trade reviews in interesting, creative ways. Sections like these, in which Lasc’s analysis transforms conservative drawings of furnished interiors into surprisingly compelling spatial illustrations that reveal much about the artistic investments of interior decorators, are among the book’s most thought-provoking.

Chapter four turns to the department store and its role in the rise of the profession of interior decoration. Department stores promoted “complete installations” (*installations complètes*) (p. 163) of furnished rooms for clients, which were staged in stores, printed in sales catalogs, and appeared in other forms of advertisement. Lasc develops an earlier theme from chapter three by examining intersections between the fine and decorative arts as they developed in the context of the department store. Keen to capitalize on the rising interior decoration industry, department stores trained craftspeople to design and oversee production of furnishings that would be staged physically within stores as *installations complètes* or full model rooms and that they also aggressively advertised in illustrated catalogs and the press. This chapter expands on Michael B. Miller’s classic history of Aristide Boucicaut’s department store *Au Bon Marché*, the “cathedral of consumption” upon which author Émile Zola based his 1883 department store novel, *Au Bonheur des dames*.^[1] It builds on Leora Auslander’s influential work on gendered consumption, taste, and the furniture industry in nineteenth-century France,^[2] and on Nancy J. Troy’s exploration of the blurring of boundaries between high and commercial art at the turn of the century.^[3] The chapter considers well-studied *grands magasins* of the period such as *Au Bon Marché* and *Les Grands Magasins du Louvre* but also brings welcome attention to lesser-known department stores such as *Au Tapis Rouge* and *A la Place Clichy* to illuminate how these institutions sought to promote interior decoration as a form of artistic production, one from which they could profit while de-emphasizing their own commercial interests. As one strategy, stores added signatures to furniture ensembles, highlighting the names of certain designers whom consumers would have recognized as artists who showed artworks at the Salon (p. 175). To further align furniture design with the art world, *grands magasins* designated spaces within them to serve as art galleries, a practice that enabled them to underscore connections to the creative side of interior design rather than to its status as a commercial enterprise.

Chapter five examines interior decorators’ roles in developing what was referred to alternately as *style fantaisie* or *style moderne*. These approaches to room design drew on a mixture of historical styles and orientalist motifs that resulted in what Lasc calls “successful eclecticism” (p. 200) and

also, she suggests, ushered in Art Nouveau at the end of the century. Lasc centers on two spaces, the *petit salon* and the *boudoir*, as privileged sites for designs characterized by what art critic Charles Blanc termed “a beautiful disorder,” or, as Lasc puts it, “a state of associative eclecticism... [that] allowed one’s mind to fly away and dream of new combinations and things unseen” (p. 195). The chapter takes as its primary case study the designs of Beaux-Arts trained architect-decorator Alexandre Sandier (1843-1914). Inspired by time spent in the U.S. working for the New York design firm Herter Brothers, at the World’s Columbian Exhibition in Chicago, and on Henry Vanderbilt’s Manhattan mansion, Sandier advocated a design style of “absolute novelty” (p. 217) that was liberated from history, such as that found in America, a relatively new nation that for him, unlike France, was not “haunted” by the past. Lasc reads closely Sandier’s vision for new homes, which incorporated modern rather than historical references—motifs of hairpins and curling irons decorating the lady of the house’s *cabinet de toilette*, for instance—with symbols of nature, such as moons, plants, animals, and insects. Lasc uses the book’s short epilogue to suggest that for Sandier, Georges Rémon and other designer contemporaries, Art Nouveau was less an amalgamation or outgrowth of previous styles and more a separate aesthetic unto itself.

This book is of value to scholarship, first because it brings to light an impressive number of understudied source materials on French design, especially those located at Paris’s *Bibliothèque Forney* (a major but underutilized decorative arts archive) and arranges them into an organized narrative. The well-produced volume is enhanced throughout with black-and-white figures and also features twenty-eight attractive full-color plates, which help to bring the visual culture of interior decorating into dialogue with art. The book will be a useful reference for those interested in connections between the work of professional domestic designers and other print images of interiors, such as those found in mass-circulating fashion plates and photographs. It should also appeal to scholars of literature seeking historical context for the interiors that figure prominently in works by certain literary authors of the period (Lasc mentions in passing Charles Baudelaire, Edmond de Goncourt, Joris-Karl Huysmans, and Émile Zola.) Occasionally Lasc offers up tantalizing observations, such as one remark that interior decorating diagrams can be considered “pre-cinematic” (p. 169) or, at another point, that “interiors and their furnishings guide owners in how to behave” (p. 41). These suggestive comments hint at comparative and interpretive approaches to the source materials that are not fundamental to Lasc’s study but that could be productively explored in future scholarship.

NOTES

[1] Michael B. Miller, *The Bon Marché: Bourgeois Culture and the Department Store, 1869–1920* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981).

[2] Leora Auslander, *Taste and Power: Furnishing Modern France* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).

[3] Nancy J. Troy, *Modernism and the Decorative Arts in France: Art Nouveau to Le Corbusier* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991). Also see Troy’s *Couture Culture: A Study in Modern Art and Fashion* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003).

Heidi Brevik-Zender
University of California, Riverside

hbzender@ucr.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