# Victorian & Edwardian Furniture & Interiors

Thames & Hudson

JEREMY COOPER

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## From the Gothic Revival to Art Nouveau

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With 683 illustrations, 74 in colour

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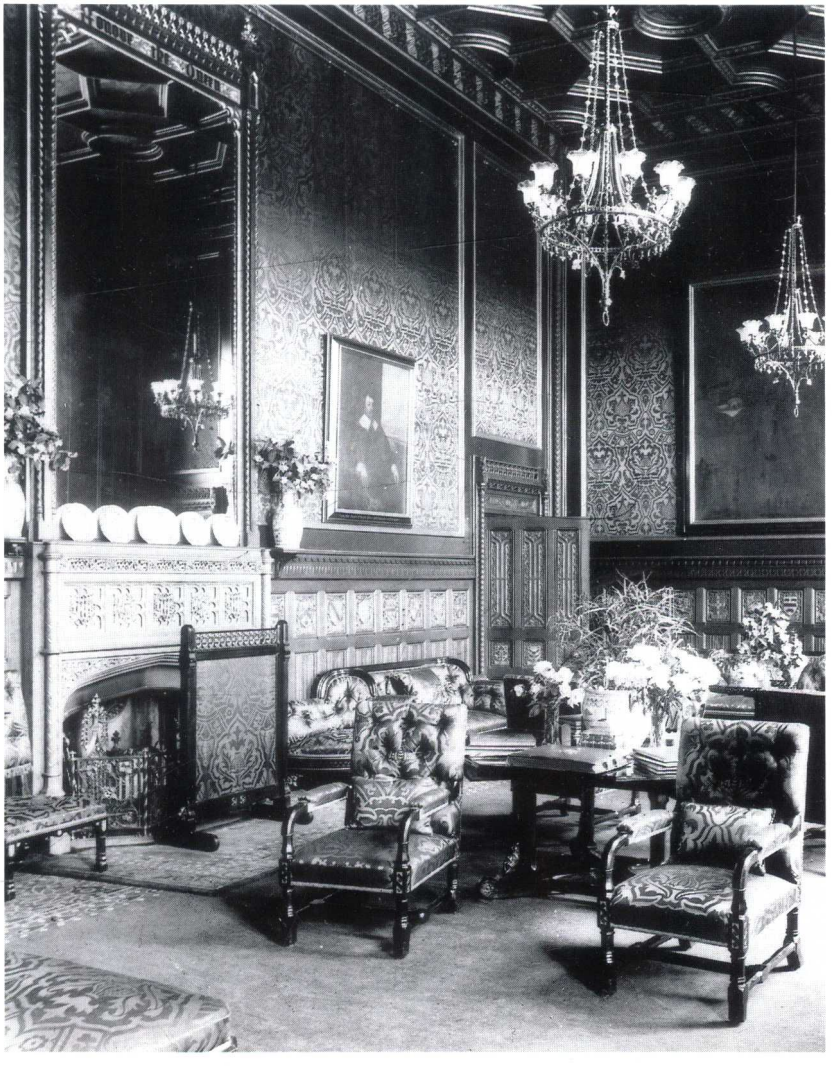

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# Preface

In gently deriding our present 'fissiparous, disconnected age ... where the volume of critical opinion greatly exceeds its content',[1] Sir Denys Lasdun could be speaking for progressive architects and designers of almost all ages in almost all countries. During the inventive period of British furniture and interior design from 1830 to 1915 critical opinion was no less combatative than it is now. The *Fortnightly Review* expressed in 1868 the robust view that 'nothing can exceed the ugliness of modern furniture, unless it be the homes into which we are obliged to put it'. A typical armchair activist of 1902, H.J. Jennings, described the work of E.W. Godwin – now prized for its crisp originality – as 'that excrescence of nineteenth century art ... effeminate, invertebrate, sensuous and mawkish'.[2] Critical comment was wide-ranging. Consider, for example, the respected opinion of the German writer Hermann Muthesius, offered in his influential book of 1904, *Das Englische Haus*: 'It is difficult to find justification for the English habit of using a knob rather than a lever to open a door. Turning a knob is the most unsuitable way of exerting pressure on a spring, especially when, as is usually the case, it is small and slippery. Whereas a German maid with both hands full can still press down the door-handle with her elbow, her English counterpart has to lay whatever she is carrying on the floor before she can open the door.'[3]

