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THE DECORATION
OF HOUSESBY EDITH WHARTON AND
OGDEN CODMAN, JR.

THE REVISED AND EXPANDED CLASSICAL AMERICA EDITION

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"Une forme doit être belle en elle-même et on ne doit jamais compter sur le décor appliqué pour en sauver les imperfections."

Henri Mayeux: *La Composition Décorative.*

INTRODUCTION

Rooms may be decorated in two ways: by a superficial application of ornament totally independent of structure, or by means of those architectural features which are part of the organism of every house, inside as well as out.

In the middle ages, when warfare and brigandage shaped the conditions of life, and men camped in their castles much as they did in their tents, it was natural that decorations should be portable, and that the naked walls of the mediæval chamber should be hung with arras, while a *ciel*, or ceiling, of cloth stretched across the open timbers of its roof.

When life became more secure, and when the Italian conquests of the Valois had acquainted men north of the Alps with the spirit of classic tradition, proportion and the relation of voids to masses gradually came to be regarded as the chief decorative values of the interior. Portable hangings were in consequence replaced by architectural ornament: in other words, the architecture of the room became its decoration.

This architectural treatment held its own through every change of taste until the second quarter of the present century; but since then various influences have combined to sever the natural connection between the outside of the modern house and its interior. In the average house the architect's task seems virtually confined to the elevations and floor-plan. The designing of what are today regarded as insignificant details, such as mouldings, architraves, and cornices, has become a perfunctory work, hurried over and unregarded; and when this work is done, the upholsterer is called in to "decorate" and furnish the rooms.

As a result of this division of labor, house-decoration has ceased to be a branch of architecture. The upholsterer cannot be expected to have the preliminary training necessary for architectural work, and it is inevitable that in his hands form should be sacrificed to color and composition to detail. In his ignorance of the legitimate means of producing certain effects, he is driven to all manner of expedients, the result of

Form used?

Baudouin

which is a piling up of heterogeneous ornament, a multiplication of incongruous effects; and lacking, as he does, a definite first conception, his work becomes so involved that it seems impossible for him to make an end.

The confusion resulting from these unscientific methods has reflected itself in the lay mind, and house-decoration has come to be regarded as a black art by those who have seen their rooms subjected to the manipulations of the modern upholsterer. Now, in the hands of decorators who understand the fundamental principles of their art, the surest effects are produced, not at the expense of simplicity and common sense, but by observing the requirements of both. These requirements are identical with those regulating domestic architecture, the chief end in both cases being the suitable accommodation of the inmates of the house.

The fact that this end has in a measure been lost sight of is perhaps sufficient warrant for the publication of this elementary sketch. No study of *house-decoration as a branch of architecture* has for at least fifty years been published in England or America; and though France is always producing admirable monographs on isolated branches of this subject, there is no modern French work corresponding with such comprehensive manuals as d'Aviler's *Cours d'Architecture* or Isaac Ware's *Complete Body of Architecture*.

The attempt to remedy this deficiency in some slight degree has made it necessary to dwell at length upon the strictly architectural principles which controlled the work of the old decorators. The effects that they aimed at having been based mainly on the due adjustment of parts, it has been impossible to explain their methods without assuming their standpoint — that of architectural proportion — in contradistinction to the modern view of house-decoration as superficial application of ornament. When house-decoration was a part of architecture all its values were founded on structural modifications; consequently it may seem that ideas to be derived from a study of such methods suggest changes too radical for those who are not building, but are merely decorating. Such changes, in fact, lie rather in the direction of alteration than of adornment; but it must be remembered that the results attained will be of greater decorative value than were an equal expenditure devoted to surface-ornament. Moreover, the

great decorators, if scrupulous in the observance of architectural principles, were ever governed, in the use of ornamental detail, by the *σωφροσύνη*, the "wise moderation," of the Greeks; and the rooms of the past were both simpler in treatment and freer from mere embellishments than those of to-day.

Besides, if it be granted for the sake of argument that a reform in house-decoration, if not necessary, is at least desirable, it must be admitted that such reform can originate only with those whose means permit of any experiments which their taste may suggest. When the rich man demands good architecture his neighbors will get it too. The vulgarity of current decoration has its source in the indifference of the wealthy to architectural fitness. Every good moulding, every carefully studied detail, exacted by those who can afford to indulge their taste, will in time find its way to the carpenter-built cottage. Once the right precedent is established, it costs less to follow than to oppose it.

In conclusion, it may be well to explain the seeming lack of accord between the arguments used in this book and the illustrations chosen to interpret them. While much is said of simplicity, the illustrations used are chiefly taken from houses of some importance. This has been done in order that only such apartments as are accessible to the traveller might be given as examples. Unprofessional readers will probably be more interested in studying rooms that they have seen, or at least heard of, than those in the ordinary private dwelling; and the arguments advanced are indirectly sustained by the most ornate rooms here shown, since their effect is based on such harmony of line that their superficial ornament might be removed without loss to the composition.

Moreover, as some of the illustrations prove, the most magnificent palaces of Europe contain rooms as simple as those in any private house; and to point out that simplicity is at home even in palaces is perhaps not the least service that may be rendered to the modern decorator.

responsibility
of the
wealthy
toward
aesthetic
values

I

THE HISTORICAL TRADITION

The last ten years have been marked by a notable development in architecture and decoration, and while France will long retain her present superiority in these arts, our own advance is perhaps more significant than that of any other country. When we measure the work recently done in the United States by the accepted architectural standards of ten years ago, the change is certainly striking, especially in view of the fact that our local architects and decorators are without the countless advantages in the way of schools, museums and libraries which are at the command of their European colleagues. In Paris, for instance, it is impossible to take even a short walk without finding inspiration in those admirable buildings, public and private, religious and secular, that bear the stamp of the most refined taste the world has known since the decline of the arts in Italy; and probably all American architects will acknowledge that no amount of travel abroad and study at home can compensate for the lack of daily familiarity with such monuments.

It is therefore all the more encouraging to note the steady advance in taste and knowledge to which the most recent architecture in America bears witness. This advance is chiefly due to the fact that American architects are beginning to perceive two things that their French colleagues, among all the modern vagaries of taste, have never quite lost sight of: first that architecture and decoration, having wandered since 1800 in a labyrinth of dubious eclecticism, can be set right only by a close study of the best models; and secondly that, given the requirements of modern life, these models are chiefly to be found in buildings erected in Italy after the beginning of the sixteenth century, and in other European countries after the full assimilation of the Italian influence.

