



American Interior Design: How a New American Sense of Style Changed Class Relations

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Introduction

In 1899, University of Chicago economist and sociologist Thorstein Veblen published his landmark work *The Theory of the Leisure Class*. With the tumultuous and sudden rise of retail mass consumerism and a new middle-class in America, Veblen was the first of many scholars attempting to make sense of the radical change in consumption patterns that took place in America from 1870 to 1914. Macy's, Wanamaker's, Lord & Taylor, Marshall Fields, and other major department stores introduced the American middle-class to a material world that many had never seen or experienced before, let alone been able to purchase.¹ To Veblen and other early observers

of this economic revolution, the advent of this new pattern of consumption represented a shift in the utility of purchased items. No longer were consumer goods simply useful in their practical utility in the home; the new value of purchased goods was found in what Pierre Bourdieu would later call their 'social capital.'² Consumer goods provided a means from which the non-elite classes, particularly the middle-class, could obtain social standing through displaying certain items of luxury and opulence. Fine china, finely crafted silverware, and other household trinkets became the envy of every class. Families bought more and more frivolous items in competition for a social standing near that of the "leisure class," a standing that

1 Jan Whitaker, *Service and Style* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2006), 31.

2 Pierre Bourdieu, *Practical Reason: On the Theory of Action* (Stanford: The Stanford University Press, 1998), 102.

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they could not possibly achieve. Veblen termed this new attitude towards purchasing goods “conspicuous consumption.”³

Since the introduction of Veblen’s theory, the idea of conspicuous consumption has been verified and embraced time and time again by historians looking for a means to understand the dynamic explosion in retail consumption that started in the 1870s and continued until the beginning of World War I. Historiography up to the late-20th century criticized conspicuous consumption as an elitist movement that promoted unattainable, ostentatious standards of living in an attempt to keep the non-Elite classes out of the social world of upper crust Americans.⁴ Modern historians did not branch out far from these earlier ideas. Historian Sven Beckert described conspicuous consumption as a tool used by the elite to define class lines through the acquisition of certain ‘necessary’ goods.⁵ William Leach in *Land of Desire* saw conspicuous consumption as a means of participating in a new conception of democracy based on the equal access of goods for all, but that not all could afford.⁶ Regardless of the conclusions drawn by individual historians, points of view on conspicuous consumption have followed several common threads, the most significant thread being the class dividing nature of unnecessary consuming.

The negative reputation of conspicuous consumption as a class dividing practice is all together not too surprising. A cyclical process of frivolous consumption in an attempt to gain social standing would naturally place those with more financial resources on the top of the social ladder. However, the view that class divisions arise from the social consumption of goods may be misplaced. Underlying historical analyses of fin de siècle consumer America is a presupposition that conspicuous consumption followed an extravagant style where greater quantity and quality were always desired. Leach defends the luxurious style dominating consumption by looking at the world of opulent displays and dazzling advertisements set up by department stores of the time period. In creating a consumer world far beyond the means of all but the wealthiest of Americans, the new retail giants were playing to tensions in class differences in an attempt to sell more ostentatious and unnecessary items.⁷ Other historians pinpoint evidence of opulent consumption in the Parisian fashions that dominated women’s clothing or the kleptomania craze that swept a nation of middle-class wives looking to gain social recognition through

stolen beauty items.⁸

In the process, historians have insufficiently examined the actual place where consumer goods are displayed – the home. Advertisers and retailers pushed to sell a certain sense of style that they thought was most profitable, but housewives, who acted as the primary consumers for the family, did not always follow these trends. Initially the new emerging middle-class housewives modeled their homes after those advertised by department stores and used by the American elite class. However, images of public areas in American homes during this time illustrate interior design styles very different from the extravagant fashions advertised. This occurred as housewives began to share their ideas through both word of mouth and women’s publications. Consequently, interior design changed from the opulent European model to a new ‘middle-class’ style based on principles that most middle and upper class Americans could follow. Simplicity, harmony, and utility were the core qualities every housewife, from both the middle- and upper-class, wanted in her house. From this new style in the home driven by consumer savvy housewives a redefinition of the effects of conspicuous consumption is in order. Tenable principles of style molded by the housewives acted as a mediatory force to the egregious standards of luxury displayed by the retailers. In so doing, conspicuous consumption blurred the lines between the Elite and middle-classes through the creation of a uniquely American style that catered to both groups.

