

# Victorian domestic interiors as subliminal space

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The Victorian notion of beauty was encapsulated in their obsession with the ideology of respectability. Respectability, a complex combination of moral, religious, economic and cultural systems, was organised around an involved set of practices and representations which covered every aspect of an individual's life. It defined appropriate and acceptable modes of behaviour, language and appearance and regulated both gender and class identities. In particular, the decoration of Victorian homes was seen as the outflow of their gentility. Through decoration a family expressed its proper understanding of life and beauty; the latter was deemed a moral quality. Victorians saw themselves as arbiters of good taste and moral guides to the appreciation of beauty. Victorian interiors suggest an element of escapism from the harsh industrial world outside; the accumulation of objects suggests a desire for security. However, this proliferation of ornament and pursuit of comfort made many Victorian domestic interiors tasteless. Thus, in their zeal to beautify their homes on the basis of their moral aptitude, their domestic interiors became vulgar. Yet, in this very intersection between the beautiful and the vulgar sublimity is located. This article will consider the complex relationship between the Victorian ideology of respectability, beauty and homeliness in domestic interiors. A literature study, a brief exposition of the context of Victorian England and the ideology of respectability, provide a theoretical background for the critical examination of a selected Victorian interior.

**Key words:** Victorian, domestic space, respectability, decoration and ornament

Being reigns in a sort of earthly paradise of matter (Bachelard 1964: 7).

**T**o the Victorians, in particular the middle classes, the home was a sanctuary, a type of earthly paradise, separate from the harsh industrial world outside. This paradise operated under an aesthetic of more rather than less, an eclectic accumulation of 'things', furniture, decoration and ornament, filled domestic space, which in turn, signified its respectability. The ideology of respectability, the fibre of Victorian existence, was a complex combination of moral, religious, economic and cultural systems. Respectability dictated specific gender definitions and was organised around an involved set of practices and representations, which covered every aspect of an individual's life. In the Victorian commitment to an imperative moral code, respectability spun a persuasive web that wove the disparate elements of the middle class together. Moreover, respectability became inseparable from the home. The Victorian home was idealised and values of domestic life were highly appreciated. The decoration of the home was seen as the outflow of gentility. Through decoration a family expressed its proper understanding of life and beauty; the latter was deemed a moral quality.

The Victorian notion of beauty, a basic duality of sentiment and reason, developed from the introduction of utility to the realm of beauty. Beauty surpassed the superfluous and became connected with value. The idea of beauty was not affected by the difference between luxury and utility, between appearances and being. There was no object, surface or decoration that did not simultaneously express both its value and durability. As an outcome of this duality the distinction between form and function became steadily blurred (Eco 2004: 361-363).

In light of this, this article explores the involved relationship between the Victorian ideology of respectability, domesticity and beauty. The study is limited to the context of Victorian England (1837-1901)<sup>1</sup>. A literature study, a brief account of the context of Victorian England and the ideologies of respectability and domesticity, provide a theoretical background for the critical analysis of a selected artefact. The article is written in a narrative style and a framework of information on the subject was established, while at the same time acknowledging where sources collude and differ. The study is exploratory and descriptive in nature, read from a

scholarly critical perspective so as to discover embedded meaning within the text (Kridel 1998: 10; De Vos & Schulze 2002: 7).

### **Character of the age**

The term, 'Victorian,' is not precise. Victorianism long antedates the coronation of Queen Victoria in 1837. It owed many of its outstanding characteristics to developments which took place between 1780 and 1837, while the late Victorian era can be considered as much a part of the twentieth century (Seaman 1973: 5, Webb 1980: 130). Thus, the Victorian age cannot be encapsulated in the sixty-four years of the Queen's reign (1837-1901). The Victorian era is not merely part of continuity greater than itself, but contains within itself many discontinuities and incongruencies (Seaman 1973: 5). One such incongruity lay in the Victorian ideology of respectability. As mentioned, respectability was an essential objective of Victorian existence and defined appropriate and acceptable modes of behaviour, language and appearance, in particular that of women. However, there was a disjuncture between a fantasy of femininity, that of the passive decorative wife or mother, and everyday practice, that the wife or mother was an active agent in her home and family. In fact, Victorian respectability was fissured, self-contradictory, contested and developed unevenly<sup>2</sup>.

