

Racializing the Parlor: Race and Victorian Bric-a-Brac Consumption

PAUL R. MULLINS

In 1897, Charles Richmond Henderson (1897:37) was among a wave of Victorian thinkers who stressed the pivotal moral impact of apparently mundane goods. Henderson's analysis of the relationship between America's social woes and household material culture concluded that "our works and our surroundings corrupt or refine our souls. The dwellings, the walls, the windows, the furniture, the pictures, the ornaments, the dress, the fence or hedge—all act constantly upon the imagination and determine its contents." This soliloquy on the moral implications of sofas and lithographs seems somewhat overwrought in hindsight, yet from the mid-nineteenth century into the Depression, a wide range of Americans shared the conviction that material objects illustrated and forged their possessor's character and values (cf. Grier 1988:2). Henderson was simply one of many thinkers who assumed that even the most prosaic objects instilled, reflected, and reproduced powerful—albeit ill-defined—"moral values." Rather than reduce goods simply to passive reflections of style, culture, or wealth, genteel Victorians believed the material world actively created, shaped, and reproduced virtuous or degenerate values that either fashioned genteel discipline or bred Victorian society's most pressing dilemmas.

In many ways, Victorians' material moralism simply perpetuated longstanding

apprehensions about the personal, communal, and spiritual tolls of material acquisitiveness and secular desire (cf. Horowitz 1985). Yet in the midst of a burgeoning consumer economy, dizzying social change, and quite stunning inequality, late nineteenth-century moralism assumed a quite distinctive tenor charged by racial ideology. Even the most commonplace household commodities were considered vessels of racial symbolism, and it was widely assumed that the dominant material symbolism was "white." "White" was a strategically ambiguous concept that concealed a tangle of class, gendered, and regional inequalities, yet racial ideologues argued quite successfully that this tacit white "norm" was the appropriate backdrop against which Victorians should interpret all social and material meaning.

The debate over material goods' racial symbolism extended to even the most innocuous objects. Perhaps the most commonplace class of commodities in Victorian homes was mass-produced bric-a-brac. "Bric-a-brac" is a somewhat inexact term referring to a range of primarily decorative objects that were common in American homes from about 1850 into the early twentieth century. Ornamental objects such as figurines, vases, statuary, and chromolithographs were produced in staggering quantities in the late nineteenth century, and they could be purchased in virtu-

ally any American market for a relatively modest cost. Mass-produced baubles depicted a vast range of motifs, including famous personalities (e.g., presidents, royalty), natural scenes (e.g., animals, landscapes), romanticized historical subjects (e.g., shepherds, aristocrats), and popular cultural motifs (e.g., classical art adaptations, colonized peoples).

Bric-a-brac's aesthetic diversity defies easy stylistic categorization, but these objects tended to feature exotic subjects, ambiguous motifs, or caricatures of everyday life that were "multivalent"—that is, the objects had a particularly rich (though still circumscribed) range of possible meanings. Bric-a-brac aesthetics and display were hotly contested among various ideologues who appreciated that its rich symbolism could be interpreted in a range of forms that could conceivably reproduce dominant ideology or resist those very ideologies. Consequently, bric-a-brac consumption was discussed extensively in household and domestic literature (cf. Mullins 1999a:155–157).

Late nineteenth-century racial ideology profoundly shaped all social experience and material symbolism, forging a fiction of universal opportunity and affluence that was radically contradicted in most Americans' lives by profound racist, class, and social barriers. Consequently, it is imprudent to believe racial ideology did not affect every single person in American public space, or that it is simply one "aspect" of identity (e.g., Wilkie, this volume). Race did end up having a quite complex range of effects that consumers negotiated in myriad ways, but we evade the sway of racial ideology if we champion the notion of identity as a fluid experiential juxtaposition of individual consciousness, ethnic history, generational wisdom, and whatever else we suppose gives us identity and makes us each individual. Bric-a-brac ultimately reveals racism in modern consumer culture as a complex lived experience that tactically maneuvers between dominant structural mechanisms, individual aspirations, and the overwhelming discrepancies between America's

social possibilities and its concrete inequalities.

Despite bric-a-brac's prominence in turn-of-the-century homes and the heated debates over its appropriate consumption, few scholars have accorded these goods much significance. Archaeologically it is tempting to ignore these sorts of things because bric-a-brac is recovered in modest quantities, it was quite inexpensive, and these objects seem more whimsical than meaningful. Meaningfulness, though, often has little to do with exchange value, and the volume of period commentary on bric-a-brac suggests it had some social significance despite its affordable cost. Reducing these goods to frivolous ornaments disregards that even a seemingly "whimsical" object can harbor a penetrating, yet oblique, social commentary. Small quantities are often the very reason we focus on some goods, and in the case of bric-a-brac, careful curation and low breakage rates explain why it appears in modest archaeological quantities. It is telling that these objects often elicit considerable musing in the field and lab, but are usually buried in an artifact catalog. Our own curiosity is a strong clue that there is significant, albeit enigmatic symbolism lurking within these things.

This chapter probes how we can interpret such apparently mundane material goods as consequential mechanisms that reflected and shaped consumers' understandings of quite significant social issues, including racial ideology, nationalism, and affluence. Most of the material culture examined here came from thirty blocks of houses in West Oakland, California, excavated by the Sonoma State University Anthropological Studies Center (Praetzellis and Praetzellis 1999). The West Oakland project area had remarkable ethnic diversity: Europeans, Chinese, African Americans, and whites lived in the community, with most working at the Oakland railroad yards or in a supporting industry. These sites provided a stunning volume of material culture, including virtually every sort of bric-a-brac. Rather than reduce these objects to fascinating but ultimately trivial trinkets, we

might instead wonder why so many consumers envisioned significant meaning in these baubles, and probe precisely what those meanings were.

THE AMBIGUITY OF BRIC-A-BRAC

Bric-a-brac was routinely produced and consumed with no absolutely clear sense of what an object or motif "communicated"; instead, these trinkets usually were not intended to represent anything particularly concrete (Mullins 1999a:165-166). Consequently, it is somewhat misguided to analyze bric-a-brac symbolism in a conventional stylistic analysis that defines what its historical motifs, recognizable personages, or depicted activities were intended to represent. Mass-produced baubles featured familiar popular symbols that were so vaguely or broadly defined that an object's consumer or viewer could interpret it in a reasonable range of ways. Bric-a-brac could evoke pleasant yet inchoate sentiments about a romanticized past, household class identity, Western cultural and racial roots, patriarchy, personal style, aristocratic behavior, or any number of things. It did not matter if a consumer could not clearly articulate the appeal of a given object; if anything, enigmatic motifs were among the most common in bric-a-brac.

This notion of ambiguous bric-a-brac symbolism is somewhat at odds with the standard premise that goods are consumed because they publicly display social identity and a dominant meaning stylistically "encoded" in the object. Thorstein Veblen's (1973) classic formulation of conspicuous materialism posited that things were consumed by a "leisure class" to publicly address society and exhibit social identity, so a good's "use value" rested on its capacity to display social prestige or some clearly defined social identity. In 1957, E. Franklin Frazier reduced "black bourgeoisie" consumption to this sort of pretentious class display. Frazier (1957: 230-231) argued that the African American middle class was "constantly buying things. . . . Many of the furnishings and gadgets which they acquire are never used; nevertheless they continue to accumulate things.

