

# Designing the Morality of Consumption: “Chamber of Horrors” at the Museum of Ornamental Art, 1852–53

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## Introduction

In Britain, where all sumptuary laws were abolished as early as 1604 (the earliest in the world), the “taste” of everyday things became an issue of great importance by the mid-nineteenth century, enough to give birth to a national institution solely dedicated to the matter. This was the Museum of Ornamental Art, now the Victoria and Albert Museum, whose primary aim was to “improve the public’s taste.” The term “taste” was introduced to Britain from France in the eighteenth century, and was discussed mainly within intellectual, aristocratic, or professional circles. Edmund Burke argued “On Taste” in the preface to his *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1756); and the title of Thomas Chippendale’s book, *Gentleman and Cabinet-Maker’s Director: Being a Large Collection of the Most Elegant and Useful Designs of Household Furniture, in the Most Fashionable Taste* (1754), was clearly suggestive of its audience. In the following century, however, after Britain had experienced the industrial revolution, “taste” was placed in a much wider context. A.W. Pugin associated taste, society, and morality in his *Contrasts: Or, A Parallel Between the Noble Edifices of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries and Similar Buildings of the Present Day, Shewing the Present Decay of Taste* (1836). Works such as *The Hand-Book of Taste: Or, How to Observe Works of Art, especially Cartoons, Pictures, and Statues* (1843) by Fabius and periodicals including *The Artist and Amateur’s Magazine: A Work Devoted to the Interests of the Arts of Design and the Cultivation of Taste*, to which William Etty and John Ruskin contributed, intended for a nonprofessional and middle-class reader, appeared soon after. So far, the focal subjects of these how-to publications were architecture, painting, sculpture, literature, and music, which, in general, were either appreciated in public or possessed by a luxuried few.

Towards the middle of the century, a different trend emerged. Taste in consumption was discussed for a nonprofessional, more general audience that would spend money on home decoration. Domestic objects became as serious a subject as any work of art, as represented by Charles Eastlake’s *Hints on Household Taste in*

*Furniture* (1868), which sold extremely well in Britain and the United States. This growing interest in everyday objects can be attributed to the Great Exhibition of 1851. As Thomas Richards argued, "Until the Exhibition the commodity had not for a moment occupied center stage in English public life; during and after the Exhibition the commodity became and remained the still center of the turning earth, the focal point of all gazing and the end point of all pilgrimages."<sup>1</sup> However, while this "palace of consumption"<sup>2</sup> certainly provided a good opportunity to discuss the commodity to an unprecedented extent, it would take further confirmation by a mechanism other than a one-time-only exhibition for this new commodity culture to have a lasting impact. That honor would fall to the Museum of Ornamental Art.

One gallery in the Museum, "Examples of False Principles in the Decoration," showed examples of "bad taste" for the purpose of illuminating the public. This gallery played a crucial role in defining the contemporary discourse on taste, and consequently on consumption. Generally known as the "Chamber of Horrors," the gallery in question was arguably the first attempt to control the consumption of commodities not by any written law, but through display and discourse on the morality of consumption. Museum histories often refer to this gallery in a side story. However, although small and short-lived, it was significant in a way more than the Great Exhibition, marking the turning point in the discussion of taste from a production view to a consumption-oriented view.

This article focuses on this controversial gallery representing "bad taste" for the purpose of understanding the formation of moral discourses of taste and consumption in the Victorian period.

### **Production-Oriented Discourse on Taste**

It is well known that Britain entered the Victorian Period with a feeling of inferiority towards Germany and France in the field of design due to the increase of German and French exports. After its appointment in 1835, the Select Committee on Arts and Manufactures "problematicized" the lack of design education, as well as issues such as the wallpaper tax and the regulation of patents. "Taste" was one of the most important issues. When Charles Robert Cockerell, the architect of the Bank of England and an associate of the Royal Academy, was called to give evidence before the Committee, he deplored the "indifference shown by Government on a subject...which is of paramount commercial and national importance in a manufacturing country where the cultivation of taste only is wanting to give us superiority over the world."<sup>3</sup>

The impact of the Select Committee on the discourse of taste and consumption can be detected in magazines including *The Penny Magazine* published by the Society of Diffusion of Useful Knowledge. Aimed at improving the working class from the middle-class point of view, this publication occasionally had articles on everyday objects

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1 Thomas Richards, *The Commodity Culture of Victorian England* (Verso, 1991), 18.

2 Tim Barringer, "The South Kensington Museum and the Mid-Victorian Moment," in *Victorian: The Style of Empire* (The Decorative Arts Institute, 1996), 26.

3 Evidence given by Charles Robert Cockerell on Aug. 28, 1835 in "Report from Select Committee on Arts and Manufactures" (1835).

such as cutlery and furniture. In the first issue, “On the Choice of a Labouring Man’s Dwelling” told the reader to “begin humbly.”<sup>4</sup> After the Committee published its results, consumption was clearly encouraged: “If rooms are to be papered at all, why should they not be ornamented with tasteful, elegant, and suitable patterns, instead of what is tawdry and ugly?”<sup>5</sup> Here, discourse was not based on the pleasure of consumption, but on taste as a stimulus for possible employment. “Improvement of Taste in the Decoration of Houses” stated that taste would secure more work positions: “A wide field for productive employment might be opened, if the taste of the people of Great Britain were so generally improved, as to require that the decoration of houses and the adaptation of household furniture, should be pursued on scientific principle.”<sup>6</sup> *The Penny Magazine* stated that good taste would do both manufacturers and workers good, demonstrating that the middle-class view on taste at this point emphasized its link with production.