The Victorian age was characterised by both *transition*, societal and political, and *doubt* concerning the nature of humankind, society and the universe (Houghton 1957: 23). Yet, the products of the age, scientific positivism and the ideology of respectability provided the Victorians with a sense of order and hope. Order was maintained not through civil action, but rather through the strength of the individual, family discipline and codes of conduct, indicative of the regulatory role that respectability played within Victorian society. Therefore, people were not impelled to be respectable by external factors, rather by the hidden structures of morality, gentility and a fear of disorder (Seaman 1973: 48, Ford 1992: 20).

According to several scholars (Seaman 1973: 6, Thompson 1988: 250-252, Houghton 1957: 220, Davidoff & Hall 2002), the factor that most contributed to the Victorian moral imperative was the outcome of religious revival, in which the home was central and which inspired an obsessive belief in work, sobriety of behaviour, respectability and self-help. Both Evangelicalism and Methodism provided crucial influences on the nineteenth century definition of home and family (Hall 1998:181). Between 1780 and 1820, in the Evangelical struggle over the prohibition of the slave trade and the reform of manners and morals, a new view of the nation, of political power and of family life was forged. Due to the close connection between religious revival and respectability it was inevitable that the Victorian notion of beauty would contain a spiritual dimension. Moreover, the beginning of the nineteenth century had seen the continued separation of work from home. This development linked to the effects of religious sentiment created a view of the home as a refuge from the world and the site of religious observance. The Evangelical emphasis on the creation of anew lifestyle and anew ethic provided the framework for the emergence of the Victorian middle class<sup>3</sup>.

### **The middle class**

Victorian society was divided according to rigid lines of class: the aristocracy, middle classes and working classes. The Victorian middle class was not homogeneous; it was made up of a diverse range of occupational groups and levels of income bound together in a common endeavour for respectability (Nead 1988: 5, Thompson 1988: 64, Tosh 1999: 11). According to Davidoff and Hall (2002: xviii), "...middle-class men and women...placed themselves in

opposition to an indolent and dissolute aristocracy, and a potentially subversive working class." The emerging idea of a *democratic society*, which referred more to economics than politics, appealed especially to the middle classes. With their new political and financial power, their social influence became decisive. This influence may be seen in the effect they had on the organisation and beautification of the home, which affected even the residences of the aristocracy and the Royal family (Girouard in Lasdun 1981: 12).

As mentioned, the Victorian period was marked by a continued separation of work from home. The middle class ideal was a home in the country, or as close as possible to it - in a leafy, green suburb. However, Tosh (1999: 17) points out that many middle class families still lived over the shop or immediately adjacent to their work premises. Nevertheless, the dominant tendency was that the household was increasingly becoming a refuge from the site of productive work (Tosh 1999: 15). The changing character of the household went beyond just space and locality; it became a badge of social status and moral standing. Branca (1975: 6) states "...in the middle class life-style...the drive for social esteem became an obsession." Tosh (1999: 17) and Branca (1975: 6) concur that a non-working wife, a contingency of servants and an elegantly furnished home were a more convincing symbol of a man's status than his business or profession. This new image brought dramatic and direct changes in the life-style of the middle class woman. The house had to provide more than just a haven for family withdrawal, for the home was also the stage for social ritual and outward manifestation of status in the community (Dickerson 1995: xviii). Decoration would become a means to achieve this; in so doing its significance came to be more than just aesthetic appeal.

## **Respectability**

Respectability, at the centre of Victorian life, was structured around a heavily polarised understanding of gender, which became inseparable from the home. The core of this refined behavioural code applied to both men and women (Davidoff & Hall 2002: 397), yet respectability meant different things for each gender. Victorian man's social position emanated from his ownership of property, professional and business activities and service to charitable activities (Davidoff & Hall 2002: 398). For women social position was defined in terms of their location within the domestic sphere and their consequent sexual respectability (Nead 1988: 28). This paradigm of *separate spheres* was articulated in the organisation and beautification of domestic space.