The homes of many middle-class Negroes have the appearance of museums for the exhibition of American manufactures and spurious art objects. The objects which they are constantly buying are always on display."

Obviously bric-a-brac was meant to be physically displayed, but it was not simply consumed so that its public exhibition would instrumentally "communicate" some distinct meaning about the consumer to others. Rather than assume its meaning to be public, self-evident, and defined by dominant stylistic mavens and viewers—which is how Veblen and many historical archaeologists tend to see goods—bric-a-brac's symbolism was equally abstract, contextual, and shaped by its consumer. Many consumers certainly did wish to impart their "style," "morality," or "status" with fashionable goods, but these terms were such malleable abstractions that they could entail many different things. Symbolically ambiguous objects allowed their parlor-making consumers to creatively daydream about their own identities and society, not simply to showcase who they were to others. Nevertheless, bric-a-brac symbolism was itself utterly ideological, so consumers did not individually fabricate bric-a-brac meanings that were disconnected to a broader social structure. Instead, material symbolism emerged from a complex tension between highly personal associations and broader systemic factors.

Bric-a-brac extended all material culture's flexible symbolism to its extremes by featuring ambiguous motifs that were primarily evocative mediums rather than straightforward representations. Consumers' attraction to bric-a-brac—and many ideologues' apprehension of the same trinkets—revolved around this ambiguous and evocative symbolism. For instance, a post-1889 cellar from an Annapolis, Maryland, home contained a figurine that was typical of late nineteenth-century bric-a-brac. The porcelain, overglaze-painted female figure's flowing hair, basket of flowers, and flowing dress are consistent with popular cultural idealizations of peasantry (Figure 10.1). We know relatively little about exactly how African Americans



Figure 10.1. This porcelain figurine was recovered from a post-1889 cellar feature in Annapolis, Maryland. This motif was typical of late nineteenth-century designs that presented quixotic visions of bucolic, non-industrial subjects. This figurine had been discarded alongside a porcelain matchholder and a large household refuse assemblage in a feature that was filled by an African American family. (Photo by the author)

actually displayed such goods, but we can persuasively argue for how their symbolism would most likely be constructed across the color-line. This Annapolis object was one of many quixotic bric-a-brac depictions of a peaceful, non-industrial past, evoked in this figurine by the girl's happy and comforting pose. These sorts of nebulous motifs tacitly critiqued contemporary society by reference to idealized but ill-defined subjects: among the most common themes were bucolic and agrarian motifs that evaded (or at least glossed over) agricultural production's complications at the very moment traditional rural agriculture was disappearing from American society. The Annapolis figurine was

discarded by an African American household whose members would seem particularly unlikely to ignore the harsh realities of agricultural life: some had been enslaved, and the others could not have ignored the profound underside of southern agriculture displayed on plantations all around Annapolis. In this home, as in most genteel parlors, the peasant figurine likely was consumed to symbolically "resolve" contemporary and historical realities by redefining them, providing a past that contrasted to the present, or naively posing agricultural life's utopian possibilities. Such peasant and agrarian motifs enjoyed widespread consumption among genteel Victorians because they provided a comforting ideological vision of America's agricultural heritage that contrasted radically to late nineteenth-century urbanization and social unrest.

Such motifs would seem problematic for many African Americans in the post-Reconstruction South, but this Annapolis household was headed by a middling social climber who was archetypal gentility in every way except for his African heritage. John Maynard had been born free in 1810, and he and his once-enslaved wife, Maria, purchased their house lot in 1847. Eventually they and their two sons' families became linked to Annapolitan African American elite in churches, fraternal organizations, and workplaces. While the Maynards never secured stunning wealth, John Maynard's 1876 probate inventory recorded a model Victorian parlor stocked with mahogany chairs, chromolithographs, and ornamental objects, including bric-a-brac. This assemblage underscored the household's fitness for citizen rights, if not its utter embrace of genteel discipline. However, this apparent endorsement of standard genteel discipline was noteworthy because black consumers were assumed to be racially incompatible with genteel privilege. The Maynards' home delivered a quite radical critique of whiteness by paradoxically embracing its genteel rules and commodity forms, thereby countering the white exclusivity associated with those rules and goods.

Bric-a-brac often featured quite familiar

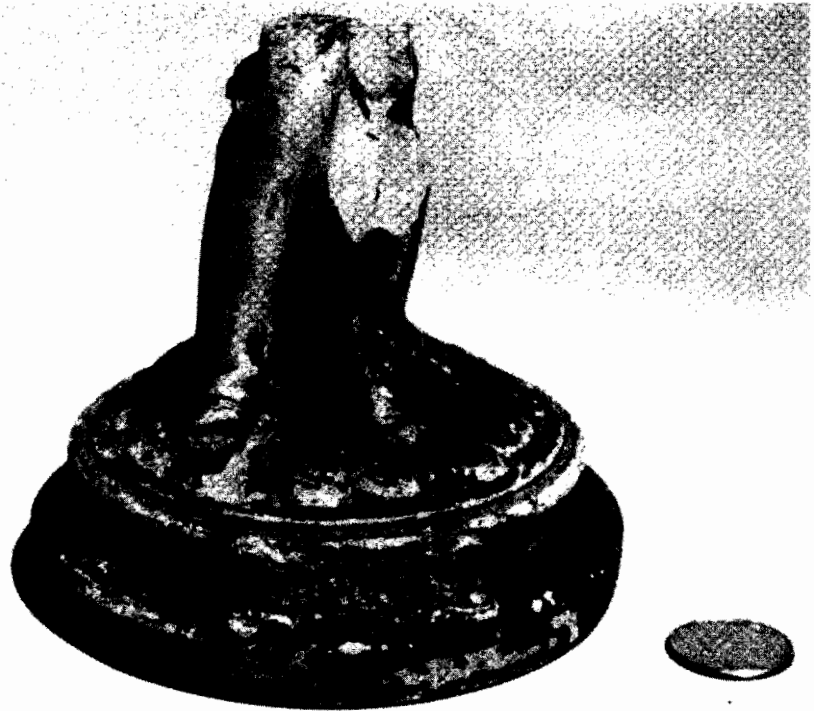


Figure 10.2. Abraham Lincoln was one of the most popular characters in late nineteenth-century bric-a-brac, including chromolithographs as well as figurines like this one, recovered at 818 Linden Street in Oakland, California. This black-glazed redware figurine, discarded about 1887, originally had gilding on portions of the placard. Its design is typical of post-Reconstruction depictions of Lincoln, which focus on his role in preserving the Union and his ambiguous character traits rather than his role in emancipation. (Courtesy of the Anthropological Studies Center, Sonoma State University)

motifs, yet even the most prominent bric-a-brac personages and subjects had ambiguous meanings never far removed from race. In about 1887, for instance, a pair of neighboring households in West Oakland filled a shared privy with household refuse. Irish-born railroad collector Patrick Barry, his wife Ellen, and a daughter lived at 818 Linden Street in a flat adjoining their tenants, Norwegian mail carrier Ammend Dorisason and his Irish wife, Mary. Included in the Barry and Dorisason households' privy assemblage was a black-glazed redware figurine of Abraham Lincoln broken just above the knees (Figure 10.2). Lincoln assumed significant symbolic pertinence in the late nineteenth-century wake of the Civil War and emancipation, and

he was among the most common characters reproduced in bric-a-brac ranging from chromolithographs to figurines to molds of his death mask (e.g., Castelveccchi 1885:6).