It was Henry Cole and his circle who would lead the discourse of taste in a more consciously consumption-oriented direction. Cole accomplished this by introducing a “moral” quality into design. A civil servant who reorganized the Public Record Office and introduced the “Penny Post” system, Cole won a silver prize at the Royal Society of Arts exhibition in 1846 and was mentioned by Prince Albert (the patron of the Society). Cole and his circle devoted themselves to the development of industry and art, the major outcome of which was the Great Exhibition of 1851. He also established Felix Summerly’s Art Manufactures in 1847, began challenging the School of Design (est. 1837—a concrete outcome of the Select Committee), and criticized the inefficiency of the design education system. In 1849, Cole began publishing the *Journal of Design and Manufactures*, which contained design theories written by artists, painter, designers, and members of the Royal Academy including Richard Redgrave, William Dyce, and others who designed for Felix Summerly’s Art Manufactures.

The biggest problem in the system was, according to Cole, the absence of “principles” in design, and the first issue of the *Journal* emphasized the importance of design theory. It was important “to present to the designer treatises developing sound principles of ornamental art, and to keep him thoroughly informed of all that is likely to be useful and instructive to him in his profession”; thus “the manufacturer and student of design will find throughout our pages something like a systematic attempt to establish recognized principles.”<sup>7</sup> Visualization was key to this process, and the first issue duly included no less than forty-four textile samples and more than two hundred illustrations.

The *Journal* included extensive discussion of both the “right” and “wrong” designs, where the “wrong” examples often came from the School of Design students. The titles of articles in the *Journal* also demonstrate the editor and writers’ tendency to dogmatize design

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4 *Penny Magazine* 1 (April 7, 1832): 16.

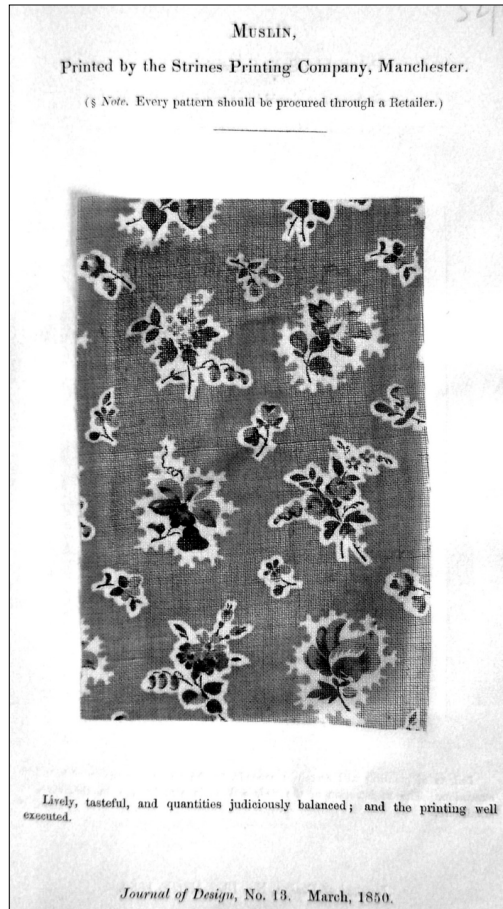
5 *Penny Magazine* 5 (Dec. 10, 1836): 484.

6 *Ibid.*

7 *Journal of Design and Manufactures* (hereafter *Journal*) 1:1 (1849): 3.

Figure 1

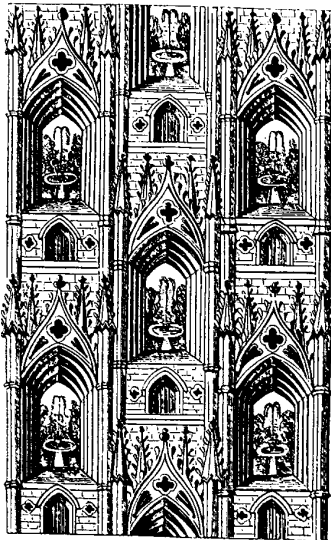
Page from the *Journal of Design and Manufactures*, No.13, 1850



theory; while the first issue contained only “reviews” of patterns. Words such as “hints” appeared in the second issue. By the fourth issue, the writers of the *Journal* had begun to make judgments on “good” or “bad” taste. The titles of articles such as “Iron-work and Its Principles of Treatment,” “Right Taste for Carpet, Wallpaper, Glass Products,” “Canons of Taste in Carpets, Paper-Hangings, and Glass,” and “The Use and Abuse of ‘Parian’” demonstrated the Cole circle’s endeavors to define the “right” taste. Geometric patterns were considered to be “good,” and naturalistic designs and excessive decorations were unwelcome, even though naturalistic flower patterns were the most commercially successful in this period.