Respectability was organised around a complex set of practices and representations which covered every aspect of an individual's life; these social rules and moral codes worked to regulate both gender and class identities (Davidoff & Hall 2002: 398, Nead 1988: 28). Houghton (1957: 184) adds that the middle class drive for respectability was energised by a struggle for social advancement and wealth. As mentioned, the Victorian middle class was not a single entity; therefore, a coherent and distinct class identity had to be created which would distinguish the middle class from the social and economic classes above and below it. To this end, Nead (1988: 5) argues that class coherence was in many ways established through the development of the shared notions of morality and respectability. Morality, a component of respectability, was seen as essential to a civilising process of an imperfectly organised and newly urbanised society. Furthermore, Seaman (1973: 13) states that members of the middle classes felt sure that the weaker among them would inevitably fall into decadence if they did not adhere to the principles of respectability.

The early Victorians lived under the shadow of the political upheavals which had taken place in Europe, especially France. Political change and industrialisation had produced a condition

which was steadily threatening and periodically violent. The Victorians feared that a French Revolution, with its violence and attacks on religious beliefs, would also explode in England. The main causes of the turmoil were considered moral not merely economic or political, therefore the basic solution lay in a reform of character of the landed and moneyed aristocracy (Houghton 1957: 242). In the middle classes the avoidance of idleness, the importance of work for the development of the individual and the sense of calling to serve society in one's particular vocation and in broader social causes were uppermost (Houghton 1957: 247-248). Success in hard work was a reflection of one's moral state. Moreover, success was perceptible in the Victorian fixation with the accumulation and display of 'things' in the home.

## **Domesticity**

The cult of domesticity maintained a dominant place in Victorian public discourse and its realisation in everyday life. Like respectability and morality, domesticity blurred class relations for it came to appear above class (Tosh 1999: 78). Domesticity held an idealised view of the home, and its power exercised over the middle classes remained undiminished. Yet, it has been argued (Vickery 1998) that domesticity was not unique to the Victorian age. However, Davidoff and Hall (2002: xx) contend, "...both beliefs and practices...around domesticity, which have been found in earlier periods, had become more widespread by the early nineteenth century. By that time more people among the expanded middle classes had greater resources to practice the domestic ideal."

Furthermore, Hall (1998: 188-189) argues the impact of the Evangelical movement in establishing the Victorian ideal of domesticity. The Evangelicals believed that home was the one place where attempts could be made to curb sin, thus the household was seen as the basis for a proper religious life - morality began at home. Connecting the religious with the domestic was extended to the division between the public and the private sphere. The former was seen as dangerous and the private sphere was seen as a safe haven. Although, as Tosh (1999: 78) asserts, the ideal of the home was part of any and every Christian denomination, it was also a priority in the moral virtues proclaimed by sceptics. Therefore, whether Christian or sceptic, beautification of domestic space was to be morally uplifting.

Within the household men and women had their separate spheres. Separate spheres were derived from 'natural' differences between the two sexes. Among those differences women were expected to sustain and even to improve the moral qualities of men (Hall 1998: 190). Home was considered a sanctuary from worldly evils, a place of rest and moral regeneration for men as well as for all members of society.

Tosh (1999: 47 & 124) argues, despite the unmistakable feminine quality of the rituals of home, the labelling of home as 'the woman's sphere' obscured the true relationship between home and gender. The popular image of Victorian domesticity is almost entirely focused on women and children and their needs in the home. Yet, Tosh (1999: 48-50) notes that much of this culture was determined by the needs of men. Middle-class men proclaimed their need to spend a significant proportion of their adult lives at home, and to a remarkable extent they did so. Therefore, domesticity was in all respects as much the creation of men as of women. Initially, the furnishing and decoration of the home would have been shared. Thereafter, the wife would have to maintain it and in so doing continue to embellish it with hand-made and bought objects that would uplift and instruct and at the same time reinforce the family's outward appearances of gentility. In her zeal to do so, the home was filled with decorative objects and ornamentation that surpassed the purely aesthetic; the aesthetic became endowed with the spiritual and the moral, in this sense the sublime.

## Consumerism and consumption

A complete comprehension of the Victorian period must take into account its relation to commodities, therefore it is necessary to clarify the relationship between the terms *decoration* and *consumption*. According to Logan (2001: 77), the former is generally understood as a practice related to aesthetic objects, while *consumption* is connected to social theory and cultural studies. Decoration could be seen as one form of consumer behaviour, in which commodities are used in the creation of domestic space; on the other hand, the acquisition of consumer goods can be seen as only part of the practice of decoration, which includes competence in selecting and arranging commodities. Further, consumption refers to things taken in from outside, becoming a part of the home. Logan (2001: 98) states, "As the external and unknown is brought into the gravitational field of the family, that field expands and grows larger. The accretion of objects both signifies and nurtures the life of the household."