Interior Design of the Elite Class:

Early Ideas of Interior Style

During the early years of middle-class consumerism, interior design was not the class-unifying, American sense of style described above. Initially, the home décor of those who had access to a wide range of home furnishings mimicked, to use Veblen’s own word, the “ostentation” of the Elite.⁹ During the post-bellum years of America when mass manufacturing was just starting to kick off, elites dictated what was fashionable and what was not. Edith Wharton in her design manual *The Decoration of Houses* commented on how “the bourgeois of one generation lives more like the aristocrats of a previous generation... and it is for this reason that the origin of modern house-planning should be sought rather in the prince’s mezzanine than in the small middle-class dwelling.”¹⁰ The newly emerging middle-class looked to the Elite to guide them to the newly opened world of interior design, particularly those public rooms of the home used to entertain and host guests: the parlor and dining room. In doing so, the extravagance that

3 Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1899), 75.

4 Andrew Tully, *Era of Elegance* (New York: Funk & Wagnalls Company, 1947), 13.

5 Sven Beckert, *Monied Metropolis: New York City and the Consolidation of the American Bourgeoisie* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 273.

6 William Leach, *Land of Desire: Merchants, Power, and the Rise of a New American Culture* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), 347.

7 Leach, *Land of Desire*, 90.

8 Elaine Abelson, *When Ladies Go A-Thieving* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 37.

9 In describing the styles of early American consumerism as a form of “ostentation,” Veblen was differentiating between the “useful purpose” of an object and the value given to it for the maximum possible purpose of decoration and display. Veblen, *Theory of the Leisure Class*, 69.

10 Edith Wharton and Ogden Codman Jr, *The Decoration of Houses* (New York: C. Scribner’s Sons, 1897), 7.

the American Elite had borrowed from Europe's aristocrats and the class-dividing conspicuous consumption that came with it became the style à la mode.

Parlors became the definitive focal point of consumer style in the post-bellum American home. As early as the 1850s, "the spread of parlor culture" put parlors into any house that could afford one.¹¹ Taken from the European tradition of the *salon de famille* and the *salon de campagne*, it was the center of public life, a room only to be opened on Sundays after church, holidays, or when host to special guests.¹² Regular family activities were kept in other rooms of the house in fear of ruining the cleanliness and delicate nature of the room, which was kept at the ready for any unexpected important visitors.¹³ With the sole exception of wives looking for sporadic refuge in the dimly lit enclosure, entrance to the parlor was strictly off limits, especially to the children who would be lucky to gain entrance more than a few times a year.¹⁴ Consequent to the parlor being *the* public room of the house, no costs were spared in decorating it with the largest quantity of the finest items each family could buy. An 1883 article from *The Decorator and Furnisher* noted, "the most popular view of a parlor is as a shrine into which is placed all that is most precious... this is really the most sensible view to take."¹⁵ Brass candelabras, glass dancer figurines and vases, carpeting, painted arras, silver tea sets, and a gilded china basket of violets are just some of the items listed in one interior design manual from 1882.¹⁶ The items that belonged in the parlor were not to be used; they were only to be displayed and adorned. Writers on interior design, recognizing the disuse of such a well-furnished room, went as far as calling it awesome, venerable, solemn, and even sacred in its limited use.¹⁷

As one might expect the elaborate decorations and sanctity of the parlor were also a source of great dread to any housewife. Housewives fretted over the possible unspoken judgment that guests made upon entering the parlor of their home. As one 1886 article from *Harper's Bazaar* put it, "your parlor is an expression of the high and low degree of art which your mind has reached."¹⁸ The extravagant nature of the parlor inevitably led to bitter class divisions on the basis of proper decoration and arrangement. An article by Mrs. E. B. Duffey in 1875 explained how families built parlors that were knowingly ugly, but they did so as a "result of necessity,"

in defense of their social standing. She finishes by criticizing the "parlor, considered as models of respectability by people of limited means."¹⁹ Mrs. Duffey was by no means alone in her lambasting of the opulent parlor that very few could afford to build, let alone furnish, properly. However, despite the inability of many to afford one, numerous parlors were built at very high expenses. The class divisions during this period ran deep even among people who could afford parlors. Interior design magazines took great pains in differentiating between the 'cozy' parlors of the countryside and apartments, and the 'brilliant' parlors of the Elite's houses.²⁰

