Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide
a journal of nineteenth-century visual culture

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book review of

Designing the French Interior: The Modern Home and Mass Media
edited by Anca I. Lasc, Georgina Downey, and Mark Taylor

Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide 15, no. 3 (Autumn 2016)

Citation: Nikki Otten, book review of *Designing the French Interior: The Modern Home and Mass Media* edited by Anca I. Lasc, Georgina Downey, and Mark Taylor, *Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide* 15, no. 3 (Autumn 2016), https://doi.org/10.29411/ncaw.2016.15.3.13.

Published by: Association of Historians of Nineteenth-Century Art

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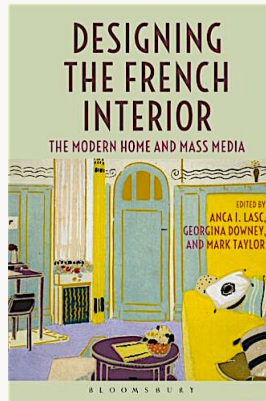

Anca I. Lasc, Georgina Downey, and Mark Taylor, eds.,
Designing the French Interior: The Modern Home and Mass Media.
London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015.
248 pp; 52 black&white photographs; bibliographies for each essay; index.
$112 (hardback)
ISBN 978-0-8578-5659-3

As France's reputation for innovation and quality in modern interior design began to grow during the eighteenth century, reproductions and representations of interiors and furnishings proliferated in magazines, paintings, photographs, novels, and exhibitions. Once such views of the formerly private interior were opened to the public through the mass media, they helped to shape the perception of what French modern design could and ought to be. Various media outlets frequently used the interior for nationalistic purposes, solidifying French identity around the country's role as a "style leader to the modern world" (8). Despite playing this role in the popular media, however, the idea of the interior was not universal. As the subject of design achieved new prominence, individuals began to adopt interior décor as a means of forming and displaying identity. In many cases, highly unique designs served as a platform for performing subversive roles within society.

Such intertwining connections between French domestic interiors and the mass media from the mid-eighteenth to the mid-twentieth century are the subject of central investigation in *Designing the French Interior: The Modern Home and Mass Media*, edited by Anca I. Lasc, Georgina Downey, and Mark Taylor. Composed of seventeen chapters by different contributors, the volume as a whole emphasizes the ways that design and popular representations of design shaped and defined each other during this time period. As the editors explain, *Designing the French Interior* "has as its primary aim to identify and historicize the singularity of the modern French domestic interior as generator of (reproducible) images, receptor for both highly crafted and mass-produced objects, and the direct result of widely circulated imagery in its own right" (3). This book helps to fill a gap in the existing scholarship related to French interior design; while literature examines the subject from a socio-historical perspective, the editors point out that little work has been done on the relationship between interiors and the mass media within a specifically French context. The editors do not directly define "mass media," but the description in the quotation above covers the wide variety of media discussed in the book. All of the essays examine either mass-

produced objects incorporated into interiors (such as portrait busts) or images of interiors printed in popular novels or magazines. Some essays work with both concepts.

The book is organized into three parts: "Sex, Dreams, and Desires: The Perversions of the Modern Interior," "Aesthetics, Anxiety, and Identity: Reproducing a Decadent Domesticity," and "Intimacy, Longing, and Performance: The Consumption and Display of the Celebrity Home." In the first part, the individual contributors challenge the notion of the interior as a space of purity, escape, and respite and present examples of the ways that domestic settings provided room for individual desire. The chapters include discussions of erotic texts and the 1988 film *Dangerous Liaisons*, Eugène Gaillard's bedroom for Siegfried Bing's Art Nouveau Pavilion, furnishing designs and Émile Zola's *The Kill*, J. K. Huysmans's *À Rebours (Against Nature)*, and Paul Nelson's design for a suspended house.

The second part focuses on the intersection between media and interiors associated with the middle class. The authors contributing to this section of the book discuss representations of the interior in photographs and prints, as well as how these and other reproducible media were themselves displayed in interiors. These chapters further explain how individuals used or worked against décor and its representations in order to establish identity. The subjects covered in this section include portrait busts, Félix Vallotton illustrations, Jules Chéret posters, Édouard Vuillard interiors, *tableaux vivants* based on Aubrey Beardsley illustrations, and Robert Mallet-Stevens's architectural designs presented in early French films.