The Victorian period saw the gradual development of a consumer orientated society, where the enlarged spending power of the middle classes was lavished on new trends in domestic architecture, decorations, furnishings, gardening and fashion (Campbell Orr 1995: 2). Buying for the home, which at one time was something a couple did when they got married and 'set up house', became an activity that went on all the time (Calder 1977: 91). The newly affluent middle class could mimic the old aristocracy by attempting to stay their status and intimidate potential rivals through deployment of material things (Logan 2001: 84). It was almost mandatory to grow more elaborate as one's circumstance improved. Vulgarly was the consequence. Gloag (1962: 7) and Calder (1977: 84) concur that wealth outstripped education and standards of taste declined as the external evidence of prosperity was demanded by the growing middle class. Veblen (in Logan 2001: 85) argues, "The superior gratification derived from the use and contemplation of costly and supposedly beautiful products is, commonly, in great measure a gratification of our sense of costliness masquerading under the name of beauty." Eco (2004: 363) accedes, over and above utility, every object became a commodity, and even the aesthetic enjoyment of the beautiful object was transformed into a display of its commercial value. The result was an inordinate accumulation of domestic decorative objects, chosen because of their utility or beauty or both, but most importantly because they signified respectability. In this way a connection was established between utility, beauty and gentility.

## Taste and style

Although the style and taste of the periods overlap, late-Georgian precedes the mid-Victorian lifestyle. At the start of the nineteenth century design was elegant, delicate and light. The typical interior forty or fifty years later was identified by a changed lifestyle. Mark Girouard (in Lasdun 1981: 10-12) describes interiors as comfortably patterned, padded and puffed out; just as the skirts of ladies had expanded so had the table legs. Furthermore, he notes the aristocracy and the Royal Family's addiction to middle class tastelessness. Calder (1977: 92) argues that "along with the curve went comfort, and comfort was, partly at least, responsible for the decline in taste." Thus, tastefulness was embedded in the need for security and comfort, which seemed to debilitate critical faculties.

Furthermore, decoration was a key word in the Victorian attitude towards what should go into the home. The home was to exert a moral influence and the moral effect of interior decoration was even greater. It was thought that the decoration of the house contributed much to the education of the entire household in refinement, intellectual development and morality (Halttunen 1989: 161). Through decoration a family expressed its proper understanding of life

and beauty, which constituted a moral quality. Victorian decoration was not merely decorative, since decoration was considered essential and good taste was essential for the choosing of decoration. Many Victorians saw themselves as judges of good taste and moral guides to the appreciation of beauty (Calder 1977: 83). By linking morality and religion with the purchase and maintenance of a Christian home, the Victorians legitimised acquisition and display of domestic goods (Halttunen 1989: 163). The Victorians partly rejected the classic aesthetic, which regarded structural forms as beautiful in themselves. According to the classic aesthetic, structural elements adhered to universal standards of harmony and proportion. The Victorians argued that the beauty of form lay in its capacity to stimulate 'proper' thoughts in the beholder's mind. Thus, to the Victorians true taste lay in the union of the beautiful and the significant, Figure 1 (Halttunen 1989: 158-159).



Figure 1

George du Maurier's satirical look at 'Aesthetic' attitudes. *The caption reads: 'The Six-Mark Teapot'. Aesthetic bridegroom: 'It is quite consummate is it not?' Intense bride: 'It is indeed! Oh, Algernon, let us live up to it!' (Calder 1977: 219)*

Girouard (in Lasdun 1981: 19) states the "interplay between practical and symbolic or emotional need is always intriguing. Very often one works against the other." In Victorian interiors practical elements, such as the large table placed near the fire or a window, where women congregated for embroidery, drawing, or to read books, tended to disappear under less practical collections of objects. The relationship between functional and decorative was thus strained - the decorative was allowed to eclipse the functional.

