

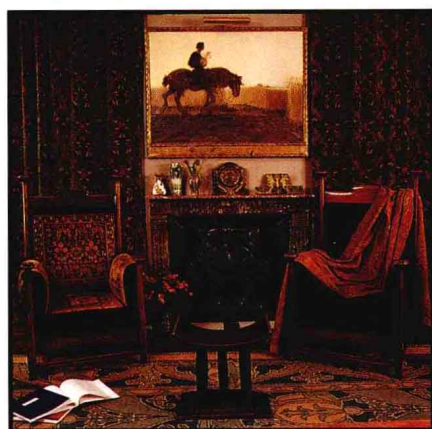
# VICTORIAN SPLENDOR

*Re-Creating America's 19th-Century Interiors*



*Allison Kyle Leopold*  
*Photography by Elizabeth Heyert*

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*Allison Kyle Leopold*

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*Stewart, Tabori and Chang*

*New York*





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## Introduction



In the course of researching and writing this book, I've come to realize that the meaning of the word "Victorian" is subject to dispute, not to mention a wide variety of prejudices. No one can agree, it seems, on what the term really means. Is "Victorian" a style of architecture, a type of home, a descriptive term for furniture? Is it a kind of decor—and, if so, what kind is it? Is it even proper to refer to American homes and interiors as "Victorian," since Victoria herself was an English queen? Or is the vaster, vaguer, and certainly less romantic label "nineteenth century" a better, if more prosaic, choice?

To those not professionally involved in the study of the nineteenth century's taste, "Victorian" conveys a much more fulfilling impression than do the blander, if more precise, substitutes. Although I use both "nineteenth century" and "Victorian," as well as the names of the various revival and reform periods, freely throughout this book, I find that the word "Victorian" most effectively evokes the vision of the rich and splendid world of the previous century. Because its use is subject to such debate, however, I feel called upon to define my terms.

"Victorian" refers not to a style, but to a period of time, held together, as are all eras, by certain accepted values and beliefs, a certain widespread code of behavior. It best describes a way of life that existed in America and Europe for the greater part of the nineteenth century. While the bulk of those years conveniently correspond with the 1837 to 1901 reign of England's beloved Queen Victoria, the roots of Victorian life in America can be found as early as the mid-1830s, and the era continued well past the turn of the century. Because daily life didn't undergo an abrupt change with the first dawning of the twentieth century (nor homes mass redecoration), the Victorian age's influences lasted into what we popularly regard as the Edwardian decade and lingered right up until the First World War.

Within that period, an unprecedented concern for the importance of interior design emerged. *House and Home Papers*, an influential little book written in 1864, for example, preached that "the man and woman who approach the august duty of creating a home are reminded of the sanctity and beauty of what they undertake." Nearly thirty years later, in 1891, *The Delineator* magazine ex-

panded that view, equating bad housekeeping with bad morals. Such was the importance of home and decoration that even women crossing the frontier in covered wagons attempted to maintain the domestic standards that they had been raised with, adding a touch of color to the wagon's interior with a green lining cloth, laying rag carpets on the floors of sleeping tents to make them homey and cozy as well as snug.

As a result of this concern, many styles appeared, most of them revivals of one kind or another. For a while it must have seemed as if there wasn't a single moment of the past that wasn't re-formed, reinterpreted, or relived, resulting in a range of Victorian ornament nothing short of overwhelming. If there was any consistent reason for this opulence and excess, it was the expansion of American wealth as the young nation expanded; and if there were any consistent themes that connected the consequent *mélange* of styles, they were those of the romantic, the picturesque, the exotic, and the ornate. In a manner which would have been directly opposed to the later "less is more" school of design, the Victorians seem to have adopted the motto "For every space there is an object," and carried it out with absolute relish.

It is just these qualities—of orna-

ment, opulence, romanticism—that I see being reborn in this twentieth-century revival of the Victorian interior. Sometimes, especially for newcomers to this Revival, it is difficult to imagine the past splendor of the sadly neglected "white elephant" house that they see, or even the very fullness of ornamentation that was once taken for granted in middle-class homes—details like rich woodwork and moldings, carved fireplaces and brass hardware, beveled-glass panes. That's not to say that thoughtless Victorian excesses or bad taste didn't exist; of course they did, as they do in any style. But also, we are now in a position to evaluate Victorian interiors, like any other style of the past, by the best they had to offer, not the worst.