The over-the-top affluence that dominated the interior décor of the parlor could also be seen in the other major public room of the house, the dining room. In conjunction with the parlor, whose sole purpose was that of the entertainment of guests, the dining room commanded the public sphere of the home. So important was this room where formal dinners and get-togethers took place that many called for luxurious decoration beyond even that of the parlor. A *Harper's Bazaar* article dating from March 1877 called on any suggestions of poverty to be eliminated from the dining room, stating, "if it is possible to have but one sumptuous room... the dining-room should be that one sumptuous one."²¹ In looking at the fashion suggested for dining rooms, Wharton and other early interior designers of the period suggested looking to the "grand French houses of the eighteenth century and to the same class of dwellings in England," when looking into how to decorate.²² Sure enough, much of the argument among early designers came along the lines of whether to follow the English-style of solemn grace or the French-style of jovial gaiety.²³ Paintings portraying light scenes, hardwood chairs and tables, finely crafted curtains, silverware, and an array of glass and china were all considered 'must haves' in putting together even the most modest dining rooms.²⁴ Agnes Bailey Ormsbee in an 1891 article accurately described the nature of many of the objects in the dining room as adding "largely to the comfort and tastefulness of the dining-room."²⁵

Needless to say, the dining room created equal amounts of class tension among the middle- and upper-classes through the high levels of décor expected. Unlike the parlor, most American families had some sort of area designated for dining within their households, so it is not surprising that so much stress was placed on decoration. The use of the dining room space and the items in it acted as one of the largest

11 Richard L. Bushman, *The Refinement of America: Persons, Houses, Cities* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1992), 273.

12 Wharton, *Decoration of Houses*, 126.

13 Mary Gay Humphreys, "The Parlor," *The Decorator and Furnisher*, May 1883, 52.

14 "Are Parlors Useless?" *Boston Daily Globe*, March 29, 1877, 4.

15 Humphreys, "The Parlor," 52.

16 T.W. Dewing, *Beauty in the Household* (New York: Harper & Brothers, Franklin Square, 1882), 117.

17 Caroline Benedict Burrell, "The Decline and Fall of the Parlor," *Congregationalist and Christian World*, November 1, 1902, 622.

18 "Modest House Decoration," *Harper's Bazaar*, May 22, 1886, 1.

19 Mrs. E. B. Duffey, "Will You Walk Into My Parlor?" *Arthur's Illustrated Home Magazine*, June 1875, 386.

20 Dewing, *Beauty in the Household*, 121.

21 "Household Furnishings: The Dining-Room," *Harper's Bazaar*, March 24, 1877, 178.

22 Wharton, *Decoration of Houses*, 159.

23 Dewing, *Beauty in the Household*, 54.

24 *Ibid.*, 62.

25 Agnes Bailey Ormsbee, "The House Comfortable: The Dining-Room," *Harper's Bazaar*, September 5, 1891, 679.

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differentiations among the elite classes and the lower classes. In accord with the European tradition of the dining hall, the use of the room was very specific. The grand state dining rooms of Europe, used as the ideal model of what a dining room should look like, were far beyond the means of most middle-class Americans.²⁶ In fact, many Americans combined the dining space of the house with the library, den, and parlor, among other things.²⁷ Items such as bookshelves and extra seating were strongly looked down on as moving away from the contented atmosphere of the eating-place.²⁸ Smaller points of departure between the classes came from the quality of the goods used and the various accessories considered essential to the décor. The table and chairs of the dining room, while obviously being essential in nature, were expected to be of hardwood, and the older the furniture the better. The extension-table, a smaller table with a central support and attachable extensions on the sides, was, as Wharton put it, “ingenious but ugly... never [as] satisfactory to the eye as one of the old round or square tables, with four or six tapering legs such as were used in eighteenth-century dining-rooms.”²⁹ China plates, silverware, and glassware also played prominently in dividing the classes. In *Beauty in the Household*, Mrs. T.W. Dewing described the necessity of portraits, flowers, china, glass and silverware at any dinner table. The joyous and festive tone of the room leads her to suggest, “indeed, were we making a dining-room regardless of expense, the ornate style of the Renaissance would seem to us to add joyousness.”³⁰