Despite what may appear as a lack of 'good taste', taste was highly topical in the Victorian period. Calder (1979: 6) states that, in spite of overcrowding interiors with bulky furniture and covering all available surfaces with useless objects, good taste in home-making was thought of as extremely important. A family, especially the wife and mother, was often evaluated by the decorations in the home and their arrangement. Tastefulness, along with efficient household management, was regarded as vital. An education in taste was considered to be essential for the home-maker as taste was not just an expression of aesthetic judgement, but primarily a moral

quality. Taste had connotations of standards and morality; 'good' taste was less a question of artistic sensitivity, more a question of understanding what was proper" (Calder 1977: 32).

The style of building, which influence the decoration of interiors, in the Victorian period is most strongly associated with architectural eclecticism, which was accompanied by an enthusiasm for the styles of other times and places. Critics of the Victorian architectural and decorative style ascribe the corruption of neoclassical principles of beauty to eclecticism and the rapid growth of a new wealthy middle class who did not have the tradition of aristocratic ideals of taste. Logan (2001: 182) argues an alternative:

...there was, except among purists, a sense of being free to choose among styles and to interpret them creatively... Not surprisingly, the very wealthy, or the very artistic, were the ones most likely to create domestic spaces around a particular foreign theme. In most households, the exotic was a small part of the total decorative scheme, usually attained by addition of relatively inexpensive ornaments.

What is significant is that taste was no longer exclusively dependent upon a classical aesthetic; rather taste was a union between the beautiful and meaningful.

### **Decoration of domestic interiors**

The most immediate impression of the middle class Victorian domestic interior is overcrowding and concealment. Hobsbawm (in Eco 2004: 362) states:

...a mass of objects more often than not disguised by drapes, cushions, cloths, wall papers and always, whatever their nature, elaborated. No picture without a gilded, a fretted, a chased, even a velvet-covered frame, no seat without upholstery or cover, no piece of textile without tassel,...no surface without cloth or object on it. This was no doubt a sign of wealth and status.

Objects expressed their cost and their value, yet cost also brought comfort, which was therefore visible as well as experienced. However, objects were more than merely utilitarian or symbols of status, they were means of personal expression and spiritual upliftment.



Figure 2  
A late Victorian drawing-room with every surface covered. (Calder 1977: 104)

Both Davidoff and Hall (2002: 375) and Calder (1977: 92-93) contend that early nineteenth century Georgian taste which favoured lightness and space was too sparse, upright and unpadding for those who wished to purchase a comfortable life with new wealth. Comfort was experienced directly and sparse domesticity was replaced by carpets, curtains, redesigned grates, mahogany furniture, wallpaper, chintz covers and bedsteads (Figure 2). The bulk was partly the result of padding, but also a reflection of substance, contributing to an atmosphere of ease. Gloag (1962: 4) concurs, "...appliances and articles that ministered to bodily comfort were seldom disguised... The shapes of armchairs, sofas, settees and divans became softly corpulent and tended to relax elegance in posture in the home, though on formal occasions decorous carriage was preserved." However, Calder (1977: 93) notes an ambiguity: although wealth bought servants as well as furnishings, the impracticality of much Victorian furnishing was not reconcilable with the dominating influence of comfort. Comfort was accompanied by a proliferation of ornament, which was considered good in itself, indicating good taste, financial status and moral awareness. The 'lived-in' look was sought after because it signified a lack of idleness, reflecting the ideal of respectability and work as virtue (Lichten 1950: 170). Moreover, lavish domestic decoration served as operative parts of an extensive system of communication. The middle class home contained many decorative objects with a straightforward narrative content, which communicated socially approved patterns of thought and behaviour. These objects related 'stories' of filial devotion or religious faith beneficial to the family and which indicated to outsiders the family's wholesome views, thus helping to establish their respectability (Logan 1995: 211).

Victorian interiors can be seen as "womb-like bowers of materiality, a materiality that is literally domesticated and thus made safe and beneficent, capable of offering an antidote to existential anxiety" (Logan 1995: 219). Bachelard (1964: 7) imagines "before being cast out... we are laid in the cradle of the house" where "being reigns in a sort of earthly paradise of matter, dissolved into the comforts of an adequate matter." Similarly, Calder (1977: 33) sees the change from early Victorian interiors, decorated in a sparse Georgian style, to increasingly cluttered, enclosed and sombre interiors as "a part of the womb-like tendency of the Victorian home, to see the thick carpets and curtains as a significant element of sanctuary, and solid furniture as representative of solid virtues." The clutter typical of a middle class Victorian interior added to the overburdened atmosphere; objects could protect as well as enhance and reassure.