The Victorian Revival interior is here to stay, as a viable "style." Once its current trendiness has faded, it will be as firmly ensconced in legitimacy as any other style. The fact that the look rests heavily on the adornment of the room's shell—its windows, walls, ceiling, and floor—as well as on furniture and accessories, contributes to its applicability to a wide range of interiors, even those that are not Victorian to start with.

Only a few of the many beautiful Victorian Revival interiors that I saw were photographed for this book,

but each one added to my perceptions about the Revival. I thank those people whose homes I was privileged to see and whose collections I admired, though they were unable to be pictured here. In particular, I would like to express my appreciation to Samuel Dornsife, who permitted me to see the extraordinary Victorian interiors of his own home, which because of scheduling difficulties could not be formally photographed. I would also like to acknowledge the many people around the country who, in hearing of my search for Victorian interiors, sent hundreds of slides, photographs, and wonderful letters detailing their own restoration efforts, or ones they knew of or had heard about.

Many people provided me invaluable assistance and guidance throughout this project.

First, I'd like to thank those members of the team at Stewart, Tabori & Chang who were helpful and encouraging during the many stages of this book. In particular, I'd like to thank my editor, Leslie Stoker, whose help was constant, advice invaluable, and assistance vital in shepherding an unwieldy project to its completion. I'm also grateful to Brian Hotchkiss, whose careful copy editing, thoughtful suggestions—and humor—helped me clarify what it was I wanted to say.

Special thanks go to my agent, Deborah Geltman, whose guidance on the project from the outset and whose support during its more turbulent moments, was appreciated.

Many thanks to Elizabeth Heyert, whose beautiful photographs make up most of the illustrative work in this book and who was able to translate through the camera my vision of Victorian life and then magically invest it with a special look of her own. Her understanding and perception of the nineteenth century added immeasurably to the quality of the project, and her courtesy and professionalism made a difficult job easier. I'd also like to acknowledge the quiet presence and steady assistance of Kristen Brochmann in the creation of these pictures, as well as the work of the other photographers whose pictures appear in this book, including David and Carin Riley.

In helping to compile the Appendices, I appreciated the assistance and enthusiasm of Megan Murray and, especially, CindyLynn Jones, who was able to step in at the eleventh hour to organize the overflow of information that had descended on my office as well as track down the stray fact, obscure quote, or lost date whenever I needed it.

Many other people assisted me in ways I would like to acknowledge: Susan Oberstein at *Vogue*, for her understanding through the duration



and demands of this project; special friends, including Maria Hopkins, who made several trips to California more pleasant, and Lynda Graham-Barber and Liz Warren, both of whom helped me with advice, leads on sources, and most of all tea and sympathy; Roberta Scheer, who, if she sees this book, knows very well why I am thanking her. My special appreciation to Professor Dale McConathy of New York University, who, as my adviser, encouraged my research from its earliest stages. It was a stroke of good fortune that led me to him through the tangled mazes of NYU, and his insights into the taste and times of the nineteenth century helped me formulate many of the ideas I've incorporated in these pages. Plus, his confidence in me—in encouraging me with this book and in helping me enter the doctoral program—helped more than he can imagine.

For varied help and Victorian information, my thanks to Carolyn Flaherty of *Victorian Homes* magazine; Judy Snyder of The Victorian Society in America; Gail Winkler, who writes beautifully about the nineteenth century, for leads on houses and other valuable sources; Nada Gray, for her hospitality and graciousness in showing me the Victorian homes of Pennsylvania. My thanks to the many people who shared their knowledge and percep-

tions of Victorian splendor, including all the “Victorian” San Franciscans like Bruce Bradbury, Larry Boyce and his team, and Jill Pilaroscia; Margot Johnson, whose charm and personal enthusiasm for the offbeat side of the Victorian era is irresistible; Sheila Parkert at Saratoga's beautiful Victorian Adelphi Hotel; experts such as Barrymore L. Scherer; Dan Damon, for generously running notice of my search for Victorian homes in his catalog as well as rushing source books to me when I needed them; John Freeman, who lent me his copy of Clarence Cook's *House Beautiful* as well as the delightful *House and Home Papers*. The insights, wit, enthusiasm, and good cheer of Dan Diehl, a member of the “Victorian” community, also made a real difference to me.

