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The parlour was the centre of the Victorian home and, as Thad Logan shows, the place where contemporary conflicts about domesticity and gender relations were frequently played out. In *The Victorian Parlour: a Cultural Study*, Logan uses an interdisciplinary approach that combines the perspectives of art history, social history, and literary theory to describe and analyze the parlour as a cultural artifact. She offers a detailed investigation of specific objects in the parlour, and argues that these things articulated social meaning and could present symbolic resolutions to disturbances in the social field. The book concludes with a discussion of how representations of the parlour in literature and art reveal the pleasures and anxieties associated with Victorian domestic life.

THAD LOGAN is Lecturer in English and Humanities at Rice University. She has published on the Victorian parlour in the *Journal of Narrative History*, *Xavier Review*, and in *Keeping the Victorian House* (edited by Vanessa Dickerson). This is her first book.

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LITERATURE AND CULTURE 30

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For Polly, Beth, Maggie, and Helen

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It is well to have, not only what men have thought, and felt, but
what their hands have handled, and their strength wrought,
and their eyes beheld, all the days of their life.

John Ruskin, *The Seven Lamps of Architecture*

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Thad Logan
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

Contents

<i>List of illustrations</i>	<i>page</i> x
<i>Preface</i>	xiii
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	xvii
1 House and home: the parlour in context	1
2. “Sweet ordering, arrangement, and decision”: decorating the parlour	36
3. An empire of things: objects in the parlour	105
4. “Intimate glimpses of home”: representations of the parlour	202
Afterword	233
<i>Notes</i>	236
<i>Bibliography</i>	260
<i>Index</i>	276

Illustrations

1. C. C. Hunt. Drawing of an interior; British mid-century. Courtesy of the V&A Picture Library.	page 3
2. “Tapping at the Window.” Music sheet, mid-century. Courtesy of the V&A Picture Library.	4
3. Frederick George Stephens (1828–1907). <i>Mother and Child</i> , c. 1854. Courtesy of the Tate Gallery, London: Art Resource, New York City.	5
4. Walter Crane (1845–1915). Frontispiece to <i>The House Beautiful</i> by Clarence Cook, 1881.	6
5. Design plan of Fillongley vicarage, Warwickshire, showing the ground and first floor layout. From <i>The National Trust Book of the English House</i> . National Trust Photographic Library.	24
6. Lady’s and gentleman’s drawing-room chairs. From <i>Cabinet Furniture: Designs and Catalogue of Cabinet and Upholstery Furniture</i> by C. and R. Light, c 1880. Courtesy of the V&A Picture Library.	34
7. Drawing-room settee. From <i>Cabinet Furniture; Designs and Catalogue of Cabinet and Upholstery Furniture</i> by C. and R. Light, c. 1880. Courtesy of the V&A Picture Library.	39
8. Drawing-room settee. From <i>Cabinet Furniture: Designs and Catalogue of Cabinet and Upholstery Furniture</i> by C. and R. Light, c. 1880. Courtesy of the V&A Picture Library.	39
9. Drawing-room in the Louis XIV style. From <i>Designs of furniture illustrative of cabinet furniture and interior decoration specially designed for James Shoolbred & Co., Tottenham Court Road</i> . 1876. Courtesy of the V&A Picture Library.	40
10. Drawing-room in the “Old English,” “Elizabethan,” or “Jacobean” style. From <i>Designs of furniture illustrative of cabinet furniture and interior decoration specially designed for James Shoolbred & Co., Tottenham Court Road</i> . 1876. Courtesy of the V&A Picture Library.	42

List of illustrations

xi

11. Window pelmets. From *Cabinet Furniture: Designs and Catalogue of Cabinet and Upholstery Furniture*, by C. and R. Light, c. 1880. Courtesy of the V&A Picture Library. 44
12. Mustard Pot – “The Bitten Tongue.” Parian ware by Minton, 1847. Courtesy of the V&A Picture Library. 50
13. Augustus Leopold Egg, *Past and Present*, no. 1, 1856. Courtesy of the Tate Gallery, London: Art Resource, New York City. 52
14. Charles West Cope, RA (1811–90). *A Life Well Spent*. Signed with monogram and dated 1862. Photograph courtesy of the Christopher Wood Gallery, London. 54
15. William Morris, *Evenlode*, printed textile, 1883. Courtesy of the Whitworth Art Gallery, University of Manchester. 58
16. William Godwin, cabinet, 1877–80. Courtesy of the Trustees of the V&A. 61
17. Christopher Dresser, tea service, 1880. Courtesy of the V&A Picture Library. 62
18. Armchair, style of William Morris. Courtesy of the V&A Picture Library. 64
19. “Drawing-room chiffonier executed by Jackson & Graham from a design by Charles L. Eastlake.” From *Hints on Household Taste*, 1867. 65
20. Bamboo furniture, from C. and R. Light’s *New Illustrated Catalogue of General Furniture, Special Trade Price List*, c. 1890. Courtesy of the Trustees of the V&A. 66
21. Wallpaper commemorating Queen Victoria’s golden jubilee, c. 1887. Courtesy of the Trustees of the V&A. 68
22. Four wallpaper patterns designed for dado, filling, and frieze. From *Designs of furniture illustrative of cabinet furniture and interior decoration specially designed for James Shoolbred & Co., Tottenham Court Road*. 1876. Courtesy of the V&A Picture Library. 70
23. The Wollaston house, 24 College Road, Bristol. 1893. Courtesy of Bristol Central Library. 72
24. “Glen Roy” interior: drawing-room. West Midlands, Birmingham, Wake Green Road, Mosely, 1891. Royal Commission on the Historical Monuments of England (RCHME) Crown Copyright. 73
25. “Temperance and Intemperance in Curvature” by John Ruskin. From *The Stones of Venice*, figures 1–4 in vol. XI of *The Works of John Ruskin*. 87