As the latter of these propositions may perhaps be questioned by those who, in admiring the earlier styles, sometimes lose sight of their relative unfitness for modern use, it must be understood at the outset that it implies no disregard for the inherent beauties of these styles. It would be difficult, assuredly, to find buildings better suited to their original purpose than some of the great feudal castles, such as Warwick in England, or Langeais in France; and as much might be said of the grim machicolated palaces of republican Florence or Siena; but our whole mode of life has so entirely changed since the days in which these buildings were erected that they no longer answer to our needs. It is only necessary to picture the lives led in those days to see how far removed from them our present social conditions are. Inside and outside the house, all told of the unsettled condition of country or town, the danger of armed attack, the clumsy means of defence, the insecurity of property, the few opportunities of social intercourse as we understand it. A man's house was in very truth his castle in the middle ages, and in France and England especially it remained so until the end of the sixteenth century.

Thus it was that many needs arose: the tall keep of masonry where the inmates, pent up against attack, awaited the signal of the watchman who, from his platform or *échauguette*, gave warning of assault; the ponderous doors, oak-ribbed and metal-studded, with doorways often narrowed to prevent entrance of two abreast, and so low that the incomer had to bend his head; the windows that were mere openings or slits, narrow and high, far out of the assailants' reach, and piercing the walls without regard to symmetry — not, as Ruskin would have us believe, because irregularity was thought artistic, but because the mediæval architect, trained to the uses of necessity, knew that he must design openings that should afford no passage to the besiegers' arrows, no clue to what was going on inside the keep. But to the reader familiar with Viollet-le-Duc, or with any of the many excellent works on English domestic architecture, further details will seem superfluous. It is necessary, however, to point out that long after the conditions of life in Europe had changed, houses retained many features of the feudal period. The survival of obsolete customs which makes the study of sociology so interesting, has its parallel in the history of architecture. In the feudal countries especially,

can read all conclusions of life in dwelling itself

where the conflict between the great nobles and the king was of such long duration that civilization spread very slowly, architecture was proportionately slow to give up many of its feudal characteristics. In Italy, on the contrary, where one city after another succumbed to some accomplished condottiere who between his campaigns read Virgil and collected antique marbles, the rugged little republics were soon converted into brilliant courts where, life being relatively secure, social intercourse rapidly developed. This change of conditions brought with it the paved street and square, the large-windowed palaces with their great court-yards and stately open stair-cases, and the market-place with its loggia adorned with statues and marble seats.

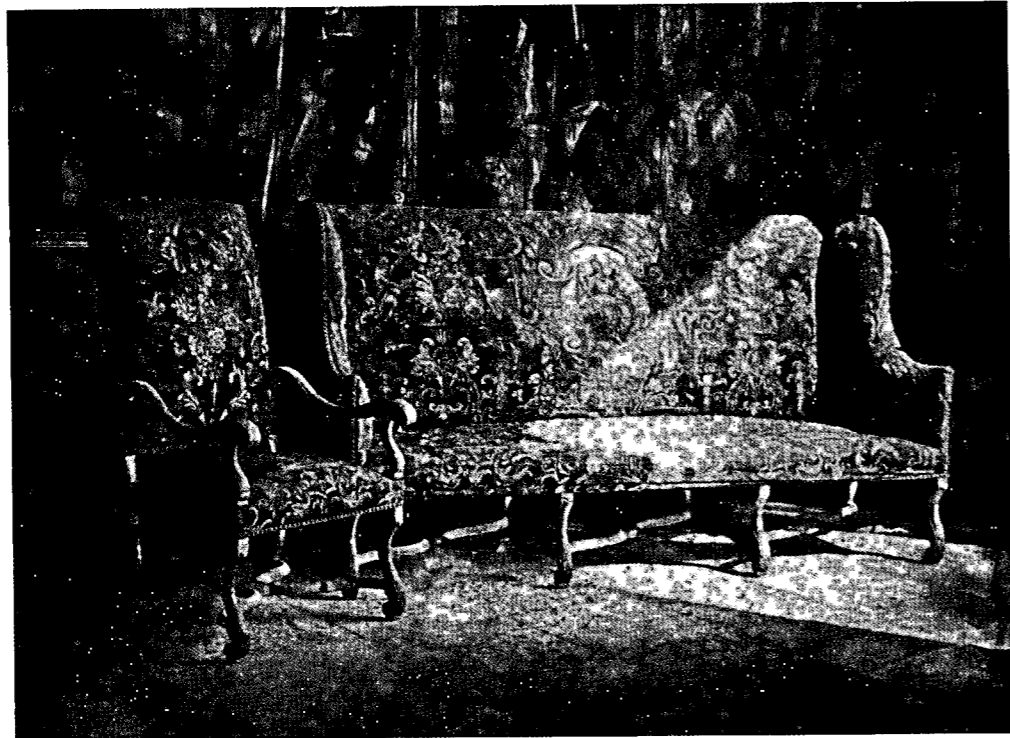
Italy, in short, returned instinctively to the Roman ideal of civic life: the life of the street, the forum and the baths. These very conditions, though approaching so much nearer than feudalism to our modern civilization, in some respects make the Italian architecture of the Renaissance less serviceable as a model than the French and English styles later developed from it. The very dangers and barbarities of feudalism had fostered and preserved the idea of home as of something private, shut off from intrusion; and while the Roman ideal flowered in the great palace with its galleries, loggias and saloons, itself a kind of roofed-in forum, the French or English feudal keep became, by the same process of growth, the modern private house. The domestic architecture of the Renaissance in Italy offers but two distinctively characteristic styles of building: the palace and the villa or hunting-lodge. There is nothing corresponding in interior arrangements with the French or English town house, or the *manoir* where the provincial nobles lived all the year round. The villa was a mere perch used for a few weeks of gaiety in spring or autumn; it was never a home as the French or English country-house was. There were, of course, private houses in Renaissance Italy, but these were occupied rather by shop-keepers, craftsmen, and the bourgeoisie than by the class which in France and England lived in country houses or small private hôtels. The elevations of these small Italian houses are often admirable examples of domestic architecture, but their planning is rudimentary, and it may be said that the characteristic tendencies of modern house-planning were developed rather in the mezzanin or low-studded intermediate story of the Italian

Renaissance palace than in the small house of the same period.