Based on the class divisions that arose from these design trends, one could conclude that during this time period the retail consumerism of America followed Veblen’s idea of ‘conspicuous consumption’ to the letter. The middle-class, in an attempt to gain social standing, plodded along with the extravagant style already set out by the Elite class and found itself unable to meet the same standard. In Veblen’s own words, “but the derivative fact – the vicarious leisure and consumption rendered by the wide... remained in vogue as a conventionality which the demands of reputability will not suffer to be slighted.”³¹ In the race by the middle-class for a high place on the societal ladder, the class dividing consumption that was already in place before the rise of mass consumerism took hold early on.

Interior Design of the Middle-Class: An American Interior Style

Yet this ostentatious style of design was not to last long. As early as the 1870s, middle-class criticism of the glitzy fashions displayed by the elite began to surface. Spearheading the movement were women’s magazines and design books, which benefited from large circulations that rapidly broadened readership beyond elite families.³² An 1878 interior design manual titled *The House Beautiful* began its section on the living room by firmly declaring its “use of the word ‘living-room’ instead of ‘Parlor,’ because... as these chapters are not written for rich people’s reading, and as none but rich people can afford to have a room in their house set apart for the pleasures of idleness.”³³ A. B. Ramsey in an article for *The Ladies’ Home Journal and Practical Housekeeper* asserted, “what every parlor needs is to be used – carefully, and somewhat formally if you will – but still *used*, each and every day.”³⁴ Early challenges such as these were only the beginning of radical changes in the consumer fashions of the country soon to come, and the center of it all was the housewife. As wives began to realize the unreasonable nature of many of the elite interior design practices, they also began to develop new principles that would come to redefine what was culturally acceptable. In the process of this grassroots development, championed by the women of the home, would come a new American sense of fashion that blended both the ostentatious fashions of the 1800s with the utilitarian, harmonic, and simple style of the early 1900s.

In 1896, Candace Wheeler wrote a magazine article for *Outlook* detailing a luncheon conversation with several other housewives in which they discussed home decoration. Wheeler asserts, “the principles of interior design [were]... Individuality; Appropriateness; Harmony... Intelligent Application.”³⁵ This fashion, based on certain core principles conveniently outlined here by Wheeler, was the newly emerging middle-class fashion that rose up to challenge existing lavish styles rooted in elite culture. The new principles were by no means Wheeler’s creation, but it was women such as her in writing for publications such as *Outlook* that spread this burgeoning fashion beyond the home. Possibly even more audacious a claim than the challenging of traditional décor was Wheeler’s challenge of expense. In calling for an interior design style with appropriateness, she meant, “not only appropriateness to place and use, but to means. Nothing can be satisfactorily beautiful which implies a strain of the resources – anything

26 Wharton, *Decoration of Houses*, 159.

27 “The Art of Furnishing: The Dining-Room,” *The Art Amateur; A Monthly Journal Devoted to Art in the Household*, August 1880, 62.

28 Hope Myddleton, “The Decoration of Our Homes: The Dining-Room,” *The Art Amateur; A Monthly Journal Devoted to Art in the Household*, February 1886, 64.

29 Wharton, *Decoration of Houses*, 164.

30 Dewing, *Beauty in the Household*, 55.

31 Veblen, *Theory of the Leisure Class*, 81.

32 Mary Ellen Waller-Zuckerman, “Old Homes, in a City of Perpetual Change: Women’s Magazines, 1890-1916,” *Business History Review* 63 (1989): 716.

33 Clarence Cook, *The House Beautiful: Essays on Beds and Tables, Stools and Candlesticks* (New York: Scribner, Armstrong & Co., 1878), 45.

34 A. R. Ramsey, “Interior Decoration: The Parlor,” *The Ladies’ Home Journal and Practical Housekeeper*, August 1888, 9.

35 Candace Wheeler, “The Principles of Decoration,” *Outlook* 53, 1896, 284.

which throws the life out of gear.”³⁶ The new middle-class style not only attacked the idea of beauty that was extolled in the old fashion, but attacked the core problem many had with the then current idea of style in general: its price.

