



INTERIOR MOTIVES: SEDUCTION BY DECORATION  
IN EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY FRANCE

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"I was very curious: it was no longer Madame de T—— that I desired, but her cabinet."

Dominique Vivant Denon, *No Tomorrow* (1777)

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Imagine a seduction in which the principal object of desire is not the body of the beloved, but rather the room in which the play of invitation and capitulation unfolds. Imagine a seduction in which every move is shaped by a piece of furniture. Imagine a seduction in which pleasure is offered and denied without the removal of single piece of clothing. Welcome to the decorated interior in eighteenth-century France.

The vignettes of *Dangerous Liaisons* vividly suggest some of the ways in which the design of clothing and interiors worked together to create elegant environments for intimate encounters. The narratives of seduction focus largely on interactions between people inspired by libertine imagery and literature: the flirtatious gesture, the stolen caress, the gorgeously attired bodies displayed and enjoyed with varying degrees of propriety. These scenarios offer a provocative point of departure for thinking about the interpersonal dynamics of the decorated interior. While it is difficult to assess the degree to which libertine sensibilities corresponded with actual practice, many social encounters were indeed conceived as rarefied rituals of seduction. Moreover, the intimacies of the interior played out not only between people but also between people and the furniture that surrounded them. Objects such as chairs and tables were active protagonists in an elaborate game of cultivated sociability. Through their luxurious materials and strategically designed forms, they facilitated a process of alluring self-presentation and elegant communication that was central to the formation of elite identities. At the same time, however, the effective use of furniture presented certain challenges that, if not met gracefully, could seriously compromise a person's social seductiveness. In other words the dangerous liaisons of the eighteenth-century interior involved not only tantalizing bodies but also tantalizing objects. Welcome to a world where, as suggested by the protagonist of

Dominique Vivant Denon's novella *No Tomorrow*, a woman's private study (*cabinet*) could be even more seductive than the woman herself.

Elite social interaction in eighteenth-century France took place in densely decorated interiors filled with diverse objects crafted from a wide range of materials. Walls were covered with carved paneling, textiles, and mirrors, while floors gleamed with polished parquet. Furnishings included silk-upholstered chairs with carved and gilded frames, tables and cabinets veneered with exotic wood and lacquer, and a multitude of fittings from gilded-bronze light fixtures to brilliantly glazed porcelain vases. Many of these objects were highly specialized, designed to be used for leisure activities such as conversation, reading, letter writing, handwork, dining, and game playing. Such pursuits might seem trivial from a modern perspective, but for eighteenth-century elites they were important means of self-definition. Physical labor and preoccupations with economic gain and professional achievement were considered incompatible with a noble heritage and high status. Therefore the most powerful way to demonstrate social superiority was to pursue a life of leisure, luxury, and refinement. To be elite was to turn everyday existence into an elaborate rejection of physical effort and base human needs. To be elite was to transform oneself into a living work of art. And the decorated interior was the principal arena in which this performance of privilege was staged.

The material abundance and social uses of the interior are exemplified by images such as Jean-François de Troy's *The Reading from Molière* of about 1728 and an engraving of 1781 after Jean-Michel Moreau le Jeune. In de Troy's painting (p. 14), a convivial group of men and women gathers near a fireplace, sheltered from drafts by a folding screen. A man seated at the center looks up from a book he has been reading aloud and is caught up in a web of glances—both reciprocated and unreciprocated—that binds the group together. Two of the women (one standing at center and another seated to the right) seem to look directly out of the picture as if acknowledging our presence and inviting us to join the party.