Lincoln was not consumed simply in the form of mass-produced goods: Kirk Savage's (1997:65) study of nineteenth-century public statuary recognizes that until the collapse of Reconstruction, Lincoln served as emancipation's public symbol. Statuary was public, permanent, monumental, and designed to provide a timeless pose and eternal symbolic resolution, so statues painted a somewhat more guarded picture of the president than the flood of Lincoln bric-a-brac. Nevertheless, figurine and statue aesthetics both were designed to impart ethereal personality at-

tributes such as strength, wisdom, and achievement through devices such as gesture, expression, adornments, and physical pose. In the 1870s, for example, most representations of Lincoln smoothed out his gaunt frame and typically gave him more heroic garb than he wore in his lifetime. He often was posed with props such as a scroll or pen, alluding to his authorship of the Emancipation Proclamation, and sometimes they placed him standing over a once-enslaved African American freed by the Great Emancipator. This aesthetic reflected the firm link between Lincoln's post-assassination legacy and emancipation, and it underscored some Americans' optimism about the end of slavery.

The Linden Street figurine, in contrast, reflects a fresh post-Reconstruction vision of Lincoln. When Reconstruction collapsed, black-white racist relations rapidly re-emerged as many Americans dispensed with the proposition that emancipation augured an antiracist society. This transformation in social and racial mood had an impact on subsequent Lincoln representations, which dispensed with African American figures and aesthetic devices such as scrolls; instead, Lincoln standing alone and unadorned became a symbol representing the Union's preservation, a wise moral compass who had healed the national rift (Savage 1997:122-124). Lincoln's role in emancipation quite quickly became subsumed to abstract personality features that evaded the resurgence of anti-black racism. The lost portions of the Oakland figurine may have had any number of gestures, poses, or accessories, but the modest remaining figure says a surprising amount about its symbolism. The space around Lincoln's feet is simply molded ground; the absence of a freed slave is consistent with shifts in post-Reconstruction Lincoln symbolism, and the remaining portions of the figurine do not refer to Lincoln's role in emancipation (e.g., scrolls). In the 1880s, aesthetic conventions stressed "realism" over idealized characterizations and contrived physical representations, and this figurine is not clothed in

the flowing cloaks or classical garb favored in earlier postwar statuary. The Linden Street Lincoln is instead wearing modest trousers and boots, much as Lincoln himself actually wore. He stood before his viewer in relatively realistic ruffled clothing (apparently without accompanying aesthetic devices), his feet askance, and his gaze likely set forward, emphasizing his powerful personality and wisdom rather than his participation in particular historical events.

Post-Reconstruction bric-a-brac like the Linden Street figure rarely depicted African Americans. Conceding African Americans a material representation in public space or a parlor was akin to confirming their newly won citizenship or even implying their genuine rights, and no consumers devoted to white superiority were likely to make either concession willingly. Newly arrived immigrants who were themselves subject to racism and xenophobia were among the most likely parties to be troubled by public African American representations. For instance, in the 1880s a sculptor submitted a design for a New York statue that depicted a kneeling slave alongside Lincoln, but in 1890 the *New York Times* reported that the design had been rejected because "the figure of a negro in a public monument would arouse the resentment of the Irish citizens" (Savage 1997: 81-82). Of course, Irish immigrants were marginalized by racism themselves and often associated with highly stigmatized blackness. Consequently, depictions of African Americans would seem particularly unlikely motifs among Irish Americans like Patrick and Ellen Barry and tenant Mary Dorisason. Lincoln alone was a relatively "safe" and ambiguous symbol that could represent anything from political partisanship, to nationalist wisdom, to a consumer's embrace of American heritage. When depicted alongside an African American, though, the object posed complicated historical and racial symbolism. Most of the racial representation in bric-a-brac was equally oblique. While consumers could purchase virulent racist representations, most parlor ornamentation celebrated ideologies

such as white supremacy, American industrial might, Christian superiority, Western domination, and patriarchy in quite symbolically elusive forms. Consequently, when we look to bric-a-brac for racial representation, it is critical to keep in mind that Victorians assumed that some dimension of racial symbolism was embedded in everything.

CLASS AND CLUTTER:
ASPIRATION AND ECLECTICISM
IN THE VICTORIAN HOUSEHOLD

Like almost all bric-a-brac, the Linden Street Lincoln suggests more about aspirations than actual material wealth. The figurine was black-glazed redware, which by the 1880s was a *passé* medium for most ceramic production except flower pots. It certainly was less expensive and less desirable than refined earthenwares, porcelain, or Parian. Nevertheless, very little mass-produced bric-a-brac was particularly costly, and the complexities of Lincoln's symbolism remained, regardless of the medium.

Rather than focus on exchange value or the medium's symbolism, it makes more sense to examine how such objects accommodated so many consumers' aspirations for citizen privileges and personal security. In any context, bric-a-brac's symbolism was a situationally distinct fusion reflecting who its consumers consciously understood themselves to be, their objective position in social and class structure, and who they *wished* to be. Symbolically, bric-a-brac was a daydreaming commodity form which consumers mused over, idealizing who they were by dreaming about who they and their society *could* be. Especially for newly arrived immigrants and Americans subordinated by racism or poverty, apparently innocuous household goods provided a modest but significant mechanism that situated them in relation to the genteel mainstream and its genuine social and material benefits. These benefits and consumers' identities and aspirations were inextricably linked to race. For appropriately disciplined Americans who reproduced the genteel, tacitly white norm, race promised empowerment; in contrast, the champions of white su-

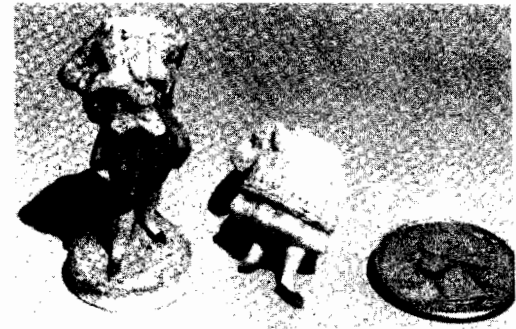


Figure 10.3. These two figurines were recovered in an early to mid-1890s feature at 1774 Atlantic Street in Oakland, California. (Courtesy of the Anthropological Studies Center, Sonoma State University)

periority aspired to deny various Others the benefits of genteel identity. Consequently there was fierce debate over what a seemingly objective object like a Lincoln figurine meant when displayed in an Irish American, African American, or white household, and whether citizen rights were conferred simply by consuming such goods.

"Aspiration" could entail many social and personal desires that took a wide range of material forms. For instance, some late nineteenth-century Americans implied their affluence and class aspirations through exotically cluttered Victorian parlors. An Oakland household at 1774 Atlantic Street had a quite visible material aesthetic that reflects one of the common forms taken by consumer aspiration. The residence was home to several African American families and one Irish immigrant's household over short successive periods, so the assemblage cannot be attributed to a specific household. Nevertheless, the African American men living in the home were all Pullman porters, and the Irish family was headed by a Southern Pacific laborer and a laundress, so these families at least shared comparable conditions. The early to mid-1890s assemblage includes a striking range of decorative goods: five vases (including two 4-inch matching blue glass bud vases), a lotus motif stoneware dish, and two porcelain figurines (one of a colonial figure and the other apparently a jester) were discarded into

the privy (Figure 10.3). Like many post-Civil War assemblages, the Atlantic Street material culture was quite aesthetically striking and included a wide range of styles and motifs.