It is a fact recognized by political economists that changes in manners and customs, no matter under what form of government, usually originate with the wealthy or aristocratic minority, and are thence transmitted to the other classes. Thus the bourgeois of one generation lives more like the aristocrat of a previous generation than like his own predecessors. This rule naturally holds good of house-planning, and it is for this reason that the origin of modern house-planning should be sought rather in the prince's mezzanin than in the small middle-class dwelling. The Italian mezzanin probably originated in the habit of building certain very high-studded saloons and of lowering the ceiling of the adjoining rooms. This created an intermediate story, or rather scattered intermediate rooms, which Bramante was among the first to use in the planning of his palaces; but Bramante did not reveal the existence of the mezzanin in his façades, and it was not until the time of Peruzzi and his contemporaries that it became, both in plan and elevation, an accepted part of the Italian palace. It is for this reason that the year 1500 is a convenient point from which to date the beginning of modern house-planning; but it must be borne in mind that this date is purely arbitrary, and represents merely an imaginary line drawn between mediæval and modern ways of living and house-planning, as exemplified respectively, for instance, in the ducal palace of Urbino, built by Luciano da Laurano about 1468, and the palace of the Massimi alle Colonne in Rome, built by Baldassare Peruzzi during the first half of the sixteenth century.

The lives of the great Italian nobles were essentially open-air lives: all was organized with a view to public pageants, ceremonies and entertainments. Domestic life was subordinated to this spectacular existence, and instead of building private houses in our sense, they built palaces, of which they set aside a portion for the use of the family. Every Italian palace has its mezzanin or private apartment; but this part of the building is now seldom seen by travellers in Italy. Not only is it usually inhabited by the owners of the palace but, its decorations being simpler than those of the piano nobile, or principal story, it is not thought worthy of inspection. As a matter of fact, the treatment of the mezzanin was generally most beautiful, because most suitable and while

beauty of the mezzanin is suitable

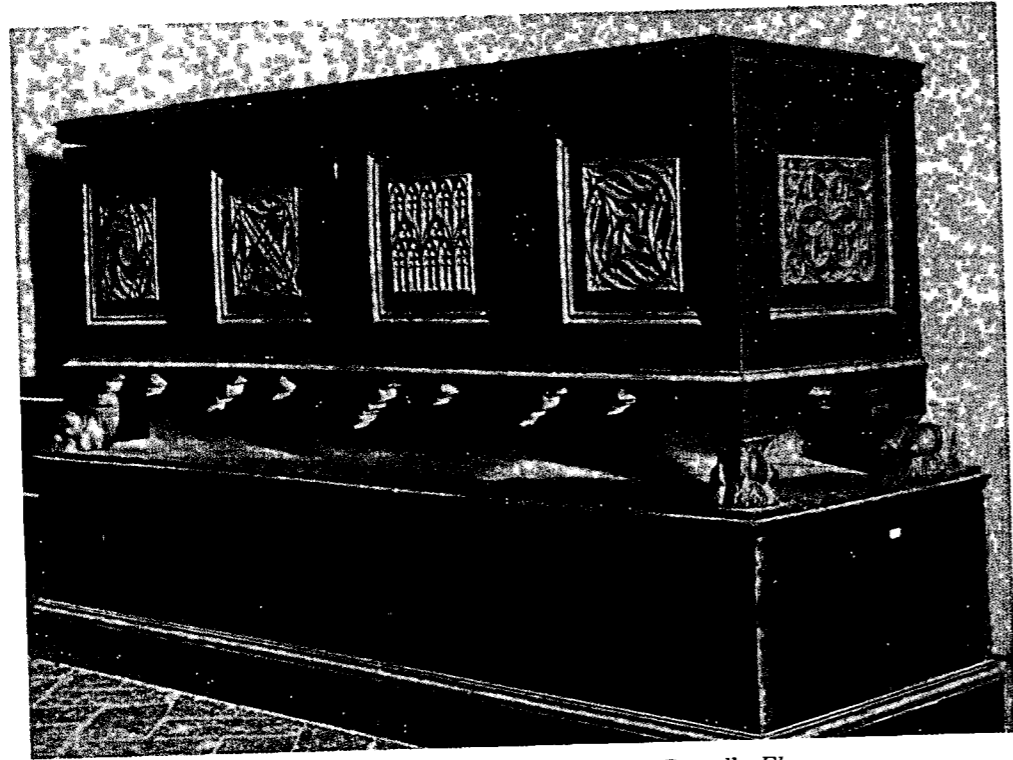


I. FRENCH SOFA AND ARMCHAIR. From the *Château de Bercy*. Louis XIV period

the Italian Renaissance palace can seldom serve as a model for a modern private house, the decoration of the mezzanin rooms is full of appropriate suggestion.

In France and England, on the other hand, private life was gradually, though slowly, developing along the lines it still follows in the present day. It is necessary to bear in mind that what we call modern civilization was a later growth in these two countries than in Italy. If this fact is insisted upon, it is only because it explains the relative unsuitability of French Renaissance or Tudor and Elizabethan architecture to modern life. In France, for instance, it was not until the Fronde was subdued and Louis XIV firmly established on the throne, that the elements which compose what we call modern life really began to combine. In fact, it might be said that the feudalism of which the Fronde was the lingering expression had its counterpart in the architecture of

