

THE VICTORIAN PERIOD

When King William IV died in the winter of 1837 his niece Victoria was to be crowned Queen at the age of 19. Victoria was born in 1819 the daughter of Edward, Duke of Kent, George III 's fourth son (Bly1971) , she married Prince Albert in 1840 . Little did she know she was about to embark on one of the longest and most auspicious reigns of English regal history. There are many reasons for this , on a political level (Collins 1979) states "... her sense of vocation did much to restore the prestige of the British monarchy" .

On a technological level this was a period in which heavy engineering was to flourish, " ...the harnessing of steam, gas and electricity, of the development of travel, large hotels , postage and newspapers , telegraphs , tramcars and underground railways (Bly1971).

Victoria came to the throne just after it was recommended that the Palace of Westminster should be redesigned in the now fashionable Gothic and Elizabethan styles. Augustus Welby Pugin helped to design these new Houses of Parliament along with Sir Charles Barry between 1836 and 1843 level (Collins 1979)(Price 1978). Railway stations colleges, and town halls rose up all over the country with gothic style arches and pierced wrought iron work. This new "gothic mania" (Price 1978) found its main outlet in churches. "The Rector of Buckland in Devon went so far as to pull down the genuine medieval church in his parish and replace it with a new, very ornate, very Gothic structure which was consecrated in 1863" (Price 1978).

Architects were still the main impetus behind furniture design as they had been since about 1750 (Hayward 1936). When the architect Pugin published his designs in "*Gothic Furniture*" his drawings were " ...lavishly adorned with pinnacles, crockets (small stylised curled leaves), tracery (an interlaced rib type pattern) and gables " (Price 1978). Pugin applied this gothic theme to all kinds of furniture as well as to buildings and interiors.

For the student of furniture and history seems apparent that any period of excess, whether of over simplicity or over decoration, is usually a symptom of an unsettled state of the nation's political, social and economic situation (Bly1971). The first few years of Victoria's reign produced a strange mixture of design and decoration meshed together as if in an attempt to find stability at least in the decorative arts (Bly 1971).

It was this tide of enthusiasm for the decorative arts that prompted Henry Cole, the Head of the "Society of Arts" to organize three annual exhibitions from 1847 to 1849 , a great success , they were to prompt calls from the society for an international exhibition to be held in Hyde-park , London (Bly 1971). The Royal commission set up in 1843 and presided over by Prince Albert at the request of Sir Robert Peel was to organize the event, a task the Prince "...threw himself into" (Price 1978). One month was allocated as time for receipt of all designs, and

over 230 designers submitted drawings. None of these were considered suitable, and as the deadline approached detailed drawings of a plan by the head gardener at Chatsworth ” (Price 1978), Joseph Paxton (1803 - 1865) to build a huge structure of iron and glass, the Crystal Palace. This superstructure was to cover approximately 19 acres of Hyde Park, and would be tall enough to enclose some of the huge elm trees growing on the site. It was to accommodate 15,000 exhibitors from all over the civilized world. Thirty miles of iron frame (Price 1978) formed the roof, and 900,000 square feet of glass were used to form the shell. “To allay any fears of its structural safety eight ton carts of cannonballs were hauled up and down the aisles, and companies of troops marched in closed ranks around the bays” (Bly 1971 p122).

The six million visitors to the exhibition found exhibitors were separated into four groups, “Fine Art and Sculpture”, “Machinery”, “Raw Materials” and “Manufacturers”. English furniture manufacturers produced huge and fantastic exhibition pieces which, although not what was actually required for the exhibition, were to be a great stimulus to nineteenth century design and constructional techniques (Price 1978).

The exhibition was in many ways a turning point in mainstream furniture quality as it was a time when woodworking machines came into much more general usage. It was also a turning point stylistically as the foreign visitors to the exhibition exerted much influence. Practically too things were on the move, the coiled upholstery spring, produced in Birmingham since 1833 (Bly1971) was being extensively used in fashionable seating of the period. Up to this time seat padding was kept to a minimum, as you can appreciate this philosophy contrasts sharply with the now popular “Chesterfield settee” originally called a Library or Hall sofa. It was deep buttoned and sumptuous, with comfort a paramount consideration, at least visually! Close nailing, in decline since the 1830's had all but died out and “Bottom canvassing” was now in vogue (Bly1971).

Papier-mâché furniture was becoming increasingly popular, Jennens & Bettridge being one of the major exponents of this trend much of it being inspired by the japanned forms of the late seventeenth century, the Chiffonier and sideboard became increasingly popular , appearing in many forms , and many sizes (Price 1978). The circular or more commonly oval “Loo” table was now fashionable and so too was the draw leaf table, the predecessor to the well known “Wind-out” table that appeared in the last quarter of the nineteenth century.