The styles, mediums, and colors of these aesthetically distinctive goods suggest a modest rendition of the archetypally colored, cluttered, and eclectic Victorian parlor, which stressed the power to consume over conformance to a clear decorative ideal. This aesthetic was championed by late nineteenth-century ideologues like the New York store Sypher and Company (1885:31-32), whose catalog concluded that “it is impossible that the old poverty of house-furnishing should ever come back. We shall no longer have rows of houses all alike inside. . . . Now we have individual tastes shown in our furniture, and they will be shown more and more as the means of gratifying them become more common.” Before about 1900, such commentators envisioned the densely stocked, idiosyncratically decorated parlor as a material symbol of American affluence and genteel worldliness that was available on some scale to any sufficiently wealthy consumer.

A circa-1885 privy at 654 Fifth Street in Oakland, California, provided a particularly ornate and eclectic example of this aesthetic focused on class aspiration and wealth. New Hampshire-born brothers Benjamin and Frederick Mann tried their hands at various ventures, including farming, mining, speculating, and banking. The 1880 census recorded the fifty-three-year-old Frederick as a miner, and his brother Benjamin as a “capitalist,” suggesting their common entrepreneurial ambitions. The Mann privy contained a stylish assemblage of tablewares, including costly matching porcelains, decorated glassware, an earthenware candelabra, candlesticks, and specialized vessel forms such as spoonholders and gravy boats. The presence of a large table setting as well as coffee beans in the privy suggests that the household entertained guests for both meals and coffee. After eating at such a well-appointed dining assemblage, the family retired to a space decorated with Victorian bric-a-brac. The Manns’ assemblage included a variety



Figure 10.4. The Mann privy included several examples of the popular decorative ceramic Parian, which often sat alongside stylish Victorian goods like this stemware. Objects like the vase in the center were marketed as art for genteel “middle-class” consumers, and their symbolism often borrowed from Classical art or more ambiguous and evocative motifs like this feminine hand. (Courtesy of the Anthropological Studies Center, Sonoma State University)

of cut, etched, and painted stemware, a distinctive cobalt blue candlestick holder with a dolphin-shaped pedestal, cut-glass lampshades, and several figurines and vases.

The Manns’ bric-a-brac included three Parian objects, a decorative ceramic that was marketed as an affordable objet d’art evoking affluence rather than as an indifferent commodity curio. An 1846 English trade journal noted that the potteries “attach very great importance to this material, as offering a valuable medium for the multiplication of works of a high order of art, at a price which will render them generally available” (Briggs 1988:150). Art in Victorian homes implied wealth and aesthetic taste based on cultivation and education, but very few Americans could actually purchase or commission art

for their parlors. Parian, though, blurred the boundary between art and commodity, and provided a mechanism for aspiring gentility to apprehend art symbolically, socially, and as a literal possession. The Manns' Parian included a striking eight-inch-tall vase molded in the form of a female hand grasping a lily flower (Figure 10.4). This was a relatively typical Parian design in the sense that the vessel did not reproduce a traditional high-art motif, but the medium itself may have been more symbolically significant than the objects' aesthetic designs. Parian was sufficiently expensive and uncommon that it would have been distinctive in most 1880s parlors.

The Mann and Atlantic Street assemblages' eclectic and cluttered aesthetic became the target of withering attack by 1900. In the 1880s and 1890s, a stream of style mavens became increasingly critical of parlors and objects like bric-a-brac that apparently stressed style over function. Decorative writer Clarence Cook (1878:100) was among the first observers to criticize the material glut in parlors, noting that the "New-York parlor of the kind called 'stylish,' where no merely useful thing is permitted, and where nothing can be used with comfort, is always overcrowded." In Victorian discourse, "eclectic" referred to interiors that evinced no clear decorative scheme, particularly spaces favoring decorative volume and texture over functional utility. Household decorator Clara Parker (1897:9) warned against such incongruous decorative volume when she concluded that "in all things—walls, carpets, chairs, sofa-pillows, bric-a-brac, fancy-work—let there be not loud or startling effects, a jumble of striking combinations." Critics of eclecticism promoted decorative "harmony" and "rational" interior designs, which in American decorative codes hearkened back to spare, symmetrically balanced colonial precedents and rejected superfluous ornamentation (Brooks 1994:23–25).

Ideologues championing the new spare ideal clearly became concerned that the cluttered Victorian interior was available to al-

most any consumer by 1900. By the turn of the century, virtually all Americans could stock their front rooms with exotic mass-produced bric-a-brac, foreign-produced goods, and inexpensive furnishings, so the parlor's capacity to stress its consumer's distinctive individual taste and class power was undercut by the breadth of the aesthetic. Consequently, when ideologues found African American homes decorated with Victorian bric-a-brac, they often struggled to comprehend (and subsequently neutralize) the symbolism of those assemblages: such observers assumed that this density of stylistically charged exotic goods was a genteel aesthetic restricted to white people. In his study of New York City's "other half," Jacob Riis (1890:118) found many quite genteel African American households, yet he concluded that even genteel objects such as chromolithographs and parlor furniture failed to conceal the essential realities of poverty and race. Riis was surprised that "the poorest negro's room in New York is bright with gaily-colored prints of his beloved 'Abe Linkum,' General Grant, President Garfield, Mrs. Cleveland, and other national celebrities, and cheery with flowers and singing birds. In the art of putting his best foot foremost, of disguising his poverty by making a little go a long way, our negro has no equal. When a fair share of prosperity is his, he knows how to make life and home very pleasant to those about him. Pianos and parlor furniture abound in the uptown homes of colored tenants and give them a very prosperous air." Riis (1890:118) conceded that the African American was "loyal to the backbone, proud of being an American and of his new-found citizenship," but he could not resist reducing African American materialism to an artificial "air" that contradicted essential racial identity.

Long after Riis's analysis, white observers continued to be confounded by African Americans' reproduction of dominant, tacitly white material codes. In 1938 a Federal Writers Project interviewer visited an African American in New York City and noted that the "apartment was extravagantly furnished

in studio fashion that would surprise many a downtown visitor. Any number of paintings and etchings adorned the walls, while a baby grand reposed [in] a corner of the living room in which much bric-a-brac were displayed" (Federal Writers Project 1938c). A pair of Federal Writers Project workers in North Carolina took a common approach to comprehending African American materialism when they denigrated the goods themselves. Describing a modest cash renter's home, the interviewers noted that "on the side table were a few china figures of the kind given away as pitch-penny prizes at the fair" (Harrison and Massengill 1939:52). A Virginia observer stigmatized such goods by observing that "salesmen also haunt Negro front doors with gaudy trinkets, Bibles, good luck charms, cardboard statuettes, and other trappings" (WPA 1940:338-339). By characterizing such goods as "gaudy" or "cheap" and stigmatizing their consumption context, these interviewers were attempting to neutralize symbolic value in what they considered to be African Americans' material insinuation of "white" symbolism.

