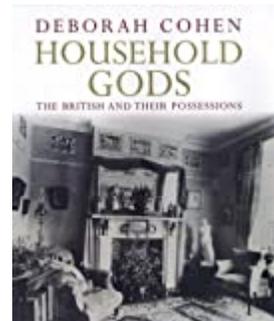




Deborah Cohen. *Household Gods: The British and Their Possessions.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006. xvii + 296 pp. \$40.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-300-11213-9.



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Consumerism in the nineteenth century has been looked at from many angles: retailing and the rise of those temples of modernity, department stores; the construction and architecture of villa-dom and suburbia; gender and privacy; the second-hand market; furniture manufacture; and so on. In this imaginative and handsomely presented study Deborah Cohen focuses on the “British love affair with the domestic interior from the age of mass manufacture to modernism” (p. x). She explores the question of why the Victorians and their successors decorated and furnished their rooms in the distinctive ways they did, largely by looking at the ideas and writings of a wide range of cultural trendsetters, a growing number of them women. She argues for the relative sparseness of bourgeois home furnishing in the early Victorian era and the lack of concern for taste—reflecting the strong influence of evangelical (and non-conformist) morality and frugality. Here the impression of sparseness comes mostly from paintings and more use could have been made, perhaps, of other evidence such as lists at house sales. From mid-century, design reformers like Henry Cole, later head of the Victorian and Albert Museum, criticized the current vogue for poor taste and urged the moral imperative of good design in the cause of progress and religion. Better furniture made better, more moral people. Despite such strictures, the late Victorian era saw a riot of household furnishing as mass

production, falling prices, and exotic imported materials made accessible to the respectable middle classes a kaleidoscope of stoves, beds, chairs, screens, and much else in virtually unlimited variety (three hundred types of sideboard from one furniture firm alone!).

The expansion of department stores and specialist furniture shops from Maples down also stimulated and supplied demand (much of this is well known from other work, but here the points are illustrated with excellent images of shop interiors, some in color). Also influential was a new generation of interior designers like Mary Eliza Haweis, who sought to fuse art, home, and commerce, whilst British artists, most notably William Morris, focused attention on the home, and art periodicals publicized their ideas. Men took a strong interest in decorating and furnishing their homes in the late nineteenth century, as the home was seen as the stage for individuality and character, but after the 1890s women had a growing say. Cohen suggests that the Oscar Wilde trial was important in giving artistic taste an effeminate reputation, scaring away male interest, but by then middle-class men may have had less opportunity for home decoration, having to work harder in their business life (as firms got bigger), while a growing part of their leisure time was devoted to the new fashion for outdoor sports and to hobbies (like stamp collecting). Encouraging fe-

male interest was the advent of home decoration shops, often run by women, some with feminist aspirations.

Another important development was growing lower-middle-class emulation of bourgeois taste, as rising living standards enabled them to pack their homes with a mishmash of cheap consumer goods of every conceivable style. Trying to be individualistic, rooms ended in being overcrowded and overwhelmed with furniture, pictures, plants, hangings, clocks, barometers, lamps, and a potpourri of tacky ornaments. Already before the First World War, one reaction against mass-produced furnishing came from antique collectors. An eye for antiques became a mark of distinction and was increasingly fashionable: large stores opened antiques departments. Cohen makes a good point here, but she might also have mentioned the growth at this time of antiquarian and local history societies up and down which helped to network the new middle classes, professional men, and minor country-house gentry. After the war, the British eschewed the modernist furniture fashionable on the Continent, despite the missionary efforts of Ambrose Heal (*pace* Cohen, I am not sure how widespread modernist furniture was in ordinary bourgeois homes even in Stockholm or Berlin), and, instead, Cohen writes, British suburban households opted for a new regime of simpler reproduction furniture. The old mishmash of individualistic interiors disappeared and new home decoration magazines preached conventionality.

Cohen has some sharp ideas and her book is peopled with personalities. If there is a general criticism one might make it is that the late- and post-Victorian home is not always discussed in its wider cultural and urban contexts. More, for instance, could have been said about the changing architecture, size, and configuration of the bourgeois house and the gendered spaces within it (women from the eighteenth century always had a greater role in furnishing their own areas). Also, changing attitudes to nature are of interest: fashionable villas not only had gardens (garden design was as important as interior design), but conservatories, and plants and other “natural” decorations and motifs penetrated the home (Morris’s early wallpapers for instance). Another question relates to domestic servants—both living in and dailies—and how crucial they were for dusting and polishing the heavily decorated home. The number of servants doubled in the late Victorian period, whilst their rapid decline after 1918 and the arrival of domestic appliances may help to explain the new vogue for sparser furnishing (as we all know, vacuuming a cluttered room is a nightmare). Finally more of a comparative perspective would have been beneficial. My impression is that late nineteenth-century continental apartments were as heavily furnished as British villas—for similar broad economic, social, and cultural reasons. Nonetheless such points do not detract from the value of this well-written, lively, and attractive study, which sheds important light on the period.

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