the period. While long familiarity with Italy was beginning to tell upon the practical side of house-planning, many obsolete details were still preserved. Even the most enthusiastic admirer of the French Renaissance would hardly maintain that the houses of that period are what we should call in the modern sense "convenient." It would be impossible for a modern family to occupy with any degree of comfort the Hôtel Voguë at Dijon, one of the best examples (as originally planned) of sixteenth-century domestic architecture in France.² The same objection applies to the furniture of the period. This arose from the fact that, owing to the unsettled state of the country, the landed proprietor always carried his furniture with him when he travelled from one estate to another. Furniture, in the vocabulary of the middle ages, meant something which may be transported: "Meubles sont apelez qu'on peut transporter"; — hence the lack of variety in furniture before the seventeenth century, and also its unsuitableness to modern life. Chairs and cabinets that had to be carried about on mule-back were necessarily somewhat stiff and angular in design. It is perhaps not too much to say that a comfortable chair, in our self-indulgent modern sense, did not exist before the Louis XIV arm-chair (see Plate 1); and the cushioned *bergère*, the ancestor of our upholstered easy-chair, cannot be traced back further than the Regency. Prior to the time of Louis XIV, the most luxurious people had to content themselves with hard straight-backed seats. The necessities of transportation permitted little variety of design, and every piece of furniture was constructed with the double purpose of being easily carried about and of being used as a trunk (see Plate 2). As Havard says, "Tout meuble se traduisait par un coffre." The unvarying design of the cabinets is explained by the fact that they were made to form two trunks,³ and even the chairs and settles had hollow seats which could be packed with the owners' wardrobe (see Plate 4). The king himself, when he went from one château to another, carried all his furniture with him, and it is thus not surprising that lesser people contented themselves with a few substantial chairs and cabinets, and enough arras or cloth of Douai to cover the draughty walls of their country-houses. One of Madame de Sévigné's letters gives an amusing instance of the scarceness of furniture even in the time of Louis XIV. In describing a fire in a



2. ITALIAN GOTHIC CHEST. *Museum of the Bargello, Florence*

house near her own hôtel in Paris, she says that one or two of the persons from the burning house were brought to her for shelter, because it was known in the neighborhood (at that time a rich and fashionable one) that she had *an extra bed* in the house!

It was not until the social influences of the reign of Louis XIV were fully established that modern domestic life really began. Tradition ascribes to Madame de Rambouillet a leading share in the advance in practical house-planning; but probably what she did is merely typical of the modifications which the new social conditions were everywhere producing. It is certain that at this time houses and rooms first began to be comfortable. The immense cavernous fireplaces originally meant for the roasting of beeves and the warming of a flock of frozen retainers, — “les grandes antiquailles de cheminées,” as Madame de Sévigné called them, — were replaced by the compact

chimney-piece of modern times. Cushioned *bergères* took the place of the throne-like seats of Louis XIII, screens kept off unwelcome draughts, Savonnerie or moquette carpets covered the stone or marble floors, and grandeur gave way to luxury.⁴

English architecture having followed a line of development so similar that it need not here be traced, it remains only to examine in detail the opening proposition, namely, that modern architecture and decoration, having in many ways deviated from the paths which the experience of the past had marked out for them, can be reclaimed only by a study of the best models.

It might of course be said that to attain this end originality is more necessary than imitativeness. To this it may be replied that no lost art can be re-acquired without at least for a time going back to the methods and manner of those who formerly practised it; or the objection may be met by the question, What is originality in art? Perhaps it is easier to define what it is *not*; and this may be done by saying that it is never a wilful rejection of what have been accepted as the necessary laws of the various forms of art. Thus, in reasoning, originality lies not in discarding the necessary laws of thought, but in using them to express new intellectual conceptions; in poetry, originality consists not in discarding the necessary laws of rhythm, but in finding new rhythms within the limits of those laws. Most of the features of architecture that have persisted through various fluctuations of taste owe their preservation to the fact that they have been proved by experience to be necessary; and it will be found that none of them precludes the exercise of individual taste, any more than the acceptance of the syllogism or of the laws of rhythm prevents new thinkers and new poets from saying what has never been said before. Once this is clearly understood, it will be seen that the supposed conflict between originality and tradition is no conflict at all.⁵

In citing logic and poetry, those arts have been purposely chosen of which the laws will perhaps best help to explain and illustrate the character of architectural limitations. A building, for whatever purpose erected, must be built in strict accordance with the requirements of that purpose; in other words, it must have a reason for being as it

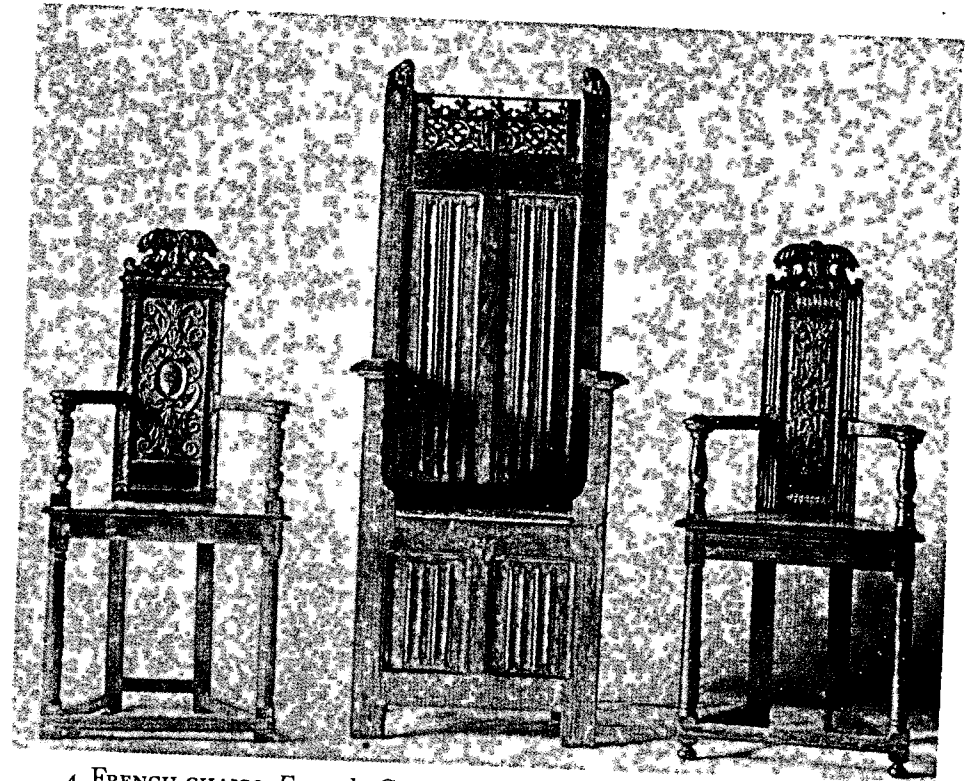
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3. FRENCH ARMOIRE. *Sixteenth century*
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Rogers Fund, 1925



4. FRENCH CHAIRS. *From the Gavet Collection. Fifteenth and sixteenth centuries*

is and must be as it is for that reason. Its decoration must harmonize with the structural limitations (which is by no means the same thing as saying that all decoration must be structural), and from this harmony of the general scheme of decoration with the building, and of the details of the decoration with each other, springs the rhythm that distinguishes architecture from mere construction. Thus all good architecture and good decoration (which, it must never be forgotten, *is only interior architecture*) must be based on rhythm and logic. A house, or room, must be planned as it is because it could not, in reason, be otherwise; must be decorated as it is because no other decoration would harmonize as well with the plan.