Despite the move toward decorative "harmony," the families on Atlantic Street were among many Americans who remained attached to the notion that a cluttered, aesthetically prominent, and highly personalized assemblage was testimony to the household's affluence, taste, and style. The Atlantic Street households were working-class and of modest means, and as African Americans or Irish immigrants, they were certainly marginalized by racial ideology, so this was not an example of a truly affluent household demonstrating its wealth and social power. Instead, the assemblage suggests many marginalized peoples' persistent assumption that possessing unusual and striking material goods had ambiguous social cachet that was not dependent on the goods' narrow exchange value or dominant ideology. Marginalized consumers often have embraced a particularly visible material style that symbolically distances them from the conventional notion of penury, which often stresses that poverty is defined by

an absence of material things. Stylistically visible assemblages and unusual goods, regardless of their cost, could confound what material marginalization literally looks like (cf. Mullins 1999a:164).

RACE, ASPIRATION, AND

HOUSEHOLD MATERIAL AESTHETICS

Many West Oaklanders worked in elaborately decorated Pullman railroad cars that used West Oakland as a main West Coast station. Luxurious railroad cars had become quite common by the 1850s, providing well-appointed men's and women's parlors, and sleeping quarters adorned with stylish window curtains, paintings, upholstered chairs and benches, woodwork, and carpets (Grier 1988:47). George Pullman's Pullman Palace Car Company was founded in 1867, and Pullman and his fleet of well-appointed cars became symbols of American luxury, affluence, and monopolism. In 1897, English traveler George Steevens (1897:258) wrote that the American sleeping car is "a miracle of luxury. All the wood is mahogany—or looks like it—and all the cushions are velvet. It looks as rich and solid as the British dining-room of the old school." In the early 1890s Pullman himself suggested that the introduction of luxurious material culture to once-lowly rail cars was intended to have the same "civilizing" effect as domestic parlors: "Take the roughest man, a man whose lines have always brought him into coarsest and poorest surroundings, and the effect upon his bearings is immediate. The more artistic and refined the mere external surroundings, in other words, the better and more refined the man" (cited in Grier 1988:61).

Any well-appointed Victorian parlor had servants, and Pullman cars had a universally African American service staff that included many West Oakland residents. Porters received good pay in comparison to most working-class laborers, but the position consumed long hours, the work was difficult, and porters were subjected to standard anti-black racism (Spires 1994:207). Two Fifth Street households were headed by Central Pacific

Railroad porters. Between 1877 and 1882, porter Abraham Holland lived at 662 Fifth Street with widow Lucinda Tilghman, two of her children, and an African American domestic who, like Holland, was also boarding with the Tilghmans. Born about 1840 in Pennsylvania, Holland had served as a porter for the Central Pacific Railroad since at least 1874. Documentary evidence paints a convincing picture of Holland as aspiring African American gentility. Holland apparently was part of the African American-managed Sweet Vengeance Mine, which was active in Brown Valley between 1848 and 1854. A local newspaper reported that in one week of April 1852 the mine produced "rich dirt, we have taken \$1,200," and less than a month later it yielded another \$1,142 in a good week. The miners reportedly sent a significant share of these profits south to purchase the freedom of enslaved relatives.

Holland's personal and entrepreneurial ambitions were somewhat different from the social climbing that typified elite African Americans in the East (Gatewood 1990:138). Genteel African American circles in the East were highly structured hierarchies defined by factors such as ancestry, rigid behavioral codes, education, and skin color; wealth was simply one of many elements bearing on African American status in the East. In the West, though, family heritage counted for little because no family could make a claim to long-term community status; eastern color-lines had far less consequence in the West; and West Coast papers spent little ink on social life among the "upper tens" (Gatewood 1990:138). Instead, West Coast African American gentility focused more on individual initiative, entrepreneurialism, and personal wealth, which are stereotypical genteel values.

There still remained quite aristocratic social sentiments among African Americans in the West, though, and Holland likely entertained these. At the end of the Civil War, California was among the sixteen states with African American Masonic lodges, and by 1874 Holland had joined their number. Hol-

land eventually ascended to the position of local Grand Master in 1878-1880, and he added to his Masonic membership a standard inventory of genteel African American social activities. In 1886, for instance, he was the president of Oakland's Literary and Aid Society. This likely was a typical African American "culture club" whose educational and social missions ranged from reading classical literature to promoting Republican candidates (Gatewood 1990:214). Holland also sent a son to college, which would have been routine among East Coast African American elite.

Abraham Holland certainly was prominent in his community, and Lucinda Tilghman was financially comfortable if not wealthy, but their early 1880s privy does not reflect the ostentatious materialism commonly associated with genteel Victorians. The privy does not contain any bric-a-brac with the exception of two flower pots. The household's genteel discipline is suggested by porcelain and white-bodied ceramics that were the height of 1870s table styles, as well as a host of grooming objects (e.g., combs, toothbrushes, and hair tonic bottles), a French porcelain brush holder, and several pieces of jewelry. At least fifty-seven glass chimney lamps were represented in the assemblage, as well as two porcelain candlesticks, a very high number of lighting artifacts among the Oakland assemblages. However, unlike the vastly more eclectic Mann privy at 654 Fifth Street or the small but eclectic Atlantic Street assemblage, the Tilghman/Holland assemblage did not have a preponderance of objects that are stylistically mismatched. Even the ceramics that were not purchased as parts of matching sets were the same color and basic shapes, so they could easily have been used together. The Mann and Atlantic Street assemblages presented a more eclectic appearance in colors, motifs, and shapes and likely contained more "clutter" of typical parlor goods.

Pullman Palace Car Company porter James William Carter lived nearby at 668 Fifth Street. Between 1889 and 1896, the

Carter household filled a 14-foot deep redwood-lined feature that likely had been a well. Like the Tilghman/Holland assemblage deposited roughly a decade earlier, the Carter assemblage also does not reflect particularly pretentious parlor materialism. The Carter assemblage contained a ceramic collection dominated by relatively inexpensive white-bodied earthenwares, a wide variety of decorated glass table vessels, and fifty saucers. While the assemblage included six redware flower pots, several vases, and a clock, it did not include any figurines. Like the Tilghman/Holland household, the Carter household apparently favored a somewhat spare and coordinated interior in keeping with genteel decorative ideology. West Coast African Americans were considered particularly individualistic and entrepreneurial, but at least these two assemblages suggest wealth and pretentious materialism were not key to African American social standing. In these cases, much as in the East, it is likely that a variety of social associations besides pure wealth contributed to African American social status.

RACE AND VICTORIAN EXOTICISM

"Exotic" motifs and objects were quite popular in Victorian material culture, but these exotics only vaguely referred to any specific people, place, or time; instead, they symbolized an abstract "Otherness" that reflected more about their consumers than various non-genteel peoples (Stewart 1993:148). Since the eighteenth century, collectors had accumulated goods from throughout the colonized and natural world, ranging from traditional handcrafted goods to items from nature. Such goods were rare and difficult to acquire, so their possession and display by an erudite collector was a powerful statement about elite collectors and the legitimacy of their class domination. Yet as the colonial world opened up over the nineteenth century, increasingly more exotic goods and non-Western aesthetic conventions reached Americans of modest means, and clever bric-a-brac manufacturers began producing a wide range

of inexpensive goods that loosely interpreted non-Western peoples, styles, and subjects. By 1885, for instance, *Spelman's Fancy Goods Graphic* hawked a vast range of notions and reminded dealers that "everybody wants a collection" (Spelman 1885:137). The Spelman's catalog featured a typical range of exotic bric-a-brac from the colonial world (e.g., Japanese and French fans), distant lands (e.g., Egyptian princess ceramic wall plaques), nature (e.g., eighteen-inch decorated alligators), and the non-genteel present (e.g., African American figurines marketed as "Baskets of Darkies"). By the second half of the nineteenth century the consumption of exotic things was no longer the province of a small aristocratic elite: unique, mass-produced, and foreign-made exotics alike were quite common in the archetypally cluttered Victorian parlor.