The *Journal* was noteworthy for connecting design with judgments of taste and morality. A. W. Pugin’s *True Principles of Christian or Pointed Architecture* (1841), had shown that nineteenth-century Christian architecture employed structure and decoration to express the true values of Christianity. Pugin went on to apply this religious judgment to judgments of taste. Cole was inspired by Pugin, with whom he worked on the Exhibition, and followed his discourse albeit without the religious aspect.<sup>8</sup> When a member of The Great Exhibition team commented: “I think experience shows that

8 See Clive Wainwright, “Principles True and False: Pugin and the Foundation of the Museum of Manufactures,” *Burlington Magazine* CXXXVI:1095 (June 1994): 357–364.



Pattern of Modern Gothic Paper.

Figure 2

Wallpaper pattern showing defective principles but "a great favourite with hotel and tavern keepers" (Pugin, *True Principles*, 29)

doctors in taste differ as much as doctors in medicine," Cole replied: "I think to act upon the principle of 'every one to his taste,' would be as mischievous as 'every one to his morals'; and I think there are principles in taste which all eminent artists are agreed upon in all parts of the world."<sup>9</sup> The *Journal* reiterated the thesis that the artistic value of design denotes its moral value:

Whilst the commercial value of ornamental design now comes home practically to the perception of tens of thousands—to manufacturers, artists, and designers; to artisans and dealers in decorative manufactures; the moral influence of ornamental art extends to millions...And surely the stale proverb of a thousand years standing, that art softens rough natures, need hardly be quoted in proof of its moral benefits.<sup>10</sup>

Another editorial opined:

Design has a twofold relation, having, in the first place, a strict reference to utility in the thing designed; and, secondly, to the beautifying or ornamenting that utility. The word design, however, with the many has become identified rather with its secondary than with its whole signification—with ornament, as apart from, and often even as opposed to, utility...These errors, by vitiating the taste of the public, react upon the artist, until both have arrived at such a state of diseased judgment, that the simplicity of truth and propriety would hardly be endured, however well presented; and the many have come to love gaudy extravagance in lieu of simple, earnest, ornamental art.<sup>11</sup>

Authors such as Joseph Addison, Lord Shaftesbury, and Francis Hatchenson had associated morality with taste from the eighteenth century, and this discourse still was strong in the following century. By using the language of "true" and "false" when discussing design, Cole's framework of "truthful" taste as the proper choice against "hideous" manufactures worked well to persuade a Victorian middle class deeply concerned with "respectability." The original utilitarian intention to increase the sale of British goods by attractive design; an intention prominently apparent in the Select Committee's conclusions; was somewhat covered by the evangelical, moral discourse.

Cole emphasized the importance of the consumer in design reform: "Improvement in design depends not only on the right intelligence of manufacturers and designers, but quite as much, or even more, on that of the public;" and "If the public are unable to appreciate excellence, surely we cannot call on the manufacturer to produce it at a sacrifice."<sup>12</sup> Six months after its first publication, the *Journal* was being published on monthly basis. Its editors began to pay full attention to the "average" consumer, and introduced selected successful examples of decorative products "considered

9 Alan S. Cole, *Fifty Years of Public Work of Sir Henry Cole, K.C.B. Accounted for in His Deeds, Speeches, and Writings I and II* (London: George Bell and Sons, 1884), 286.

10 *Journal* 1:1 (1849): 1.

11 *Journal* 1:2 (1849): 56.

12 *Journal* 11:7 (1849): 1.

with reference to the use of them by the consumer” and to “direct means of interesting the general public practically in design.”<sup>13</sup> They desired “to exhibit and criticize not so much the best and most costly productions, and therefore exclusive patterns, but the *fair average* character of our manufactures, not neglecting the *very cheapest*.”<sup>14</sup> Ironically, the reader of the magazine was never “average,” but rather restricted mainly to retailers and those in the design professions. The magazine’s dynamic idea of attaching textile samples with prices was well received, but the practice also limited the publication run practically and financially. As the *Art Journal* pointed out, it was expensive: “It has not been successful; its circulation has been small, and not remunerative” and “could not have taken place at all if the circulation of the *Journal* had been extensive.”<sup>15</sup> However, the attempt to visualize taste judgments to promote taste socially gave impetus to the next big project: a large-scale public exhibition.

Thus came the world’s first Great Exhibition of 1851, displaying one-hundred thousand objects from more than thirty-two countries (half of the products were British-made), which revealed the aesthetic inferiority of British products and supplied a good opportunity to discuss “taste” openly. In *Art Journal*, R. N. Wornum wrote a twenty-two-page essay on “[The] Exhibition as a lesson in taste.” Wornum’s main argument was that people needed education to improve their taste, and if the criteria for good taste were exhibited in public space, the public would learn better taste through the exhibited objects. In the beginning of his article, Wornum quoted Edmund Burke, arguing that bad taste derived from a lack of design theory and education. He discussed improvement in design would bring “not only a direct success but also the whole social progress” with many foreign objects concurrently displayed with the British ones, thus providing an opportunity for comparison. The Great Exhibition, he believed, was “of all things the best calculated to advance our National Taste.”<sup>16</sup>