Many of the most popular features in modern house-planning and decoration will not be found to stand this double test. Often (as will be shown further on) they are

merely survivals of earlier social conditions, and have been preserved in obedience to that instinct that makes people cling to so many customs the meaning of which is lost. In other cases they have been revived by the archæologizing spirit which is so characteristic of the present time, and which so often leads its possessors to think that a thing must be beautiful because it is old and appropriate because it is beautiful.

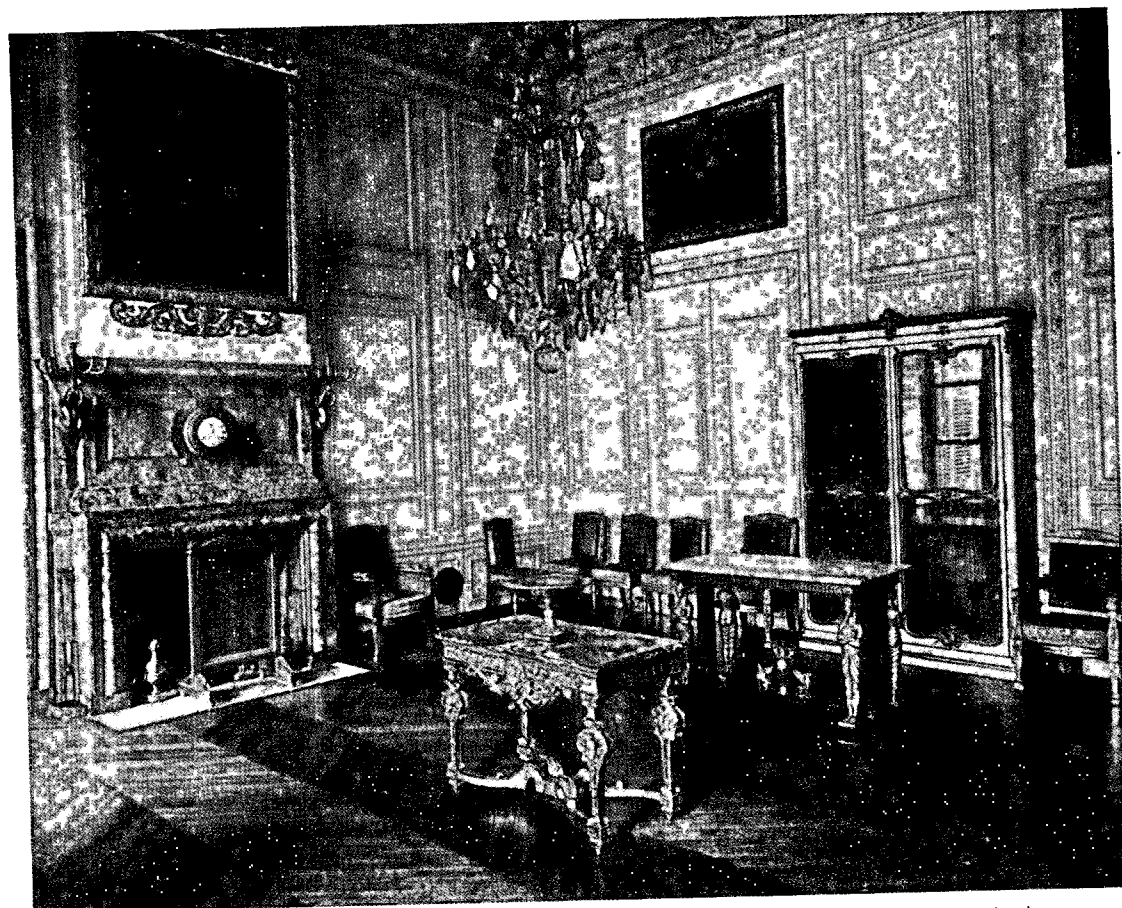
But since the beauty of all such features depends on their appropriateness, they may in every case be replaced by a more suitable form of treatment without loss to the general effect of house or room. It is this which makes it important that each room (or, better still, all the rooms) in a house should receive the same style of decoration. To some people this may seem as meaningless a piece of archaism as the habit of using obsolete fragments of planning or decoration; but such is not the case. It must not be forgotten, in discussing the question of reproducing certain styles, that the essence of a style lies not in its use of ornament, but in its handling of proportion. Structure conditions ornament, not ornament structure. That is, a room with unsuitably proportioned openings, wall-spaces and cornice might receive a surface application of Louis XV or Louis XVI ornament and not represent either of those styles of decoration; whereas a room constructed according to the laws of proportion accepted in one or the other of those periods, in spite of a surface application of decorative detail widely different in character, — say Romanesque or Gothic, — would yet maintain its distinctive style, because the detail, in conforming with the laws of proportion governing the structure of the room, must necessarily conform with its style. In other words, decoration is always subservient to proportion; and a room, whatever its decoration may be, must represent the style to which its proportions belong. The less cannot include the greater. Unfortunately, it is usually by ornamental details, rather than by proportion, that people distinguish one style from another. To many persons, garlands, bow-knots, quivers, and a great deal of gilding represent the Louis XVI style; if they object to these, they condemn the style. To an architect familiar with the subject the same style means something absolutely different. He knows that a Louis XVI room may exist without any of these or similar characteristics; and he often deprecates their use as representing the cheaper and more trivial effects of the period,

and those that have most helped to vulgarize it. In fact, in nine cases out of ten his use of them is a concession to the client who, having asked for a Louis XVI room, would not know he had got it were these details left out.⁶

Another thing which has perhaps contributed to make people distrustful of "styles" is the garbled form in which they are presented by some architects. After a period of eclecticism that has lasted long enough to make architects and decorators lose their traditional habits of design, there has arisen a sudden demand for "style." It necessarily follows that only the most competent are ready to respond to this unexpected summons. Much has to be relearned, still more to be unlearned. The essence of the great styles lay in proportion and the science of proportion is not to be acquired in a day. In fact, in such matters the cultivated layman, whether or not he has any special familiarity with the different schools of architecture, is often a better judge than the half-educated architect. It is no wonder that people of taste are disconcerted by the so-called "colonial" houses where stair-rails are used as roof-balustrades and mantel-friezes as exterior entablatures, or by Louis XV rooms where the wavy movement which, in the best rococo, was always an ornamental incident and never broke up the main lines of the design, is suffered to run riot through the whole treatment of the walls, so that the bewildered eye seeks in vain for a straight line amid the whirl of incoherent curves.