### **Proliferation of ornament**

The decorative objects and ornamentation in the Victorian house were immensely important. Things cluttered one's drawing room not only because they were beautiful but because they were symbols of one's standards. Gloag (1962: 136) states, "Ornament appeased the anxious appetite of the new rich and the prosperous middle classes for visible evidence of their status." Objects lent security when life was uncertain, for although the Victorian age is often considered a self-confident age, it was plagued with doubt, despair, fear of revolution and a dislike of change. Girouard (in Lasdun 1981: 20) argues that the accumulation of objects, which took many forms, suggested an element of escapism and a desire for security. Moreover, Gloag (1962: 137) asserts the immoderate ornamentation of nearly every article in the home made even spacious rooms seem cramped, and in small rooms the effect was overwhelming. Yet, this overindulgence of ornament contributed to an atmosphere of "solid unshakeable comfort".

The notion of functionalism did not yet exist. Had it existed, the Victorian designer would have rejected it, because 'disguise was the spice of life' and as Gloag (1962: 1) notes, Victorian designers had "...a persistent tendency to confuse design with disguise." When architecture



ceased to be orderly, and became disturbing as a result of a wanton use of eclecticism, the application of ornament was unregulated by any disciplined sense of restraint. Ornament and function became confused (Figure 3). Ornament provided visible evidence of social status for the new rich and prosperous middle classes, as well as became a means of escape from the realities of life (Gloag 1962: 136). Thus, Victorians subordinated form and function to the interests of ornament. Pugin (in Gloag 1962: 151) wrote:

...there is a false notion of *disguising* instead of beautifying articles of utility. However many objects of ordinary use are rendered monstrous and ridiculous simply because the artist, instead of seeking the *most convenient* form, and then *decorating it*, has embodied some extravagance to *conceal the real purpose for which the article has been made!*



Figure 3  
A stork candelabrum, by William Potts of Birmingham, 1851. (Gloag 1962: 139)



Figure 4  
A bell, 'The Faery Summoner', a mixture of symbolic and naturalistic. (Gloag 1962: 141)

Perhaps this was because to the Victorians ornament was, in itself good, while utility indicated nothing, except perhaps worthiness, ornament indicated good taste, financial status

and moral awareness. What was more, by borrowing from the lofty ideas of the great Gothic architects, ornamentation was not only good, but to the glory of God. Comfort was a proper reward for hard work, the subsequent synthesis of ornament and comfort was befitting of a middle class who used religion and morality as weapons of self-protection (Calder 1977: 92-94). Overcrowding came to be identified with comfort, yet comfort was respectable and like ornament had become an end in itself (Gloag 1962: 158).

Classical motifs were distorted, often combined with antique styles, the exotic or the Gothic, without emphasis or appreciation for proportions in the design. Further, ornamentation tended to be naturalistic. According to Gloag (1962: 137), the assumption was nature is beautiful; therefore ornamental details derived immediately from beautiful natural objects will ensure a beautiful design. Often the result was that the *ornament* substituted the thing being ornamented. Symbolic figures were as popular as naturalistic motifs and they often competed for attention (Figure 4).



Figure 5  
The drawing-room looking north, 18 Stafford Terrace, London (Nicholson 1988: plate vii)

### **Analysis of artefact**

Against this context, an artefact was identified and selected, for critical analysis. Sambourne House, London, was chosen because it provides an excellently preserved and documented example of Victorian domestic life.

### The drawing-room, 18 Stafford Terrace, London (1870s)

The drawing-room of number 18 Stafford Terrace, home to Linley and Marion Sambourne, is critically analysed (cf Introduction). Sambourne House was opened as a museum in 1980 and is located in the London borough of Kensington. Sambourne House exists as an example of a genuine Victorian home where the original decorative scheme, devised in the 1870's is almost unaltered (Nicholson 1988: 9). It consists of three storeys and a basement: behind the narrow frontage the house has two rooms on each floor; the staircase rises from the back of the hall with bathrooms and lavatories off the half-landings. The kitchen and servants' rooms are in the basement, the dining-room and morning-room on the ground floor, and the drawing-room on the first floor. On the second floor are the main bedroom and a spare bedroom, with the day nursery, night nursery and room for the nursemaid above that.