I'd like to express special thanks to John Burrows, whose generosity in sharing his ideas and sources was a great help on many occasions. I especially appreciate his introducing me to Victorian San Francisco and opening up just the right homes to me there, his assistance on many of the California shootings, and his true Victorian spirit.

Also, I extend my appreciation to all the curators, antique dealers, and other experts listed in the Appendices, who took the time to respond both to my questionnaires and my follow-up interviews. Most of all, I'd

like to thank the people who graciously allowed their homes to be photographed for this book and who, in the course of doing so, shared their considerable expertise and love of the Victorian century: Dennis Rolland, Nancy Stoddart Huang, Marilyn Buckland and Ralph Gillis, Kenneth Jay Lane, Jean-Marie and Neita Blondeau, Mark Rosen and Arlene Dahl, David Hocker, Alan and LaDel Clendenon, Tom and Tommie Veirs, Dr. Don Van Derby and Don M. Liles, Paul Pilgrim and Jerry Roy, Don Clay, Ralph DuCasse and Tom Roberts, Wandz Constanzo and Richard J. Tuff, and, in Cape May, Tom and Sue Carrol at the Mainstay Inn, Jay and Marianne Schatz at The Abbey, and Karen Andrus, who caters beautiful Victorian-style dinners and created the Victorian tea for this book. Special thanks to Julie and Jim Dale, for their graciousness on what were a very hectic two days in their lives; Richard Reutlinger, who literally gave us the run of his extraordinary Victorian mansion; and Joan and

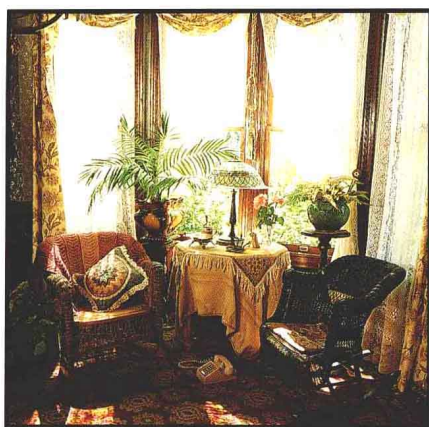
Dane Wells at Cape May's Queen Victoria Inn, both of whom made special efforts to make our stay there both productive and especially pleasant.

Finally, to my two very special "Victorian" friends, Jody Shields and Rita Baron-Faust, who are as taken with the beautiful, bewildering Victorian world as I am. Their knowledge and honest comments improved the book with the challenges they posed, and their understanding, support, and, especially, friendship mean a great deal to me. Also, to my sister Jody, who patiently listened to long chapters over the phone and whose good, natural ear and thoughtful responses helped me most of all. When time travel is perfected, these are the three people with whom I would like most to visit the nineteenth century.

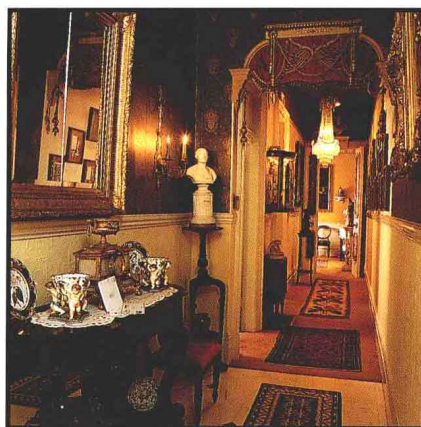
And to my husband, Tom—for his stoic patience, for taking care of everything, big and small, in our lives for two years while I worked—this book is affectionately dedicated.