There were two obvious roadblocks to the Exhibition as a site encouraging the improvement of taste: its temporality and the exhibits’ mixed nature. *Mechanics’ Magazine* editors had expressed their suspicion that “The few objects intrinsically good will be smothered by what are intrinsically bad,” and that “public taste will be blinded to truth and perverted to false good.”<sup>17</sup> Wornum also recognized this problem in his essay. In order to improve the public taste, Britain needed a permanent exhibition space to display selected objects. An institution such as a museum was the most suitable venue for this, since museums and galleries were considered ideal for all classes to share knowledge. Britain had only a few museums at the beginning of the nineteenth century, but the number of the museums gradually increased to around forty in 1845, when the Museum Act was issued. During the Exhibition, Cole already had suggested to the Department of Trade that selected well-designed objects should be moved to the collection of the School of Design. Cole, Redgrave,

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13 *Journal* III:1 (1849): 5.

14 *Journal* I:1 (1849): 5

15 *Art Journal* (1852): 99.

16 Ralph Wornum, “The Exhibition as a Lesson in Taste,” *Art Journal* (1851): I, VII, XXII, V–VI.

17 *Mechanics’ Magazine* 1396 (1850): 370–1.

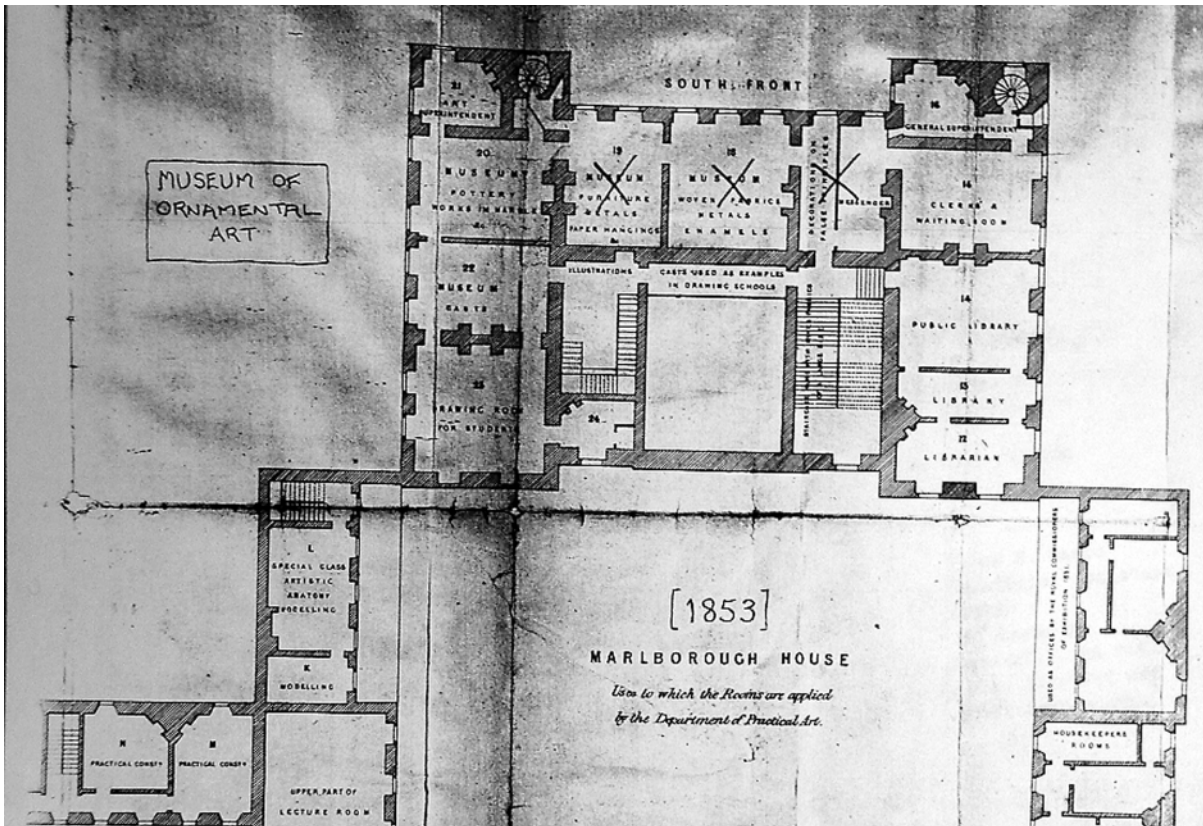


Figure 3  
Plan of the Museum of Ornamental Art at  
Marlborough House (V&A Museum)

Pugin, and Owen Jones selected the objects. In January 1852, the new Department of Practical Art (Department of Science and Art from 1853) started, with Cole as director. The Department's aims were:

1st, General Elementary Instruction in Art, as a branch of national education among all classes of the community, with the view of laying the foundation for correct judgment, both in the consumer and the producer of manufactures; 2nd, Advanced Instruction in Art; and lastly, the Application of the Principles of Technical Art to the improvement of manufactures, together with the establishment of Museums, by which all classes might be induced to investigate those common principles of taste which may be traced in the works of excellence of all ages.<sup>18</sup>

Queen Victoria and Prince Albert gave Cole permission to use Marlborough House of Pall Mall. They refurbished on the top floor to the house the School of Design's collection—objects from the Great Exhibition estimated to be worth around five thousand pounds, including the royal ceramic collection. The Museum of Ornamental Art thus was established as a result of Cole's doing "twice the work of anyone else."<sup>19</sup> He ceased publication of the *Journal* in February 1852. In May, Owen Jones gave four lectures on "The True and False Principles of Design." The audience for these lectures averaged 116

18 "First Report of the Department of Practical Art" (London, 1853): 2.