To conform to a style, then, is to accept those rules of proportion which the artistic experience of centuries has established as the best, while within those limits allowing free scope to the individual requirements which must inevitably modify every house or room adapted to the use and convenience of its occupants.

There is one thing more to be said in defence of conformity to style; and that is, the difficulty of getting rid of style. Strive as we may for originality, we are hampered at every turn by an artistic tradition of over two thousand years. Does any but the most inexperienced architect really think that he can ever rid himself of such an inheritance? He may mutilate or misapply the component parts of his design, but he cannot originate a whole new architectural alphabet. The chances are that he will not find it easy to invent one wholly new moulding.



5. ROOM IN THE GRAND TRIANON. Versailles (example of simple Louis XIV decoration)

The styles especially suited to modern life have already been roughly indicated as those prevailing in Italy since 1500, in France from the time of Louis XIV, and in England since the introduction of the Italian manner by Inigo Jones; and as the French and English styles are perhaps more familiar to the general reader, the examples given will usually be drawn from these. Supposing the argument in favor of these styles to have been accepted, at least as a working hypothesis, it must be explained why, in each room, the decoration and furniture should harmonize. Most people will admit the necessity of harmonizing the colors in a room, because a feeling for color

is more general than a feeling for form; but in reality the latter is the more important in decoration, and it is the feeling for form, and not any archæological affectation, which makes the best decorators insist upon the necessity of keeping to the same style of furniture and decoration. Thus the massive dimensions and heavy panelling of a seventeenth-century room would dwarf a set of eighteenth-century furniture; and the wavy, capricious movement of Louis XV decoration would make the austere yet delicate line of Adam furniture look stiff and mean.

Many persons object not only to any attempt at uniformity of style, but to the use of any recognized style in the decoration of a room. They characterize it, according to their individual views, as "servile," "formal," or "pretentious."

It has already been suggested that to conform within rational limits to a given style is no more servile than to pay one's taxes or to write according to the rules of grammar. As to the accusations of formality and pretentiousness (which are more often made in America than elsewhere), they may probably be explained by the fact that most Americans necessarily form their idea of the great European styles from public buildings and palaces. Certainly, if an architect were to propose to his client to decorate a room in a moderate-sized house in the Louis XIV style, and if the client had formed his idea of that style from the state apartments in the palace at Versailles, he would be justified in rejecting the proposed treatment as absolutely unsuitable to modern private life; whereas the architect who had gone somewhat more deeply into the subject might have singled out the style as eminently suitable, having in mind one of the simple panelled rooms, with tall windows, a dignified fireplace, large tables and comfortable arm-chairs, which were to be found in the private houses of the same period (see Plate 5). It is the old story of the two knights fighting about the color of the shield. Both architect and client would be right, but they would be looking at the different sides of the question. As a matter of fact, the bed-rooms, sitting-rooms, libraries and other private apartments in the smaller dwelling-houses built in Europe between 1650 and 1800 were far simpler, less pretentious and more practical in treatment than those in the average modern house.

It is therefore hoped that the antagonists of "style," when they are shown that to follow a certain style is not to sacrifice either convenience or imagination, but to give more latitude to both, will withdraw an opposition which seems to be based on a misapprehension of facts.

Hitherto architecture and decoration have been spoken of as one, as in any well-designed house they ought to be. Indeed, it is one of the numerous disadvantages of the present use of styles, that unless the architect who has built the house also decorates it, the most hopeless discord is apt to result. This was otherwise before our present desire for variety had thrown architects, decorators, and workmen out of the regular routine of their business. Before 1800 the decorator called upon to treat the interior of a house invariably found a suitable background prepared for his work, while much in the way of detail was intrusted to the workmen, who were trained in certain traditions instead of being called upon to carry out in each new house the vagaries of a different designer.

But it is with the decorator's work alone that these pages are concerned, and the above digression is intended to explain why his task is now so difficult, and why his results are so often unsatisfactory to himself as well as to his clients. The decorator of the present day may be compared to a person who is called upon to write a letter in the English language, but is ordered, in so doing, to conform to the Chinese or Egyptian rules of grammar, or possibly to both together.

By the use of a little common sense and a reasonable conformity to those traditions of design which have been tested by generations of architects, it is possible to produce great variety in the decoration of rooms without losing sight of the purpose for which they are intended. Indeed, the more closely this purpose is kept in view, and the more clearly it is expressed in all the details of each room, the more pleasing that room will be, so that it is easy to make a room with tinted walls, deal furniture and dimity curtains more beautiful, because more logical and more harmonious, than a ball-room lined with gold and marbles, in which the laws of rhythm and logic have been ignored.

Benjamin
Kocher
Baudelaire
Lolita
Havel

II

ROOMS IN GENERAL

Before beginning to decorate a room it is essential to consider for what purpose the room is to be used. It is not enough to ticket it with some general designation as "library," "drawing-room," or "den." The individual tastes and habits of the people who are to occupy it must be taken into account; it must be not "a library," or "a drawing-room," but the library or the drawing-room best suited to the master or mistress of the house which is being decorated. Individuality in house-furnishing has seldom been more harped upon than at the present time. That (cheap originality) which finds expression in putting things to uses for which they were not intended is often confounded with individuality; whereas the latter consists not in an attempt to be different from other people at the cost of comfort, but in the desire to be comfortable in one's own way, even though it be the way of a monotonously large majority. It seems easier to most people to arrange a room like some one else's than to analyze and express their own needs. Men, in these matters, are less exacting than women, because their demands, besides being simpler, are uncomplicated by the feminine tendency to want things because other people have them, rather than to have things because they are wanted.

