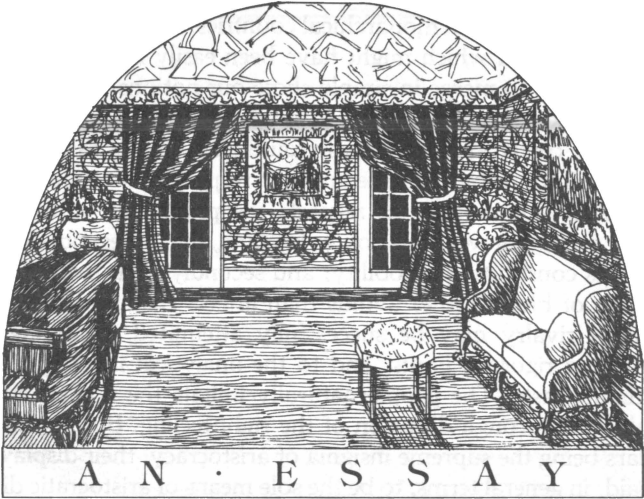


THE PHILOSOPHY OF FURNITURE



PHILOSOPHY," SAYS HEGEL, "is utterly useless and fruitless, and, for this very reason, is the sublimest of all pursuits, the most deserving of our attention, and the most worthy of our zeal"—a somewhat Coleridgey assertion, with a rivulet of deep meaning in a meadow of words. It would be wasting time to disentangle the paradox—and the more so as no one will deny that Philosophy has its merits, and is applicable to an infinity of purposes. There is reason, it is said, in the roasting of eggs, and there is philosophy even in furniture—a philosophy nevertheless which seems to be more imperfectly understood by Americans than by any civilized nation upon the face of the earth.

In the internal decoration, if not in the external architecture of their residences, the English are supreme. The Italians have but little sentiment beyond marbles and colors. In France, *meliora probant, deteriora sequuntur* [they approve the best; the worst is followed]—the people are too much a race of gad-about to study and maintain those household proprieties of which, indeed, they have a delicate appreciation, or at least the elements of a proper sense. The Chinese and most of the eastern races have a warm but

inappropriate fancy. The Scotch are *poor* decorists. The Dutch have merely a vague idea that a curtain is not a cabbage. In Spain they are *all* curtains—a nation of *hangmen*. The Russians do not furnish. The Hottentots and Kickapoos are very well in their way. The Yankees alone are preposterous.

How this happens, it is not difficult to see. We have no aristocracy of blood, and having therefore as a natural, and indeed as an inevitable thing, fashioned for ourselves an aristocracy of dollars, the *display of wealth* has here to take the place and perform the office of the heraldic display in monarchical countries. By a transition readily understood, and which might have been easily foreseen, we have been brought to merge in simple *show* our notions of taste itself.

To speak less abstractedly. In England, for example, no mere parade of costly appurtenances would be so likely as with us, to create an impression of the beautiful in respect to the appurtenances themselves—or of taste as respects the proprietor:—this for the reason, first, that wealth is not, in England, the loftiest object of ambition as constituting a nobility; and secondly, that there, the true nobility of blood rather avoids than affects costliness in which a parvenu rivalry may be successfully attempted, confining itself within the rigorous limits, and to the analytical investigation, of legitimate taste. The people naturally imitate the nobles, and the result is a thorough diffusion of the right feeling. But in America, dollars being the supreme insignia of aristocracy, their display may be said, in general terms, to be the sole means of aristocratic distinction; and the populace, looking up for models, are insensibly led to confound the two entirely separate ideas of magnificence and beauty. In short, the cost of an article of furniture has at length come to be, with us, nearly the sole test of its merit in a decorative point of view—and this test, once established, has led the way to many analogous errors, readily traceable to the one primitive folly.

There could be scarcely any thing more directly offensive to the eye of an artist than the interior of what is termed in the United States, a well-furnished apartment. Its most usual defect is a preposterous want of keeping. We speak of the keeping of a room as we would of the keeping of a picture—for both the picture and the room are amenable to those undeviating principles which regulate all varieties of art; and very nearly the same laws by which we decide upon the higher merits of a painting, suffice for a decision upon the adjustment of a chamber.