19 Henry Cole Diary, July 20, 1852 (typed manuscript, National Art library).

people in the morning, and 211 in the evening; attendance figures which exceeded audiences at lectures that year. The museum was open to the public for seventeen days in May and June, and after the summer, it reopened permanently, offering unlimited admission to students, and free admission to the public on Mondays and Tuesdays. Despite the fact that the British Museum closed galleries because gas lights would damage the objects on display, and the National Gallery regulated opening hours against the “unreliable” working class, the Museum of Ornamental Art was the first museum opened until the early evening “to ascertain practically what hours are most convenient to the working classes.”<sup>20</sup> According to the first report the Department of Practical Art issued in 1853, the museum had an average of 800 visitors on days it was open to the public, and seventy on student days.<sup>21</sup> It attracted 6,359 visitors between February 27, 1852 and January 6, 1853, and sold 18,706 catalogs, thus reaching a much broader audience than had the *Journal*.<sup>22</sup>

*The Illustrated London News* reported that the museum was a “new-born school of taste.”<sup>23</sup> Indeed it was, for all visitors had to physically pass through the “Examples of False Principles in Decoration” gallery (its name and the content obviously echoing Pugin’s book *True Principles*), or so-called “Chamber of Horrors,” before entering the main galleries of treasures. There were eighty-seven objects specifically selected to represent “bad taste.” Visitors were encouraged to observe these objects with the guidance of the catalogue, which described every single detail of falsehood in the exhibits, and depicted why these were “false.” The *Journal*’s emphasis on simplicity, geometry, and truth to material was firmly stamped in the catalogue of the museum. It said:

There has arisen a new species of ornament of the most objectionable kind, which it is desirable at once to deprecate on account of its complete departure from just taste and true principles. This may be called the “natural” or merely imitative style, and it is seen in its worst development in some of the articles of form.<sup>24</sup>

Articles such as “Landscapes and pictures are almost always out of place in pottery,” and “Brilliance of surface and transparency should ever be preserved with the greatest care in all right treatment of glass,” added to the emphasis. Generally, three-dimensional naturalistic patterns on two-dimensional surfaces received the most criticism. A carpet (Catalogue No. 1) was judged as “bad taste” for its “Direct imitation of nature; flowers out of scale; architectural ornament in imitation relief; inharmonious colouring,” and imitation of ribbons upon fabrics were repeatedly criticized. Wallpaper (No. 27) with “Perspective representation of a railway station, frequently repeated and falsifying the perspective” was determined to be “false.” A jelly glass (No. 64) represented that “the natural outline of the glass when blown destroyed by the surfaces being cut.” A

20 However, there were no difficulties in opening the museum to the working class. *The Observer* reported that the people neatly queued. They did not at all damage objects estimated at thousands of pounds, and that all of the visitors were satisfied with the display and contents at the museum. (*The Observer*, January 9, 1853).

21 “First Report of the Department of Practical Art” (London, 1853): 44.

22 Henry Cole, *The Functions of the Science and Art Department* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1857), 24.

23 *The Illustrated London News* (September 11, 1852): 195.

24 *A Catalogue of the Museum of Ornamental Art, at Marlborough House, Pall Mall, for the Use of Students and Manufacturers, and the Public* (London, 1853), 13.





Figure 4 (above left)  
Object no. 16 (V&A Museum)

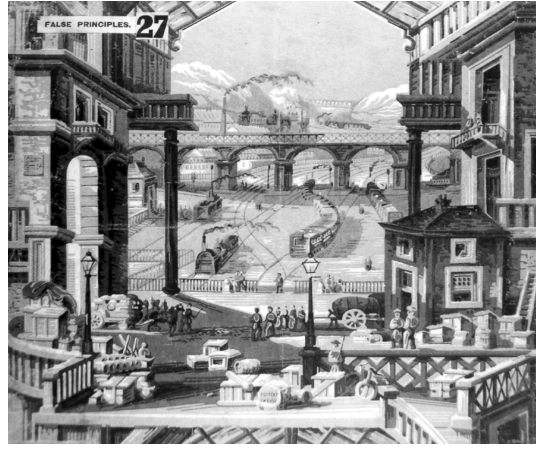


Figure 5 (above right)  
Object no. 27 (V&A Museum)