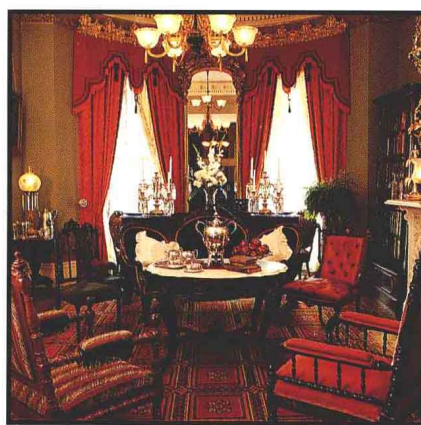
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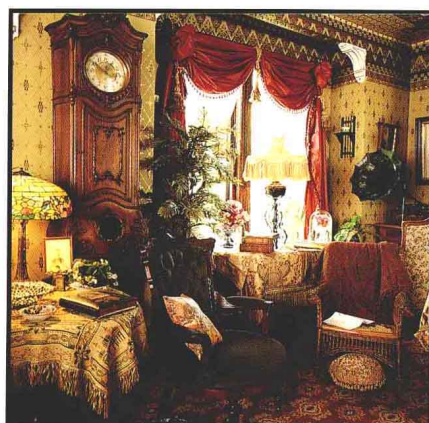
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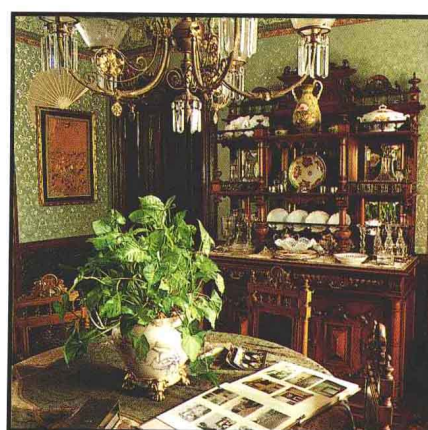
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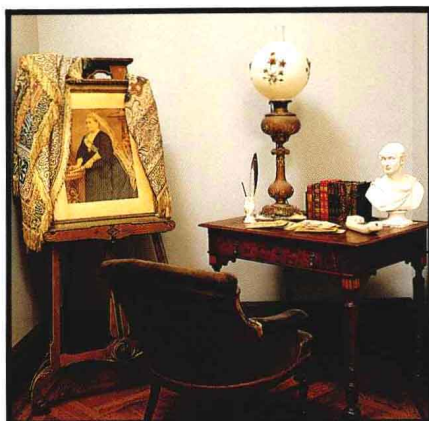
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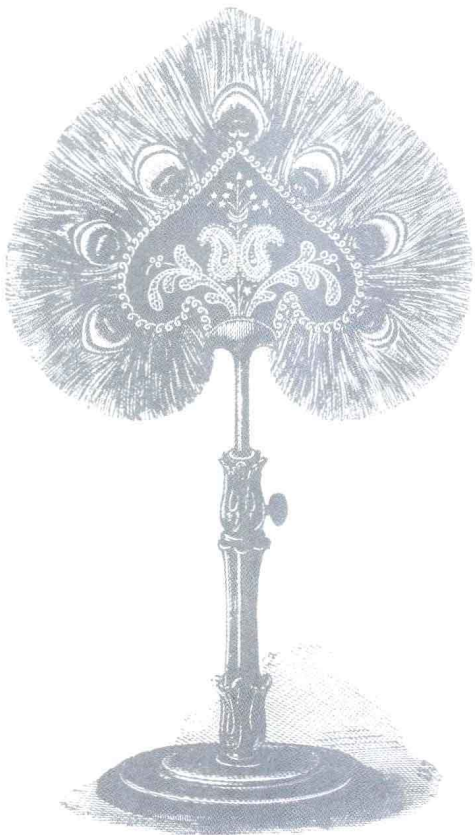
## Chapter 1

### *The Victorian Revival: A Legacy of the Romantic Age*



*A true home should be called the noblest work of art possible to human creatures, inasmuch as it is the very image chosen to represent the last and highest rest of the soul, the consummation of man's blessedness.*

*House and Home Papers (1864)*



*The curve of this bay window in a restored nineteenth-century Anaheim home speaks of a primary Victorian Revival mood—nostalgia and domesticity. The room owes this old-time ambiance to the soft, layered draperies on table and windows, the Victorian wicker chairs, and the homey familiarity of much-loved objects scattered about.*





**P**icture this. Picture a rich parlor, bursting with romantic detail. Picture walls covered with a sensually dark wallpaper, its gilding lit by a flickering mellow light. Imagine fanciful Oriental rugs, piled one on top of the other; the twinkle of delicate etched glass; the patina of gleaming mahogany woodwork. Now, focus

on the furniture—tall mirrors; low chairs with garnet-colored upholstery accented with tassels and silken fringe, drawn together here and there in intimate conversational clusters; draped side tables strewn with a magpie mixture of exotic carved boxes of jade, photographs in sinuous silver frames, bits of old ivory and amber, leatherbound books. Picture too the greenery, palms and leafy ferns filling the shadows, filtering the light.