But it must never be forgotten that every one is unconsciously tyrannized over by the wants of others, — the wants of dead and gone predecessors, who have an inconvenient way of thrusting their different habits and tastes across the current of later existences. The unsatisfactory relations of some people with their rooms are often to be explained in this way. They have still in their blood the traditional uses to which these rooms were put in times quite different from the present. It is only an unconscious extension of the

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V WINDOWS

In the decorative treatment of a room the importance of openings can hardly be over-estimated. Not only do they represent the three chief essentials of its comfort, — light, heat and means of access, — but they are the leading features in that combination of voids and masses that forms the basis of architectural harmony. In fact, it is chiefly because the decorative value of openings has ceased to be recognized that modern rooms so seldom produce a satisfactory and harmonious impression. It used to be thought that the effect of a room depended on the treatment of its wall-spaces and openings; now it is supposed to depend on its curtains and furniture. Accessory details have crowded out the main decorative features; and, as invariably happens when the relation of parts is disturbed, everything in the modern room has been thrown out of balance by this confusion between the essential and the incidental in decoration.¹⁹

The return to a more architectural treatment of rooms and to a recognition of the decorative value of openings, besides producing much better results, would undoubtedly reduce the expense of house-decoration. A small quantity of ornament, properly applied, will produce far more effect than ten times its amount used in the wrong way; and it will be found that when decorators rely for their effects on the treatment of openings, the rest of the room will require little ornamentation. The crowding of rooms with furniture and bric-à-brac is doubtless partly due to an unconscious desire to fill up the blanks caused by the lack of architectural composition in the treatment of the walls.

The importance of connecting the main lines of the openings with the cornice having been explained in the previous chapter, it is now necessary to study the different

openings in turn, and to see in how many ways they serve to increase the dignity and beauty of their surroundings.

As light-giving is the main purpose for which windows are made, the top of the window should be as near the ceiling as the cornice will allow. Ventilation, the secondary purpose of the window, is also better served by its being so placed, since an opening a foot wide near the ceiling will do more towards airing a room than a space twice as large near the floor. In our northern States, where the dark winter days and the need of artificial heat make light and ventilation so necessary, these considerations are especially important. In Italian palaces the windows are generally lower than in more northern countries, since the greater intensity of the sunshine makes a much smaller opening sufficient; moreover, in Italy, during the summer, houses are not kept cool by letting in the air, but by shutting it out.

Windows should not exceed five feet in width, while in small rooms openings three feet wide will be found sufficient. There are practical as well as artistic reasons for observing this rule, since a sash-window containing a sheet of glass more than five feet wide cannot be so hung that it may be raised without effort; while a casement, or French window, though it may be made somewhat wider, is not easy to open if its width exceeds six feet.

The next point to consider is the distance between the bottom of the window and the floor. This must be decided by circumstances, such as the nature of the view, the existence of a balcony or veranda, or the wish to have a window-seat. The outlook must also be considered, and the window treated in one way if it looks upon the street, and in another if it gives on the garden or informal side of the house. In the country nothing is more charming than the French window opening to the floor. On the more public side of the house, unless the latter gives on an enclosed court, it is best that the windows should be placed about three feet from the floor, so that persons approaching the house may not be able to look in. Windows placed at this height should be provided with a fixed seat, or with one of the little settees with arms, but without a back, formerly used for this purpose.

Although for practical reasons it may be necessary that the same room should contain some windows opening to the floor and others raised several feet above it, the tops of all the windows should be on a level. To place them at different heights serves no useful end, and interferes with any general scheme of decoration and more specially with the arrangement of curtains.

Mullions dividing a window in the centre should be avoided whenever possible, since they are an unnecessary obstruction to the view. The chief drawback to a casement window is that its sashes join in the middle; but as this is a structural necessity, it is less objectionable. If mullions are required, they should be so placed as to divide the window into three parts, thus preserving an unobstructed central pane. The window called Palladian illustrates this point.

Now that large plate-glass windows have ceased to be a novelty, it will perhaps be recognized that the old window with subdivided panes had certain artistic and practical merits that have of late been disregarded.

Where there is a fine prospect, windows made of a single plate of glass are often preferred; but it must be remembered that the subdivisions of a sash, while obstructing the view, serve to establish a relation between the inside of the house and the landscape, making the latter what, as seen from a room, it logically ought to be: a part of the wall-decoration, in the sense of being subordinated to the same general lines. A large unbroken sheet of plate-glass interrupts the decorative scheme of the room, just as in verse, if the distances between the rhymes are so great that the ear cannot connect them, the continuity of sound is interrupted. Decoration must rhyme to the eye, and to do so must be subject to the limitations of the eye, as verse is subject to the limitations of the ear. Success in any art depends on a due regard for the limitations of the sense to which it appeals.

The effect of a perpetually open window, produced by a large sheet of plate-glass, while it gives a sense of coolness and the impression of being out of doors, becomes for these very reasons a disadvantage in cold weather.

It is sometimes said that the architects of the eighteenth century would have used

large plates of glass in their windows had they been able to obtain them; but as such plates were frequently used for mirrors, it is evident that they were not difficult to get, and that there must have been other reasons for not employing them in windows; while the additional expense could hardly have been an obstacle in an age when princes and nobles built with such royal disregard of cost. The French, always logical in such matters, having tried the effect of plate-glass, are now returning to the old fashion of smaller panes; and in many of the new houses in Paris, where the windows at first contained large plates of glass, the latter have since been subdivided by a network of narrow mouldings applied to the glass.

As to the comparative merits of French, or casement, and sash windows, both arrangements have certain advantages. In houses built in the French or Italian style, casement windows are best adapted to the general treatment; while the sash-window is more in keeping in English houses. Perhaps the best way of deciding the question is to remember that "*les fenêtres sont intimement liées aux grandes lignes de l'architecture,*" and to conform to the rule suggested by this axiom.

The two common objections to French windows — that they are less convenient for ventilation, and that they cannot be opened without letting in cold air near the floor — are both unfounded. All properly made French windows have at the top an impost or stationary part containing small panes, one of which is made to open, thus affording perfect ventilation without draught. Another expedient, seen in one of the rooms of Mesdames de France at Versailles, is a small pane in the main part of the window, opening on hinges of its own.

