



CHAPTER 41

Aesthetic Movement

1860s–1890s

The Aesthetic Movement attempts to reform design by educating consumers about artistic principles. Not a single style but an attitude or philosophy, the movement draws upon many styles and cultures for inspiration and largely rejects the idea that art should serve a higher, moral purpose. Followers see no division between the fine and decorative arts, so they introduce principles of Art into interiors, furniture, textiles, accessories, and other areas. Primarily focused on the ordinary home, the movement inspires artistic interiors and furniture in England and the United States. Lasting only about two decades, the Aesthetic Movement brings changes with immediate and far-reaching influences.

HISTORICAL AND SOCIAL

The Aesthetic Movement stems from the desire to reform the home and its design following London's Crystal Palace Exhibition, 1851. The movement takes form when poet Charles Algernon Swinburne and writer Walter Pater bring the cult of Aestheticism to England from France in the 1860s. Finding a

The ceiling is frescoed in bold work of black and gold of unsymmetrical design. The walls are paneled with Japanese painted stuffs framed in gilt bamboo, and the frieze is a continuous band of brilliant figures on paper crêpe. Over the doors, and in the spaces where the tint of wall is flat, fans of brilliant colors have been tastefully displayed. A table in blue and white, and red lacquer saucers inserted in the dull black wood of the furniture, help the effect.

—William A. Hammond House, *The Art Amateur*, June 1879 (description of Japanese bedroom)

sympathetic audience in the artists and designers of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood and others, their discussions of aesthetics begin to take a different, less moralistic tone in contrast to other reform ideas and movements.

Many members of the Aesthetic Movement follow Matthew Arnold's *Culture and Anarchy*, which defines two groups according to their taste and ability to appreciate art. The more important group is the Aesthetes, who enjoy "artistic" sensibilities. In contrast are the Philistines, members of the middle class, who possess little or no appreciation for or capacity to assess beauty. Crass materialists, Philistines lack the high-minded, artistic natures of the Aesthetes. The most aesthetic Aesthetes, such as James A. M. Whistler and Oscar Wilde, reject everything admired by the Philistines. They esteem delicacy, refinement, soft colors, anything old, and the young. Although the more radical group remains small, many others in England during the 1870s are inspired to cultivate their artistic sensibilities in order to live in beautiful surroundings. In the United States, the Aesthetic Movement is at its height in all levels of society from the mid-1870s to the mid-1880s. The Centennial International Exhibition of 1876; publications; and visits from Aesthetes, such as Wilde, introduce the American public to English artistic precepts.

Aesthetic discussions of what constitutes beauty inspire various artists, designers, and architects to establish design principles

based on usefulness, color, form, and ornament to assess the beauty of an object or artwork. With missionary passion, followers set out to reform taste through example and publication. The movement stimulates artistic activity and opportunities for collaboration among designers in both England and the United States. Designers, artists, and architects come together to create Artistic architecture, interiors, furniture, and decorative arts. Their roles change and expand. Architects not only routinely design the building but also the interiors, furniture, wallpaper, textiles, and accessories. Painters and sculptors also design interiors or furniture. Some designers publish books of ornament drawn from every culture, while others advance the movement through lectures, plays, and novels.

The terms *Art* and *Artistic* signal aesthetic sensibilities early in the movement's development. By the late 1870s and 1880s, the terms become synonymous with the latest fashion, and anyone and everyone uses them to appeal to consumers. Architecture, interiors, furniture, and accessories are never described as *Aesthetic*, but rather as *Artistic*. Consequently, firms, artists, and designers create Artistic rooms and design Artistic furniture. The well-known Liberty's Department Store in London, as well as other department stores, sell "Art Furniture," and local and imported "Artistic" goods reflective of the Aesthetic taste.

Numerous books and periodicals serve as guides and educate the public on matters of design and taste. *Hints on Household Taste* by Charles Locke Eastlake, published in 1868 and running to numerous editions, begins a deluge of books by artists, designers, and dilettantes offering advice on decorating and furnishing the home. Artistic journals include *The Decorator and Furnisher*, New York, and *The House, An Artistic Monthly for Those Who Manage and Beautify the Home*, London. The movement also inspires various art societies and groups in England and America who spread its tenets. One outgrowth of the Aesthetic Movement's passion for education comes from the affluent who, believing in *noblesse oblige*, sometimes open their homes for tours by lesser folk. In addition, during this period wealthy patrons' collections of art and objects often form the basis for public museums. The Aesthetic Movement also inspires the Household Art or Art at Home Movement.