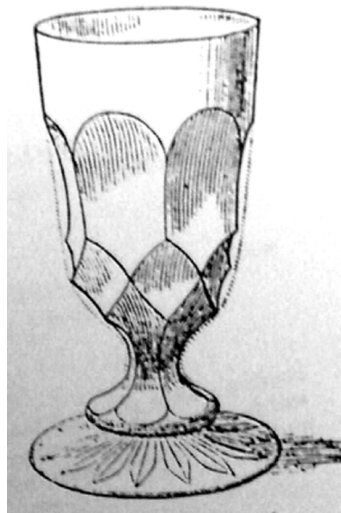


Figure 6 (right)  
Object no. 64 (V&A Museum)

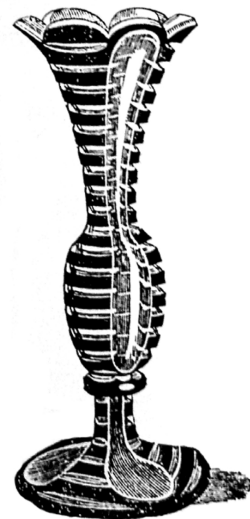


Figure 7 (far right)  
Object no. 69 (V&A Museum)

glass vase (No. 69) also was assessed as having its “general outline entirely destroyed by the vertical cuttings.” The commentary on a jug (No. 76) sounds very curious: “The general form totally disregarded; it is a rude imitation, in blue earthenware, of the trunk of a tree, on which are applied figures, vine leaves, and grapes, all out of scale with one another; this jug has been one of the most popular ever manufactured.” A gas burner (No. 83), made in Birmingham, one of “those inexhaustible mines of bad taste” according to Pugin,<sup>25</sup> also was very popular in society, but it was “entirely indefensible in principle.”

### Reactions to the “Horrors”

The “Chamber of Horrors” affected both consumers and producers, although in different ways. Consumers were taken aback. Some people completely misunderstood the message, due to the paradox of an art museum displaying objects of “bad taste,” and admired the “false principles” as creditable examples. Some who managed to

25 The other city was Sheffield. A.W.N. Pugin, *True Principles of Pointed or Christian Architecture* (London, 1854): 28.



Figure 8  
Object no. 83 (V&A Museum)

understand the message correctly faced an identity crisis. First, they were upset to find that they had been living surrounded by what was labeled “bad taste.” The gallery immediately was caricatured in Dickens’s weekly magazine, *Household Words*. The plot, about a middle-class gentleman who was happy until he visited the gallery, was set exactly as Cole had envisaged. The crisis began once Mr. Crumpet had “acquired some ‘Correct Principles of Taste.’” He realized that he had been living in what the exhibit called a “reproduction of nature.” When he went into the gallery with the catalogue, he was “ashamed of the pattern of my own trousers, for I saw a piece of them hung up there as a horror.” After his return from the museum of ordeal, he “saw it all; when I went home I found that I had been living among horrors up to that hour. The paper in my parlour contains four kinds of bird of paradise, besides bridges and pagodas.” At a friend’s house, he suffered from the “imitation of nature” present in the wallpaper’s perspective pattern, and flowers and fruits in the pattern of a carpet. He almost fainted when he found a naturalistic drawing on the bottom of a teacup: “Butter-fly-inside my cup! Horr-horr-horr-horr-i-ble!” His friend took him home in a cab. He sympathetically told him that design certainly needed “true principles,” but such abstract ideas would not become common until the next generation. If things went too far, it meant no good.<sup>26</sup>

Another kind of confusion arose when consumers attempted to understand the concept behind the display. A gentleman wrote to *The Observer*:

A party of young ladies entering here saw a small handkerchief, with the motto, “Honesty is the best policy.” Immediately over it were the words, “False principles,” referring to the picture on the handkerchief. “Oh!” cried one of them, “if honesty is the best policy is false principles, we must take care of our pockets here.” Most of the visitors were confounded by this ominous label of false principles. Even those who recognized the truth of the objections (writes our correspondent) could not understand why a rose, for instance, so beautifully copied, could be false; and, we believe, for the first time in their lives they began to think about art and its meanings.<sup>27</sup>

As the above examples show, the gallery was much appreciated but its overly serious approach towards “bad taste” was a butt of many jokes. Still, one consistent message was certainly felt: the consumer was strongly made aware that s/he was expected to “choose” correctly. The gallery took advantage of this psychology of consumption. The production side naturally was extremely unhappy with the “Chamber of Horrors,” especially those whose own products were displayed in it. In 1853, thick pamphlets consisted of three volumes entitled, *A Mild Remonstrance against the Taste-Censorship at Marlborough House in Reference to Manufacturing Ornamentation*

26 Henry Morley, “A House Full of Horrors,” *Household Words* VI (December 4, 1852): 265–270.

27 *The Observer* (January 9, 1853).

and *Decorative Design (to Manufacturers, Decorators, Designers, Public Generale)* came out. The anonymous writer called himself "Argus," after the mythical monster with multiple eyes. Each pamphlet cost six pence, but manufacturers were able to buy a hundred copies for four shillings when they circulated them free to their clients and suppliers.