Sash-windows have the disadvantage of not opening more than half-way, a serious drawback in our hot summer climate. It is often said that French windows cannot be opened wide without interfering with the curtains; but this difficulty is easily met by the use of curtains made with cords and pulleys, in the sensible old-fashioned manner. The real purpose of the window-curtain is to regulate the amount of light admitted to the room, and a curtain so arranged that it cannot be drawn backward and forward at will is but a meaningless accessory. It was not until the beginning of the present century



23. STAIRCASE IN THE PARODI PALACE, GENOA.
Sixteenth century (showing inter-mural stairs and marble floor)



24. STAIRCASE OF THE HÔTEL DE VILLE, NANCY.
Louis XV period (built by Héré de Corny; stair-rail by Jean Lamour)

that curtains were used without regard to their practical purpose. The window-hangings of the middle ages and of the Renaissance were simply straight pieces of cloth or tapestry hung across the window without any attempt at drapery, and regarded not as part of the decoration of the room, but as a necessary protection against draughts. It is probably for this reason that in old prints and pictures representing the rooms of wealthy people, curtains are so seldom seen. The better the house, the less need there was for curtains. In the engravings of Abraham Bosse, which so faithfully represent the interior decoration of every class of French house during the reign of Louis XIII, it will be noticed that in the richest apartments there are no window-curtains. In all the finest rooms of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the inside shutters and embrasures of the windows were decorated with a care which proves that they were not meant to be concealed by curtains. The shutters in the state apartments of Fouquet's château of Vaux-le-Vicomte, near Melun, are painted on both sides with exquisite arabesques, while those in the apartments of Mesdames de France, on the ground floor of the palace of Versailles, are examples of the most beautiful carving. In fact, it would be more difficult to cite a room of any importance in which the windows were not so treated, than to go on enumerating examples of what was really a universal custom until the beginning of the present century. It is known, of course, that curtains were used in former times: prints, pictures and inventories alike prove this fact; but the care expended on the decorative treatment of windows makes it plain that the curtain, like the portière, was regarded as a necessary evil rather than as part of the general scheme of decoration. The meagreness and simplicity of the curtains in old pictures prove that they were used merely as window shades or sun-blinds. The scant straight folds pushed back from the tall windows of the Prince de Conti's salon, in Olivier's charming picture of "Le Thé à l'Anglaise chez le Prince de Conti," are as obviously utilitarian as the strip of green woollen stuff hanging against the leaded casement of the mediæval bed-chamber in Carpaccio's "Dream of St. Ursula."

Another way of hanging window-curtains in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was to place them inside the architrave, so that they did not conceal it. The

architectural treatment of the trim, and the practice prevalent at that period of carrying the windows up to the cornice, made this a satisfactory way of arranging the curtain; but in the modern American house, where the trim is usually bad, and where there is often a dreary waste of wall-paper between the window and the ceiling, it is better to hang the curtains close under the cornice.

It was not until the eighteenth century that the window-curtain was divided in the middle; and this change was intended only to facilitate the drawing of the hangings, which, owing to the increased size of the windows, were necessarily wider and heavier. The curtain continued to hang down in straight folds, pulled back at will to permit the opening of the window, and drawn at night. Fixed window-draperies, with festoons and folds so arranged that they cannot be lowered or raised, are an invention of the modern upholsterer. Not only have these fixed draperies done away with the true purpose of the curtain, but they have made architects and decorators careless in their treatment of openings. The architrave and embrasure of a window are now regarded as of no more importance in the decorative treatment of a room than the inside of the chimney.

The modern use of the lambrequin as an ornamental finish to window-curtains is another instance of misapplied decoration. Its history is easy to trace. The mediæval bed was always enclosed in curtains hanging from a wooden framework, and the lambrequin was used as a kind of cornice to conceal it. When the use of gathered window-shades became general in Italy, the lambrequin was transferred from the bed to the window, in order to hide the clumsy bunches of folds formed by these shades when drawn up. In old prints, lambrequins over windows are almost always seen in connection with Italian shades, and this is the only logical way of using them; though they are often of service in concealing the defects of badly-shaped windows and unarchitectural trim.

Those who criticize the architects and decorators of the past are sometimes disposed to think that they worked in a certain way because they were too ignorant to devise a better method; whereas they were usually controlled by practical and artistic considerations which their critics are prone to disregard, not only in judging the work of the past, but in the attempt to make good its deficiencies. Thus the cabinet-makers

of the Renaissance did not make straight-backed wooden chairs because they were incapable of imaging anything more comfortable, but because the former were better adapted than cushioned arm-chairs to the *déplacements* so frequent at that period. In like manner, the decorator who regarded curtains as a necessity rather than as part of the decoration of the room knew (what the modern upholsterer fails to understand) that, the beauty of a room depending chiefly on its openings, to conceal these under draperies is to hide the key of the whole decorative scheme.

The muslin window-curtain is a recent innovation. Its only purpose is to protect the interior of the room from public view: a need not felt before the use of large sheets of glass, since it is difficult to look through a subdivided sash from the outside. Under such circumstances muslin curtains are, of course, useful; but where they may be dispensed with, owing to the situation of the room or the subdivision of panes, they are no loss. Lingerie effects do not combine well with architecture, and the more architecturally a window is treated, the less it need be dressed up in ruffles. To put such curtains in a window, and then loop them back so that they form a mere frame to the pane, is to do away with their real purpose, and to substitute a textile for an architectural effect. Where muslin curtains are necessary, they should be a mere transparent screen hung against the glass. In town houses especially all outward show of richness should be avoided; the use of elaborate lace-figured curtains, besides obstructing the view, seems an attempt to protrude the luxury of the interior upon the street. It is needless to point out the futility of the second layer of muslin which, in some houses, hangs inside the sash-curtains.

The solid inside shutter, now so generally discarded, save in France, formerly served the purposes for which curtains and shades are used, and, combined with outside blinds, afforded all the protection that a window really requires (see Plate 14). These shutters should be made with solid panels, not with slats, their purpose being to darken the room and keep out the cold, while the light is regulated by the outside blinds. The best of these is the old-fashioned hand-made blind, with wide fixed slats, still to be seen on old New England houses and always used in France and Italy: the frail machine-made substitute now in general use has nothing to recommend it.



25. HALL OF THE HORATHI AND THE CURIATHI. *Palace of the Conservators, Rome.*
Sixteenth century (example of frescoed walls and carved ceilings)