Despite the early protests of housewives, the new ‘principles’ of interior design championed in the home did not gain solid ground immediately. In a field heavily dictated by history and fine culture, these new ideas of decoration struggled to find educated supporters. When noted Yale Professor Edward E. Salisbury delivered his 1887 address *Principles of Domestic Taste*, in which he championed harmonious furnishings of the home based on personal ideals and taste, his ideas were received with skepticism, but seen as intriguing nevertheless.³⁷ In asking women to place their own culture first and to allow home art to “grow from within outward,” Professor Salisbury was asking housewives to forge ahead towards a uniquely American domestic life.³⁸ It was not until around 1910 or so that these ‘principles’ took on a wider popular role, widely influencing fashion trends for middle and upper classes alike. First and foremost, these new principles of decoration had a massive effect on interior décor within the public spaces that had been so tantamount earlier in the century. The role and fashion of the parlor and the dining room were significantly altered in the almost half-century since the principles came into being; the changes attacked the old institutions to a degree never before imaginable.

The parlor, which had earlier been the center of all public life within the home, found its final death stroke with the arrival of these ideals that championed utility and simplicity over extravagant superfluosity. However, as previously mentioned, this change did not happen instantaneously, but gradually as the ideas fostered by the housewives gained popularity. The first quality of the parlor challenged by the housewives was its utility. In 1872, the *Ohio Farmer* shared the following sentiment: “I confess to liking a homely parlor – one that looks as if it were used.”³⁹ A.B. Ramsey also reiterated the demand for use of the parlor in writing for the *Ladies’ Home Journal*, as did a plethora of other interior design writers looking to redefine the dreaded room of public affairs.⁴⁰ Calls for tarnished brass, worn-out chairs, and the elimination of excessive wall hangings were just some of the earlier changes made to the parlor in an attempt to make more use of them. Many designers and homemakers continued to champion the idea of the parlor well into the early 1900s, but it was far too late for the antiquated space. The movement to make parlors

more and more usable led to a desire for more space. Parlors were emptied of the trinkets and knickknacks that once adorned the shelves and what was left were a few choice pieces of furniture and decoration that ‘harmonized’ well.⁴¹ No longer was the idea to cover every space with a large quantity of the most quality items. The key to interior décor in the parlor was balancing simple and elegant elements together to achieve that homely feel as described by the *Ohio Farmer*.⁴²

The harmony of the room and the simplification of decoration, though, was not enough to save the parlor. Even with space freed up within the parlor, the new middle-class sense of taste desiring a combination of utility, simplicity, and personality could not be satisfied any longer with concessions to the original model. To the housewives of America the parlor became the room of ‘grandmothers’ symbolizing a style far out of date with modern necessity.⁴³ It became, according to the *Ohio Farmer*, so “hearse like... that my very blood chilled at their uninviting upholstery stiffness.”⁴⁴ The impersonal, small, and cluttered rooms that represented the parlor filled with small goods of little utility except for the utility of display disappeared from the home as a singular public space. To fill in the need left behind by the parlor, the homely, spacious, and utilitarian living room came in to replace it. As Caroline Burrell described it, the living room was “one large room which is to take the place of a parlor, sitting-room and library. Often... even larger, so there may be opportunity for several groups of people to engage in different pursuits in it at the same time with some degree of privacy.”⁴⁵ The parlor, with its clear specificity in function and impersonal feel, could not compete with the living room’s “general service, unique in usefulness, its realization a continuous source of delight.”⁴⁶

Despite this growing sentiment, some more traditional housewives and interior decorators continued to defend the idea of the parlor. One defender of the parlor, writing in the editor’s column of *Atlantic Monthly* in 1903, stressed the sanctity of the parlor as a means of keeping the public and private spheres of life separate from each other: “Here in the sitting-room we have a divine right to be *we*; but you, the outsider? No, I am old-fashioned, I had rather there were a parlor for you – stay there!”⁴⁷ Efforts to bring back the parlor, though, were met with limited success. By 1900, all but a few interior design catalogues included the parlor in its description of rooms and those that did usually only did so to explain its sudden decline.