26. Painted and gilded papier mâché tray, mid-century.
 Courtesy of the Trustees of the V&A. 112
27. Overmantels. From *Designs of furniture illustrative of cabinet
 furniture and interior decoration specially designed for James Shoolbred
 & Co., Tottenham Court Road*. 1876. Courtesy of the V&A
 Picture Library. 118
28. Page from a scrapbook. Courtesy of the V&A Picture Library. 125
29. Hiram Powers. *The Greek Slave*, 1846. Marble. In the collection
 of the Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington D.C. Gift of
 William Wilson Corcoran. 73.4. Courtesy of the Corcoran
 Gallery of Art. 130
30. Wall bracket. Illustration for *Hints on Household Taste* by
 Charles Eastlake, 1856. 136
31. Birdcages. From *S. Ramsey and Co., Merchant and manufacturers;
 Bird Cages and Wire Weavers*, 1885. Courtesy of the V&A
 Picture Library. 149
32. "Drawing of a Fernery." From *Rustic Adornments for Homes of
 Taste* by Shirley Hibbard, 1856. National Trust Photographic
 Library. 151
33. "Drawing of a River Tank containing Gold Carp, Roach and
 Minnow; Vallisneria spiralis, Arachanis alsinastrum and
 Floating Frog-bit." From *Rustic Adornments for Homes of Taste* by
 Shirley Hibbard, 1856. National Trust Photographic Library. 153
34. "Pets of the Aquarium." Plate III of *Links in the Chain* by
 George Kearnly, 1862. (7207) D9. By permission of the
 British Library. 156
35. Berlin work, mid-century. Courtesy of the V&A Picture
 Library. 169
36. Shell flower ornament *c.* 1870 (on display in the Victorian
 Period Room). Courtesy of the Museum of London. 171
37. Japanese-style plate, made in England *c.* 1885. Author's
 collection. 190
38. "The Old China Polka." Music sheet. Courtesy of the
 Trustees of the V&A. 191
39. Japanese fans. *Liberty's Miscellaneous Catalogue of Eastern and
 other Art Objects*. 1884. Courtesy of the V&A Picture Library. 192
40. Frederick Goodall. *A Letter from Papa*, 1855. Courtesy of the
 Tunbridge Wells Gallery. 221
41. William Nicol. *Quiet*, signed with initials and dated 1860.
 Burton Collection, York City Art Gallery. 222

Preface

In the Victorian era the home assumed extraordinary importance in life and in art. The doctrine of separate spheres and the development of consumer capitalism led to the establishment of the middle-class home as a privileged cultural space, a feminized space in which material things simultaneously asserted and concealed a relation to the marketplace. In the domestic interior, powerful (and contested) oppositions of male and female, public and private, self and other were being symbolically negotiated. The decorative complexity of the Victorian home mirrored the intensity of the issues being articulated around it. The parlour, in particular, was a site of collection and display comparable to the museum, department store, and trade fair. Women, insofar as they were primarily responsible for the decoration of houses, played a major role in managing, at a local level, the plenitude of things coming into being in the wake of industrialization and the emergence of a consumer economy. They were guided by an ever-increasing number of domestic manuals and periodicals, which helped to establish conventions governing the exercise of individual choices in domestic decoration, conventions which bore significant relations to contemporary aesthetic and moral debates. Indeed, Victorian cultural life is inseparable from the practices and products of domesticity, and the domestic interior is a site through which many aspects of that culture can be read. To study Victorian culture through an analysis of the parlour, to ask what such a room looked like, what it contained, and how it functioned within the system of the home and the larger social world, is to engage with the complex relations between materiality and ideology in a historically specific way. This book examines the middle-class Victorian parlour as a material artifact and as a subject of representation.