A want of keeping is observable sometimes in the character of the several pieces of furniture, but generally in their colors or modes of adaptation to use. Very often the eye is offended by their inartistical arrangement. Straight lines are too prevalent—too uninterruptedly

continued—or clumsily interrupted at right angles. If curved lines occur, they are repeated into unpleasant uniformity. Undue precision spoils the appearance of many a room.

Curtains are rarely well disposed, or well chosen in respect to the other decorations. With formal furniture, curtains are out of place; and an excessive volume of drapery of any kind is, under any circumstances, irreconcilable with good taste—the proper quantum, as well as the proper adjustment, depends upon the character of the general effect.

Carpets are better understood of late than of ancient days, but we still very frequently err in their patterns and colors. A carpet is the soul of an apartment. From it are deduced not only the hues but the forms of all objects incumbent. A judge at common law *may be* an ordinary man; a good judge of carpet *must be* a genius. Yet I have heard fellows discourse of carpets, with the visage of a sheep in a reverie—“*d'un mouton qui rêve,*” who should not and who could not be entrusted with the management of their own mustachios. Every one knows that a large floor should have a covering of large figures, and a small one of small—yet this is not all the knowledge in the world. As regards texture, the Saxony is alone admissible. Brussels is the preterpluperfect tense of fashion, and Turkey is taste in its dying agonies. Touching pattern—a carpet should *not* be bedizzened out like a Riccaree Indian—all red chalk, yellow ochre, and cock's feathers. In brief—distinct grounds, and vivid circular figures, *of no meaning*, are here Median laws. The abomination of flowers, or representations of well-known objects of any kind, should never be endured within the limits of Christendom. Indeed, whether on carpets, or curtains, or paper-hangings, or ottoman coverings, all upholstery of this nature should be rigidly Arabesque. Those antique floor-cloths which are still seen occasionally in the dwellings of the rabble—cloths of huge, sprawling, and radiating devices, stripe-interspersed, and glorious with all hues, among which no ground is intelligible—are but the wicked invention of a race of time-servers and money-lovers—children of Baal and worshippers of Mammon—men, who, to save trouble of thought and exercise of fancy, first cruelly invented the Kaleidoscope, and then established a patent company to twirl it by steam.

Glare is a leading error in the philosophy of American household decoration—an error easily recognised as deduced from the perversion of taste just specified. We are violently enamored of gas and glass. The former is totally inadmissible within doors. Its harsh and unsteady light is positively offensive. No man having both brains and eyes will use it. A mild, or what artists term a cool light, with its consequent warm shadows, will do wonders for even an ill-

furnished apartment. Never was a more lovely thought than that of the astral lamp. I mean, of course, the astral lamp proper, and do not wish to be misunderstood—the lamp of Argand, with its original plain ground-glass shade, and its tempered and uniform moonlight rays. The cut-glass shade is a weak invention of the enemy. The eagerness with which we have adopted it, partly on account of its *flashiness*, but principally on account of its *greater cost*, is a good commentary upon the proposition with which I began. It is not too much to say, that the deliberate employer of a cut-glass shade, is a person either radically deficient in taste, or blindly subservient to the caprices of fashion. The light proceeding from one of these gaudy abominations is unequal, broken, and painful. It alone is sufficient to mar a world of good effect in the furniture subjected to its influence. Female loveliness, in especial, is more than one-half disenchanted beneath its evil eye.

In the matter of glass, generally, we proceed upon false principles. Its leading feature is *glitter*—and in that one word how much of all that is detestable do we express! Flickering, unquiet lights, are *sometimes* pleasing—to children and idiots always so—but in the embellishment of a room they should be scrupulously avoided. In truth, even strong *steady* lights are inadmissible. The huge and unmeaning glass chandeliers, prism-cut, gas-litten, and without shade, which dangle by night in our most fashionable drawing-rooms, may be cited as the quintessence of false taste, as so many concentrations of preposterous folly.

The rage for *glitter*—because its idea has become, as I before observed, confounded with that of magnificence in the abstract—has led also, to the exaggerated employment of mirrors. We line our dwellings with great British plates, and then imagine we have done a fine thing. Now the slightest thought will be sufficient to convince any one who has an eye at all, of the ill effect of numerous looking-glasses, and especially of large ones. Regarded apart from its reflection, the mirror presents a continuous, flat, colorless, unrelieved surface,—a thing always unpleasant and obviously so. Considered as a reflector, it is potent in producing a monstrous and odious uniformity: and the evil is here aggravated, in no direct proportion with the augmentation of its sources, but in a ratio constantly increasing. In fact, a room with four or five mirrors arranged at random, is, for all purposes of artistical show, a room of no shape at all. If we add to this the attendant glitter upon glitter, we have a perfect farrago of discordant and displeasing effects. The veriest bumpkin, not addle-headed, upon entering an apartment so bedizzened, would be instantly aware of something wrong, although he might be altogether unable to assign a cause for his

dissatisfaction. But let the same individual be led into a room tastefully furnished, and he would be startled into an exclamation of surprise and of pleasure.

