

Muthesius on Lasc (2018)

Lasc, Anca I. *Interior Decoration in Nineteenth-Century France: The Visual Culture of a New Profession*. Manchester UP, 2018, pp. xviii + 267, ISBN 978-1-5261-1338-

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Until today, an important interior of, say, a statesman's palace, would invariably be described as "nobly elegant" and "French," not only in the West, but in the near-East, too. Anca Lasc's massively researched and clearly presented investigation constitutes a vital chapter in the history of this kind of design. Strictly speaking, this book is not quite about actual interiors, as the title suggests, but about the pictorially conjured decorative splendor in domestic interiors of the last quarter of the nineteenth century as procured by a number of Parisian artists and draftsmen/designers who collaborated with diverse craftspeople and traders. The phenomenon is still very much with us, in images produced today in undiminished quantities and published in journals of a kind most likely encountered while waiting at a railway station.

The book begins with an overview of such issues as connoisseurship and domestic advice literature. The growing wealth of the higher and middle levels of society manifested itself straightforwardly in the ever greater quantity of decorations produced in various materials, for instance in the incredible massing of drapery. A key question arose as to who should coordinate decorating efforts. For the richest interiors, it was most likely the architect of the building who, in cases of exceptional rank, would also design the totality of furnishings. For lesser interiors, the relevant specialized trades needed to cooperate, thus creating a situation where drapers and upholsterers, furniture makers, and house painters vied to take the lead, creating a plethora of new self-designations like "tapissier-décorateur," "peintre-décorateur," or "dessinateur-décorateur" (61).

Such competition accompanied an increase in the production of images. Earlier pictorial publications tended to show individual items, sets of furniture, or portieres, but from the mid-1870s they produced a veritable avalanche of large chromolithographic plates of complete interiors, mostly bound together in albums, and characterized here as "dreamscapes" (133). Lasc affiliates these plates with contemporary history painting as well as theatrical décor. Whereas earlier and more modest kinds of pictorial presentations tended to be accurate but rather stiff, the new dreamscapes used diagonal perspectives and optimized light-dark situations to result in a presentation as elegant and sophisticated as a history painting, minus the actors (though sometimes the designers figured a model occupant, too). Somewhat surprising is that photographs, for instance of interiors created in exhibitions, played little role, in contrast to parallel developments in Germany and the United States (148). Unfortunately, the seventy-five pale-grey illustrations in this book are mere shadows of their colored originals, and the twenty-eight color images are so small that they produce only a limited sense of these dreamscapes. Considering the high price of the book, the number and quality of the images allowed by the press can only grudgingly be considered adequate.

The production of pictorial works was further linked to the new department stores, especially Au Bon Marché and Au Petit-Thomas, in the context of their claim to supply everything. Such practices formed an enormous grey area between the anonymity of those practicing trades, crafts, and industrial production on the one hand and those producing "art" on the other. As a result, a new kind of character not tied with a specific trade or manufacture arrived on the scene and became relatively well-known from the late 1870s and into the late 1890s. Figures such as Alexandre-Eugène Prignot and his son-in-law and "successor" Georges Rémon, who sometimes worked with Henri Rémon, "possibly his brother" (133), called themselves painters or architects, or both. Their activities were also given other designations, such as "dessinateur de l'industrie" or "inventeur d'ameublements" (119). They made themselves known primarily through the images they produced, but Lasc traces other activities, such as taking part in exhibitions of all kinds. Only a minute amount of their work has been physically preserved, which means that some of the information about it can only be based on "assumptions," or formed by "suggestions" (166–67). Twentieth-century art historical and architectural discourse dealing with nineteenth-century artists working in domestic interior design in France simply does not exist, in stark contrast to the well-documented "art architecture" movement of 1870s and 1880s London.

The last major chapter addresses style, following the general nineteenth-century design tendency of treating the individuality and specificity of the historical styles employed, such as Oriental, Henri II, or Louis XV. It was the "dessinateur," the designer, who most likely contributed these aspects, rather than the crafts or trades person. The other variants in the design equation were room use, eating, studying, and also sleeping, the latter being given ever greater attention, often in tandem with the adjacent boudoir, once again resulting in spectacular drapery. Yet another aspect included the desire to sound innovative, to go beyond adherence to old styles. The term "style fantaisie" (197) thus arrived in the late 1870s, and from 1878 the label "style moderne" began to be used (199 ff.), even if it would be hard to tie either of them to sets of identifiable features.

The book ends with Art Nouveau, or, to be precise, just before Art Nouveau. A completely new art history would have clicked in and would thus have brought the movements outlined in this book to a decisive end. With Art Nouveau, the history and understanding of domestic interior design bifurcates: the well-known story of modernist design and designer personalities separates from the now invisible history of making and its concomitant trading processes. The constant slide between art and industry and between “design” and “decoration”—the title of the book could arguably have included “design”—were left behind; after all modernism aimed to eliminate decoration altogether. While one may see Lasc’s book as the implicit reaffirmation of the centrality of twentieth-century modernism’s designer-actor, at the same time she makes a very important contribution to the history of the design profession more generally.

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