Critics of all periods chew the same old bones of contention. In the nineteenth century architects were pilloried, as they are now, for revivalism, for turning both too slavishly and too quirkily to earlier sources for their dominant motifs. In the High Victorian period this pattern-book mentality was said to have led to a style of interior design more suitable to 'a fairground booth'[4] – an apposite epitaph, some might say today, for Post-Modernism. But whatever the possible similarities between the aesthetics of the 1880s and those of the 1980s, there are at least two fundamental differences. Firstly, in the 1880s furniture and interior design throughout the world were dominated by British architects; secondly, the rich and the fashionable lived in brand-new homes surrounded by brand-new art.

Not all homes, of course, were progressive and modern in their design, for as well as harbouring the talents of a remarkably diverse band of inventive architect-designers, the nineteenth century also encouraged the commercial production of furniture and furnishings of equally remarkable ugliness. The fact remains, however, that even the most idealistic of talented church builders also concerned themselves with the decorative arts: William Butterfield produced designs for embroidery and wallpapers, A.W.N. Pugin for bookcases and dinner services decades before the better-known architectural ensembles of a C.F.A. Voysey or a Charles Rennie Mackintosh. Unlike today, the designers of the best furniture between 1830 and 1915 were mostly practising architects and much of what they produced was progressively modern, so much so that even now chairs by Pugin, for instance, retain an air of elemental originality. Concerned not merely with the external appearances of their buildings but also with every stage of construction, decoration and furnishing, many architects worked extensively with commercial manufacturers to produce designs for 'multiples', to use the modern artist-craftsman term, as well as for individual commissions. Godwin expressed the architectural belief of the time in the introduction to a commercial catalogue of his designs, published in 1877: 'The commonest article of furniture cannot be an artistic work by any happy-go-lucky process whatsoever.'[5] It is furniture of this nature, made to an authoritative design, whether one-off or mass-produced, that exclusively concerns us in this book.

The introductory first chapter, 'A Matter of Style', looks into Victorian attitudes to style and taste, taking the lead from contemporary design manuals such as Henry Shaw's *Specimens of Ancient Furniture*, Owen Jones's *Grammar of Ornament* and Mrs Haweis's *Beautiful Houses*. Whether in the 'Gothic', 'Elizabethan', or 'Louis XV' style, all furniture of the early Victorian period tended to look much the same, rounded and comfortable in form, in its way almost style-*less* – see, for example, the designs of Anthony Salvin, Philip Hardwick, or Richard Bridgens. The taste for exotic Moorish interiors is also discussed in this chapter, together with the contemporary interest in antiquarianism. In discussing matters of style in this general way, the ground is prepared for the succeeding eight specialist chapters, which begin with A.W.N. Pugin, who, despite his medievalism,

was 'almost an early modern'.[6] The Pugin chapter also covers the work of his eldest son, Edward, and of his principal collaborator, J.G. Crace. Long after A.W.N. Pugin's death in 1852, Puginesque furniture continued to be produced by the cabinetmakers Gillow's and Holland & Sons, both of whom reused the original designs he had made for them, and by commercial firms such as C. & R. Light of Shoreditch, production centre of what the designer C.R. Ashbee called 'slaughtered furniture'.[7]

As William Burges was the only architect to concentrate exclusively on painted furniture, he and his assistants H.W. Lonsdale, E.J. Tarver and W.G. Saunders are allotted the next chapter to themselves. This is followed by an omnium gatherum chapter entitled 'Geometric Gothic', a term coined by the collector Charles Handley-Read[8] to describe furniture of the 1860s and 1870s designed by, among others, Bruce Talbert and Charles Bevan. This chapter also includes the spikier Ruskinesque furniture of J.H. Chamberlain, the plainer designs of C.L. Eastlake, and the Old-Englishy interiors of Alfred Waterhouse. It does not include Richard Norman Shaw or W.E. Nesfield, both of whom began their careers in the Gothic tradition but whose principal field of influence is on the aesthetic movement, discussed in the next chapter, 'From "Nankin" to Bedford Park'. (Much of the blue-and-white porcelain imported from Japan was said to come from 'Nankin'; Bedford Park, 'an aesthetic Eden',[9] is a west London suburb built by Godwin, Shaw and others, largely in the 'Queen Anne' style.) A close connection between the Gothic and Japanese revivals might at first glance seem unlikely, but many designers moved easily between the two. Burges stated of the 1862 London International Exhibition that 'truly the Japanese Court is the real medieval court'[10] and Bruce Talbert's ebonized furniture clearly combines the two influences.