It is an evil growing out of our republican institutions, that here a man of large purse has usually a very little soul which he keeps in it. The corruption of taste is a portion and a pendant of the dollar-manufacture. As we grow rich, our ideas grow rusty. It is, therefore, not among *our* aristocracy that we must look if at all, in the United States, for the spirituality of a British *boudoir*. But I have seen apartments in the tenure of Americans—men of exceedingly moderate means yet *raræ aves* of good taste—which, in negative merit at least, might vie with any of the *or-molu'd* cabinets of our friends across the water. Even now, there is present to my mind's eye a small and not ostentatious chamber with whose decorations no fault can be found. The proprietor lies asleep upon a sofa—the weather is cool—the time is near midnight: I will make a sketch of the room ere he awakes.

It is oblong—some thirty feet in length and twenty-five in breadth—a shape affording the best opportunities for the adjustment of furniture. It has but one door which is at one end of the parallelogram, and but two windows, which are at the other. These latter are large, reaching downwards to the floor—are situated in deep recesses—and open upon an Italian *veranda*. Their panes are of a crimson-tinted glass, set in rose-wood framings, of a kind somewhat broader than usual. They are curtained within the recess, by a thick silver tissue adapted to the shape of the window, and hanging loosely, but having no volume. Without the recess are curtains of an exceedingly rich crimson silk, fringed with a deep network of gold, and lined with the silver tissue, which forms the exterior blind. There are no cornices; but the folds of the whole fabric (which are sharp rather than massive, and have an airy appearance,) issue from beneath a broad entablature of rich giltwork, which encircles the room at the junction of the ceiling and walls. The drapery is thrown open also, or closed, by means of a thick rope of gold loosely enveloping it, and resolving itself readily into a knot; no pins or other such devices are apparent. The colors of the curtains and its fringe—the tints of crimson and gold—form the character of the room, and appear every where in profusion. The carpet—of Saxony material—is quite half an inch thick, and is of the same crimson ground, relieved simply by the *appearance* of a gold cord (like that festooning the curtains) thrown upon it in such a manner as to form a close succession of short irregular curves, one overlaying the other. This carpet has no border. The paper on the walls is of a glossy, silvery hue, intermingled with small Arabesque devices of a

fainter tint of the prevalent crimson. Many paintings relieve the expanse of the paper. These are chiefly landscapes of an imaginative cast—such as the fairy grottoes of Stanfield, or the lake of the Dismal Swamp of our own Chapman. The tone of each is warm, but dark. There are no “brilliant effects.” Not one of the pictures is of small size. Diminutive paintings give that *spotty* look to a room, which is the blemish of so many a fine work of Art overtouched. The frames are broad *but not deep*, and richly carved, without being filigreed. Their profuse gilding gives them the whole lustre of gold. They lie flat upon the walls, and do not hang off with cords. The designs themselves may, sometimes, be best seen in this latter position, but the general appearance of the chamber is injured. No mirror is visible—nor chairs. Two large sofas of rose-wood and crimson silk, form the only seats. There is a piano-forte—also of rose-wood without cover. Mahogany has been avoided. An octagonal table, formed entirely of the richest gold-threaded marble, is placed near one of the sofas—this table is also without cover—the drapery of the curtains has been thought sufficient. Four large and gorgeous Sèvres vases, in which grow a number of sweet and vivid flowers in full bloom, occupy the angles of the room. A tall and magnificent candelabrum, bearing a small antique lamp with strongly perfumed oil, is standing near the head of my sleeping friend. Some light and graceful hanging shelves, with golden edges and crimson silk cords and gold tassels, sustain two or three hundred magnificently bound books. Beyond these things, there is no furniture, if we except an Argand lamp, with a plain crimson-tinted shade, which depends from the lofty vaulted ceiling by a single gold chain, and throws a subdued magical radiance over all.

[May, 1840]