Mass production was firmly established in 1845 by the invention of a mechanized carving device. Its inventor T.B. Jordan was most likely unaware that a battle between good design, and perceived need to establish the superiority of machine made furniture, was to rage from 1851 until 1870. Furniture from this period often suffers from chronic over decoration and is questionably constructed (Bly 1971). Providing the opposition to this mechanical revolution was the so-called “Warwick school”, a group founded by the long established family firm of carvers W.G. Rogers and sons. They were to produce pieces for Queen Victoria and it is said

their work impressed Prince Albert enough to inspire him to offer a prize for amateur wood-carving to be presented by the then "Society of Arts" (Price 1978).

As early as 1860 William Morris (1834 - 1896) was proclaiming himself a medievalist and predicting the self-destruction of the furniture industry through over mechanization and over decoration. By 1865 it could be said that the first seeds of the "Arts and Crafts" movement were now sprouting. The movement soon gathered momentum as many of his contemporaries, especially among the young and more highly educated, found much to despise in the results of mass-production. They were anxious to return to what they considered to be the values of an older and simpler way of life. In a highly formal period where fine tailoring and stiff collars were *de rigueur*, Morris' contemporaries wore loose jackets and flowing cravats, ladies renounced bustles, tight lacing and wasp-waists and also opted for practicality and simplicity (Price 1978).

Groups of craftsmen began to come together in what was actually a revival of the medieval Guild system, their ideals were simplicity of design and the highest possible standards of craftsmanship. They took great pleasure in the natural qualities of the timber they used. Decoration came in the form of visible tenons and dowels and in the various means of jointing deliberately exposed and some surfaces were deliberately left unfinished (Bly1971).

One of the most important of these groups was the Cotswold School whose-members shared a passionate interest in traditional country-made furniture. They were among the most original designers of their day and worked strictly to William Morris' ideology Among the most prominent were Ernest and Sidney Barnsley,- Ernest Gimson, William Lethaby and Reginald Blomfield; Gimson and the Barnsleys were the founders of the group, who first set -up a workshop in the Cotswold Hills not far from Cirencester (Price 1978). Much of their furniture shows considerable use of frame and panel construction as in early Gothic chest furniture. Wrought iron frequently provided the only decoration, another favorite was showing the plane marks, hammer blows and other toolmarks to emphasize the hand-made nature of the product.

There was a renewed passion for painting furniture, borrowing heavily from thirteenth century Gothic originals. In 1862 Exhibition such pieces were prominent, including the famous St. George Cabinet designed by Philip Webb (Price 1978). Much of the fashionable furniture was painted, usually in pale colours – particularly green – and ebonised woods were also very much in favour . On some of the painted cabinets and wardrobes, tooled and gilded painted leather panels were often added as decoration (Price 1978).

Modernization of old furniture was also common and it became popular to replace brass pulls with turned wooden knobs, Morris himself was in favour of this.

Tunbridgeware was becoming increasingly popular, being so called because it originated in Tunbridge Wells. Tunbridgeware is a mass-produced parquetry mosaic banding used to decorate furniture and smaller objects built up from stained and coloured woods arranged into patterns and cut into strips (Bly 1971).

Bentwood furniture was becoming popular late in the century after its introduction in the 1830's (Bly 1971). The name Thonet of course immediately springs to mind, it is estimated that the firm sold a staggering 50,000,000 of their famous café chair alone (Salazar 1980).

It is without question that in the Arts and Crafts movement outlined briefly above lay the first vestiges of the stylistic period that was to be called "Art Nouveau". The movement took its name from a fashionable shop in Paris called L'Art Nouveau (Bly 1971). This was a style firmly rooted in the arts and crafts philosophy but carrying the principles further by using heavily stylised foliate motifs in an attempt to further forge a bond between nature and design. An ashwood fire screen by Emile Galle that resides in the Victoria and Albert Museum demonstrates this technique perfectly (Salazar 1980).

Whilst some were looking forward others were looking back. This was a period of great interest in the Antique, and therefore the inevitable emergence of the faker. Many earlier pieces were being copied, and plain late eighteenth century furniture was inlaid in the Sheraton style (Bly 1971). Eighteenth century plain oak bureau were being carved in the medieval style not only for commercial reasons but also as an outlet for the now popular "hobby" of woodcarving, a movement highly influenced by Prince Albert as mentioned above.

Victoria's reign ended in 1901 when she died after 64 years as Monarch at the end of a century which had seen the flourishing of the industrial revolution and tremendous political and empirical upheaval. Stylistically furniture had evolved from elegant gothic sophistication through ugly over indulgence and on into modern simplicity. Practically the furniture industry had gone from a labour intensive hand craft whose fruits were only enjoyed by the upper classes to a mechanized factory based industry able to provide mass produced furniture to the ever growing middle classes.

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