The contents were provocative. The author condemned the practice of calling British design "bad taste" compared to that of France, Italy, and China: "What right have they to have different tastes, different habits, and different modes of thought, to Englishmen?"<sup>28</sup> Argus blamed the Museum of Ornamental Art for wasting the nation's tax money, and pointed out the paradoxes in the catalogue's "principles." The pamphlet criticized the Museum for its acquisition of foreign cabinets, described at the Great Exhibition as "Notwithstanding the defects in the upper part of this piece of furniture, where there is a great mixture of styles; and the bad carving of the figures in the lower part, this was one of the finest works of its kind in the Exhibition, and cannot be too strongly recommended" for four-hundred pounds. The author urged the museum to explain: "In the first place, with such defects in style, and so bad in workmanship, why was it purchased? In the next place, notwithstanding these defects from top to bottom, why is it one of the very first things we meet with as illustrative of "True Principles"? or rather, why is it not, all costly as it is, in your Chamber of Horrors?" Also, if "Simplicity is one of the first constituents of Beauty", why then did you buy the elaborately-ornamented Snuff-box? Why the elaborately ornamented Knife-handle, price £200? Why, in short, did you purchase all the other elaborately ornamented articles which make a Wardour Street Curiosity-shop of your museum?" He maintained that the "Chamber of Horrors" was a challenge to the laissez-faire spirit in industry and "an act of imbecile and wanton injustice." He pointed out that only one-twentieth of the museum's objects followed the true principles, and suggested that "the sooner you withdraw your Principle, or shut up your Museum, the better."<sup>29</sup>

Argus's remonstrance was rhetorically constructed. In the first volume, the tone was humanitarian. He called Redgrave, Jones, and Cole a "Triumvirate of Taste" that believed in the existence of "Canons of Taste." In the second volume, he criticized the censorship of taste as "an encroachment on our liberties" and "tyranny."<sup>30</sup> He strongly stated that "You can no more change the Religion of a nation by a coup d'état, than you can reform the Taste of a nation by simply willing it in solemn conclave at Marlborough House."<sup>31</sup> He opposed the regulation of taste by referring to human freedom and democratic rights, rather than commercial intentions. The economic function of design was covered with the word "taste" tinted with morality, as Cole often had done. In the third volume, he finally mentioned business, but again using Cole's "true" and "false" rhetoric itself to confront his group. Manufacturers needed to apply

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28 Argus (pseudonym), "A Mild Remonstrance Against the Taste-Censorship at Marlborough House in Reference to Manufacturing Ornamentation and Decorative Design," Part I (London, 1853): 3.

29 Argus, *ibid.*, Part I: 25–7.

30 Argus, *ibid.*, Part II: 33.

31 Argus, *ibid.*, Part II: 11–3.

complex rather than simple decoration in order to sell products with added values, and what sold was “true” to them.

In fact, the “Chamber of Horrors” was severely damaging to certain trades. A manufacturer who mainly used “flowery patterns” and the “direct imitation of nature” complained that “My whole stock— my machinery—my capital,—my all—is jeopardized by the interference, in the name of the Government, of these censors” as the result of their products being displayed in the ‘Chamber of Horrors.’”<sup>32</sup> Finally, manufacturers’ similar complaints reached Parliament, and the gallery was closed in the spring of 1853.

One must note that this was not the end of the taste bureaucracy, but rather the beginning of its long-lasting influence. Cole himself seemed to be satisfied with the excitement it caused. When the Crystal Palace was moved to Sydenham, he suggested that organizers create another “Chamber of Horrors” there. He also reflected proudly on this event in *What Is Art Culture?* (1877): “You may recollect that, in 1853, there was a ‘chamber of horrors’ in Kensington Museum, which consisted of a collection of samples of decorations of the most costly kind, which had no principles of decorations about them. That chamber produced a startling effect; it was talked about even in Parliament.” He continued that “The productions of our best manufacturers are now much more consistent with standards of good taste than formerly,” and, therefore, he maintained, “Such a chamber of horrors could not be produced now.”<sup>33</sup> His belief in the canon of taste was never shaken.

The influence of the gallery certainly was felt in the manufacturing world. *The Builder* noticed at the Paris Exposition Universelle (1855) that “In the present exhibition we miss the atrocious natural imitations of fruit, flowers, and landscapes once so popular among all classes; and in place of them, sober, conventional treatments of foliage, exhibiting considerable skill in design and arrangement.”<sup>34</sup> At the Great Exhibition of 1862, as the government set more clear regulations for its collection, or because manufacturers began to take taste concerns more seriously, the numbers of objects in “imitation of nature” was observed to be less than at the Great Exhibition. Modes of consumption must have been influenced, too, for in the 1860s, many living rooms were refurbished with two-dimensional pattern designs, reflecting the lessons shown by the exhibit at the “Chamber.”<sup>35</sup>

The argument regarding good and bad, or true and false, design was penetrating society in various ways, most directly through advice literature. Christopher Dresser’s *Principle of Decorative Design* (1873), a manual for practical designers, was largely based on the same discourse. As for manuals for the consumer, Eastlake’s *Hints on Household Taste* aimed to “encourage a discrimination between good and bad design in those articles of daily use.” Eastlake also stressed that judging a commodity’s quality was part of moral housewives’ duties, emphasizing the link between femininity and

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32 *Morning Advertiser* (February 25, 1853).