In dealing with the work of Morris and Company after the aesthetic movement rather than before, direct connections can more easily be made between Morris and the arts and crafts movement, the subject of chapter seven, many of whose leaders – W.R. Lethaby, Walter Crane, etc. – were earlier employed by 'The Firm', as Morris, Marshall, Faulkner & Co. was known. Anyway, William Morris was very much a turn-of-the-century hero, whereas most of the 'Francesca da Rimini, niminy, piminy'[11] aesthetes were despised by the artist-craftsmen. (When Mrs Ashbee left London for Chipping Campden in 1902 she deeply regretted having to lease her Chelsea house to Whistler, 'the little, horrid, cantankerous, curled, perfumed creature'.)[12] The title of chapter seven, 'The Arts and Crafts Movement', defines its limits, although certain Voysey interiors discussed in that chapter might also be described as 'New Art', and one of the most important commissions of the 'New Art' designer M.H. Baillie Scott, the furniture for the Grand Duke of Hesse's palace in Darmstadt, was executed by Ashbee's Guild of Handicraft. The 'New Art', however, especially in the work of Mackintosh and the Glasgow School, was characterized not simply by the fact that one designer was responsible for the whole interior, but also by the single unifying themes of these interiors. 'New Art' – *l'Art nouveau* in France – was also distinguished by the virulence of the criticism it attracted. The sculptor George Frampton, one-time Master of the Art-Workers' Guild, commented: 'I believe it is made on the continent and used by parents to frighten naughty children.'[13]

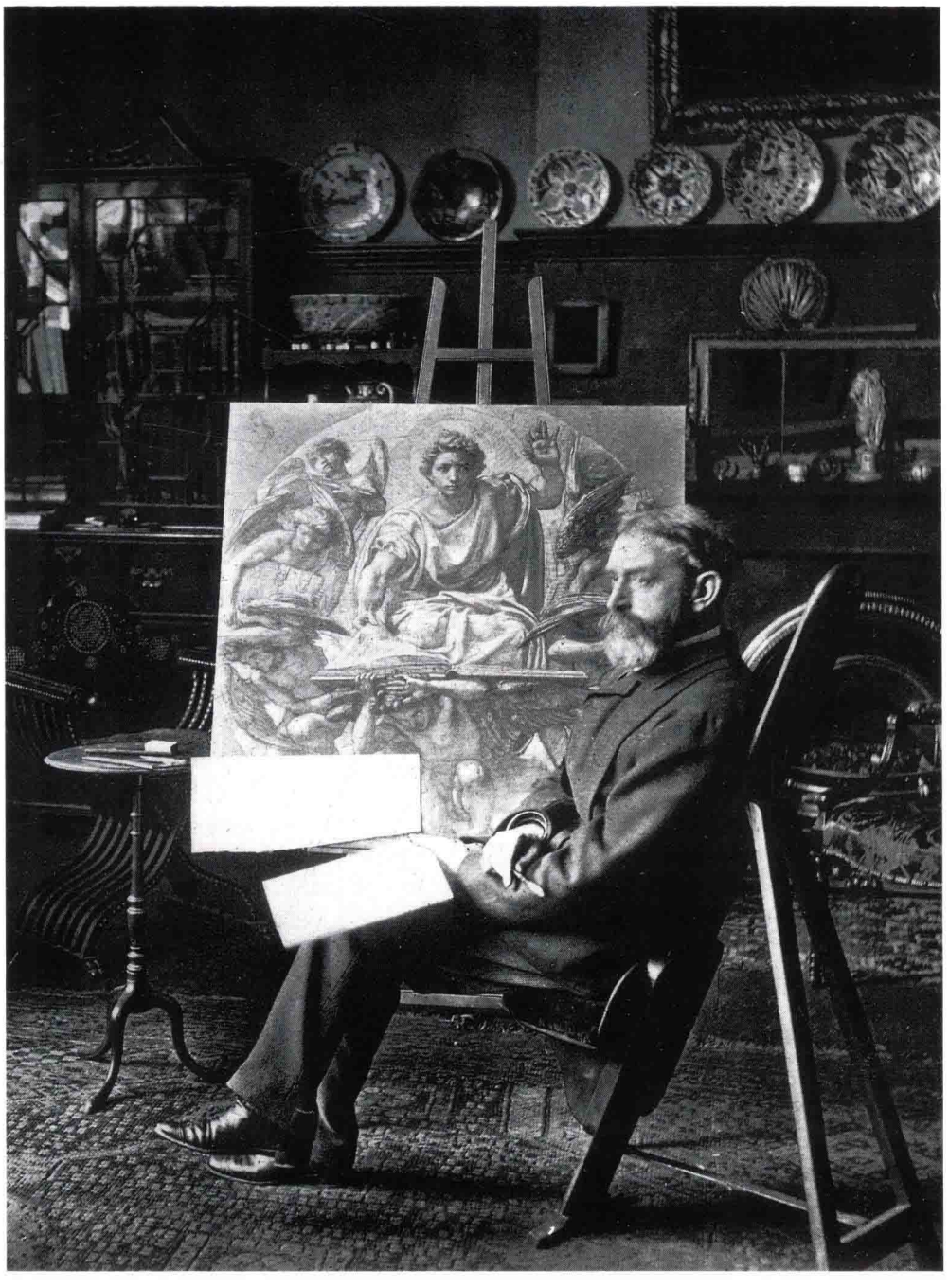
Finally, there is a chapter on the commercial furniture of Heal's and Liberty's – Liberty's because of the breadth of their influence (Marcel Proust owned a Liberty duvet which played havoc with his asthma), Heal's because Sir Ambrose Heal, 'that rare thing: a successful pioneer who never lost touch with economic realities',[14] was not only an excellent designer but is also one of the few from this period whose work is still neglected by collectors.