Contributing significantly to the scene's sense of intimacy are the design and position of the chairs. With their low, wide seats, tilted backs, and generously stuffed upholstery, they seem to invite hours of relaxed comfort. Their arrangement in a tight cluster brings the elegantly dressed bodies close together, the women's skirts overlapping in a sumptuous heap of fabrics. These chairs exemplify the specialization that characterized eighteenth-century French furniture. They are ideally suited to an informal gathering for reading and conversation but would not have been used for other kinds of activities. A hairdressing chair, for example, would have a low back to facilitate the process of combing, curling, and powdering, and its seat might revolve for further convenience. A writing chair would have minimal arms, to allow it to be drawn close to a desk, and its supports would be positioned beneath the center of each side of the seat, rather than at the corners, to accommodate the weight and posture of someone leaning forward with legs apart.

The engraving after Moreau le Jeune (p. 18) further suggests this fascination with customized design and its contribution to social intimacy. Two couples are engaging in a flirtatious supper party. One woman pours wine for an eager-looking man, while the other teases her companion by holding a piece of paper—perhaps a love letter from another admirer—just beyond his grasp. Like the women in de Troy's painting, she includes the viewer in the fun by looking out of the picture with a coy, sidelong gaze.

Here, too, the furniture and other objects do much to facilitate personal encounters. The dining table is just large enough for four, and the trim lines of the chairs allow bodies to lean close together

The dining table, draped in linen and strewn with a companionable clutter of plates and utensils, is flanked by two smaller tables that are much more specialized in design. Compact, easily moved, and fitted with shelves and compartments, they are meant to keep items such as wine bottles, dishes, and napkins within easy reach. Dining practice developed many refinements during the eighteenth century, including serving wine from chilled containers and providing each diner with his or her own wineglass, which was rinsed between refills. The side tables in the engraving include wells for cooling bottles, and the one in the foreground holds a scallop-rimmed basin in which upturned stemware awaits the next round of drinks. By making it possible for diners to serve themselves, these design features reduced the need for servants and allowed meals to become far more private and informal affairs. The image vividly suggests the erotic turn that this social intimacy could take as diners attended to each other's appetites, gastronomic and otherwise.

The eighteenth-century interior, then, was a highly articulated landscape in which numerous, diverse objects enhanced the pursuit of leisure. This design sophistication was widely regarded as uniquely modern and uniquely French, a sensitivity to personal comfort and convenience that existed in no other place or time. And, indeed, many eighteenth-century objects do seem to be tremendously accommodating, easy and pleasurable to use and perfectly tailored to dynamics of elite social life. There was, however, a catch. To yield up an enjoyable experience, furniture had to be used properly, and this was not as obvious or simple as it might at first seem. To understand how elite individuals inhabited their elegant environments, we need to know more about how they were expected to conduct themselves and what it took to achieve an ideal social persona. The delights of the interior came at a price—one that only a privileged few could pay.

The central premise of elite social behavior was that the body was an instrument of pleasure. Interaction was conceived as a process of seduction—not necessarily a pursuit of overt sexual expression, but rather an exchange in which individuals sought to engage and delight each other with an artfully conducted repertoire of pleasing poses, gestures, expressions, and conversation. The goal was to use physical appearance and communication skills to gratify the aesthetic and social sensibilities of others, while at the same time demonstrating reciprocal pleasure in response to similar efforts on their part. This was no easy matter—social seduction was a delicate balancing act fraught with paradox. It meant avoiding the equally displeasing extremes of aggression and impassivity. It meant being well groomed but not self-absorbed. It meant pleasing others, and being pleased by them, without seeming to be pleased with oneself. Moreover, this cycle of mutual pleasing was to be conducted in a way that seemed utterly natural, as if agreeable manners were innate rather than learned. Conduct that betrayed effort and awkwardness suggested a worker's lack of cultivation or the laboriously acquired pretensions of a newly wealthy bourgeois. The best way to suggest long-standing social privilege was to seduce, and be seduced, with an acute self-awareness masquerading as selfless ease.