Like all bric-a-brac, exotic goods were fundamentally a statement about their consumers, not about the place where they originated or the culture and time to which they ostensibly referred. Popular cultural descriptions of exotic peoples and places were predictably ambiguous, ideological, and racist: for example, American consumers' vision of "Turkish style" was re-created in numerous households' "Turkish corners," but that style had virtually nothing to do with Turkish history and culture (cf. Brooks 1994:20). Typical of such exoticized decorative ideology was a 1903 household manual describing an "Oriental Scheme for [a] Smoking Den" that included a "cozy corner [that] has a Moorish crown" (Barnard, Sumner, and Putnam Company 1903:30). Exoticism's appeal relied upon its invocation of racial ideology (especially the contrast of historical and cultural Others to the contemporary genteel West), its implication of worldliness and "taste," and the suggestion that exotic objects reflected material affluence.

The most striking shows of decorative material culture were utterly dependent on wealth, but even in these instances race and a tangle of genteel ideologies lurked within the symbolism. After the Paris Exposition of



Figure 10.5. When this photograph was taken in the late nineteenth century, the McDermott home in West Oakland was a model for formal front parlors. The room included oil paintings, French and Asian goods, a concert grand pianoforte, aesthetically elaborate fabrics and textures ranging from silk curtains to hand-painted ceilings, and a quite prominent golden eagle surveying the scene. (From the collection of Vernon J. Sappers)

1878, for instance, West Oakland's stunning McDermott estate added exhibition goods to a high-style Victorian interior. The August 10, 1878, *Oakland Times* reported that "the rooms are beautifully frescoed in oil colors, and have elegant French furniture. The windows all have elegant silk hangings with rich curtains to match. In the parlor may be seen a Watteau painting of great value... [and] bric a brac from the Paris Exposition.... In another room a pair of screens, Chinese work, embroidered on white silk... birds, nearly a hundred in number are represented flying about and at rest among flowers" (cited in Olmsted and Olmsted 1994:126-127).

The McDermotts' front parlor focused on recognizably foreign goods and styles to

evoke, as the newspaper put it, "wealth, luxury, and taste" (Figure 10.5). The home's rear parlor, in contrast, was intended as the scene of family activities rather than socializing with guests and contained the Chinese silk frames as well as family pictures, books, needlework, rattan furniture, and more modest bric-a-brac than that in the front (Figure 10.6). The front parlor's foreign goods most clearly evoked the family's class power and worldliness, whereas the rear parlor's exotics represented the family's genteel domesticity.

Few household ideologues plumbed the complexities of Westerners' attraction to objects from other cultures and time, instead representing it as Americans' distinctive "curiosity." In 1885, Sypher and Company

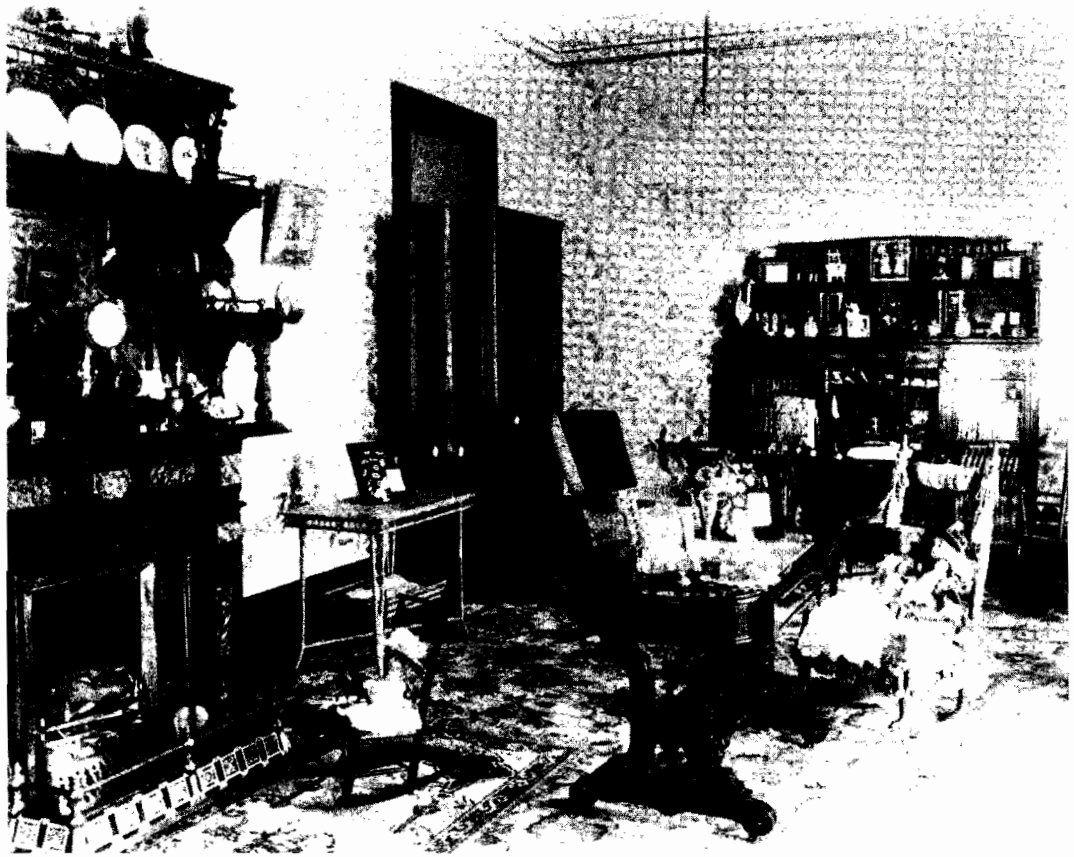


Figure 10.6. The McDermotts' rear parlor was more clearly domestic than the high-style front parlor and contained fewer ostentatious material goods. Framed pictures—likely of family—are distributed throughout the room, and the parlor is graced by an assemblage of various handcrafted objects, dolls, Chinese rattan furniture, and collectibles, including plates over the fireplace and two rows of bric-a-brac on the desk shelves. (From the collection of Vernon J. Sappers)

(1885:8) rhapsodized that Victorians “take a very great interest in other peoples and in other countries, an interest so great that it has affected our whole way of living; not only our houses show it, but our pictures, our amusements, our books, our newspapers, and our dress. In our houses we give our love of adventure free play, and like to be reminded at every turn, of the fact that America, big as is her territory, is but a small part of the world.”

Americans may well have had a “very great interest” in non-Western peoples, but little bric-a-brac contained substantially realistic references to contemporary colonized peoples. If anything, exotics from still-living cultures posed threats that an extinct, idealized, or utterly vanquished group (e.g., Na-

tive Americans) did not pose (cf. Stewart 1993:148). The hazard of the “Other” was neutralized by bric-a-brac that grossly caricatured or did not clearly refer to the realities of colonized peoples’ lives—that is, bric-a-brac was intended to distance its consumer from such realities and verify what they already believed about themselves and genteel society. Most American consumers only “knew” bric-a-brac’s foreign producers or non-genteel subjects through popular culture, so exotic bric-a-brac was unlikely to foster any genuine appreciation of the late nineteenth-century colonial world.