The third section features chapters related to the all-consuming public interest in celebrity culture beginning in the late nineteenth century, and it also demonstrates how the mass media presented the relationship between the famous and their lavish interiors. The subjects covered in in this last part include photos of celebrity homes published in *La Revue Illustrée*, the homes of the Duke and Duchess of Windsor and Baronne Salomon de Rothschild, studios designed for women sculptors in Montparnasse, *Monsieur* magazine's role in forming queer masculine authority within interior design, and *Paris Match*'s sponsorship of interior design displays at the annual *Salon des arts ménagers* exhibitions.

As is perhaps clear from this overview of the highly varied topics included in the book, *Designing the French Interior* both benefits from and is somewhat hindered by its format. The publication grew out of discussions at the 58th Annual Meeting of the Society for French Historical Studies in 2012, and, although the contributions included in the book were not presented there, the essays bear some resemblance to conference papers. Each chapter is ten pages long, and, as a result, the authors have little space to develop an argument after establishing the necessary background information related to their topics. On the other hand, this brevity allows the editors to cover a wide range of subjects and methodologies. Such an approach provides readers with a sense of the myriad ways in which the idea of the "French domestic interior" might be understood and studied. The variety that the essays offer also ensures that there will be a chapter or two that will interest scholars of many different specialties within French modernism, including painting, cinema, popular magazines, literature, sculpture, design, and architecture.

While the book's format proved detrimental to some of its chapters, a few authors were able to present intriguing and well-supported ideas within a limited space. I have chosen one

essay from each of the book's three sections that I found especially well-argued or insightful. These are certainly not the only three chapters worthy of attention, but I believe this selection also gives a sense of the broad time frame and range of subjects that *Designing the French Interior* offers.

"Intimate Vibrations: Inventing the Dream Bedroom," written by art historian Fae Brauer, appears in the first part of the book, "Sex, Dreams and Desires: The Perversions of the Modern Interior." This chapter provides an analysis of Eugène Gaillard's *chambre à coucher* (bedroom) in Siegfried Bing's Art Nouveau pavilion at the 1900 Paris World's Fair. Brauer firmly situates Gaillard's furniture within the social and cultural history of Paris, explaining how recent evolutionary theories and public anxieties influenced Gaillard's designs and choice of materials. Amidst concerns about precipitous and widespread degeneration in France, Brauer argues that Gaillard adopted ideas about regeneration that were influenced by Jean-Baptiste Lamarck's evolutionary theories. Lamarckians saw nature as a force that could renew the public's energy—an especially crucial function in a bedroom, since declining birth rates were a major concern at the turn of the century. As Brauer points out, Neo-Lamarckian Transformist theory held that external parasites could affect internal protoplasm during conception (37). For this reason, it was important to consider the design of the bedroom. Children conceived in an environment as energizing as Gaillard's *chambre à coucher* would be especially healthy and capable of strengthening the French nation. While Brauer does not state that Gaillard read Lamarck's work, she does provide evidence that Lamarck's theories were prominent in other French institutions at the time. The Natural History Museum, for example, was under the direction of Edmond Perrier, who organized the museum's collections in accordance with Lamarckian principles (31–2). She also uses Gaillard's 1906 text on the applied arts to demonstrate that the artist's ideas about "constant communion" among natural organisms, which he called *L'Évolution ineluctable*, were compatible with Lamarck's (37).

Brauer further supports her argument that Gaillard's bedroom served as an "instrument of psychospatial intervention" (43) by noting the common nineteenth-century association between interior decoration and inner psychology (39). Experiments in hypnosis that Jean-Martin Charcot conducted at Salpêtrière demonstrated that visual suggestion could induce particular emotional states in patients suffering from hysteria and neurasthenia. Physicians such as Hippolyte Bernheim claimed that healthy individuals were also prone to such visual suggestion. Brauer explains that, because humans had been found to be susceptible to such stimuli, the French public began to recognize the domestic interior as a source of health and healing (40). She provides quotations from critics writing on Gaillard's *chambre à coucher* to demonstrate that they frequently cited the room's ability to conjure calming dream-like states (41).

For Gaillard, selecting the right material was essential to achieving an optimal environment (41). Brauer includes quotations from Gaillard's 1906 treatise that express his opinion that wood was variable and retained the properties of the environmental factors that affected its growth. The fibers within the wood could also produce vibrations of different intensities. Brauer convincingly argues that Gaillard incorporated "vigorously pulsating wood graining" into his bed and wardrobe for its ability to stimulate neurological vibrations, which in turn created energy (42). This belief was related to a new understanding of the universe.