The mandate of pleasure governed every aspect of elite behavior. For example, the socially adept individual demonstrated a bearing that was upright but not stiff, self-contained yet relaxed. Physical motion should be smooth and flowing, neither too rapid nor too slow. Gestures should be expressive without being too broad, abrupt, or agitated. Similarly, facial expression should be animated without succumbing to such offenses as grinning, frowning, or staring. Any semblance of confrontation should be avoided: one should never stand directly in front of another person, grasp their sleeve to get attention, or stamp a foot for emphasis. In conversation, speech should be modulated in tone, pedantic subjects avoided, and personal interests forsaken for those of others. It was *considered*



rude to make long speeches or blunt statements, and preferable to communicate through the more subtle, indirect tactics of euphemism and qualification.

But it was not enough to observe the same general code of conduct in all social situations. Every set of circumstances demanded behavior that was tailored to the gender, rank, and marital status of one's interlocutor and the location, time of day, and occasion of the encounter. For example, a young, unmarried count would approach a widowed duchess at a formal ball in a way that was very different from his overtures to an unmarried woman during a garden stroll or his conversation with a gentleman of equal rank at a game table in a private residence. A broad smile that was companionable at the game table might be considered disrespectful at the ball and positively lewd in the garden. The cultivated individual was thus required to maintain a constant state of social vigilance—surveying shifting circumstances, assessing relevant variables, and adapting actions accordingly.

This, then, was the code of conduct that shaped encounters within the decorated interior. The body was used in ways that suppressed its most basic qualities—its awkwardness, its weightiness, its spontaneous impulses—in order to deliver a pleasing performance of grace and ease. In this context furniture design takes on a whole new look. Consider once again the scenario presented by de Troy (p. 14). The low chairs, with their sloping backs and soft cushions, would be difficult to sink into and arise from with fluid ease. Accomplished successfully, such movements could highlight a person's physical grace and provide opportunities for enjoyable interaction as, say, a gentleman offers a lady his hand for support. But accomplished awkwardly, the act of sitting or standing could expose the imperfections of an ungainly body or an ill-calculated attempt at gallantry. Moreover, once ensconced, the sitter is subjected to further conditions. The chair's high, broad back frames the head and upper body, drawing attention to facial expressions and hand gestures in a way that could either enhance allure or make gracelessness all the more apparent. And, if several such chairs are arranged in a tight cluster, as in de Troy's painting, their occupants are effectively immobilized by their proximity and so visible to one another that no movement would go unnoticed. The ultimate effect of this arrangement is precisely the opposite of what the chair seems designed to do—it may invite the user to loll with abandon, but it poses major social risks to those who dare to do so.

Similarly, the engraving of the supper party (p. 18) is as full of dangers as it is of delights. Consider how many objects there are to bump into, tip over, or break: the lightweight chairs and side tables, the fragile wineglasses slippery from their bath of cool water, the generously draped tablecloth just waiting to catch in the heel of a shoe. On the other hand, consider the opportunities for pleasurable performance that are offered by the very same objects. The well-stocked side tables might inspire a gentleman to offer his companion a napkin, opening it with a flourish and moving a little closer to her in the process. The act of rinsing, filling, and drinking from a wineglass might enable a woman to show off the graceful tilt of her head, the delicacy of her hands, the rosininess of her lips. The more objects that were involved in a social scenario, the greater the potential for both accident and enjoyment. The art of interaction meant negotiating a decorative minefield while seeming utterly at ease.

The vignettes of *Dangerous Liaisons* are full of such promising yet precarious moments. In "The Card Game" (pp. 102–3), the gaming table is simultaneously convenient and challenging. It has a light, compact, folding structure that makes it easy to position and reposition according to the changing inclinations of the players. Gathered around the table's small surface, several people are brought together in intimate proximity. But imagine how easily elbows or knees could collide with a

jolt rather than a teasing nudge. Imagine how an abrupt gesture of triumph or concession could make a teacup fall to the floor, or how someone departing too quickly—especially a woman in voluminous skirts—could overturn the entire thing.