Although acres of 'Victoriana' – once ignored by the art market, now overvalued – will here remain uncultivated, it is difficult to look at architect-designed furniture without also being influenced by current collecting trends. As Richard Norman Shaw was prepared publicly to admit: 'Those of us who happen to be collectors, in even a small way, fall into error and make our homes too much like little museums – an error, this, that causes a room (and its owner, too, now and then) to be just a trifle tedious.'[15] The pieces illustrated in this book were originally created as part of often outrageously adventurous contemporary interiors, but now they must be viewed in the precious light of 'museum interest' and of colour-plate auction catalogues, their values warmed by the praise of an antiques-orientated artistic establishment. This furniture has therefore become exactly what its creators abhorred, a field of collecting approved by the fashionable rich intent on surrounding themselves with fine 'antiques' instead of commissioning living architects to build and furnish new homes. If Morris were alive today he would be tearing down his own hangings and burning his friend Burges's wardrobes, which now sell for £80,000 or more. 'I have never been in any rich man's house', Morris said, 'which would not have looked better for having a bonfire made outside of nine-tenths of what it held.'[16]

The point to be emphasized is that all the best nineteenth-century furniture was the work of individualists and iconoclasts living in a period which welcomed change. The difference between us and the Victorians is illustrated by Prince Albert's commission for the Great Exhibition in Hyde Park in 1851 of a glass and iron pre-fabricated 'palace', one of the most ambitious, technically advanced and aesthetically far-sighted buildings England has ever seen. After the opening of Prince Albert's 'Crystal Palace', Queen Victoria noted in her journal: 'The sight ... was magic and impressive. The tremendous cheering, the joy expressed in every face, the vastness of the building, with all its decorations and exhibits ... and my beloved husband, the creator of this peace festival uniting the art and industry of all nations on earth.'[17] The vivacity of the Victorian vision, and its optimism too, are jointly reflected in the period's furniture and interiors.

CHAPTER ONE

# A Matter of Style



3 The artist E. J. Poynter in his studio at The Avenue, Fulham Road, 1884. On the easel is a cartoon for mosaic decoration in the dome of St Paul's Cathedral.