The traditional notion of an exotic good was one that was literally produced in another society using non-industrial techniques

developed over centuries of craft production and aesthetic innovation. The most common West Coast exotics came from China and Japan, and the West Oakland assemblages included many Asian goods. Most Californians had some genuine exposure to Chinese immigrants, but popular ideologues painted a powerful racist caricature of the Chinese. Caricatures of groups such as the Irish or Chinese were sufficiently resilient, widely repeated, and so advantageous to other groups that they assumed the status of reality. Consequently, most Californians "knew" the Chinese and Japanese through popular culture and material style, and had no genuine comprehension of Asian cultures.

Some Chinese- and Japanese-manufactured objects probably were consumed for functionality or price as much as their unspoken capacity to summon forth various visions of the Orient. Yet many of these goods clearly were consumed for their decorative exoticism as much as for their utility or ready availability. Between 1892 and 1896, for instance, the family of Illinois-born paper hanger Harry Pierson Chapman lived at 828 Myrtle Street. The Chapman household discarded five Japanese porcelain vessels along with a Chinese porcelain vessel, an oriental motif vessel likely produced in an art pottery, and two porcelain figurines. Household writers often counseled home decorators to use Asian material goods such as these. For instance, Clarence Cook (1878:102) decreed just ten years after Japan was opened to foreign trade that "money is well spent on really good bits of Japanese workmanship.... A Japanese ivory-carving or wood-carving of the best kind, . . . one of their studies of animal life, or of the human figure, or of their playful, sociable divinities, pixie, or goblin, or monkeyman, has a great deal in it that lifts it above the notion of a toy." Cook's description reflected how many observers reduced non-Western aesthetics to whimsical artistic styles divorced of their cultural footing and easily integrated and reinterpreted within genteel homes. For most consumers, "the Orient" evoked splendor, art, wisdom, despotism,

and sensuality, concepts whose meaning was based more on their tacit contrast to rational Western society than genuine understanding of the Far East (Said 1978). When Americans purchased Asian material goods, they were consuming an idea about the contrast of East and West that was suitable for display in a genteel parlor where rational people could make sense of the Orient.

Several of the Chapmans' Japanese vessels had no evident use-wear; for instance, one matching Kutani export cup and saucer show no clear saucer or cup base wear consistent with regular use. These Kutani vessels, produced in northwest Japan, have quite colorful depictions of birds passing over leaning reeds, a traditional aesthetic representation of seasonal change. This illumination of Japanese tradition probably escaped the Chapmans, who more likely displayed these oriental objects for their brilliant color, distinctive and exotic aesthetics, and insinuation of household worldliness. The bright Japanese palette would have been quite unlike the staid molding and overwhelmingly white-bodied ceramics favored by most period household ideologues. The Chapmans' Rose Canton bowl likely was also a decorative vessel since its elaborate overglaze scene is well-preserved, and even the household's English vessels are quite elaborately decorated. Cumulatively, the Chapmans' Asian ceramics, their bold but passé Rebekah at the Well Rockingham teapot, and decorated table glass suggest that this house was quite decoratively eclectic. A circa-1906 feature at 812 Market Street contained a similar swath of colorful and exotic goods. Deposited in the wake of the earthquake, the Market Street assemblage included colorful Victorian-style majolica, a Chinese celadon vessel, and two Japanese ceramic vessels. While the assemblage did not include any figurines and only three flower pots, it suggests a rich color palette and exotic styles similar to the Chapmans' assemblage.

The Chapmans, like most American consumers, may have been attracted to exotic aesthetics in general, with no articulate inter-

est in whether any given object was actually produced in a foreign place, had a cultural or historical story to tell, was displayed alongside similar sorts of items (e.g., Asian goods), and so on. For instance, the household at 1774 Atlantic Street discarded a stoneware dish in a molded lotus flower form, a typical motif in Japanese aesthetics, but the vessel's base contains an unidentified mark that reflects the vessel's probable origins in a West Coast art pottery. This vessel apparently went unused and has hints of rim wear that may reflect its display on edge, so it was an ornamental item much like the Chapmans' bric-a-brac. In these cases, it would appear that some households were less concerned with acquiring a "genuine" Japanese artifact than with having an object that incorporated exotic symbolism.

The consumption of "real" exotic goods (or quality craft objects like the Atlantic Street lotus dish) was sometimes considered an antidote to the crudely executed flood of mass-produced goods. In 1898, for example, *The House Beautiful* (1898:61-62) noted that "if a poor man's taste demands a statuette, he is unable to purchase one of Rodin's marbles, and so attempts to satisfy his want by securing a [mass-produced] 'Rodgers group.' It would have been far better, for example, for him to have used an empty ginger jar for decoration." This comment augured the tone of many early twentieth-century critics of mass-produced commodities; *The House Beautiful's* editors insinuated that the Chinese ginger vessel was more "artistic" because the Chinese craft producer was not divorced from the object in the way mass-produced goods were detached from living craftspeople. The Brady household at 812 Castro Street may well have taken *The House Beautiful's* advice. Terrence and Annie Brady's circa-1889-1902 assemblage did not include any figurines, but it did include a Chinese ginger jar like that recommended by the magazine. The Bradys had a four-room house that included a formal parlor, and the "Japanese cabinet," twenty-three "pictures" (probably chromolithographs), and eighteen

vases in Annie's 1917 probate inventory suggest the household still contained prototypical parlor furnishings long after parlors became antiquated.

The ultimate exotic was a unique object, and many Victorians collected objects from nature or antiquity to display alongside their mass-produced bric-a-brac. The best archaeological evidence for such consumption in West Oakland came from a privy deposited by the household of John and Katie Taylor. The 768 Fifth Street privy was filled in about 1884 with a relatively unremarkable assemblage of household refuse, but nine prehistoric groundstone net weights were recovered alongside the Taylors' domestic discards. Their recovery in a discrete deposit argues that the stones were discarded together during the formation of the privy fill and were likely collected by a household member. These net weights could have been collected in several local spots. In 1939, for instance, Oakland resident Fred D. Realey (1939:111) asked his readers of the *West of Market Boys' Journal* if they remembered "when Shell Mound Park was an ancient village and when excavations were made of the mound. There were discovered numerous bones of Indians, shells, arrow and spear heads and other objects of interest that had been owned by the Indian tribes of other days." The park in nearby Emeryville became a well-known amusement center, and it is likely that some West Oakland residents—perhaps including the Taylors—collected objects at this and other regional sites for their household assemblages.

Clarence Cook (1878:101) was among the household writers who advocated display of such objects. He noted that a Victorian cabinet might be made a museum for the preservation of all the curiosities and pretty things gathered in the family walks and travels. The bubble-bottle of old Roman glass stirred in walking by one's own foot in the ruined palace of the Caesars, and not bought in a shop; the Dutch drinking-glass, with the crest of William of Orange; the trilobites found in a

Newburgh stone-wall, or the box of Indian arrow-heads, jasper, and feldspar, and quartz picked up in a Westchester County field; bits of nature's craft and man's, gathered in one of these pendant museums, may make a collection of what were else scattered and lost, and which, though of little intrinsic value, and of small regard to see to, will often find its use in a house of wide-awake children.