36 Wheeler, “Principles of Decoration,” 285.

37 Prof. Edward E. Salisbury, “Principles of Domestic Taste: A Lecture Delivered in the Yale School of the Fine Arts,” *New Englander*, April 1877, 310; “Harmony in Home Decoration,” *National Repository, Devoted to General and Religious Literature, Criticism, ...*, October 1877, 370.

38 Salisbury, “Principles of Domestic Taste,” 326.

39 “Parlors,” *Ohio Farmer*, February 17, 1872, 106.

40 A. R. Ramsey, “Interior Decoration: The Parlor,” 10.

41 Miss Helen A. Hawley, “The Reformation of the Parlor,” *New York Observer and Chronicle*, January 28, 1909, 9.

42 “Parlors,” *Ohio Farmer*, February 17, 1872, 107.

43 Eugene Wood, “The Parlor Back Home,” *McClure’s Magazine*, September 1909, 475.

44 “Parlors,” *Ohio Farmer*, February 17, 1872, 106.

45 Caroline Benedict Burrell, “The Decline and Fall of the Parlor,” 623.

46 Alice M. Kellogg, *Home Furnishing: Practical and Artistic* (New York: Frederick A. Stokes Co., 1905), 31.

47 “The Contributor’s Club: The Passing of the Parlor,” *Atlantic Monthly*, 1903, 712.

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Furthermore, design manuals focused less on detailing the exact type of plush curtains and silver plates to buy, and focused more on developing, in the words of interior designer Fred Daniels, “for those who have sense and feeling... [a] good taste in the home.”⁴⁸ The combination of harmony, simplicity, utility, and personality redefined American interior design and style. In tandem with the development of these principles also came the devaluation of price as essential to creating a properly decorated household. Elsie de Wolfe in her décor manual *The Household in Good Taste*, stressed that “it [was] much more important that wall openings, windows, doors and fireplaces should be in the right place... than that there should be expensive and extravagant hangings and carpets.”⁴⁹ While in the past a certain price was always required when looking to decorate a room, the new principles of interior design stressed balance over quantity and quality. Eugene Wood in the September 1909 volume of *McClure’s Magazine* summed up the final sentiment on the ostentatious parlor room quite nicely when he said, “the old-time aristocratic, idle, useless Parlor went because it was more bother than it was good... I never could see that the idling-place about a house had any better right to be prettier than the working-place about the house.”⁵⁰

Much like the parlor, the dining room eventually transitioned from being a public center of glamorous decoration and intricate tableware into a more personal and family-oriented area where decorations were important mostly for their usefulness to the room. However, the dining hall’s transformation with the rise of this new middle-class style could be considered even more striking than that of the parlor room. China, silverware, brass, and glassware stayed the norm through this time period, but the quality and quantity of tableware that was socially acceptable shifted dramatically from a style where the highest quality and quantity was desired to a style where uniformity and the balancing of colors and forms took precedence and was socially praised regardless of price and luxury.⁵¹ In following this new middle-class style, dining rooms were decorated with furniture that served function without deviating far into the intricate European designs called on by earlier designers. An article in *The Craftsman* detailing the development of American interior décor style of home furnishing noted, “in order to achieve real distinction and beauty in American home furnishings, we must approach the undertaking from the standpoint of elimination, or judicious selection of objects, textures and color harmonies.”⁵² The

simplicity of the furniture applied equally to the decorations that hung against the walls, as Elsie de Wolfe stated, “but one thing you must have: simplicity... the easiest way to destroy this simplicity is to litter the room with displays of silver and glass... [but] let your walls take care of themselves and to put away your silver and china and glass, the room will be as dignified as you could wish.”⁵³ This shift to the more simple, harmonic, and utilitarian design mirrored the dining rooms shift from a mainly public space to one focused on the family. In Abbot McClure’s *House Furnishing and Decoration* the newly focused significance of the dining room is stressed as it is “in the dining-room [that] we perform pass much of our time, and time we spend there should embrace many of our pleasantest hours, for though family table talk cannot be expected to... [be] uninterrupted... it ought at least to be lively, good-natured and as constant as possible.”⁵⁴