The Victorians were much concerned with matters of style and taste, and the passion of their language on the subject is a fair indication of its importance to them. The Gothic fantast William Burges called the revived Queen Anne style 'negro-language',[1] and his architect colleague J.D. Sedding followed this up with a suggestion that 'the conduct of some of the designers of this class is like unto a child in a garden picking the tops of flowers ... to make a promiscuous but malodorous nosegay'.[2] Popular pundits were as concerned as the aesthetes. The voluble Mrs Haweis, in her tour of the painter Alma-Tadema's home (32–34), noted how he could afford to be 'independent of the fashion – aesthetic or vulgar ... It is not an Owen Jones or Cottier house ... not a Morrisey house, though Morris wallpapers are brought in whenever they are wanted ... not exactly a Dutch house nor exactly a classic house ... it is essentially an Alma-Tadema house.'[3] As always, there is the problem of stylistic definition in what the *Building News* of 1868 saw as 'an age of picking to pieces ... [an age in which] the critical faculty is ... developed at the expense of creativity'. Far from ignoring matters of style, as Stracheyan detractors of the period would have us believe, the Victorians thought more about the way they and their homes looked than do all but the most ultra-fashionconscious of today. Good taste and the right style were national issues in which the principal arbiters were largely the artists and architects themselves. As an introduction, therefore, to the complex matter of Victorian style, it makes sense to see how some of the creators of contemporary taste chose to live.

In the second half of the nineteenth century leading painters were rich and sociable. Courted by their even richer clients, they earned and spent their money not on the fringes of fashionable society but at its centre. Like their patrons, many artists built themselves smart new homes in the expanding suburbs of Kensington, Chelsea, or St John's Wood, and lived on a scale it is difficult to imagine today. When in 1866 Frederick, later Lord, Leighton decided to build a studio house in Holland Park Road, his architect George Aitchison and the builders Hack & Sons were able to provide him with one in which 'we find much that revives an Italian Renascence palace'[4] at a cost of £4,500 (excluding later additions such as the Arab Hall (12) and an extra picture gallery). In the mid-1860s Sir John Everett Millais's income from society portraiture is known to have exceeded £20,000 a year, and Leighton's would have been much the same; a painter's annual earnings were therefore roughly five times the cost of building an impressive town house, in the most modern style and with the best materials. The cost today of such a venture – purely for building works, forgetting the incalculable changes in urban land values – might be £300,000 or so, meaning that today's comparably successful artist would have an annual income of £1,500,000! The rewards given by a society to its artists are realistic indicators of that society's true wealth: in the period 1830 to 1915 the industrially-dominant colony-owning British were much the richest people in the world, an important fact to remember in assessing matters of style and taste in Victorian and Edwardian furniture and interiors.

Artists' homes reflected a variety of contrasting attitudes, not all affirming the progressive ideas of Edward Burne-Jones, who aspired in an age of sofas and cushions ... to be indifferent to comfort'.[5] Millais, having dramatically married John Ruskin's ex-wife, Effie, settled down to a life of plump conservatism. Millais's sense of satisfaction – with himself as with the status quo – was reflected in his work, which became opulent and dull. The same is true of the home he and his erstwhile runaway created, 'into which the aestheticism of the day does not enter; no, not by so much as a peacock fan'.[6]

The studio of Sir Edward J. Poynter, 'that grave and industrious man',[7] is hardly a riot of modernity either, but there are a few tell-tale signs of fashionable taste (3): on the mantleshelf a recently excavated Tanagra figurine; balanced against the mirror an oriental fan; on the dado rail some vivid Isnic pottery; nearby, on the top shelf of a what-not, a large Kutani bowl; and an inlaid Savonarola chair behind the easel. The most adventurous piece of furniture is actually the most practical, an adjustable artist's stool on which the painter impatiently waits for the photographer to finish. Despite marriage to a bright, bohemian lady – Burne-Jones's sister-in-law, Agnes – the shy Poynter retreated into the shell of aloofness created by his academic achievements: Director of the National Gallery for eleven years, President of the Royal Academy for twenty-two. As a young man he had been much more outgoing, tramping the Continent with the ineluctable 'Billy' Burges, for whom he painted the Wines and Beers cabinet (151), exhibited at the 1862 London International Exhibition. Together with other, more progressive, artists Poynter objected to the separation of the 'fine' from the 'applied' arts, and in 1868 happily designed tiles for the decoration of the Grill Room at the South Kensington Museum (now the Victoria and Albert); five years later he enjoyed himself painting the Earl of Wharncliffe's billiard room. Poynter's was perhaps a fairly typical attitude: support in theory for advanced ideas in interior design but preference, in practice, for the tasteful restraint of Georgian bureau-bookcases and Hepplewhite-style shieldback armchairs.