Similarly, the specialized chair used by one man to watch the game both flatters the body and demands a significant measure of self-control. Termed a *voyeuse* (literally, a “viewer”), it is designed to be straddled backward by a man (others were made to be knelt upon by a woman). The saddle-shaped seat accommodates the user’s parted legs, sheathed in tight breeches, and the padded top rail offers a comfortable resting place for the forearms. Successfully used, it would have produced a pleasing pose, with the man’s limbs elegantly extended in a way that highlighted his lace cuffs and well-formed calves. At the same time, the proper way to occupy such a chair may not have been obvious to everyone, and it demands a physical dexterity that does not come easily to all. Thus the *voyeuse*, like many other objects, yields pleasure—for user and observer alike—only if its image-enhancing design features are gracefully engaged. It is also a remarkable example of the way in which eighteenth-century furniture turned even the most seemingly simple activity into an artful spectacle. The casual act of sitting backward, which easily could be done with a standard side chair, becomes an elaborately choreographed pose. The chair is a pedestal for the body, displaying it for the delectation of others, while the sitter, in keeping with the rules of cultivated conduct, appears unaware of his allure.

The social power of furniture is perhaps most vividly demonstrated in the vignette entitled “The Levée” (pp. 38–39). It represents a widely practiced eighteenth-century ritual, also known as the *toilette*, in which elite women (and many men) received visitors while dressing. As suggested by an engraving after Nicolas Lavreince II (p. 21), the *toilette* was a semipublic event in which an individual presided over the construction of his or her appearance while conducting a variety of interactions with a steady stream of visitors. These might include both casual and intimate acquaintances, household staff, tailors or milliners in the process of completing commissions, artists or writers in search of patronage, and sellers of a wide range of luxury goods from dress trimmings to freshly brewed coffee. And although grooming and conversation were the central activities, the event also incorporated other leisure pursuits such as serving refreshments and reading aloud.

Numerous eighteenth-century images and texts represent the *toilette* as an event devoted solely to female vanity, frivolity, and sexual machinations. But it was also an important occasion for the game of social seduction through which elite identities were defined. Virtually every aspect of the ritual’s dynamics—spatial, temporal, material, and behavioral—provided the protagonist with an opportunity to express both her own social standing and those of others. Through wide-ranging conversation and the display of personal possessions—from books to jewelry to perfume—it provided numerous opportunities to demonstrate wealth and taste, exchange information, and develop relationships. Moreover, by controlling the point at which visitors were received, the duration of their stay, and the way in which they were allowed—or not allowed—to engage with objects and events, a woman at her *toilette* could communicate very specific degrees of social intimacy or distance. For instance, an old friend might be admitted alone, while her hostess was still bare of makeup, and invited to sit close to the dressing table and drink some rich, expensive chocolate from a newly acquired cup. In contrast, a creditor might be summoned to a roomful of people during the final stages of the dressing process and made to wait, standing by the door, before being dismissed without payment, let alone refreshment. In both cases the visitor would know exactly where she or he stood in the nuanced hierarchy of favor. The *toilette*, in other words, was an



early modern version of networking—a strategic cultivation of interpersonal connections that define and strengthen social positions.

More than any other elite social ritual, the toilette centered on the aesthetic and social seductiveness of the body. In the engraving after Lavreince a woman has her hair done while examining fabric samples and entertaining a clergyman and a musician. Several visual cues hint at some kind of erotic intrigue. The clergyman fixes his hostess with a satisfied stare while clutching the top of a rather phallic cane. And while the musician's face is invisible, the broken strings erupting from the top of his instrument suggest that he, too, may be in a somewhat flustered state. But the focal point of the composition is the woman herself. Turning away from her dressing table, she gestures toward a length of fabric in a way that simultaneously asserts her authority as a consumer and displays her bodily charms. The simple act of pointing becomes an occasion for displaying an elegantly extended arm and allowing her breasts to be revealed, as if by accident, between the ruffled edges of her parted robe. This is a quintessential example of the artful innocence with which the elite individual was expected to make herself pleasing to others. By attending momentarily to something other than her appearance, she actually draws attention to it, inviting delectation without crossing the line into overt exhibitionism. Indeed the title of the print ("What does the abbé think of it?") is a play on this feint: she is asking the clergyman about the piece of cloth, but his eyes are fixed on her chest.