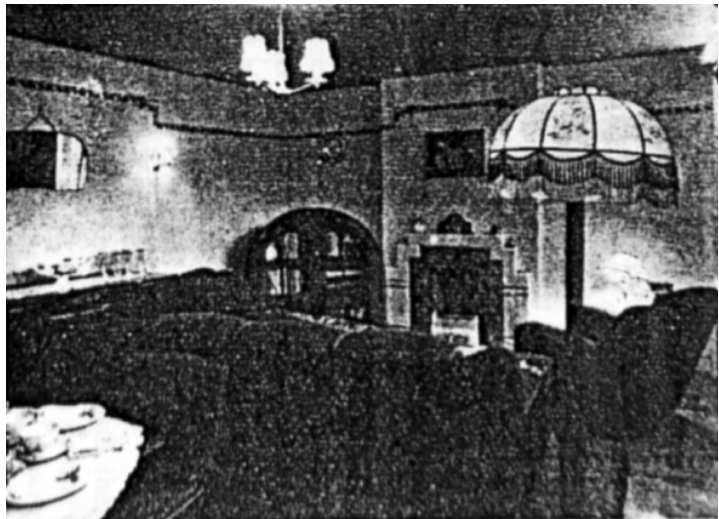
33 Henry Cole, *What Is Art Culture?* (London, 1877), 6.

34 *The Builder* (1855)

35 Barbara Morris, *The Inspiration of Design* (London, 1986), 21.

Figure 9

Two rooms at the "Register Your Choice" Exhibition (Mass-Observation Bulletin, No. 49, March/June, 1953)



consumption. Eastlake, who saw the "Chamber of Horrors" as a way "to illustrate the progress of bad taste in this century,"<sup>36</sup> reiterated the arguments found in its catalogue: "It is an established principle in the theory of design that decorative art is degraded when it passes into a direct imitation of natural objects."<sup>37</sup>

Taste and morality became inseparable in the Victorian discourse of consumption. In 1864, John Ruskin was more straightforward: "...good taste is essentially a moral quality... Taste is not only a part and index of morality;— it is the only morality."<sup>38</sup> To choose correctly and tastefully was of great significance, and the consumer had to follow the taste bureaucrats. Echoes of the "Chamber of Horrors" can be found in later design reform movements. In the first half of the next century, when modernism emphasized geometric forms even more than Cole could ever have imagined, moral discourse in taste again was very strong. Modernism was first thought to be "immoral." As Sir Laurence Weaver lamented, "A great many excellent

36 Charles Eastlake, *Hints on Household Taste* (London, 1868), 15, 67–8.

37 *Ibid.*, 161.

38 John Ruskin, *The Crown of Wild Olive* (1864).

people, good husbands and fathers, who think that any art which proclaims itself to be modern must be Bolshevik; that if you do not want to be Georgian or Queen Anne, you must be immoral; that modernism in art is a thing which has to be stamped on firmly.”<sup>39</sup> In turn, modernists claimed that modernism was true and moral. The Design and Industries Association (est. 1915) was a prominent example. The Association, conscious of leading and formulating the modern taste, visualized what they thought as “bad taste” in 1928 at the *Daily Mail*’s “Ideal Home Exhibition” by preparing a new “Chamber of Horrors.” In 1953, a century after the Chamber closed, the Association organized the “Register Your Choice” Exhibition at Charing Cross Station, with two rooms furnished in different tastes (one modern, the other conservative). A governmental organization, the Council of Industrial Design, also favored comparative exhibitions of “good” and “bad” design exhibited for comparison at the “Britain Can Make It” Exhibition (1946). Thus, the framework for the politics of taste constructed by Cole, whom Argus had sarcastically called “man of design,” survived until the dawn of post-modernism finally negated any unified criteria for good design.

### Conclusion

Design means order, method, and plan: the antonym of disorder. And a museum was, and remains today, epistemologically a space in which the world is ordered in a certain system. Considering the significance of principles for pacifying society as expressed in Matthew Arnold’s *Culture and Anarchy* (1869), anything associated with disorder was in a way a “horror” to the Victorian mind. Adding nuances of morality to taste and design helped to manipulate and regulate public opinion and standardize taste, especially when this was visualized at a national museum.

In 1959, Kenneth Clark, then Director of the National Gallery, published a pamphlet entitled, *What Is Good Taste?* In the pamphlet, written in the transitional period from modern to post-modern, he did not give a definitive answer to the question, but he made an interesting comment:

I’m not saying that machinery is the enemy of taste necessarily; but it changes the basis of taste from making to choosing.<sup>40</sup>

In a society of mass production supported by mechanization, what mattered for taste was not making or production, but choosing or consumption. Thus, society was led toward a more consumption-conscious axis. The “Chamber of Horrors” symbolized the new conditions for taste, and *forced* the change on Victorian society. A new consciousness was rooted into the consumer.

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39 Sir Laurence Weaver, “Art in Industry and Salesmanship” (lecture pamphlet, February 5, 1929): 14–15.

40 Sir Kenneth Clark, *What Is Good Taste?* (Associated Television Limited, 1959).