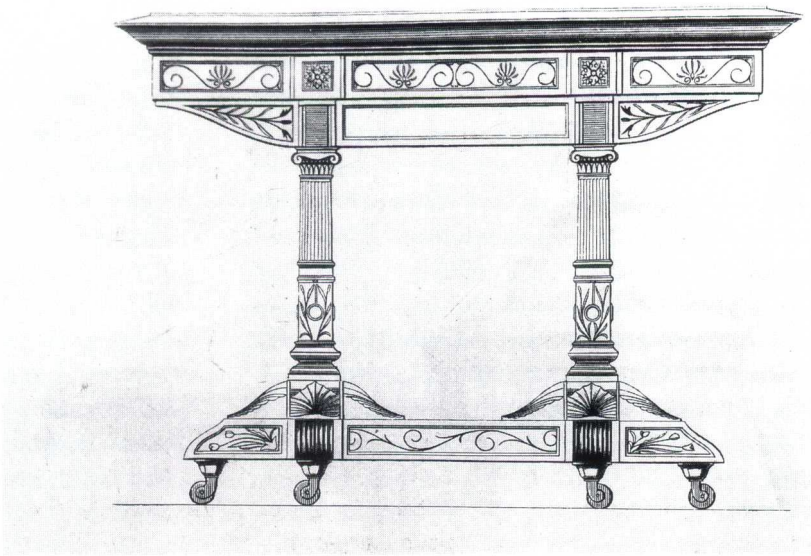
Along the newly laid-out streets of the Holland Estate in Kensington an amicable rivalry developed between artists in the appointment of their new homes. Luke Fildes, at 31 Melbury Road, believed his house 'knocked Stone's to bits',[8] though both were designed by Richard Norman Shaw and built by W.H. Lascelles. Marcus Stone's house, No. 8, was the first of the two to be occupied, in 1875; the interior (37) was said to embody 'the spirit of an Old English Home'.[9] It is not easy to ascertain precisely what was meant by the 'Old English' style (promoted by Shaw and Nesfield in the 1870s) as distinct from the 'Queen Anne' style with which it overlapped, or from the general 'Wrenaissance' of the last quarter of the century. In 1882 Mrs Haweis tried 'to explain

the apparent confusion of terms . . . [and] remind readers . . . that the slang term 'Queen Anne' means almost anything just now, but is oftenest applied to the pseudo-classic fashions of the First Empire'.[10] If the complex gradations in Victorian style were confusing to contemporaries they might well be assumed to be beyond precise definition by ourselves; certainly, to our eyes, the one thing 'Queen Anne' seems not to have had was any of the bold classicism of Empire design. As for the 'Old English' of Marcus Stone's Melbury Road studio, it does not look markedly different from Poynter's, save for the elegant proportions of Shaw's angled chimney-piece. The dissection and labelling of the historical origins of various Victorian styles is a difficult task, best left to committed pigeon-holers.