Yet the delights of the toilette were every bit as qualified as those of other leisure activities. In fact it probably posed more challenges than any other social event, for its extensive array of furniture and accessories offered almost endless opportunities to either showcase virtuosity or betray a lack of finesse. Many of these objects were small, intricately designed, and liable to spill or break. There were cosmetics to be applied with tiny brushes, beverages to be served in thin porcelain cups, slippery ribbons to be retrieved from lidded boxes—all, of course, while conversing amiably with visitors and betraying no sign of awkwardness or effort.

The accessories of the toilette were often arranged, as in the engraving after Lavreince, on a plain table draped with fabric and lace. But the ritual achieved its greatest opportunities and difficulties when it was conducted with a specialized dressing table such as the one featured in "The Levée." This piece is designed to be manipulated in a variety of ways in order to serve multiple functions. The upper half has two lidded storage compartments, an adjustable reading stand that rotates in its frame to reveal a mirror on the other side, and a drawer fitted with an inkstand and covered by a hinged lid that can be used as a writing surface. This entire top section can be removed, revealing four short legs, and used by someone propped up in bed. The lower half of the table incorporates two writing slides at front and back and two deep side drawers divided into compartments. And to complete its attractions, it is equipped with various objects for grooming, sewing, and eating—including rock-crystal perfume flasks, a tortoiseshell eyelash comb, a lacquer needle case, and a breakfast set of Sèvres porcelain.

Dressing tables like this were veritable arsenals for social seduction. Each manipulation of the object and its fittings would have involved a particular pose or gestural sequence on the part of the user. Opening the hinged lids of the upper section might show off the turn of the arms, while bending to retrieve something from a lower compartment might allow a glimpse of a powdered neck or barely contained breast. On the other hand, consider the awkwardness of groping for the button that makes the mirror revolve, or allowing a drooping sleeve to sweep an ink bottle off the writing

if the user knows how it works and remains in control of the process.

It should be clear by now that social seduction in eighteenth-century France was impossible without furniture. Objects were like extensions of the body, part of a wardrobe that, correctly worn, could turn the activities of elite existence into dances of artful persuasion. The wardrobe analogy is really very apt, for the way in which furniture simultaneously valorized the body and controlled its conduct is closely related to the aesthetic and social impact of clothing. Lace cuffs, for instance, emphasized smooth, soft hands that were never subjected to manual labor. Shoes with high heels and elongated toes made the wearer seem to hover above the floor and encouraged a light tiptoeing gait. Men's coats were cut to curve away from the front of the body, conveying an impression of flowing, forward-tilted movement. A similar effect was produced in women by skirts that were fuller in the back than in the front and corsets that flattened the abdomen and pushed the chest forward. The elite body was thus doubly disciplined by fashion, shaped by both its decorative dressing and its decorated environment.

At first glance the lavishly staged tableaux of *Dangerous Liaisons* might seem to exemplify a world of pure elegance. But the real revelation is the way in which they suggest the risks of pleasure. The seductions of the eighteenth-century interior unfolded amid the possibility—indeed, the likelihood—of numerous unseductive entanglements. Interacting with decorated spaces was in itself a dangerous liaison: an encounter spurred by attraction and fraught with uncertainty, part savvy calculation and part unpredictable effect, the magnitude of its dangers equal only to the scope of its delights. Like teasing lovers, objects were both alluring and resistant, promising infinite rewards even as they posed one challenge after another. And, once we begin to understand the workings of these interior motives, the figures who animate the vignettes, like those who look out at us from de Troy's convivial reading circle (p. 14) or Moreau le Jeune's intimate supper (p. 18), become even more suggestive. They seem to take on a knowing, conspiratorial air—poised for our admiration, inviting us to join the game, daring us to take a seat.