According to several different theories at the time, vibrations of different frequencies composed and connected all energy and forms of matter. These vibrations could be exchanged among living beings, and Brauer suggests that this is why Gaillard believed his *chambre à coucher*—crafted from wood and designed to resemble natural forms—was invested with the power to energize the couples within and foster feelings of sensuality and intimacy. Overall, Brauer's use of primary texts, as well as her clear presentation of several intertwining concerns that were prevalent within French society, allows her to make a creative and persuasive argument that helps us understand how attendees at the 1900 Universal Exposition would have viewed Gaillard's furniture.

In the second section of the book, "Aesthetics, Anxiety, and Identity: Reproducing a Decadent Domesticity," art historian Ronit Milano takes up the subject of portrait busts and their role in shaping identity in the late eighteenth century. Her essay, "The Interiorization of Identity: Portrait Busts and the Politics of Selfhood in Pre- and Early Revolutionary France," argues that individuals chose portrait busts for their homes in order to display, and also to constitute, particular selfhoods (83). When they were included in painted portraits of the Parisian bourgeoisie, these busts also represented the interiority of the sitter. As Milano explains, "[T]he portrait bust represented not only a specific person (and yet not a generic image) but rather *an idea of a particular person*—an image that any viewer who wished to do so could identify with. In an ambience that celebrated the rise of the modern self and the formation of a public identity and an individuated society, the portrait bust was thus deployed within a particular interior as a manifestation of self-exploration and self-constitution" (84). Often, the busts that individuals selected announced their political allegiances. Milano analyzes a 1794 portrait of Marie-Antoinette attributed to Anne-Flore Millet and a 1791 portrait of Count Pierre-Jean de Bourcet, painted by Charles Paul Landon, to provide evidence of this function of busts within the Parisian home. In the latter painting, Landon includes busts of Louis XVI and Marie-Antoinette to indicate that the Count and his family support the monarchy. As Milano points out, the space in which the family is situated is rather generic because it is meant to function as a representation of both physical and psychological interiority. The figural groupings within the interior also reinforce the gendered roles within the family, which prepared the children for their future public social roles (86).

Milano considers portrait busts of philosophers as well as royals, arguing that representations of famous thinkers redoubled the interiorizing function of busts because they also referenced a particular body of knowledge (88). Jean-Jacques Rousseau serves as her example, and she writes that sculptor Jean-Antoine Houdon was summoned to make a death mask when Rousseau died in 1778. Rousseau had not permitted a bust to be made during his lifetime. According to the fashion of the day, Houdon made three versions of the bust: one dressed *à la française*, one dressed as a philosopher with a headband, and one with a bared chest. Milano references busts of other philosophers, such as Voltaire and Diderot, who were represented in contemporary clothing with open shirts. As she explains, the exposed chests of the philosophers symbolized self-revelation, as well as modernity and the present. Private individuals, however, often preferred the more formal *à la française* style of bust for their interiors because they would resemble their owners more closely (91). This resemblance made it easier for visitors in the home to attribute the qualities of the portrait bust's sitter to the homeowner.

Though Milano's argument is generally convincing overall, she is not clear enough in distinguishing the function of the portrait bust within painted portraits from the function of the portrait bust within the home. It is not always evident whether the associations and effects she describes are a product of the bust, the representation of the bust, or both. For example, is the bourgeois homeowner fashioning his selfhood by commissioning a literal bust, by allowing an artist to include a bust as a symbol in his portrait, or both? Except in the case of a painting of the Marquis de Girardin with a bust of Rousseau, Milano does not state whether the sitters actually owned the busts represented in the paintings or whether the painter incorporated them as potent symbols that did not reflect the sitter's actual possessions. If the latter case is true, this would affect Milano's argument that busts allowed their owners to construct selfhoods. If the painter used the bust as a device, it does not necessarily demonstrate an active, self-fashioning choice on the part of the homeowner/ portrait sitter.

In the final section of the book, one chapter returns to the topic of modern design presented at major expositions. Like Gaillard's *chambre à coucher* in Bing's 1900 pavilion, model furniture and apartment layout designs continued to promise a brighter and better-designed future to the people who visited the annual *Salons des arts ménagers (SAM)* of the 1940s and 50s. Historian Guillaume de Syon analyzes several of these household exhibitions in his essay, "'Si ma cuisine m'était comptée:' *Paris Match* and the *Salon des Arts Ménagers* During the Fourth Republic." This chapter concludes both section three, "Intimacy, Longing, and Performance: The Consumption and Display of the Celebrity Home," as well as *Designing the French Interior* as a whole. This placement is logical not only because Syon's essay covers the most contemporary material in the book, but also because it so strongly reinforces the main theme of the anthology. This chapter forcefully demonstrates the constitutive relationship between interior design and the mass media by examining displays at *SAM* that were sponsored by an immensely popular weekly magazine, *Paris Match*. Although it focuses on the post-war period in France, Syon's essay is relevant to nineteenth-century studies because it demonstrates the legacy of large public exhibitions and their frequent failure to transport innovative, high-quality design out of the exhibition hall and into the homes of the broader public. For most visitors to world's fairs in the nineteenth century and to *SAM* in the twentieth, the furniture and appliances on display could enter the domestic interior only in the pages of exhibition brochures or magazines like *Paris Match*.