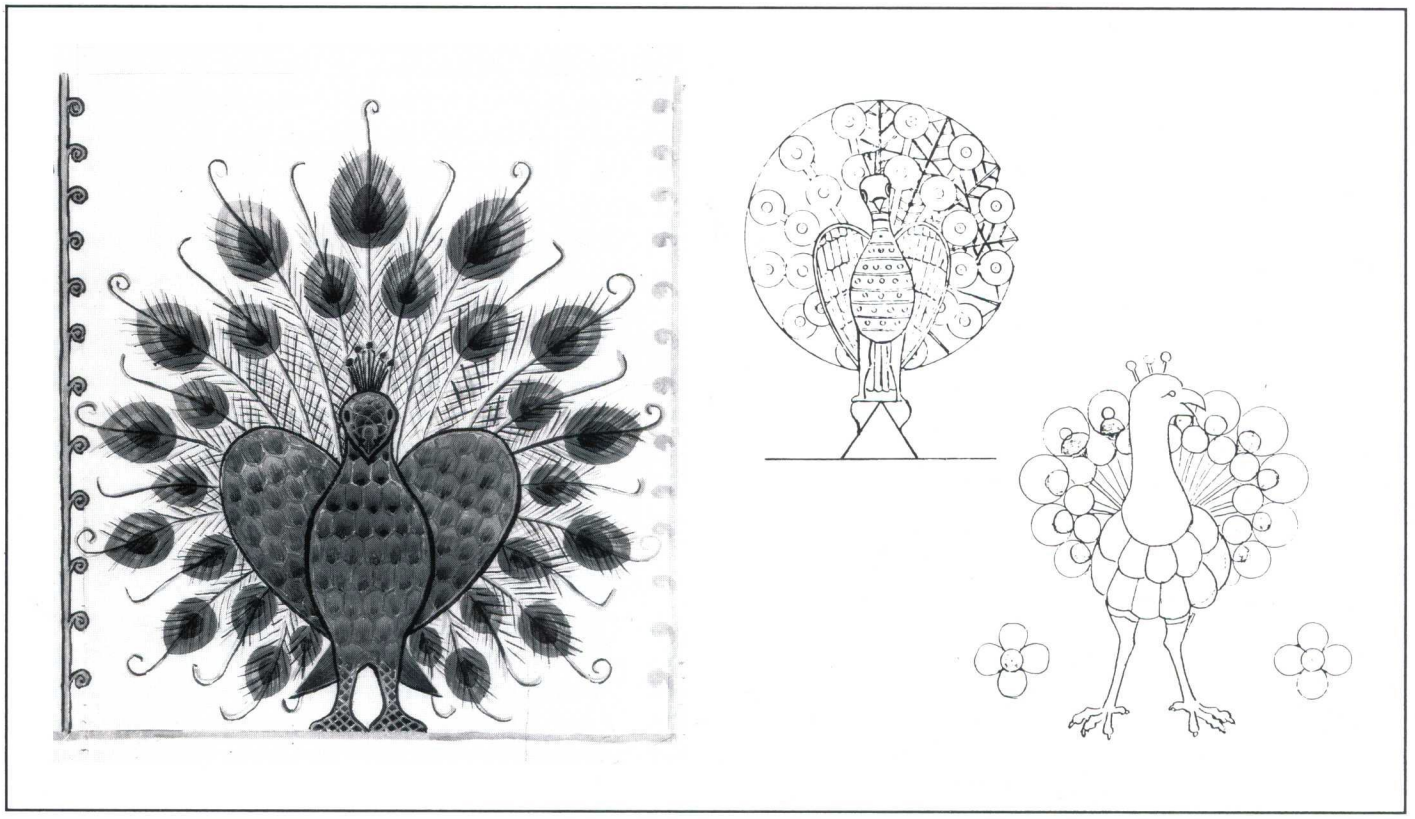
In choosing their architect, many painters turned to Shaw (1831–1912), one of the most stylistically versatile of them all. In 1870, for example, he produced skilful plans for F.W. Goodall's Grims Dyke, a 'country' house at Harrow Weald, only ten miles from Marble Arch. The main feature of its open-beamed structure was a large studio. Goodall soon discovered the professional inconvenience of living outside central London, and sold Grims Dyke, which passed in 1890 into the hands of W.S. Gilbert, the comic opera librettist. Gilbert's London house, in Harrington Gardens, was the work of Ernest George and Harold Peto, and it was to this busy partnership that he turned for the redecoration of Grims Dyke. Amongst other 'improvements', the architects installed a gigantic alabaster chimney piece in the studio (38), an ugly addendum, although by that time Shaw himself would probably have approved. The only piece of 'Art Furniture' is a Morris & Co. adjustable armchair in the left foreground. The lace petticoat serving as a lamp shade was much to Gilbert's taste: he died in the lake beside the house, of a heart attack, 'apparently while going to the assistance of two young ladies in distress'.[11] The photograph was taken by Bedford Lemère, who had joined his father's photographic business in the Strand in 1881 and continued working at the same address almost to his death in 1944. Lemère specialized exclusively in architectural photography, producing, it now appears, well over 50,000 negatives, the majority shot in natural light, with small apertures and long exposures, resulting in these crisp images. Carefully composed, they are remarkable house-portraits, as well as invaluable record shots.