My work is grounded in the assumption that the artifacts of

middle-class domesticity deserve scholarly and critical scrutiny. Thanks largely to feminist research of the last two decades, we know a great deal about the discourse and practices of domesticity, but we know less about the look and feel of those homes which figure so prominently in theoretical constructions of Victorian culture. I have taken as my field of study one particular room within the domestic interior, and focused my attention on how architectural elements, furnishings, decorative features, and objects combine within this space to create a distinctive artifact which is more than the sum of its parts. Bringing that artifact into view has been the goal of this project since its inception. The Victorian parlour – extraordinarily rich in detail, situated in a central position within the theory and practice of Victorian culture – can be taken as a kind of synecdoche for that culture itself, a microcosm of the middle-class Victorian world, miniaturized, as if under glass.

I hope my text will be useful in several ways: as a contribution to work in various disciplines that centers on domestic experience, as a contextualizing of nineteenth-century discourse on decoration and design, as an intervention in studies of consumption and commodities, and as a source book for those curious about the setting or scene of everyday life in the Victorian era.

Chapter 1 examines how the parlour appears within the evolution of the English house, and situates the parlour in the context of daily life in the Victorian middle-class household. Chapter 2 considers the decoration of houses in terms of Victorian aesthetic theory, and analyzes decoration as a social practice. Chapter 3 develops an analysis of the parlour as an artifact characterized by the accumulation of objects, investigating in some detail what kinds of things were likely to be found in the parlour: the second section of this chapter looks at how contested ideas about nature and culture, mass production and handcrafts, and the foreign and the domestic were negotiated through material things. Chapter 4 considers representations of the parlour in Victorian fiction and painting, tracing the contours of a rhetoric of the interior as it is developed in the nineteenth-century novel, and moving to analyze space and gender in some Victorian paintings.

A few brief definitions may be in order. I have used the phrase *middle class* quite loosely to refer to those households whose income derived neither from rents and land nor from work as an artisan or factory operative, households in which wives and daughters did not

Preface

xv

work for pay, and which employed at least one servant. Obviously, this could include both well-to-do professionals and impecunious clerks: I have frequently used the plural term, *middle classes*, to indicate this range, and I have tried always to avoid aiming only at the upper income levels in my discussion. The term *Victorian* refers simply to the years 1837–1901, although important trends in design and developments in manufacturing began before and extended beyond these dates. My research is actually centered on a period from roughly the end of the 1830s to the end of the 1880s, since it is in these years that a characteristically Victorian style was being worked out, reformed, and disseminated. Some texts consider *Victorian* as a descriptive term for American as well as British interiors of the period, but my own study looks only at the latter. Since domestic interiors are profoundly imbricated in a particular historical experience, working with American parlours would have committed me to a study of American cultural and social history that I was not prepared to undertake. The American parlour, moreover, although it does develop in some different ways, cannot be adequately understood without a knowledge of the British parlour, since nineteenth-century Americans still were heavily dependent on British cultural authority in the realms of design and decoration. The term *parlour* is best defined by considering both the etymology of the word and the history of the English house, which I do in chapter 1. For my purposes, there is no significant distinction between parlour and drawing-room.

A guiding principle in the construction of this study has been that it must be grounded in historical facts about the decorative arts of the period. Without the work of historians in this field, my project would have been impossible: I am deeply indebted to those whose scholarship has been central to this project. First mention must go to Peter Thornton, whose *Authentic Decor: the Domestic Interior 1620–1920* is an indispensable guide. More specialized studies of Victorian interiors have also been essential to this project, particularly *Victorian Interior Design* by Joanna Banham, Sally Macdonald, and Julia Porter, and *Nineteenth-Century Decoration: the Art of the Interior* by Charlotte Gere. Moreover, books by Beatrice Howe (*Antiques from the Victorian Home*) and Frances Lichten (*Decorative Art of Victoria's Era*) have been my constant companions throughout this journey into the flora and fauna of the parlour. This book cannot and does not attempt to replicate the work of specialists in the field of decorative arts: what it

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Frontmatter
[More information](#)

xvi

Preface

offers is a synthesizing vision focused on one particular and complex artifact, the Victorian parlour.

Finally, I want to acknowledge the contributions of colleagues, friends, and family. In the Department of English at Rice University, “Eminent Victorianists” Helena Michie and Robert L. Patten read the manuscript at various stages, as did William Bowman Piper: it is no exaggeration to say that without their continuing support and encouragement, this book would not have been completed. I am also grateful to Robert Wilson and George Marchi for teaching me to go out on a limb, to Judith Burnett, John Bouchard and Marsha Recknagel for believing in me, and to Cynthia Macdonald for listening. Thanks go as well to members of the *Nineteenth-Century Enquiry* group at Rice, to Colleen Lamos, to Anna Louise Penner for her intelligent and careful illustration research, to Theresa Munisteri for her incomparable editing, and to Linda Bree at Cambridge University Press for her encouragement, patience, and acuity. Finally, Eric and Helen Lueders have made everything worthwhile, and I thank them for being so funny and so true.

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