While Syon tends to assert *Paris Match*'s significance within the media landscape a bit too adamantly where most readers likely need no further convincing, the magazine's role in shaping and publicizing *SAM* is remarkable. The journal sponsored a model apartment at the 1952 *SAM* that was meant to house a family of four in a small space (74 square meters, or roughly 800 square feet). Syon points out that this project also served nationalistic goals, allowing France to claim a place in modern design alongside America and Scandinavia. The success of this model apartment prompted *Paris Match* to build a functional apartment in the Paris suburbs for the *SAM* of the following year. The magazine then went so far as to buy the land where the model apartment sat, promising to develop it and provide affordable mortgages for families. Syon explains that this arrangement quickly became complicated and the magazine passed the project to an association (222).

Paris Match was also influential in changing the public perception of kitchens. Its 1954 contribution to *SAM* was four kitchen designs, which integrated this room with other, more public areas of the home. This broke the taboo associated with this working room of the household. Syon argues that, "While French cooking was lauded as a national identifier that associated good food with health ad proper childrearing the actual work was demeaned as monotonous and empty. . . . Offering new ways of building one's surroundings would parry the sense of alienation from the kitchen or so the editors [of *Paris Match*] seemed to think" (221). Syon argues that a nationalist message, rather than a modernist one, was necessary to ensure that the integrated kitchen design would gain acceptability amongst the French public. To reinforce the cultural message of these designs, *Paris Match* published photos of famous French actresses in the magazine's model kitchens. *Paris Match* also adopted this strategy for its 1955 and 1957 installations at *SAM*, using the singer Patachou to publicize its electrified house and the duo of choreographer Roland Petit and ballerina Zizi Jeanmaire in a photo spread illustrating its futuristic kitchen (225–6).

This last example is key to Syon's critique that, "*Paris Match*, however, never questioned gender boundaries while [presenting solutions to the problems of where to live, how to live and how to match one's interior to one's identity], reaffirming middle-class gender ideals and ignoring the reality of women's constricted social roles" (226). This example also demonstrates the problem of the book's short chapters; Syon's argument would have been more compelling if he could have examined the issue of gender within the *Paris Match* photos more closely. Presumably due to the format of the book, however, his discussion of gender is limited to a few sentences.

Syon does, however, establish the social and historical environment that shaped the interests and strategy that *Paris Match* adopted. He notes that many of the goods and appliances offered at *SAM* were not at all practical or affordable for the people who visited the exhibition. He situates his subject within the post-war economic circumstances and recovery mindset that existed in France and prevented many families from making large investments. He emphasizes the vast gap between the technological possibilities and the actual circumstances in place for much of the country by providing an anecdote of a woman without electricity or gas in her home who won her choice of an electric or gas-powered stove at the 1949 *SAM* (219). Such home goods priced beyond the means of the lower classes are reminiscent of the furniture crafted by proponents of the Arts and Crafts Movement. Just as many elements of practical design were out of reach for *SAM* visitors, Gaillard's *chambre à coucher* at the Bing Pavilion would have represented a potential purchase for only the wealthiest of attendees at the 1900 *Exposition Universelle*. While the French nation as a whole would, according to regeneration theory, become stronger if more couples had the optimal environment in which to conceive a child, very few could afford Gaillard's psycho-spatial furniture. Similarly, the busy working class women who would most benefit from automated assistance with household tasks often could not afford appliances—or the utility lines to run them. Thus while the mass media helped to bring the *idea* of advanced design into more homes, it ultimately could not, despite the best efforts of *Paris Match*, change the way that people actually lived. The disparity between the ideals and the practicalities of interior design present in the nineteenth century lingered into the twentieth.

Designing the French Interior: The Modern Home and Mass Media sets out a body of essays that demonstrates the richness of the book's subject matter. With this volume, the editors have certainly begun to address the gap in the literature that they note in the introduction to the contributed chapters. Although the essays considered individually are not sufficiently substantive in this format, several could be turned into longer studies that would further enrich this area of inquiry. Taken as a whole, the breadth of time periods, media and topics presented in the volume creates its own compelling argument that the intersection of the mass media and modern French interior design deserves further study.

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