Another Lemère photograph – of 1885 – shows the Hall of Narcissus at Leighton House (39), designed by George Aitchison. Mrs Haweis wrote of this view: 'The walls are deepest sea-blue tiles . . . the floor is pallid (the well-known mosaic of the Caesars' palaces) and casts up shimmering reflected lights upon the greeny-silvery ceiling . . . It possesses an imperial stateliness and strength of flavour; and the silence is like a throne.'[12] The camera leads us through to Leighton's luxurious Arab Hall, with new William De Morgan tiles to match a collection of Turkish originals, and a Walter Crane frieze 'in a beautiful running pattern of fawns and vines, carried out in gold Venice mosaic'.[13] Aitchison summoned Queen Victoria's favourite sculptor, Sir Edgar Boehm, to carve the smaller capitals in the Arab Hall; the gilded birds on the larger columns at the entrance are the work of Randolph Caldecott, like Crane better known for his children's book illustrations. As well as the building, Aitchison also designed much of the furniture, in an unfortunate combination of ill-conceived historical styles, typical of which is the table on the right in Lemère's photograph. Lauded in the popular press, the house did not please more demanding architectural critics. E.W. Godwin found the building 'altogether unsatisfactory . . . Mr Webb's work in Mr Val Prinsep's house next door [399–400] comes into close comparison with it, and is chiefly admirable for the very things in which its neighbour is so utterly deficient – viz. in beauty of skyline and pleasing arrangement of mass'.[14]

George Aitchison was one of a large group of commercially successful architects working in what his friend Robert Kerr called 'the comfortable style',[15] which was, by comparison with so much exciting design of the period,



**4** A map table for the Trinity Square offices of the Thames Conservancy Board, designed by George Aitchison in 1865 or 1866.



without any creative quality – the style-less style, it might be called. Aitchison, also an admired academic, turned down the offer of a knighthood on the grounds that it would add twenty percent to his bills. His father was the architect of Ivory House in St Katharine's Dock, a building noted for its early use of iron, and in 1862 the younger George had taken over as Architect and Surveyor to the St Katharine's Dock Company. In 1865 he was commissioned by the Thames Conservancy Board to redesign their offices. He produced his usual brand of mediocre furniture (4) and invited Leighton to design the frieze. The decoration of a house in Berkeley Square belonging to Frederick Lehmann M.P., however, turned out to be the extravagant apogee of Aitchison's interior design; he again turned to a painter for assistance, this time Albert Moore, who produced, in 1873, the renowned peacock frieze in the Front Drawing Room.

By then, peacocks had become the fashionable symbol of artistic taste, in life as in art. Not content with feathers in a vase, Viscountess Beaconsfield allowed her large flock of peacocks to roam free across the grounds of Hughenden Manor; the sculptor Alfred Stevens kept his peacock in the studio, pecking at his forever unfinished plaster maquettes; Alma-Tadema had his stuffed, then nailed it to the studio wall (32). 'A plump active little Dutchman',[16] Lourens Alma-Tadema became a naturalized Englishman in 1873 and was created Sir 'Lawrence' in 1899, at a celebratory dinner for which his friends sang the specially penned 'Carmen Tademare', set to music by George Henschel. 'Alma-Tad of the Royal Acad'[17] was a popular figure in society and 'all London sympathised with him when, on October 2nd 1874, his house, a very treasury of art, was shattered by the explosion of a barge's cargo of gunpowder and benzolene'[18] on the nearby Regent's Canal. Undeterred, the painter restored Townshend House in its entirety, executing much of the decoration himself, including the Pompeian frieze in the studio. The household was famous for its private concerts, held in a music room with gold walls and ceiling, onyx windows, and one of the grandest grand pianos of the period (33). Inside the lid of the piano Alma-Tadema fixed a parchment on which famous visitors were asked to sign their names, a list that included Tchaikovsky, Paderewski, Saint-Saëns and Clara Schumann. Designed in the 'Byzantine' style by Alma-Tadema and his friend G.E. Cox, the piano was included in Christie's disposal of the deceased artist's effects on 9 June 1913. It failed to find a buyer and was picked up after the war by the furniture retailers Maples for £441 (they paid an additional £115 for the bench, the back of which was painted by Alma-Tadema himself). This piano, which Mrs Haweis had earlier declared King Solomon could not *possibly* have refused from the Queen of Sheba, remained on prestigious display at Maples's showrooms until they, and it, were destroyed by a bomb in the Second World War.[19]

A surviving suite of Alma-Tadema furniture, in a style 'which may be described as Graeco-Roman',[20] was commissioned by Henry Marquand for the music room in his New York apartment. The piano (13), piano stools, chairs (35–36) and some side tables were exhibited at the Bond Street showrooms of Johnstone, Norman & Co. in 1885 prior to shipment to America; sold in 1981 by Sotheby's in New York, one of the chairs has since returned to England and is now in the Victoria and Albert Museum.