It's a vignette right out of the heart of America's Golden Age, the Victorian years. Sumptuous, yet warm and comfortable, it is a very cozy sort of splendor. There's a sense of gracious invitation about it that recalls the life and pleasures of a bygone era.

Now, actually step into that parlor to hear the crackling fire, the glasses clinking, people talking. In-

stead of soft murmurings about the opening of the Suez Canal, Mr. Edwin Booth's fine performance in last week's *Othello*, or whether the new Bell and Edison Telephone Companies will ever amount to anything, the conversation is about something called a VCR. Someone mentions income taxes. The Academy Awards. Shopping malls. We're in the 1980s, not the 1880s, after all.

But for the content of the conversation, this newly redesigned living room in San Francisco's Pacific Heights could as easily have been found in the San Francisco of one hundred years ago; or it could just as easily be seen in a restored townhouse in Boston's South End, in one of Houston's ten thousand recently constructed "Victorian" homes, or in the suburbs of Stamford, Connecticut. It could be found in a Midwest Queen Anne, a New York City co-op, or a shingle-style mansion perched atop a New England hill.

While the Victorian era is long past, its heritage of style is in a period of rediscovery: designers, collectors, and homeowners are creating interiors that recall the ambience that flourished during America's nineteenth century. Called Victorian Revival, it's a style that's attracting a new and fervent following. Probably more people have reupholstered sofas in the past two years than in the past ten. More and more people are

scavenging salvage barns for fanciful Victorian fretwork, stained-glass windows, stately marble mantels, and embossed brass doorknobs. It is particularly interesting to observers of taste to see how wall treatments, once rejected as fussy or oppressive, now seem alive with fantastic pattern and color; how carvings, once scorned as overblown, have come to resemble complex sculpture. Even the floorplans of old Victorian homes are finding favor again. Their nooks and corridors are no longer branded as wastes of space or as evidence of poor design, but rather are sought after for their individuality, prized for their lingering rustle-of-taffeta charm. For the first time in the history of twentieth-century design, people have begun to prefer the splendid to the simple, the intensely personal to the safely neutral, the freely flamboyant to the austere discipline of minimalism.

Finally, the time has arrived for the return of the Victorian interior. Given the passage of many years, the Victorian era in all its facets—its fine and decorative arts, its politics and scientific accomplishments—is being reevaluated and reassessed. Today, spirited bidding on Belter and Bougureau fills the auction houses; Victorian furnishings and art have an honored place in museums from New York's Metropolitan to the High Museum in Atlanta.

Time is not the only reason for the return of the Victorian-inspired interior, either. The romance that clings to our perception of the nineteenth century, which masks its defects and softens its reality, is another reason for the appeal of Victorian interiors. The years spanning the 1830s to the turn of the century bring to mind certain clear pictures: the gallant clip of horse-drawn phaetons, landaus, barouches, victorias on cobblestoned streets; wasp-waisted ladies, their white shoulders gleaming as they move under the lights of great crystal ballroom chandeliers; the faint mixture of lavender mingling with bay rum; children playing with hoops and china-faced dolls.

But the Victorian era was also one of contrasts and contradictions, asking that the passionate and the proper, the sensual and the sentimental exist side-by-side. Victorian America was far from being all satins and laces. It embraced the bravado of the entrepreneur, the rugged independence of the Wild West, the perfumed allure of the opium den, as much as it did the genteel manners of polite society.

All of this was reflected in the development of the Victorian interior; there has never been anything to compare. There was—and is—a rhyme and a reason to all its elements, for it was very much an out-



*This family of dolls, decked out in lace and finery, evokes the charm and innocence of the Victorian era. The "lives" of dolls like these were a favorite theme for writers of children's books in the second half of the nineteenth century. Today, dolls of this vintage are of tremendous value and appeal to collectors.*

*Overleaf: Carmine-colored walls and deeply tufted upholstery point to the nineteenth century in this grand, urban expression of the Victorian Revival. Actually the studio apartment of a New York City designer, this Victorian mix is as intimate as it is elegant—with unmatched Victorian chairs, rare nineteenth-century brass tables and needlepoint rug, and the elegantly carved center table attributed to Alexandre Roux. Yet one also senses the undercurrent of tongue-in-cheek humor from the unexpected combinations.*