Figure 6

The Drawing-room looking south, 18 Stafford Terrace, London (Nicholson 1988: plate vi)

Edward Linley Sambourne, born in 1844, was a black-and-white artist who worked as a cartoonist for *Punch*, one of the most successful of nineteenth century periodicals (Nicholson 1988: 9). His influence can be seen throughout the house; however there was another person responsible too for the arrangement of the rooms at Stafford Terrace. This was his wife, Marion, whose contribution has had little recognition. "Marion could not claim to be an artist, or a writer, or a social reformer, or even a famous beauty. She was just a typical middle-class Victorian wife..." (Nicholson 1988: 10). The couple had lived at 18 Stafford Terrace, Kensington, since their marriage in October 1874 and by 1881 had two children, Maud and Roy

(Nicholson 1988: 13). Both Linley and Marion kept diaries, from which a picture emerges of two interesting people, both busy and preoccupied in their individual spheres but happily united in their appreciation of each other, their family and their home.

It would appear that Linley and Marion Sambourne adopted many of the precepts of the Aesthetic Movement in the decoration of their home. The Aesthetic Movement was associated with the painter, James Whistler, Oscar Wilde, Gilbert and Sullivan, and with the idea of 'Art for Art's Sake' (Dixon & Muthesius 1978: 23). The Sambournes chose to throw the usual two rooms on the first floor into one large L-shaped drawing-room. Yet, despite the large surface area the room still feels cluttered and awkward (Figures 5 & 6).

The drawing-room was the most prestigious room of any Victorian home. The term was derived from the 'withdrawing room' of the seventeenth century, which was usually situated near the bedrooms, where the ladies withdrew after dinner. This pattern of behaviour continued to some extent into the nineteenth century, when the men remained in the dining-room after dinner or went to the study or library, the male preserve, joining the ladies in the drawing-room later. In addition to large formal dinners, the room served many other occasions of greater or lesser formality, like 'morning calls' or 'at homes' or piano playing; writing letters and embroidery (Muthesius 1982: 46, 48). Thus, the drawing-room, both a public and private space, functioned as an important means of display of a family's wealth and respectability. As a result it was the most decorative room of the house.

The most striking thing about this room in Sambourne house is the accumulation of furniture and decorative details. Every possible type of seat is present: comfortable chairs, upright chairs, stools and footstools, all of which are padded and upholstered in patterned or hand-embroidered fabrics. The other furniture, tables, writing desks and commodes, are mostly eighteenth-century French (Louis-seize) or good-quality Victorian copies in the same style (Nicholson 1988: 25). Loose, intricately patterned carpets, Turkish or Persian, are strewn over the already patterned parquet floors.

Besides the forest of furniture, the wallpapered walls almost disappear behind the closely hung framed prints and paintings, and "a whole range of ornaments, lamps, and knick knacks, including Neopolitan copies of Etruscan vases, Japanese painted vases, a French boulle clock, a bronzed reduction by Coalbrookdale of John Bull's Eagle Slayer, shown at the 1851 exhibition, and a bronze nymph by Barbedienne." (Nicholson 1988: 25). This demonstrates how the Victorian home could combine the restraint of neo-classicism on plan with a proliferation of decorative detail and interiors full of furnishings.

Above each of the two white marble fireplaces is a large mirror in a heavy and ornate frame, which was a classic mid-Victorian indicator of status. Logan (2001: 114) states a mirrored reflection of domestic space would have enlarged the sense of space and doubled its contents. This enlargement and replication would have contributed to an apprehension of material wealth and comfort. The mantel garniture, a symmetrical arrangement of bronze figurines and classical vases, all individually mounted on a substantial piece of marble, bring 'art' into the home, providing a visual confirmation of the family's respectability.