Women are especially important in the Aesthetic Movement as both the focus and transmitters of reform. Critics, many of whom are female, devote much attention to housewives, who now have the duty of decorating their homes artistically. Writers emphasize that decorating is a very important task because the design and furnishings must demonstrate the family's culture and taste and create a wholesome environment and refuge to counter the negative effects of contemporary life. This new role, coupled with greater emphasis upon education, prompts many women to become artists, designers, decorators, and critics. Not only do they create artistic goods and interiors, but they also write books and articles to assist other women in doing the same. They form and participate in art groups, such as china painters or embroidery societies, as leisure activities or to produce an income. Some of these groups exert important and longlasting effects on art education by establishing art schools or museums.

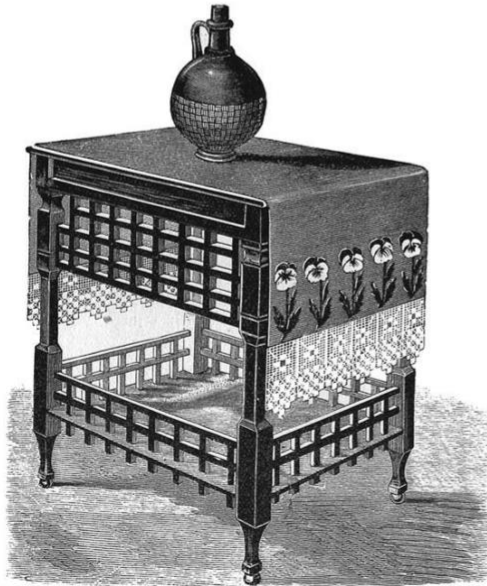


▲ 41-1. "My Lady's Chamber"; published in *The House Beautiful: Essays on Beds and Tables, Stools and Candlesticks*, 1878; Clarence Cook.

Regarded by some as an excuse for excess and self-indulgence, Aesthetes and the Aesthetic Movement frequently are ridiculed in the press and become the subject of numerous satirical articles; cartoons; songs; and even an opera, *Patience* by Gilbert and Sullivan. Nevertheless, the movement has positive effects on design; the home; and, more important, the way people think about them. The deemphasis of styles helps loosen the grip of historicism. Promoting principles of Art increases awareness that art is important in all areas of life, which in turn helps to promote the worth of an object as deriving from its intrinsic beauty instead of its associations. By the 1880s, the Aesthetic Movement begins to move in other directions, such as the Arts and Crafts Movement and Art Nouveau. However, discussions about beauty and the pursuit of excellence in design continue long after the Aesthetic Movement declines and its ideas influence subsequent movements.

■ **Storage.** Still an important piece, the drawing room cabinet or *étagère* displays a carefully chosen collection of vases, plates, tiles, Oriental porcelains, and other objects (Fig. 41-8, 41-18, 41-19). Rectangular in form with a façade composed of solids and voids, it is made up of shelves, brackets, spindles, cabinets or arched niches, and mirrors with beveled edges, and may be topped with a spindle gallery or a coved panel. Decoration may include painted or carved sunflowers, lilies, or foliage. Anglo-Japanese cabinets are rectilinear with a balanced, often asymmetrical, arrangement of vertical and horizontal lines, solids, and voids (Fig. 41-15, 41-17). Minimal surface decoration and no elaborate carving, ornament, or moldings are characteristic. Eastlake cabinets feature incising, spindles, and simplified ornament usually derived from Medieval sources. Many Artistic rooms have Eastlake-style or Anglo-Japanese wall cabinets for additional display space. Like other pieces, sideboards and secretaries reflect Aesthetic design principles.

■ **Beds.** Most beds (Fig. 41-5) have tall rectangular headboards and lower footboards. Paneled head- and footboards may have diagonal boards, plain or printed textiles, Art Tiles, or painted decorations. Cresting is made up of galleries of spindles or rooflike projections. Anglo-Japanese beds have bamboo spindles or moldings. Eastlake beds have incising and diaper or sawtooth edging. Matching the bed are dressers with matching tops, washstands, armoires, night stands, and shaving stands.



▲ 41-15. Table, c. 1890s; United States.

DESIGN SPOTLIGHT

Furniture: Inspired by Japanese woodcuts, Edward W. Godwin's composition for this Anglo-Japanese sideboard is a careful balance of horizontals and verticals, and solids and voids like Japanese architecture. The simplicity and elegance also reflect the Japanese aesthetic. Japanese leather paper covers the doors, and silvered handles and hinges add a touch of decoration. Like most Japanese-style furniture, the sideboard is ebonized. Godwin succeeds in capturing the essence of Japanese design in this piece, in contrast to many others who simply add Japanese motifs and some forms to Western furniture.



▲ 41-16. Anglo-Japanese cabinet, c. 1860s–1890s.