Cook's comments reflected that unique exotics from nature or history served as educational mechanisms as well as souvenirs that reminded their consumers of the collecting experience and the objects' interpretation by family members. All bric-a-brac potentially could be defined as a souvenir that referred to a specific personal experience. Cook's memory of "the box of Indian arrow-heads... picked up in a Westchester County field" indicates how otherwise mundane objects essentially became vehicles to remember experiences. This collecting practice certainly continued alongside mass-consumed bric-a-brac accumulation long into the twentieth century. In 1938, for instance, a Federal Writers Project worker in Nebraska reported on a "modest" African American home: "The rooms in the house although not elaborately furnished catch the attention of the eye because of the many wonderful paintings and pictures that are hung about the walls... There are many relics in a cabinet that are very historical, as they have come from all over the world, being gifts from various friends" (Federal Writers Project 1938b). Several weeks earlier, the same interviewer had visited another African American who "has a lot of collections and relics that he proudly display[s]" (Federal Writers Project 1938a), and he described another African American neighbor's home as "well furnished with old style furniture, pictures, and relics" (Federal Writers Project 1938d).

Some goods were marketed expressly to commemorate a specific event. For instance, a circa-1930 African American deposit in Indianapolis, Indiana, contained an 1893 coin from the Chicago Columbian Exposition that depicted the Beaux-Arts style Mines and

Mining Building. Inscribed "Coal Miner/World Exposition Chicago," the coin certainly came from one of the Mines and Mining exhibitors, which included displays by diamond miners, a silver statue of actress Ada Rehan, and a Statue of Liberty made of salt (World's Columbian Exposition 1999:3). African Americans twenty-eight years removed from slavery were eager to participate in such a landmark event as the exposition, and Frederick Douglass, Booker T. Washington, Paul Lawrence Dunbar, Francis Watkins Harper, and George Washington Carver were among the parade of African American elite at the fair (Reed 1999). African Americans certainly experienced racism there, but many African Americans attended the exposition as lecturers, laborers, entertainers, and patrons. The exposition's significance is suggested by the Indianapolis household's reluctance to discard this souvenir medallion until the Depression. Leslie Stewart-Abernathy (1992) recovered a similar coin from the 1893 exposition on an Arkansas site, and Charles Orser (1988b:218-220) recovered a medallion inscribed "SOUVENIR OF THE 1887 ICE CARNIVAL" in a turn-of-the-century tenant farmer's cabin in South Carolina. The Minnesota Ice Carnival and the Chicago Exposition were sufficiently far removed from these consumers' lives to be exotic and invoke their worldliness. These objects contrasted to their consumers' prosaic everyday lives and provided a material representation of experiences that could not be represented in any other commodity form. They also formed a selective life narrative when assembled alongside objects drawn from personal experience, such as scrapbooks, natural objects (e.g., dried flowers from weddings), and postcards.

Objects collected from nature and antiquity nostalgically invoked the past, but they were fundamentally comments on the social world of the consumer; that is, they critiqued the present by lamenting some essential human experience lost by their consumer (Stewart 1993:139-140). Many West Oakland homes likely had objects like the Taylors' net weights displayed alongside shells, foreign exotics, and mass-produced bric-a-brac. The

collection of goods produced by extinct “primitive” peoples provided their genteel consumers a readily displayable parlor lesson on the fate of cultures. The prehistoric peoples that once lived in Oakland had suffered the fate of cultures unable or unwilling to conform to capitalism and Western society, and they had been vanquished at least in part by a supposedly superior white, Western culture. These objects both verified Western superiority and delivered a warning that such a fate might befall the genteel West if it was not constantly vigilant.

CONCLUSION

In the 1880s Jacob Riis trekked through New York City documenting Gotham’s impoverished masses of immigrants, people of color, and various other Americans forcefully excluded from affluence. Riis’s subsequent account, *How the Other Half Lives*, had a spectacular impact on the once-untroubled Gilded Age elite, who consciously tolerated—if not condoned—profound poverty and marginalization in many places like New York. Yet, like many Victorians, even the morally indignant Riis was unable to subdue his own cultural xenophobia and racism and appreciate the complex aspirations that lurked beneath the surface of poverty. Riis was unable to comprehend that Victorian goods were genuinely significant to this “other half,” much less that they could mean many things to various citizens. Nevertheless, such goods were often one of the mechanisms marginalized consumers used to secure some small but significant foothold into consumer abundance.

Like many subsequent commentators, Riis apparently could not fathom how consumers might project personally significant symbolism onto apparently inconsequential things. He seemed unable to even wonder why marginalized consumers would seek out goods that were intended for more lavish and ceremonial contexts than those in which they were eventually consumed. Others who did directly confront these questions, such as Thorstein Veblen, were prone to reduce it to “emulation” of the powerful by the power-

less. Yet what bric-a-brac suggests is that such consumption is more complex than the instrumental copying of elite behavior. It is unlikely that many consumers were sufficiently naive to believe that their ceramic figurines or Victorian table settings would transform them into aristocrats. Victorian consumption instead makes a very powerful statement about the profound conviction many Americans had in affluence even when they were marginalized by that very society because of classism, patriarchy, racism, xenophobia, regional prejudices, and a host of other ideologies that always curtailed opportunity. Some thinkers reduce this apparent paradox to false consciousness, concluding that consumption is simply the masses’ way of unwittingly participating in their own oppression. There is, indeed, a genuine measure of self-imposed oppression that is reproduced by consumption and its reproduction of wage labor. Yet it might just as well be argued that when consumers transform the meaning of mass-produced goods, they are using those goods as vehicles of social critique as much as self-inflicted oppression (cf. Hebdige 1979).

The reality, of course, lays somewhere in between. For instance, just as the Linden Street figure proclaimed its Irish American consumers’ ambitions to citizenship, it also reproduced an anti-black historical vision and risked ignoring the similar prejudices inflicted on Irish arrivals. These contradictions were already in public space, but objects like this figurine evoked the complexities of riches, racism, and American identity that were difficult to otherwise articulate. For those scholars who hope objects will provide a clear reflection of nineteenth-century society’s most pressing social dilemmas, bric-a-brac instead provides a fragmentary, selective, and distorted reflection: rather than delivering a resounding symbolic resolution of profound social quandaries, bric-a-brac in most cases evoked generally inchoate and idealized associations. Like most popular culture, bric-a-brac was a self-possessed reflection of American society that attempted to present back to consumers their deeply held preconceptions of themselves and others. Yet

because its symbolism was so ambiguous, bric-a-brac inevitably had the potential to question and undermine those very preconceptions. The challenge is to identify what specific ambitions various consumers were most likely to connect to such symbols.

Bric-a-brac was, on one hand, an imaginative vehicle of personal and social ambition; on the other, none of these desires were simply hatched from consumers' imaginations and disconnected from dominant social structure. Bric-a-brac's material forms were not provided by producers who were intent upon fomenting revolution through the sale of household curios. Instead, householders selected goods that symbolically "situated" the consumer within the world by appearing to secure consumer culture's opportunities, but not threatening the social and ideological foundations upon which it stood. Because

there was such a reasonably wide range of experiences of such ambition and ideology, it is not surprising that the meaning of household material culture would be so rich and complex.

Note

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