The rise of a new middle-class driven interior design style based on certain key principles of good taste and sense, affected interior design drastically as seen through the significant change brought on the public and decorated rooms in the house, the parlor and dining room. Simplicity, harmony, personality, and affordability changed American interior design style starting with the middle-class and then moving slowly towards the Elite. The effort of the middle-class facilitated a class-consciousness among them that spurred on this new push in style. With the support of intellectuals such as Professor Edward E. Salisbury of Yale University and University of Pennsylvania economist Simon N. Patten, who called for the rejection of European extravagance in favor of American cheap and cultivated pleasures, the newly emerging middle-class style gained an intellectual defense based on harmonious ideals of the home.⁵⁵ The combined support of women’s publications, a few upper echelon social circles within academia, and the business elite facilitated a unification of style between the classes. Finally, the crossover of the grass-roots interior design into the upper crust of American society was completed through the adoption of these middle-class principles of decoration style by the major interior decorators of the time period. The middle-class consciousness that challenged class divisions succeeded. In successfully spreading this new principles-based style, the middle-class consciousness became the conscious of the whole, both of the middle-class and the elite. In finding a unified style to follow, the middle and upper class were able to bridge the divisions of the early consumer era, and blurred class lines from the early nineteenth century through the cultural acceptance of a wider range of the American populous by way of interior design.

48 Fred Hamilton Daniels, *The Furnishing of a Modest Home* (Worcester: The David Press, 1908), 12.

49 Elsie De Wolfe, *The House in Good Taste* (New York: The Century Co., 1913), 17.

50 Wood, “The Parlor Back Home,” 482.

51 Mrs. Julian Hawthorne, “Cheapness, Comfort, and Luxury: Dining-Rooms,” *Harper’s Bazaar*, May 22, 1875, 338.

52 “The Development of an American Style of Home Furnishing Founded upon Beauty, Comfort and Simplicity,” *The Craftsman*, 1914, 70.

53 De Wolfe, *House in Good Taste*, 176.

54 Abbot McClure and Harold Donaldson Eberlein, *House Furnishing and Decoration* (New York: Robert M. McBride & Co., 1916), 113.

55 Simon N. Patten, *The Consumption of Wealth* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1889), 36.

Conclusion

In analyzing a new form of fashion that both adhered to the cultural consumption of goods but delineated a means other than quantity or quality to determine the effect of these goods on social rank, Veblen's theory of conspicuous consumption is both verified and challenged. Using the *décor* style created by the middle-class housewives, class lines were bridged in a way that Veblen's initial theory and that of many modern economic historians did not account for. The 'inconspicuous consumption' outlined by such a style would alter the negative class effects usually presented in discussions of mass consumerism in America. The ostentatious luxuriousness of the early years of consumerism would continue to be championed by the department stores of the age, particularly those catering to a higher-class audience such as Wanamaker's or Marshall Fields. The efforts of the retail industry to propagate class fission via elitist consumption could even be seen as the retail giants' response to the attack towards maximum consumption presented by middle-class style. However, the influence of the grass-roots housewives' style became a mainstay focus of the emerging 'American' style and acted as a mediator to the 'buy more' ideology impressed by the department stores.

As to why middle-class women were able to rally together under this common cause of home design, that question proves too large to answer in the scope of this paper but there are certainly clues that can help point the way. The commanding control late-nineteenth century housewives had on literacy certainly played an important role. The early explosion of women's magazines decades before their rise in the mainstream media might have given women a focused voice of opinion that consumer corporations were unsure how to deal with.⁵⁶ Another possible reason for the quick structuring of design principles could have been the great pressure women suddenly faced to be aware and vigilant of on-going trends, especially if they could benefit their family. In turning women into full-time shoppers, department stores might also have inadvertently created full-time trendsetters. What we know for certain, however, is that middle-class style would continue to evolve in tandem with the ostentatious style of the old Elite and the department stores as both styles tried to gain the upper hand. The ebb-and-flow between the two competing interior fashions generated a new uniquely American style. Increased consumption softened by principles of taste propelled retail consumption forward into the twentieth century, while creating a cultural cohesion based on tenable principles of taste. In so doing, a cultural permeability brought the upper- and middle-classes closer together and began what would become strong ties between the two groups in the decades to come.

56 Waller-Zuckerman, "Old Homes, in a City of Perpetual Change," 756.

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