The various ornaments and knick knacks were all objects signifying the home's respectability. For example, the small statue or bust suited both the financial means of the middle classes and their desire to use such objects to adorn the mantel, tables, occasional tables and over-mantels or 'whatnots'. According to Logan (2001: 129) in Victorian sculpture and its reproductions nudity could legitimately be displayed under the aegis of art provided that the representation of female nudes carefully followed the conventional prohibitions of colour, body hair and details of genitalia. Such sculptures were quite commonly found in respectable

homes. Besides decorative objects the surfaces are generally covered with textiles, many of them embroidered. Some would have served a purpose, such as lamp mats to catch spills, while others were purely ornamental. In this way objects were 'underlined' by placing pieces of fabric under, over or around them. There was also the fashion of 'draping', which included chairs, tables, fireplaces and windows. In this instance not only are the windows hung with heavy curtains and tassels, but the doorway is also draped with fabric. This suggests sensuality and the pleasure taken in the tactile and visual appeal of fabrics as additions to home décor (Logan 2001: 134).

There is a clear exuberance of ornament based on the natural world throughout the period. The Victorian approach to nature was peculiar in that it conflated scientific, aesthetic and moral impulses. In addition to the use of natural motifs, a great variety of objects that embodied or gestured toward the natural appeared in the home. In this interior, there are flower motifs on the fabrics, dried flowers and living plants present. According to Logan (2001: 142), one of the reasons for the appearance of various representations of the natural world was a continued apprehension of that world as beautiful, or at least a continued prestige attached to those who were sensible of that beauty.

Heavily framed photographs are displayed on the piano and tables throughout the room. The prints and paintings that congest the walls are more simply framed. Graphic art displayed in the home depended on wealth and taste, but were considered essential because of its moral value, able to instruct and elevate. Moreover, paintings and prints provided images of a world outside the home and were an important part of decoration. Logan (2001: 140) asserts, the drawing-room, in particular, was a space filled with things that led the imagination beyond its walls, which paradoxically also focused attention on the security and asylum of domestic space.

A number of the decorative objects in the drawing-room are 'foreign'. Logan (2001: 182) defines 'foreign objects' as those that either "...by virtue of provenance or their design or their outright narrative elements, allude to a world distinct from the middle-class Victorian home." Foreign ornaments provided an outlet for the Victorian fascination with the exotic, which originated from at least the eighteenth century with the notions of the picturesque and Romanticism. The dialectic relationship between the domestic and the foreign was an important part of the Victorian notion of beauty (Logan 2001: 184). The drawing-room contains a number of Japanese painted vases, as well as Etruscan vases, that are prominently displayed. The value of these 'foreign' vases lay not necessarily in the craftsmanship or practical use, rather that they were signifiers of a real or imagined escape from everyday life. Moreover, they served to buoy middle class identity by miniaturizing the foreign Other and reconstructing it a private property (Logan 2001: 186-7).

It is evident that the proliferation of furniture, decorative detail and ornaments in this drawing-room signifies something more than mere aesthetic pleasure. Simply the superabundance of things serves to enfold its occupants with a womb-like sense of comfort and security. Moreover, the accumulation of decorative commodities, chosen for their beauty and economic value, helped maintain outward appearances of respectability. The choice of exotic ornaments, vases, figurines, prints and paintings suggest extrication from reality. The profusion of pattern and colour lent a sensual tactile and visual pleasure to the space. Yet, the seemingly unrestrained exuberance in embellishment becomes jarring and the senses are left over-stimulated. A tension exists; the drawing-room for all its carefully chosen components is located between the beautiful and the offensive.

## Conclusion

The literature study and scrutiny of the artefact indicate that the Victorian notion of beauty was not situated in the superfluous; beauty acquired significance. Respectability and domesticity with the associated ideas of security and comfort, function and ornament, escape to the natural world and the exotic, morally instructive and elevating, value and wealth, 'art for art's sake', and sensual tactile and visual pleasure, became inextricable from the articulation and appreciation of the aesthetic. The result was, more often than not, excessive, almost obscene. In this way, the apprehension and appreciation Victorian domestic interiors acquire an almost subliminal quality. Thus, domestic space is the site of the intersection between the beautiful and the vulgar and it is here that sublimity is located.

## Notes

- 1 The context of Southern Africa during the Victorian period falls outside the scope of this study.
- 2 See Poovey (1988) and Nead (1997) for a detailed discussion.
- 3 See Davidoff & Hall (2002) for a detailed discussion on Evangelicalism and the Victorian domesticity.

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